

The Benefits of Learning Practical Skills

By Diane Trautman

In August I escorted my younger son to his first year of college and, as late September approaches, I will be preparing to get my older son back to the dorms for his sophomore year. During this transitional time, my thoughts are vacillating wildly between delightful memories and halting concerns. Both of my young men need the tools to navigate through the world of post-secondary education and the real world beyond. I worry: Did I teach them enough to guide them through their day-to-day lives?

When I was in high school, we had home economics classes where we learned basic sewing and cooking techniques. In math classes, we learned how to develop and manage a household budget, and learned about bank accounts and balancing checkbooks. While some boys took the Home-Ec class (perhaps just to be surrounded by girls), many others enjoyed metal and wood working classes. The practical arts were considered foundational both for trade-bound and college-bound students.

My sons took cooking in junior high school, but these and other life skills lessons are now few and far between. Most of our young people lack an understanding of even the most basic personal financial management. They wouldn't know what to do if a check bounced, and they throw clothes away because they don't know how to repair them. Our society has become so fixated on test scores that it's easy to neglect showing them how to manage their lives responsibly once they've left the nest.

Many parents have full-time jobs which leave little time at the end of the day to teach these skills. Nevertheless, we must take steps to prepare our children for adulthood. We can begin by teaching young children how to count money and make change, and eventually manage an allowance and a bank account. We can teach our sons and daughters how to use needle and thread to mend their clothes and learn how set up a sewing machine and measure fabric to create something new. We can engage them in meal planning and preparation. We can teach them how to take care of the family car. These and other skills help our children better understand the practical applications of the concepts they're learning in the classroom. As a result, caring for self and others becomes important, and school becomes meaningful.

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