

# EDUCATION A LA CARTE

CHOOSING  
THE BEST SCHOOLING OPTIONS  
FOR YOUR CHILD

Dr. Kevin Leman



*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Dr. Kevin Leman, *Education A La Carte*  
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To my four grandkids—  
Conner, Adeline, Olive, and Ezra.  
Don't ever limit yourself—other people  
will try to do that for you.  
Strive to be your own person.  
Tackle obstacles with an attitude of “I can do it.”  
If you have an opportunity, go after it.  
I believe in you. The sky's the limit!  
And on top of that,  
you're blessed to have great parents.

# CONTENTS

## **Acknowledgments 11**

## **Introduction: It's Time to Change the Conversation 13**

Why a quality education is so critical in today's world, and how you can get it.

## **1. The Top Concerns of Parents 23**

What's most important to parents, and how they can best help their child succeed.

## **2. Factoring In Your Child's Uniqueness 43**

Capitalizing on your child's strengths, natural talents, and curiosity.

## **3. Schooling a la Carte 57**

Wading through the plethora of options—pros and cons.

## **4. Finding Just the Right Menu for Your Palate 84**

Selecting the perfect education options to bring out the best in your child.

- 5. Your Parental Role in Schooling 110**  
How your background, expectations, and beliefs influence your definition of your child's success.
- 6. Preschool and Kindergarten 140**  
How to know if your child is ready for these first steps.
- 7. Homework and Grades 154**  
What homework and grades really mean, and how best to motivate your child.
- 8. Top Traits of the Absolute Best Schools 178**  
How to know if you've found just what you're looking for.
- 9. Your Personal Menu to Educational Success 192**  
Taking what you've learned and turning it into a practical plan.
- Ask Dr. Leman 209**  
The hottest questions parents ask about education and my time-tested answers.
- An Encouraging Word 261**
- Top 10 List: What to Look For in a Quality Education 265**
- Notes 267**
- About Dr. Kevin Leman 269**
- Resources by Dr. Kevin Leman 273**

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# INTRODUCTION

## It's Time to Change the Conversation

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*Why a quality education is so critical in today's world, and how you can get it.*

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**E**very day in America a typical conversation between parent and child plays out something like this:

Parent: “So, what did you learn at school today?”

Child: “Nothin’.” (Said with a shrug, turned-away head, or worse, merely a grunt to acknowledge the question was asked.)

What if, instead of that typical exchange, the conversation was a stimulating, lively interaction? One where you as parent wouldn't need to prod for any details? What if, in fact, your child excitedly said, without prompting, “Mom [Dad], guess what I learned at school today!”

Can you imagine such a scene? Well, it *can* happen for you and your child. Not just once but on a continual basis as you find the right schooling match.

Education in general is getting a bad rap these days. Understandably so. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress, America's high school seniors have shown a decline in math skills in the past three years.<sup>1</sup> ACT scores are also down for 2016. As ACT Chief Executive Officer Marten Roorda says, "When a third of high school graduates are not well prepared in any of the core subject areas, college readiness remains a significant problem that must be addressed."<sup>2</sup> But all the rhetoric about how schools are going down the tubes won't change the course of education unless parents and educators join forces to become a solidified team in shaping quality schooling for today's kids.

It's time we change the conversation about education. School isn't just about cramming information into a child's head, making sure they can recall it so they test well, and getting As that look great on a report card and college transcript. It's about mastering principles that carry into real-life applications. It includes identifying your child's unique skills and interests that encourage her to want to give back to her world.

The quality of education a child receives has everything to do with preparation for life both inside and outside the classroom. As Dr. Bill Bennett, former secretary of education, says, "The essence of education is, in the words of one philosopher, the transmission of civilization—the imparting of ideals as well as knowledge, the cultivation of the ability to distinguish the true and good from their counterfeits, and



the wisdom to prefer the former to the latter.”<sup>3</sup> However, how much should parents count on teachers and schools to accomplish, and how much should be the role of the parent? And with a growing number of options for schooling, how can parents know what kind of education would be best for their unique child?

Every parent wants their child to be able to compete, and compete well, in a highly dog-eat-dog world that grows more global by the minute. So what does a quality education accomplish?

- It builds a cache of information that, if used with discernment (which is both taught and caught), helps shape thinking that goes on to transform families and culture.
- It prepares today’s youth to become healthy, well-balanced individuals in their relationships and all of life.
- It grooms students to become contributing members of society, future leaders, and powerful difference makers in our world.

