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By Tchiki Davis, MA, PhD What are life skills and how do we build the ones we need for a successful life? Here, we'll talk about the science behind life skills and offer lots of examples of life skills for you to explore. *This page may include affiliate links; that means we earn from qualifying purchases of products. Have you ever wondered why some people get ahead and others do not? Have you noticed that the smartest people are rarely the ones in charge? That's because "smarts" are just a small part of what is required to live a happy and successful life. We also need to develop life skills, which include a mixture of psychological and behavioral skills. In this article, we'll talk about what life skills are, provide examples of life skills, and talk about how to build the most important life skills. Before getting started, we thought you might be interested in our free well-being quiz. And if you're a well-being entrepreneur, coach, or consultant, check out our free Wellness Business Growth eBook to get expert tips, tools, and resources to grow your wellness business fast. Life skills can be defined as abilities that enable humans to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of life. They may also be called psychosocial skills, as they are psychological in nature and include thinking and behavioral processes. Others define life skills as behavioral, cognitive, or interpersonal skills that enable individuals to succeed in various areas of life (Hodge, Danish, & Martin, 2013).To clarify, life skills are often broken down into three types (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017):Thinking skills: This might involve being able to think of multiple solutions to a problem or develop new innovations in a creative way.Social skills: This might involve knowing how to develop healthy relationships, how to communicate in effective ways, and how to interact with others successfully. Emotional skills: This might involve being comfortable in your own skin, dealing with emotions effectively, and knowing who you are. Research suggests that developing life skills may help reduce drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. It may also reduce aggression and violence (Botvin & Griffin, 2004). In addition to these bigger outcomes, life skills can just make life a bit easier. When we can regulate our emotions effectively and develop enduring, supportive relationships, we're happier and healthier. This is why developing life skills is key not only to being successful in life, it's key for our health and well-being. According to several key organizations including UNICEF, UNESCO, and WHO, the following are the basic life skills (Prajapati, Sharma, & Sharma, 2017):Self-awarenessCritical thinkingCreative thinkingDecision makingProblem SolvingEffective communicationInterpersonal relationshipsEmpathyCoping with stressCoping with emotionOf course, these skills overlap, with each of them aiding and supporting the others. There may also be other life skills and there may be subcategories of life skills within each of these basic life skill types. Let's talk a bit more about the basic life skills mentioned above. What exactly do they involve and how do we build them?Self-awarenessSelf-awareness is conscious attention directed towards the self (Wicklund, 1975). To cultivate self-awareness, we may engage in reflection or introspection. When we have this life skill, we often find ourselves pondering why we are the way we are or why we do the things we do. Critical thinkingCritical thinking can be defined as reflective thinking that focuses on deciding what to believe or do. It may involve organizing facts, analyzing ideas, and evaluating arguments. Overall, having this life skill means we use disciplined thinking to make the best judgments we can and take actions that make the most sense given these judgments (Huit, 1998).Creative thinkingCreativity involves the ability to understand a problem and also to redefine it, transform thoughts, reinterpret information, and ignore existing boundaries to find new solutions (Kim, 2006). Creative thinking involves fluency, originality, and elaboration. Fluency is the number of relevant ideas that you can come up with. Originally is the number of rare or infrequent ideas you come up with. Elaboration is the number of added ideas you can come up with to build on existing ideas. This life skill may also include "resistance to closure"—or in other words, keeping an open mind (Kim, 2006).Decision makingDecision making can be defined as identifying and choosing from alternatives. Our decision making process depends on our values, beliefs, goals, etc.... This life skill involves tasks such as defining a problem, determining the requirements of an effective solution, establishing the goals of the decision, and identifying alternatives. (Fülöp, 2005).Problem SolvingProblem solving may be defined as a thinking process where we use our knowledge, skills, and understanding to manage an unfamiliar situation. But keep in mind that problem solving is not like an algorithm. A problem simple enough to be solved with a series of "IF-THEN" statements (as is done in an algorithm) has no need for the life skill of problem solving. When it comes to the human mind, it is capable of much more complex problem solving (Carson, 2007).Effective communicationCommunication might