

SUMMARY

HOW TO RAISE SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE

ESTHER WOJCICKI



Summary of How to Raise Successful People by Esther Wojcicki

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Vital lessons on raising children to be independent,
resilient, and kind.

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Introduction

“There are no Nobel Prizes for parenting or education, but there should be. They are the two most important things we do in our society. How we raise and educate our children determines not only the people they become but the society we create.”

Author Esther Wojcicki had her first child in 1968 and it was a time when childhood development was still a new field of research. The only parenting advice available was the folksy wisdom of friends and families. Today there are virtual libraries of books on how to raise your kids, but so much of that advice concerns itself primarily with how to raise kids to be over-achievers. And while this isn't necessarily a bad thing, the advice typically involves helicopter parenting and pushing your kids too hard.

While this might help them get high grades or become successful in the business world, it doesn't properly prepare them to deal with the stresses of life, or teach them how to be independent, and most of all it doesn't worry about how to raise your children to be happy and kind.

So Wojcicki has set out to create a book that attempts to teach parents how to raise their kids with values like trust, compassion, and autonomy at the forefront.

Don't Just Mimic Your Parents

Most parents end up mimicking their own parents, even if they don't intend to. It's no mystery that abusive parents were themselves abused, and naturally those with good parents try to emulate them. But even good parents can have bad, or sub-optimal, parenting methods. So the goal should be to keep what your parents did that worked, and discard the rest.

The author experienced a somewhat typical childhood for people of her generation. Unfortunately that meant she was subjected to many poor parenting methods, some of which would even be considered abusive. Growing up in the 50s and in a religious household, sexism was baked into her parent's child rearing philosophy. She was taught in no uncertain terms that girls were lesser than boys, and women were meant to be subservient.

Where her brother was given leeway, she was treated with unforgiving strictness. Where her brother was spoiled, she was deprived. Where her brother was told he could grow up to be anything he wanted, she was told women belonged in the kitchen as housewives. Her parents even expected her to get married at 18! Ultimately when she refused, and instead moved out and went to college, her parents disowned her.

When people have rough childhoods they usually go one of two directions when they become parents themselves, they either recreate the parenting style they experienced, or they consciously decide to do the opposite. To give their children the type of childhood they had been denied.

Thankfully Wojcicki chose the latter option and vowed to be the kind of parent she never had. This was all the more important considering all of her children ended up being girls. And while her parents clearly weren't very good, she followed her own advice and took the few good things they did and replicated them. Namely the warmth and affection she received from her mother.

The author made sure to reinforce to her daughters that they were in charge of their own lives, and that they had worth. When she needed them to eat their fruits and veggies, rather than simply telling them to do so she would give them a choice between the two and let them pick, thus helping to teach them that they had the power to make their own choices, while still being a responsible parent.

Having Faith in Your Child

We currently live in a historically safe period. In the United States crime is at a 50 year low, violent crime rates are half of what they were 25 years ago, crime against children (especially by strangers) is practically nonexistent.

Despite that, polls show that people in general are convinced that we live in a more dangerous time than ever. This is largely due to the 24hr news cycle, and the fear mongering way in which news is portrayed. As a result of this sort of hysteria, children have less independence than ever before in history.

It was once the norm for children to be kicked out of the house to play outside all day long in the summer. No supervision, very few limitations. High schoolers left campus to go to lunch, kids were babysitting by the time they were 12. Today kids are constantly being monitored. Their days are carefully planned out, whether by schools or by parents, they have very little freedom and spend more and more time indoors.

Polls show that most Americans report not trusting their neighbors, as a matter of fact most don't even know their neighbors. Younger generations, those raised by helicopter parents, report believing most people are untrustworthy.

The results of this sort of hyper-vigilant, panic stricken parenting have been disastrous. Anxiety issues among younger generations are through the roof, and people have worse coping skills than ever when it comes to dealing with stress.

Kids can't build self-confidence if they're not given the chance to see what they're capable of. And kids can't learn to trust their own abilities and instincts if their parents never show trust in them. By not trusting kids to be independent, we're teaching them that the world is a dangerous place, that people can't be trusted, and that they can't trust themselves.

If You Don't Respect Your Child's Choices, They'll Learn That Their Choices Don't Matter

Parents often pressure their children to pursue similar careers as they did, or to only pursue careers their parents find acceptable. While pushing your child to go to school to study “sensible” subjects like engineering or business may seem like you’re being responsible and preparing them for success, the unintended consequences are often tragic.

The danger that comes with not respecting your child’s goals and choices is that you risk alienating your child. When they feel they can’t tell you their dreams, or what life choices they make, they’ll stop trusting you. One of the leading causes of teenage suicide is feeling isolated from one’s parents. And even if things don’t turn out that tragically, you can’t have a strong relationship with your child if they don’t feel safe confiding in you, or don’t feel like you accept them for who they are.