Why is getting a good education so important? Because schooling isn’t just about academic excellence; it’s about real-life mastery so your child is groomed for success.

Why am I so passionate about making sure *your* child gets the perfect schooling for her? Because my own educational path was a rock-strewn one. However, my parents—especially my dear, saintly mom (you’ll know why I say “saintly” in a minute)—and a teacher who believed in me, as well as finding the right motivation, changed the course of my life.

## My Story

I grew up in the Buffalo, New York, area in a very modest home with two working parents whose total income never exceeded \$12,000 in any given year. I did poorly in school—so poorly, in fact, that I have a vivid memory of sitting in a first-grade reading group, watching a girl who was eating paste instead of paying attention to her reading. But I also remember thinking, *I know I don't belong in this group. So why am I here?*

Yet I continued to struggle through school, barely eking out any academic existence. It didn't help that I had a straight-A big sister and an older brother who was also a star. I even jokingly referred to him as “God” and got pounded frequently for it by him. So how could I compete? I distinguished myself by getting into trouble in order to be noticed. In fact, I was such a prankster that I drove one of my teachers out of teaching.

It wasn't until April of my senior year in high school that an “older” teacher (she was about 45) pulled me aside and said, “Kevin, have you ever thought of using those skills you have to do something positive in life?”

*Skills?* I thought, shocked. *I have skills?*

It was the first time I remember a teacher encouraging me by saying I had skills. That moment was eye-opening. Up until then, only two people had truly believed in me—my mother and my father. My mom went out of her way to tell others, “But he's such a good boy,” after I'd gotten into trouble once again. Later in life she confessed to me that she used to pray fervently for just one C to appear on my report card as a sign that some potential—*any* potential—was there.

Yet my parents' continued belief in me—who I was and who I would be someday—planted a seed that germinated for years. But it took that teacher, who also tutored me in her home my senior year, to water the seed. I needed both parental involvement and a teacher's highlighting of my skills to make me realize that I did indeed have talents and could go somewhere in life.

But that change didn't happen overnight. I graduated high school fourth from the bottom of my class. My SAT scores were near the 0 percentile. I applied to over 140 colleges and universities, but my high school counselor told me, "Leman, with your grades and record in this school, I couldn't get you admitted to reform school." No school institution wanted me. Even the church denomination I grew up in turned me down for their school.

Finally, nine days before college started, I was admitted on probation to North Park University in Chicago. I managed to eke out a C-minus average my first year. But the prankster in me again kicked in, and the second trimester of my sophomore year, I was thrown out by the dean of students for stealing the "conscience fund." It was really just a college prank gone awry.

Fast-forward 10 years later, though, and I myself was a dean of students at the University of Arizona.

Granted, that's a pretty big leap. "What on earth happened in between?" you ask.

It's simple. I finally found my motivation.

After getting kicked out of North Park University, I moved to Tucson and lived with my parents. I got a job as a janitor in a local hospital.

My life changed one day while I was holding a broom and a five-foot-nine beauty—a nurses' aide—walked by me.

After I found out where she worked in the hospital, I paid the janitor on that unit \$5 to introduce me.

That very day I was cleaning the floors in the men's restroom when she walked in to help a little old man go potty. Our eyes met. The first stupid thing I said to my future wife was, "Would you like to go to the World's Fair with me?"

She, being the smarter one of us from the get-go, replied, "I don't know." (The World's Fair was in New York City. We were all the way across the country in Arizona.)

I replied, "How about lunch, then?"

Our first lunch was at McDonald's, where we split a 20-cent cheeseburger and a 10-cent Coke. It was all I could afford.

During that lunch, I fell like a ton of bricks. Through Sande's influence and belief in me combined with my mother's, and a surprising intervention from God Almighty, I gained motivation in my life for the first time. I went back to school, this time at the University of Arizona. Even though I carried a full load of classes and worked part-time, in my very first semester I made the dean's list.

From that point, I never looked back . . . only forward. At last I knew who I was, what I was good at, and how I could use my skills to help families. If my elementary and high school teachers could meet me in person now, I know the vast majority would be shocked that little Kevin Leman amounted to anything. Yet today I have multiple degrees, speak nationally and internationally, and have written over 50 books aimed at helping families thrive.

