

Taking The Hits: 7 Ways to Raise Tough Kids

“The world ain’t all sunshine and rainbows. It’s a very mean and nasty place and I don’t care how tough you are, it will beat you to your knees and keep you there permanently if you let it. You, me, or nobody is gonna hit as hard as life. But it ain’t about how hard you hit. It’s about how hard you can get hit and keep moving forward. How much you can take and keep moving forward. That’s how winning is done!”

Rocky Balboa

Most of us are familiar with the term “helicopter parents”, those mothers or fathers who hover over their children, obsessing about their welfare, taking an immoderate interest in their decisions, and fretting over even minor tribulations.

Enter now the “lawnmower parent.”

These anxious guardians take helicopter parenting a step farther by trying to anticipate their children’s difficulties, clearing the path for them, seeking to remove obstacles or unpleasantness before they occur. They handpick their children’s playmates. They refuse kids access to a playground they deem the least bit dangerous. They go overboard in assisting with homework assignments. On the first day of soccer practice they consult with the coach to ensure that Tim or Sally will be given plenty of playing time. They help their high school seniors compose the required personal essays for college admission and call various people requesting letters of recommendation to bolster that application. Some of these parents even accompany their eighteen-year-olds to college registration.

All too often, such coddling produces young adults who have

trouble making decisions, who back away from challenges, and who feel lost without the guiding hand that steered them through their pre-adult lives.

Most parents understand the instinct behind this phenomenon. We want to protect and help our children. But most of us also want our kids to become grownups, capable, as Rocky says, of taking the hits and moving forward. We want them to be able to make decisions and stand up for themselves. We want daughters and sons tough enough to endure the storms faced by every human being.

Here are seven ways to toughen up your kids and point them toward adulthood.

1. When they are adolescents, give your children unsupervised time every day, preferably outside. Such free play allows them to explore everything from the backyard to their imaginations. If you're hauling your ten-year-old daughter to five and six organized after-school activities a week—dance, soccer, play practice—think about cutting back. Ask yourself: Would you like a schedule where every hour is this regimented?
2. From their early years, acquaint your children with heroes from literature, biography, and history. You can use books, like the *Childhood of Famous American Series* or *The Lord of the Rings*, movies like *Star Wars* or some of the Disney films, or television shows like *The Waltons* or *Little House on the Prairie*. Discuss these films and books with your children. Show them how others have faced challenges and fearful odds, and won out in the end.
3. Assign daily chores. The humblest apartment and the most magnificent mansion demand upkeep. Turn some of that work over to the kids: folding laundry, washing dishes, sweeping floors, mowing lawns. Such duties not only enhance the appearance of a home, but also

tell the children that they are part of a family unit, with responsibilities as well as privileges. It also teaches the concept of TANSTAAFL. (See Robert Heinlein's "There ain't no such thing as a free lunch" in *The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress*.)

4. Demand that your children exercise. Many American youngsters are overweight and out of shape. Diet will cure the first, exercise the second. Have them join sports teams. If they have no interest in organized sports, then have them run, swim, ride bikes, or hike.
5. From late elementary school through high school, have your children communicate with others. If in seventh grade your daughter has scheduling problems with her soccer practice that week, have her—not you—call the coach. If she goes with you to a restaurant, have her order her meal herself. If she is in high school and has performed poorly on a test, have her approach the teacher and ask for help. Such efforts encourage maturity.
6. High school students should work summer jobs. Whether in a fast-food restaurant or as a counselor at a camp, the summer job teaches young people the importance of money and the responsibility that comes with any paid task. In addition, they meet other young people from different backgrounds and with different values and aspirations.
7. Teach life skills to your children. Have them open and keep a bank account. Teach them how to do the laundry, change a tire on a car, cook meals, fix the smoke alarm, and the dozens of other tasks any adult should master. By learning such things, children gain confidence and independence.

Frederick Douglass once remarked, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."

Make your children strong. Give them the ability to face and conquer challenges.

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