Further, when your child grows up feeling like what they want doesn’t matter, you’re making them easy prey for abuse. A child already conditioned to believe their choices don’t matter is much more likely to end up in abusive relationships, much more likely to be taken advantage of, and much more vulnerable to things like sexual harassment and coercion.

The author uses a story from her own life, when one of her daughters graduated college they decided they didn’t want to go out and pursue a career, and instead wanted to live at home working as a babysitter. She was feeling aimless at the time and didn’t know what to do with her life.

But rather than respond to the natural urge to try and push her daughter to fulfill her potential, the author stepped back and said since her daughter was an adult it was her choice. Naturally after a short period her daughter came to her senses and ended up going on to found ancestry company 23andMe.

Successful People Aren't Afraid of Failure

One of the most important lessons you can instill in your child is that failure is itself part of success. You can't ever succeed unless you risk failing, and you'll usually fail several times before succeeding. You have to bring your children up in an environment where they understand that mistakes will be forgiven. That you don't think less of them for messing up, and that every mistake is a learning opportunity.

A big element of that is to instill in them an understanding that things like intelligence, talent, and skills are malleable. You aren't born talented or intelligent, and you are always able to improve on something you're not good at. If kids believe that if they fail at something it means they'll never get better, then they'll never try again after a failure.

Teaching them that innate ability is less important than learned skill will help them grow up with determination and a willingness to work. Success requires clearly defined goals, and an unwillingness to give up.

Failure is not a reason to give up, in fact it can help guarantee future success, as failure is a chance to learn what you can do better and how to do it.

Authoritarian Parenting is Counterproductive

Authoritarian and disciplinarian styles of parenting don't actually result in well behaved children, they result in obedient children and children that are good at lying.

Obedience may seem like a nice thing to have from your children, but the issue is that they won't know how to run their own lives once they become adults.

Kids need boundaries and structures in place to feel secure. But too much structure leaves them ironically feeling insecure, because they will feel like they have no control over their lives.

The author suggests instead of being authoritarian, or even just overly structured, to be collaborative in your parenting style. This involves things like giving kids choices, while still imposing the boundary you need. The earlier examples of kids needing to eat fruits and veggies for instance, your kid has to eat them, but by giving them the choice of which fruits and veggies they eat, you're giving them a sense of control over their lives and teaching them to make responsible decisions.

Another example of collaborative parenting would be to avoid using phrases like "because I said so". While it can be annoying responding to a kid constantly asking "why", and it might feel insulting to think you need to explain yourself to a child, instead of saying "because I said so", tell them the thing they have to do but also explain why you want them to do it. It doesn't have to be a debate, if they keep asking why they should do it simply reply "I already told you why", but by giving them reasoning for commands, you teach them not to ever do anything without question. To stand up for themselves.

Collaborative parenting gives kids a sense of agency, and helps them grow up confident in themselves. It also teaches them the importance of working together with others.

Kindness Is More Important Than Over-Achievement

Unfortunately polls are showing that another result of helicopter parenting is a decrease in compassion. Children polled in a Harvard study were found to overwhelmingly report that they considered their own personal happiness and success a priority in life, with only 20% of them reporting that caring for others was their top priority.

Helicopter parents often overlap with so-called tiger parents, i.e. parents that obsessively push their children to over-achieve. The children of such parents have their days pre-planned out from beginning to end, are rarely allowed to play or socialize, and are critiqued on the most minute elements of their performance in school.

Children of such parents have higher stress levels, lower self-esteem, and higher rates of substance abuse. The parenting style of so-called “tiger mom” gurus like Amy Chua are, at their core, cruel. Amy Chua herself has said she’s never even considered whether her kids were happy or if she was kind to them, all that mattered was that her kids were better than everyone else at the things they did.

Cruel parents create sad, lonely, and sometimes cruel, children.

Gratitude

Helping your child develop into a kind person has obvious advantages for the people around him. After all, who wouldn't want to live next door to someone who's always willing to do you a favor, or who cares about your well-being?

Research has shown that people who report feeling a lot of gratitude are on average happier and more hopeful than the general population. Raising children with a high sense of gratitude helps them deal with disappointment and setbacks better, lowers their likelihood of experiencing depression, and makes them more kind and generous to others.

Instilling a sense of gratitude into your kids is simple, but it isn't easy. It requires regular reinforcement, but that can take very small and everyday forms. For instance on birthdays don't let your child simply open their presents one after another, instead make them thank the person who gave it, and encourage them to sit with the gift for a moment appreciating it, before they move onto the next one.

Another useful exercise is to encourage your kids to write, to regularly make lists of things they're thankful for, and to keep a diary regularly documenting their emotional experiences. Studies have actually demonstrated that this directly increases feelings of gratitude.

Final Summary

All parents want their children to succeed, but consider how you are defining success in regards to your child. Is it that they make lots of money? Or have a prestigious career? Or is it that they are happy, healthy, positive contributors to society? Raising your children with values in mind rather than specific goals, values like kindness, gratitude, self-respect, and independence, can actually go farther to helping them achieve in life than pushing them to follow a certain path.



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