Because I believe so deeply in the power of education and that every child deserves a quality education uniquely suited to them, I founded Leman Academy of Excellence ([www.lemanacademy.com](http://www.lemanacademy.com)). Based on a classical, rigorous curriculum

and my time-tested principles of respect, accountability, and birth order, it's the kind of school that helps students discover their particular niches and prepare for real-life skills, while pursuing excellence as an ultimate long-term goal. By the end of the first grade, our scholars can even diagram a sentence and memorize a poem or narrative that's several paragraphs long and present it in front of the class. And the school upholds the key idea that parental involvement is essential in maximizing the student's educational experience.

### **Finding the Right Match for Your Child**

Back when I grew up, there were no other schooling options for me, other than the school down the block. Clearly the environment and teaching style weren't a match for young Kevin Leman. But that experience developed a deep-seated desire in me as an adult to do everything in my power to ensure that every child is given the opportunity for the right school match. That's what led me to found the swiftly growing Leman Academy and to pen this book.

Parent, one of the most important things you'll ever do is steer your child's education. That's why it's critical you evaluate your child's schooling options carefully.

Today's options on the education menu are many—likely more than you think at this moment. You don't always have to pick just one. You can try a la carte items that are uniquely suited to each individual child as he or she grows.

But where do you start when the options can seem so overwhelming?

You might be thinking about getting your 3-year-old or 4-year-old launched into preschool. You may be wondering

if your 5-year-old is ready for kindergarten. Or perhaps you have a fifth grader or middle schooler who is discouraged in her current environment, and you want to try something new. Or maybe you're concerned about your 15-year-old daughter's safety in the school she'd be attending this fall and desire to explore other options.

No matter your situation, *Education a la Carte* will introduce you to a menu of options to consider in your decision. Then you'll want to do further research about the options that look best to you in your specific locale.

You, after all, are your child's most trusted advocate. No one knows your child or her particular bent better. If you choose one direction and realize after a year that it didn't work as well as you'd thought it would, there's nothing wrong with saying, "Let's try something different." Choosing a different direction in education isn't a failure. It's a smart strategy to pursue the best match with your child's present and future in mind.

The type of schooling you pursue for your child is one of the most critical decisions you'll ever make as a parent. That's why you deserve to see and weigh the options for yourself.

In *Education a la Carte*, you'll

- discover what the top concerns of parents are (you're not alone in your fears!)
- learn how to capitalize on your child's strengths, weaknesses, natural talents, and curiosity
- wade through the myriad education options—pros and cons
- understand how your background, expectations, and beliefs influence your definition of success

- find out if your child is ready for preschool or kindergarten
- gain perspective on grades and homework
- strategize just the right education options for your individual child
- read “What We Did” success stories from parents in the trenches about the schooling options they chose and why

In the “Ask Dr. Leman” section, you’ll see the hottest questions parents ask about school-related topics and my time-tested answers. Skim through them as a primer on general issues or read the topics you’re currently most concerned about. You can search for other Q&As on my Facebook and podcasts. Having as much information as possible in your hands will help you make a wise decision for each individual child in your family.

If you have a high-flying child, you’ll need to become the grounding that child needs as you sort through life’s options together.

If you have a child who struggles academically and hates to read, you’ll need to become the sleuth who helps figure out how to make education meaningful and targeted.

If you have a child who thinks school is boring, you can work together to figure out how to make it exciting and fun.

If you have a child like me who keeps you guessing with his antics, I know your road seems difficult right now. But I’m living proof of the hope that *anyone* can succeed in life, given the right motivation.

The biggest motivation your child needs is your approval. Knowing you accept him, support him, and believe he is competent to tackle any hurdles he faces in school—yes, even when some evidence seems to point to the contrary—can set his trajectory for the positive in life.

Someday that child will even thank you.

I know that firsthand.



# 1



## The Top Concerns of Parents

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*What's most important to parents, and how they can best help their child succeed.*

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I don't have to be in a room long with other parents before they start sharing their concerns with me. Ninety-five percent of the time, those concerns are focused around their children and their long-term welfare. I understand thoroughly, because I'm a parent of five kids who are spaced far enough apart that I was in the active trenches of parenting for a long time. Now I have the joy of being an involved grandparent of four.

Every parent wants the best for their child and will do everything in their utmost power to secure their child's long-term success and happiness. So much of a child's path in life will be determined by the education she receives.