be defined as the act of disclosing, unmasking, or explaining something in detail (Rowan, 2003). Researchers suggest that we can improve our communication in four ways:Use common, everyday wordsUse "you" and other pronounsUse the active voiceAnd use short sentencesThis life skill also involves achieving a goal with our communication. For example, we might wish to inform, persuade, or communicate assertively (Rowan, 2003).Interpersonal relationshipsTo have successful, healthy relationships, we need a variety of social skills. These life skills might include things like sensitivity to nonverbal cues, low fear of rejection, and the ability to easily adapt when moving from one social situation to the next (Riggio, 1986).EmpathyEmpathy refers to our ability to understand and share the feelings of another. When you are empathetic, you put yourself in another person's shoes, make an effort to see the world from their perspective, and feel the emotions that they feel. Coping with stressOur ability to have resiliency in the face of stress is another key life skill. This might involve developing healthy coping skills, engaging in stress management strategies, and using self-care.Coping with emotionCoping with our emotions—for example by tolerating distress and regulating emotions—is another type of life skill. This is especially important for our well-being but skills of this type also have important impacts on our relationships. There are many other important life skills that fall within the larger life skill categories and that are key to well-being. They include the following: Although all of the life skills we've discussed so far are important for people of all ages, we may have an easier time learning specific life skills (and benefiting from them) at different ages. It all has to do with the kinds of challenges we are facing at different times in our lives. A teenager, for example, is dealing with changing hormones, peer pressure, and identity formation. Here are some life skills that might be good for teenagers to focus on:Learning how to say "no"Setting a scheduleAllotting time for adequate sleepTime managementLearning to communicate with adultsTolerating rejectionManaging peer pressureMaking their own decisionsExpressing their true feelingsBeing authenticStress tolerance and reductionMaking new friends Unlike adults and teenagers, kids are just beginning to develop social and emotional skills. Therefore, their focus should be on more basic and fundamental processes that aid the development of more complex life skills later on. Here are few life skills that kids need:Taking the perspective of others Communicating their needs and feelings to othersMaking connections between things (e.g., knowing that the word "ball" represents an item that is a ball.)Making decisions (e.g., choosing what to wear)Self-management (e.g., keeping track of their backpack and keeping their room clean)Creativity (often developed through gameplay)Resilience in the face of challenges (e.g., getting back up on the bike after they fall off)Intrinsic motivation (doing activities simply for enjoyment rather than a reward) It is difficult to build life skills simply by reading about them. Building life skills often involves engaging in activities that require the skill. With time and practice, these activities help you get better at the given life skill. So, here are a handful of activities that can help you build life skills that lead to well-being.Try loving-kindness meditation. Loving-kindness meditation is a type of meditation that focuses on imagining sending love to the self and others. It can help cultivate life skills like compassion, kindness, love, and other important relationship skills. You can try several loving-kindness meditations here.Write a gratitude journal. Writing a journal with lists and stories of the things you're grateful for is a great way to build your emotional coping skills. And, gratitude is one of those skills that actually sticks (Davis et al., 2016). Once you've built this skill, your brain can find it easier to be grateful even when you're not trying. Learn more about gratitude journaling here. Use affirmations. Affirmations are when we say a positive statement, usually about ourselves, out loud. This can help us develop more positive feelings about ourselves, boost our confidence, and improve our sense of self-worth. You can learn how to do positive affirmations here. We've already linked to a ton of other articles on life skills in this article. But here are a few more articles related to building life skills that you might find interesting. Here are some books to explore if you want to learn more about life skills and how to keep building them. There are so many life skills we could build that improve our lives. It can often be hard to know where to start. Generally, we benefit from building the skills we're worst at—that way, we can see the biggest gains. But, if you're having a hard time getting started, just pick something easy and enjoyable. Then you can move on to more difficult life skills later on. Botvin, G. J., & Griffin, K. W. (2004). Life skills training: Empirical findings and future directions. *Journal of primary prevention*, 25(2), 211-232.Carson, J. (2007). A problem with problem solving: Teaching thinking without teaching knowledge. *The mathematics educator*, 17(2).Davis, D. 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