

Education Beyond the Classroom

The 12 Secrets to Raising a Successful Blind Child

by John Buckley, PhD

Although all my professional life was spent teaching college students, one of my favorite quotations is from Mark Twain: “Never let school get in the way of your education.” After all, most, if not all, of the most important lessons we learn in life take place outside the conventional classroom. This is as much true for the blind child as his or her sighted peer.

As you might have guessed, I’m using the Twain quotation as a bridge to talk about the lessons parents and guardians need to teach their blind child. As anyone who has ever raised a child knows, it is one, and frequently the most, difficult thing you’ll ever do. You are a part of that great parental fire department – on call twenty-four hours a day, never receiving a vacation, and, not infrequently, little appreciation. With all of this, you’re going to have to make tens of thousands of decisions with the certain knowledge some of them are going to be wrong. This is not intended as an argument for life-long celibacy, but it is a pretty good one anyway.

It’s impossible to do more than just outline what is involved in parenting a blind child. Some issues are confronted by all parents while others loom large for some families but are less important for others. While the following list is certainly not comprehensive, I’d suggest it’s a pretty good starting point for parenting a blind child. It’s based on a great many conversations with “successful” blind adults, and you may define that however you will, and asking how they were raised. I think everything on this list would be good parenting practice for any child, but these are things that are especially important if this child is visually impaired. They are in no particular order; they’re all important.

1. Children should be accountable for their actions. A child should be raised in such a way that, should their vision be magically restored at some point in the future, they would have the tools and personality to be a happy, productive, independent adult.
2. Develop a good work ethic. Obtaining employment and being professionally successful are certain to be challenging. Sadly, discrimination is a fact of life and not likely to magically disappear any time soon. This makes it even more important to have a work ethic that is an asset. Everyone, regardless of how well they can see, needs to be accountable for how they work. As a child grows, there will be a great many things they can do nothing about; however, there will be two things that they can always control: their attitude and their work ethic.
3. They should have regular chores that they’re expected to perform to the best of their ability. To the extent possible, these should be similar to their peers.

4. Develop good social skills. Sight has nothing to do with courtesy, thoughtfulness, friendliness, etc. There is no excuse for not being as good, if not better, than your peers at all of these things. Too often the important people in a child's life – parents, teachers, family – allow a child to get-by with behavior that is not tolerated in the larger world.

5. Get exposed to as many different experiences as possible. Blindness can be allowed to shrink a child's horizons. Extra attention should be paid to developing hobbies, taking trips, and trying new things. It is tempting for the child to develop in a narrow, circumscribed universe that rarely prepares them for a meaningful adult life.

6. Master the "blind skills" that are most appropriate for the child as early as possible: Braille, the use of a cane, accessible technologies, etc. This may mean that the parents need to ensure that the school provides formal training in these things and that the lessons are reinforced at home.

7. Don't tell them that they can't do something. You could be wrong and, even if you're right, they'll still learn from the effort. After all, we are certain that, when a sighted child says that he or she wants to be President (and I can't imagine why any child would want to do this), there is virtually no chance they will succeed, but we smile and wish them luck anyway.

8. Don't helicopter. The natural temptation to hover over our children is greatly magnified if that child has a disability. While we don't want to think about it, we are all mortal and the time will come when you won't be there. It's understood that, when a child is little, a parent's primary responsibility is to ensure their safety. An equally important obligation as they grow is to prepare the child to live on their own as adults. When trying to decide whether I should protect or push, it seems to me that the question to ask is "How is what I'm about to do going to affect my child in twenty years?" That won't give the perfect answer every time, but it will come pretty close.

9. The child should be allowed to fail. You can bet if they're not failing, they're not trying. And, if they're not trying, they're not progressing.

10. Teach them to advocate for themselves. Learning to do this appropriately is not hard, but it is a skill that is essential to learn and can be taught early. It seems to me that advocacy boils down to advocating for your rights while simultaneously respecting the rights of the other party. In doing this, it's important to underscore that advocating is not a license to be rude.

11. Teach the child to be a "problem solver." Successful adults, sighted or blind, cultivate the habit, when encountering a problem, of thinking, "Now, how can I solve this?" instead of "Oh, I can't do this." I can pretty much guarantee that, if a child doesn't learn to do this, they're not going to be "successful."

12. Whenever possible, model the behavior you expect. After all, you are the most influential teacher in your child's life.

One footnote: Whether the child is totally blind or has limited vision, parents and family need to have a strong self-concept because, if their parenting decisions are going to be in the long-term best interests of the child, friends and neighbors may not always agree with what they're doing.

Finally, grant yourself forgiveness. Even the very best parents make mistakes. If they didn't, there wouldn't be a need for psychotherapists.

So, instead of thinking that someone blind is so "amazing," I'd encourage you to think, "You must have had great parenting" because they almost certainly did.