What are your top concerns as a parent? And in an increasingly complicated, fast-paced world, how can you best help your child succeed? Those are million-dollar questions this book will assist you in answering.

### **Concern #1: Safety at School**

These days, parents always list the safety of their children at school as a paramount concern. We live in a violent world, with racial tensions, fear, anger, bullying, and cyberbullying on the rise.

Sadly, shootings in school aren't a new phenomenon, but the scope of the deaths and coverage of them has increased greatly. Why are they so prevalent? A study found that mass killings and school shootings tend to spread "contagiously." In other words, excessive national media coverage of one killing or shooting greatly increases the chance that others—copycats of the crime—will occur within a couple of weeks.<sup>1</sup>

All children crave attention and belonging. Students who haven't had those needs fulfilled in positive ways can easily move toward revenge and begin to identify with the shooters as "celebrities" who have their day in the limelight. The media not only highlights the perpetrator's name, background, and motivation for the crime but also details specifics about weapons used and the number of victims. Effectively, such coverage gives the potential next school shooter a road map for his crime and the hope that he may have his own day in the spotlight.

However, the media coverage of such tragedies also serves to bring the problem to the forefront of our nation's attention.

That allows schools the opportunity to become more prepared for these events. But with the continued occurrence of such tragedies, no school can be completely prepared.

What could possibly make the difference in lessening the number of school shootings? The website Security Today says, “The media needs to eliminate the shooter as the focal point for stories and instead focus on the victims, their families, and highlight what could have been done to prevent this in the first place.”<sup>2</sup> In other words, the media should focus not on the shooter—making him into a monster celebrity to be emulated—but on solutions. What can schools do to increase safety and lower the chances of such a shooting happening? What warning signs should students, counselors, and teachers look for? Unfortunately, such coverage isn’t likely to happen with the nature of today’s media, where the principle of “the more shocking, the more newsworthy the event” reigns.

Many schools have installed extra security precautions—badges for visitors, metal detectors, front security doors, lockdown procedures, regular drills with law enforcement, designated safety areas, and bulletproof classroom doors. They’ve also trained counselors to spot warning signs and at-risk behavior in students. However, there is no 100 percent guarantee in life, and that includes safety for our children at school. Yes, we can do all in our power to choose the school and its location wisely, but we can’t always protect against every aspect of human nature gone awry. Children can be injured or killed while at school, but they also can become victims of drive-by shootings anywhere.

What can be done to limit classroom violence? As Security Today reports, it doesn’t matter whether a student is in

kindergarten or in college; she will always be at risk because of insufficient security in schools.<sup>3</sup> The best way to limit the risk is to ramp up the resources spent to help troubled students. With bullying so common at school—and cyberbullying carrying the damage even wider so that the student isn't really safe anywhere, even in his own home where his cell phone accompanies him—school violence and shootings will continue to escalate.

A parent's concerns about the social environment of a school are very valid in terms of safety. Sure, a school may have a strong academic reputation, but what is the atmosphere like? Are the students safe walking the hallways? In the locker rooms? In the restrooms?

When we build Leman Academy of Excellence schools, I make sure every wing has single-unit bathrooms to guarantee privacy. So many problems in school generate from the restrooms. It's a congregating place where not a lot of good happens . . . except for the elimination process. Even if bullying isn't officially allowed, what would the students of the school say confidentially if you asked them? Would they whisper the truth that a certain segment of kids have a "Get out of jail free" card on anything they do, because their parents are heavy hitters with the school administration in some way?

What's the school's internet and social media policy? Is cyberbullying passed over as "just something kids do" and nothing really to be concerned about? Or is it taken seriously and acted upon, involving students, parents, teachers, and administration?

Simply stated, today's school landscape is scary. No school is immune from the fracas, though some schools are more

prone to trouble than others. But you as a parent always have a choice of what to do about it.

### **Concern #2: The Ability to Compete in a Global World**

I recently overheard two moms conversing at a doctor's office.

Mom 1: "I tell him all the time how important school is."

Mom 2 (nodding): "We also stress that she has to get really good grades."

Mom 1: "Agreed. Without them, he won't be able to get into my alma mater. The stipulations for entrance are pretty stiff."

Mom 2: "So what do you think of the Academy on 4th Street, near downtown?"

Mom 1: "I've heard it's an excellent high school. The grads are successful in a lot of different fields. I think Ryan might be good in science."

Mom 2: "Oh? How did you figure that out?"

