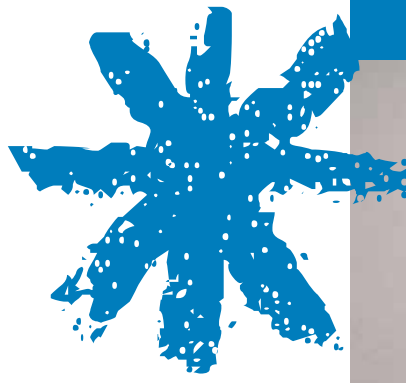


parenting *ideas insights



How to grow kids into leaders

By Michael Grose

Here are seven ways you can foster rather than inhibit your child's or young person's leadership potential.

Recently I bumped into Stephen, a friend's son in the local supermarket.

"G'day Steve*. I hear you're School Captain this year."

Seventeen-year-old Stephen shuffled a little and looked down at his feet before he said, "Yeah, I got the job." His voice was low as if he didn't want the news to get out.

I continued, "Congratulations. You should be pleased with yourself. That's quite an honour."

Finally, a smile spread across his face as he said, "Yeah thanks for that. I'm stoked actually."

Stephen's reticence to accept praise I think was due partly to his modest personality and partly to the fact that he is not a classical school leader type. Academically he holds his own but he's not an outstanding student. He's not sporty, musical and he doesn't excel in the performing arts or other fields.

But he has leadership potential written all over him. He's a wonderful young man with solid values. He's very likeable, very caring and could be described as a 'doer'. He gets stuff done.

He's also raised by parents who have inadvertently nurtured his leadership

potential by not molly-coddling him or over-managing him. Neither have they over-inflated his ego telling him how wonderful he is, even when his behaviour or efforts fall short of an acceptable level.

If you believe as I do, that leaders are made, not born then the way we raise our kids has a massive impact on their leadership potential.

Here are seven ways you can foster rather than inhibit your child's or young person's leadership potential:

1. Allow children and young people to experience risk

Currently our community is risk adverse when it comes to our kids. It's a parent's job to protect our children and young people but that doesn't mean we completely insulate them from risk-taking behaviour. One European study found that if children don't play outside and have never experienced skinned knees and other small hurts, they frequently develop phobias as adults. Just as young children need to learn to fail a few times to learn it's normal, teenagers need to experience some friendship break-ups along the way to appreciate the maturity that real relationships require. When we remove risk we increase children's dependence on others, which is the antithesis of strong leadership.

2. Give kids a chance to solve their own problems

If your child left his lunch at home would you take it to him or her? If your teenager forgot a sports uniform would you take it to school if you were able? If so, you'd be inhibiting their resourcefulness by solving their problems or, alternatively, not allowing them to cope with inconvenience. Flexibility, coping skills and resourcefulness are trademarks of good leadership in both adults and young people.

3. Be realistic with praise

Stephen felt uncomfortable receiving my praise because it hadn't been overly lavished on him as a child or young man. He had to earn his parents' praise so he hasn't been conditioned to expect it as a right. Praise and feedback should be realistic and given sensitively rather than handed out like a nervous tic whenever children or young people do something well. Young people generally learn at some stage that their parents are the only people who think they're awesome, which can come as a rude shock when they hit the real world of the workforce.

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4. Expect them to earn the rights

A common trait among many children and young people is their strong and increasingly, false sense of entitlement. That is, many kids expect they have a right to (pick any of the following and feel free to add to the list): go where they want; use their mobile phone whenever they want; play in the living room without cleaning up. Alternatively, we can insist that children and young people earn their rights through hard work, responsible behaviour and being cooperative. Learning that a right needs to be earned, rather than something that's simply handed out to you, is a valuable lesson for an aspiring leader in any field of endeavour.

5. Focus on character

Currently as a community we neglect character at the expense of personality. In this current era of reality TV and social media it's not hard to get fifteen minutes of fame whereas in the past your spot in the limelight needed to be earned usually by applying yourself to a sporting, artistic or other endeavour. It's quite a turnaround. However, character strengths such as grit, conscientiousness and reliability rather than personality traits consistently appear in discussions about leadership. Parents can actively promote their character strengths of children and young people in many ways - including focusing on character

in conversations; sharing stories where character paid off for them in their lives; and using every day examples of how character leads to success.

6. Develop accountability

Leadership is always partnered with accountability. When kids don't hold themselves accountable they are reliant on others to excuse them or rescue them. Allowing children and young people to experience the consequences of their actions may make us feel bad as parents in the short term, however, in the long term it increases leadership capacities of young people immeasurably.

7. Share your struggles

As children and young people spread their wings and expand their boundaries they will invariably face new situations and challenges. We may not always be there for them but we can share our stories including our struggles that we experienced at the same age in a way that will help them make good choices. (NOTE to Parents of teenagers: Steer clear of lectures about alcohol, smoking and drugs. These are topics for another time.) Sharing your mistakes, your learnings and your decision-making processes can act as a type of GPS as kids navigate new territory away from you. It's the stories they hear from adults whom they admire that will give them a roadmap for authentic leadership that is tolerant, humble and brave.



Focusing on the above strategies won't necessarily mean that your child will hold a leadership position in primary or secondary school. There are many factors involved in holding a school leadership position and being made of the right stuff is just one of them. But the qualities and traits we nurture in children and young people today will manifest in our future community, sporting and business leaders. That's why great parenting matters.

*Stephen is not the real name.

Visit our website for more ideas and information to help you raise confident and resilient young people.



Special note: I'm thrilled to announce that my latest book *Spoonfed Generation: How to raise independent children* is out. It's available at parentingideas.com.au