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Raising Competent Kids In An Incompetent World

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by [Larry Diffey](#) , [May 11, 2014](#)

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It's probably no surprise that the young people of today aren't particularly independent. Not only does [the "education" system take great pains to mold them](#) into follow-the-herd, terrified automatons, society in general doesn't force them to do much for themselves either.

My oldest daughter recently came home for summer vacation and we discussed her first year of college. She told me that her younger sister, age 13, was much more mature and competent than many of the kids in her student apartment building. "I had to show a bunch of them how to do laundry and they didn't even know how to make a box of Kraft Macaroni and Cheese," she said.

Apparently they were in awe of her [ability to cook actual food](#) that did not originate in a pouch or box, her skills at changing a tire, her knack for making coffee using a French press instead of a coffee maker, and her ease at operating a washing machine and clothes dryer. She says that even though she thought I was being mean at the time I began making her do things for herself, she's now glad that she possesses those skills. Hers was also [the apartment that had everything needed to solve everyday problems](#): basic tools, [first aid supplies](#), OTC medicine, and home remedies.

This got me thinking about how life will be when disaster eventually strikes.

If the country is populated by a bunch of people who can't even cook a box of macaroni and cheese when their stoves function at optimum efficiency, how on earth will they sustain themselves when they have to not only acquire their food, but must use off-grid methods to prepare it? How can someone who requires an instruction manual to operate a digital thermostat hope to keep warm when their home environment is controlled by wood they have collected and fires they have lit with it?

Of course, the above is a particularly dire scenario. Let's look at some less dramatic, but more likely, situations. This isn't even about prepping, per se, but [about life skills](#).

Job Loss

In the current economy it might not even be as cut and dried as job loss – the new generation [may never find work at all](#). When you have little-to-no money, cost-cutting efforts in order to get by requires certain skills and adaptations to stay fed and clean. Your kids need to know how to:

- Cook inexpensive, nutritious meals from scratch using pantry basics.
- Do laundry by hand and hang it to dry.
- Get from point A to point B using public transit or under their own power.
- Budget limited money so that the most important things are paid first.
- Mend and repair items instead of replacing them.

Power Outage Due to Natural Disaster

We've all seen the aftermath of hurricanes, tornadoes, blizzards, and superstorms. Your kids should be able to:

- Keep warm, whether that means safely operating an indoor propane heater, using the woodstove/fireplace, or bundling up in a tent and sleeping bags in the living room.
- Keep fed – they should have enough supplies on hand that they can stay fed at home for up to two weeks: cereal, powdered milk, granola bars, canned fruit, etc.
- Keep safe – they need to understand it is dangerous to go out and about during situations like this and they need to have basic self defense and weapons-handling skills. As well, they need to understand the dangers of off-grid heating and cooking, such as the risk of carbon monoxide poisoning in unventilated rooms.

Illness and Injury

This can happen anywhere at any time. Keeping a cool head when someone is ill or injured is the absolute most important step towards a good outcome. My kids both took babysitting courses and First Aid courses to further their money-making abilities as young teens, but the skills learned their go much further than bandaging a toddler's scraped knee. Kids should:

- Take a course in First Aid, CPR, and anything else applicable that is offered. The more you know, the calmer you are able to remain during a crisis.
- Have a good basic First Aid kit and know how to use everything in it.
- Know some home remedies for various common illnesses: teas for tummy aches, treatment for flu symptoms, how to soothe skin irritations, and how to care for a fever.

Automotive Safety

An astonishing number of young adults don't know how to drive. Back when I was a kid, the most exciting thing in my teenage life was getting behind the wheel of a car, getting a learner's permit when I was fourteen, and having that permit turn into a real driver's license on my 16th birthday.

Now, many kids could care less if they ever learn how to drive. Instead, they rely on public transit or friends and family members who drive. It's one thing if you live in a major metropolitan area, but in places with lower populations, it seems that this is a vital skill. In order to transport yourself to work and school, or to help out in the event of an emergency, it seems to me that kids should know how to:

- Drive. Not only an automatic transmission, but also a standard transmission.
- Change a tire. You don't want your teenage daughter stranded on the side of the road at the mercy of whomever stops to help. My daughter was not allowed to drive the car until she demonstrated her ability to change the tire with the factory jack.
- Perform minor maintenance, like checking oil and fluid levels, filling up the washer fluid, checking

tire pressures and topping them up if needed, and changing the windshield wiper blades. I have a background in the automotive industry, so I also taught my daughter how to change the oil, which is nice to know, but not absolutely necessary. **And finally, what about day-to-day life skills?**

I was truly surprised when my daughter told me about the lack of life skills her friends have. I always thought maybe I was secretly lazy and that was the basis on my insistence that my girls be able to fend for themselves, but it honestly prepares them for life far better than if I was a hands-on mom that did absolutely everything for them. They need to realize that clothing does not get worn and then neatly reappear on a hanger in the closet, ready to be worn again. They need to understand that meals do not magically appear on the table, created by singing appliances ala *Beauty and the Beast*.

Here are some of the life skills that kids should have gained before leaving the nest:

- How to use basic tools for repairs.
- How to cook a healthy meal.
- How to grocery shop within a budget and have healthy food for the week ahead.
- Speaking of that, how to budget in general, so that they don't have "too much month and not enough money."
- How to clean.
- How to do laundry, including stain removal.
- How to think for themselves and question authority.
- How to manage their time to get necessary tasks accomplished by the deadlines.
- How to tell the difference between a want and a need.
- How to be frugal with utilities and consumable goods.
- How to pay bills.
- How to stay out of debt (not easy with the college credit card racket that you see on campuses across the country and rampant student loans).

The more they practice these things under your watchful eye, the more competent they will be when they set out on their own. We all want our kids to be successful and independent. Don't allow them to become crippled by a world that babies them in the name of convenience.

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