And the conversation continued.

I couldn't help but shake my head. I looked over at the two little kids sitting on the floor, playing with toys. They weren't even 2 years old yet, and the boy was clearly still in pull-ups.

Yes, we parents need to be proactive. But we also shouldn't go over the top in mapping our child's entire life out when it has barely started.

Let's be honest, shall we? Each one of us wants our child not only to compete but also to be top dog in an increasingly complicated, global world. None of us wants our child on

the bottom of the heap if there's anything we can do about it. That means our kids have to be both adequate and skilled in tackling all aspects of technology, which changes at a rapid pace. And they have to do well in subjects we may have done poorly in, such as math and science. Children who aren't, we fear, will be left in everyone else's dust.

**We parents need to be proactive. But we also shouldn't go over the top in mapping our child's entire life out when it has barely started.**

That's why we parents, more than at any other time in our history, are pushing our kids. The instant they come into this world, many of us start planning their education and directing their dreams. We talk to them about

the importance of school and studying to get good grades before they're even in school or can comprehend what that means.

When friends of ours adopted a baby, they were shocked when other parents told them, "Your baby is already 6 months old and you haven't signed up for kindergarten yet? You're not going to be able to get into one of the best ones. There's a long waiting list."

If you don't have your child in preschool, you've probably faced pressure from other parents who give you "the look." You know, the one that says, "Wow, you really dropped the ball. You're endangering your kid's future."

Why are we so worried that our child becomes a good student? A big motivation is that if they don't get good grades, it means they can't get into a certain college. This pressure transfers to the child psychologically as, "If you don't get into

## WHAT WE DID

I have an amazing, delightful daughter, Suzanne. A high-honor student, she has always worked hard on her studies and been self-motivated. Even more important, she willingly gives back to her family and has a compassionate heart toward others. However, when she was a high school senior, she still wasn't certain of her career path. She had interests in engineering, being a pharmacist, or even being an entrepreneur who might start her own company.

After a lot of research together, we decided not to spend the \$25,000 per year at the university she'd initially applied to and been accepted at. Instead, Suzanne would take two years of basic classes from the community college nearby. She could save further expenses by living at home for that time. This also would allow her to take a broad variety of classes to fine-tune her direction.

When she was a sophomore, she found her love—genetic engineering. Knowing she could help children who struggled with illnesses completely fit her compassionate heart too. The two years of basic courses from community college transferred directly to the four-year university, so that saved us some more bucks. She's now a senior at the university and loves her internship in genetics. The company, in fact, likes her so much they've offered her a job when she graduates in two months.

Although our plan raised a few eyebrows—including those of my own parents, who couldn't believe we weren't sending our smart daughter straight to university—it was a wise one. It gave Suzanne a running start so she'll be able to exit college with as little debt as possible and with the skills for a solidified career direction that she loves.

that college I want you to get into, then you are a nothing.”  
But is that the truth?

The reality is that you have to go to some sort of college these days in order to make a decent buck. However, not all students are highly motivated or have the natural skills and intelligence to be accepted by the best colleges in the nation. Pushing them in that direction will only frustrate you and your child. Frankly, most students exit high school with a very fuzzy view of what to do next. If that’s the case, then why spend upwards of \$100,000 to put your kid through four years of college or a university, earning him a degree he won’t know what to do with and doesn’t have the passion to really pursue? And incurring debt he or you will be paying off for years to come? The best option might be for him to go to community college for a couple years to get the basic classes covered, and then once he’s identified his direction, transfer the credits to a four-year college or university.

Today, college kids have become boomerang kids in huge numbers. When they couldn’t find work after graduation, they moved back home. Now they’re struggling to find work—any work—that they’re passionate about. One 23-year-old I know, Jared, is a sociology major who graduated two years ago from a prestigious four-year university. Problem is, he hasn’t been able to identify a single job in the sociology field that sounds interesting to him. He is now majoring in living in his parents’ basement and working part-time at a garage to pay the monthly minimum on his college debts. Sadly, this is the same kid who, when he was 16, showed a great deal of interest in auto mechanics. He was always in the garage, tinkering with the clunker car he’d bought for a thousand bucks with money earned from odd jobs. But his



parents insisted that he pursue a degree in one of the “helping people” fields—just like his father and grandfather had. Though he often fixed the family car, they didn’t see those practical skills as a career direction. Too bad, because auto mechanics seems like a perfect fit for Jared. My guess is that he’ll eventually end up in that field, but it’ll take him years to pay off his university debts.

Which of you wants to see your child in debt? Or be in debt yourself for years to come? As you think about your child’s future college decision, keep your options broad. Is your child more talented with practical skills, such as fixing computers or being a craftsman of some sort? Is she academically focused, someone who would make a good teacher or scientist? In vocational counseling with kids, we always talk about people, data, and things. Does your child show signs that she is specifically interested in one of those three? The answer to those questions—rather than your desire to see your child succeed in a particular way—should become the basis of your brainstorming for your child’s future direction. After all, it’s not your future. It’s hers.

That’s why it’s important to let your child’s natural talents unfold, instead of feeling the push to make her compete in a global world. If your child is in her niche, she will be able to compete. No, she may not be top dog, but that isn’t all there is to life.

Parents who fear their kids are going to be left behind are the parents who do their kid’s homework and science project. Their reasoning? *He has to have good grades. He has to look good to others or he won’t make it in life.*

But think about that for a minute. Do you really have such little confidence that your child can make it on his own? If

so, is that because you have little confidence in yourself and you're living with lots of unfulfilled desires? If you as a parent aren't confident, don't expect your child to be. You have to be the one who believes your child can develop what it takes to compete, and compete well, in life and his area of expertise.

People who are successful aren't usually those whose path has been snowplowed in life. They're people who have failed, gotten back up, and worked hard toward their dreams because they were internally motivated to make a difference on the planet.

Take a look around, parent. Who do you see as successful in life? How did they get there? People who are successful aren't usually those whose path has been snowplowed in life. They're people who have failed, gotten back up, and worked hard toward their dreams because they were internally motivated to make a difference on the planet.

Has your child failed already? What has he learned from you about dusting himself off and getting back up? About working hard? No matter what other teachers your child has, the best teacher of all is you.

### **Concern #3: The Influence of Peers**

Not every child has been raised the way yours has been. Not every child has a parent who cares about her enough to read this book. Parents are wise to consider the influence of peers on their child. As children grow older, peers have a significant impact, especially in the adolescent and

teenage years. (If you're in those years, you'll find my books *Planet Middle School* and *Have a New Teenager by Friday* helpful as well.) Those are the years in which your children are figuring out what their parents' values truly are . . . and which of those values they believe themselves. That's why one minute your kids say they love you, and the next they say they hate you. They are simply trying to figure out what is uniquely theirs.

Children who have friends with values similar to their own family's tend to stay with those values in their growing-up years. However, if they never have the opportunity to have their values tested, will they still be able to firmly adhere to them when they are out of your little nest and on their own?

"No way are we sending our child to the regular school in our area," a mom told me recently. "I don't want my daughter around those kinds of people."

*Those kinds of people?* I thought. *Wow. Nothing like lumping every person in a school in the same category.*

I could relate to her concerns about public schools in general because of all the bad press about them nationally. However, the particular public school she was talking about was a stellar one, with a well-respected administrator who emphasized academic excellence and worked hard to ensure the safest possible environment in his school. She had lumped all public schools and public school kids together.

In the same way, if you're a person of faith, sending your child to a religious school doesn't mean everyone there will share your values. Nor does it mean that you shouldn't be responsible for your own child's religious training at home, where it counts most. Educators are not a replacement for parents.

I understand wanting to protect your kids, but this kind of sad, prejudicial, and short-sighted thinking won't serve your child well. Not sending your child to a certain school so she won't be around certain peers who might make her stray from your values isn't necessarily the answer. Every school has segments of kids who set themselves up to rebel against "the norm." Some rebel quietly; others rebel openly.

There is a gourmet dish called pheasant under glass. In food form, it's a delicious delicacy. But if you try to treat your child like that, you do her a disservice. You might protect her temporarily while she's under the glass. However, as soon as the glass cover is removed, she'll get eaten by the hungry predators that surround her.

Would you intentionally put your child in a dangerous environment? Certainly not. But should you protect her from every idea and worldview that is different from yours? From every bump in the road? Isn't it better that while she still lives at home and you can help her process her choices, she learns to stand strong in whatever environment she is in? That she owns your family's values for herself rather than just accepting them because all of her friends do? That she can navigate the ups and downs of life by herself and gain confidence in doing so? Will you always be there to tell her what she should do and think? To protect her every minute?

All parents have a hidden desire to protect our children as if they're encased in bubble wrap. None of us wants to see our child hurt. But we sometimes take this desire to an extreme.

Jessica's third-grade daughter came home crying because a girl at school told her she was fat. Jessica immediately called the principal and demanded a meeting, then insisted the other girl be expelled. Problem was, Jessica was missing some key

details. When the principal informed her that her daughter had called the other girl a bad name first, Jessica was shocked. You see, bullying isn't always one-sided, and children are notorious for leaving out details that might incriminate them.

There is a big difference between bullying and a single negative incident. Kids will always be kids—at times volatile, vindictive, jealous, and even vicious. They'll say and do mean things and won't think of the consequences. But bullying is a repeated pattern of abusive and intimidating behavior that often is based on a clear imbalance of power. In other words, a much larger child is intimidating a much smaller child and taking his lunch money. Or a group of girls is constantly tripping another girl in the hallway by her locker. Onetime negative incidents should be handled by the student participants as much as possible. Yes, an adult should be involved as a backup nearby and within earshot, especially if the incident has involved physical violence, but the resolving of the matter should be between the students, who then have to report the satisfactory resolution to the adult.

In short, peers can have a tremendous influence over your child. As a parent, you should be highly aware of who your child's friends are—and who their parents are. The best way is to naturally involve yourself in your child's world. Volunteer in the classroom or on field trips. Provide snacks for your kids and their friends after school. Nothing draws children into your world better than food. Just hang around within earshot of your kitchen, and you'll learn a lot. Attend concerts and games. Watch who your child interacts with and how she responds.

Especially in the adolescent and teenage years, be aware that your children will experiment with various looks—hairstyles,

clothing, makeup, attitudes—on the path to establishing their individuality in the world. That’s all very normal. You’ll likely go through a lot of those stages with them. As you do, don’t major in the minors. Clothing and hairstyles may change from month to month. What matter are your child’s heart and attitude. Lauren, one of my daughters, went through a blue-hair phase for a while. But she remained the same kindhearted, others-focused young woman she’s always been, so I wasn’t worried.

In the tumultuous world of peers—where a BFF one minute can be an enemy the next—what’s most important is that your relationship with your child remains constantly loving and supportive. If she can count on you, she won’t need to find her identity and belonging among her peers.

### **Your Home—the Primary School**

Throughout your child’s life, she will have favorite teachers for various reasons. However, you are the best teacher your child will ever have, and your role is lifelong. What kind of an education is your child getting within your home school, where you are the headmaster? What is your child being taught by watching you? No matter what schooling option you choose, you are your child’s primary teacher. Your home is their primary school. Everything and everyone else is secondary.

The type of authority you establish as parent and teacher in your home also sets up the future authority of every teacher your child will have.

Teachers today are bashed physically and F-bombed with regularity in many schools, even by kindergarteners and first graders. Why is that? Because kids haven’t been trained by

parents to show respect to authority figures. They don't turn in homework because they haven't learned about accountability and finishing projects they start. They act without consequences because they haven't learned about responsibilities and consequences at home.

What values are you teaching at home?

***Start with the end in mind.***

“Look 10 to 20 years down the road. What do you want your child to be like?” When I ask parents that question, here are some answers that continually pop up:

- To be able to think for herself
- To make good decisions
- To be a person of integrity who does what he says he will
- To be honest and trustworthy
- To care about others
- To work hard and to be able to accomplish her goals
- To not give up, even when times are hard
- To use his skills to better humankind

If that's what you want, then you should “start with the end in mind,” as my friend Stephen R. Covey used to say.

Want your child to be able to think for herself and make good decisions? Then allow her to make age-appropriate choices and to experience the consequences—both good and bad—for herself.

Want him to be a person of integrity who is honest and trustworthy? Then if he doesn't get up to make it to school

on time, don't rescue him by writing a note that he was at a doctor's appointment. If you want an honest child, then be a role model of honesty in your own life.

Want your child to care about others? Children exit the womb as hedonists, caring only about themselves and their needs. They need to be taught to be considerate of others. Find opportunities where your child can give to others and serve others—whether it's planting flowers in a window box for the elderly woman next door, putting away groceries for her, or helping a younger child who's struggling to learn how to read.

Want your child to work hard and to be able to accomplish her goals, even when the road is hard? Then encourage her to hang in there, even when a task is difficult—such as the geometry she hates. When she's having a difficult time with that clarinet she begged to play, tell her the truth. "It's really hard to learn an instrument, so don't give up. I believe in you. I know you can do it." Don't let her back out of her commitment to band for that year. Many parents have the mentality that their kids should start at the top. But to become truly successful, they need to start at the bottom and work their way up through the challenges.

Want your child to develop skills that can make the planet a better place? Discuss news with her as it occurs. Connect local, national, and international events with her life and increasing skills. For example, "When I volunteered for the class party, I noticed that you were really kind to the new girl in your class. Other kids ignored her, but you included her by asking her to come to your table. Honey, that's wonderful to do, and it made me so happy to see that. If there were more people like you, the news wouldn't be as full of . . ." (and



you go on to connect her actions to a recent event). Those types of connections develop global thinking in your child and also prompt her to think, *Hey, all these bad things are happening, but since I'm making a difference in this area right now, maybe I could make an even bigger one when I grow up.* In such a way, you naturally encourage her skills and also grow her heart toward others.

Many parents today tend to overemphasize giftedness. I can't tell you how many times a parent has said to me, "My child is extremely bright and talented."

My usual response? "My condolences."

I say that tongue in cheek, of course. What I mean in all sincerity, though, is that parents shouldn't get caught up in their child's giftedness. Some parents think their kids are exceptional just because they can count from 10 to 1 before kindergarten. Just because your child may be gifted in one area doesn't mean there isn't another child who is more gifted in that area. Allow your child to develop naturally. He will have a lot of years to compete with others in the world. You don't need to jump-start the process.

Throughout your child's education, it's much better that he works at his own pace, doesn't see himself as better than anybody else, and develops positive values that will assist him in becoming the kind of person you want him to be.

***Introduce your child to new worlds.***

One of the best things you can do is develop a love of reading in your kids. That love starts with you, parent. If your kids are young, make the reading of a bedtime or after-school story part of your routine. Vary the types of books

you read. One of your children may love fictional adventures; another may love biographies. You can also share snippets of information or stories you find on the internet.

“I just saw the sweetest story,” you tell your second-grade animal-loving daughter, “about baby pandas in China and their caretakers.”

She perks up. “Oh yeah? Where?”

You google the site and read the story together. Questions will naturally come up and lead to further research about the animal, the country, and even the living conditions of the average person in China.

Or you say to your sports-loving adolescent, “I wonder what it would be like to win the World Series after 108 years, like the Chicago Cubs did. I don’t really understand the rules of baseball. Maybe you can explain it to me sometime.” You’ve given your son the opening to explain to you what he knows. One of the best ways to learn more about something is to teach it to someone else.

**Learning to read well  
is as fundamental  
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game of basketball.**

Learning to read well is as fundamental to being successful in life as learning to dribble a ball is to the game of basketball. As Dr. Bill Bennett says, “The elementary school must assume as its sublime and most solemn responsibility the task of teaching every child in it to read. Any school that does not accomplish this has failed.”<sup>4</sup> If you’re

a good reader, you’ll constantly expand your knowledge and assimilate new information. Having a thirst for reading expands your horizons. My grandson, Conner, has read so much about creatures in the ocean and all the planets that

he can tell you nearly any detail about them. That love for reading will serve him well in any career he chooses.

Once your child shows interest in specific topics, follow up on those areas. Visit a planetarium or oceanarium, go to the local zoo, attend a free community concert, or go to a local baseball game. Ask friends who have specific jobs—an auto mechanic, a computer programmer, a music teacher, a design consultant, an accountant—to show your child what they actually do. Do the same for your friends' children. You never know what interests you might spark in a young mind.

***Make your home the best place to be.***

Do you want a child who would rather be with you on a Friday night than with her friends? Who can't wait to return home on her college breaks? Who wants to bring her boyfriend to meet you? Who can't wait for her kids to spend time with their grandparents?

Then start now to make your home the kind of place where all of these elements combine into a one-of-a-kind atmosphere. A place where your child wants to not only show up, but stay and bring her friends to. A place of

- safety and support
- warmth and encouragement
- belonging and acceptance
- growth
- and don't forget the fun!

How can you best help your child succeed in this complicated world? By carefully considering your schooling options

in light of your top parental concerns—safety, the ability to compete in a global world, and peer influence. But most of all, by realizing that what happens in the home, with their favorite, lifelong teacher—you—is the most important education they will ever receive.