



NEWSLETTER



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How to not melt the couch, and other life skills to teach your kids this summer

by Karen Weese

Until recently, my smart and accomplished 17-year-old neighbor did not know how to use a can opener, and a bright 15-year-old relative recently tried to microwave a plate of spaghetti with a metal fork in it. Another friend's teenage sister tried to mail a letter without a stamp.

It's fun to giggle at these life-skills lapses, but let's be fair: We used to mess stuff up, too. When I was in my 20s, I decided it was too much trouble to drag out the ironing board for just one pair of pants, and instead ironed them on my new couch, which subsequently melted. My friend's mother singed her eyebrows off when a baked potato exploded (she thought the fork holes her own mom put in potatoes had just been for decoration). As a teenager, my friend Pete used the dining room table as a makeshift bench to cut a piece of wood, forgetting that in cutting the board he would also slice off a giant piece of the table. Another friend's grandmother, who went to college in Arizona, was so stymied by laundry that she sent all of it home. By train. To Minnesota. "My sister once called my dad to ask how she would know when the water on the stove was boiling," another friend tells me. "He hung up on her."

These stories made me realize that my kids, ages 10 and 13, won't know this stuff if I don't teach them. So I'm declaring this the Summer of Life Skills, and have created a list of things to cover, with input from other parents.

How to iron. Turns out there's more than one way to mess this up. "My oldest son, who was taught to iron, decided in college that it was a waste of time to use an ironing board, and instead ironed the shirt while it was on him," says Migdalia Rivera. For a refresher on how (and where) to iron, try this video.

How to set the table properly, wash dishes by hand, and load and unload the dishwasher. Also, what soap to use. “I can’t tell you how many times that college students at my work have put dishwashing liquid in the dishwasher,” Katy Clark says. “Bubbles for miles!”

How to use a paper map. My son and I did this one already, by accident. I was driving him to a park across town when both our phones died. We dug out a map from the bottom of the glove compartment, and, after a few hints, he was able to navigate us to our destination. (I’m hoping to repeat this with my daughter, perhaps to a distant ice cream store?)

How to order a pizza using a landline phone. This will ensure that they know how to use a landline phone, how to politely order something over the phone and interact with a delivery person, and how to calculate a tip.

How to mow the lawn. Also, how to identify/pull weeds, and plant/water flowers.

How to do the Heimlich on yourself. Few things are scarier than choking when you’re alone; this video shows what to do.

How to cut up common fruits and veggies without requiring medical attention. Also, how to wash fruits and vegetables properly. (This piece goes over basic knife skills.)

How to shop for groceries. How to compare prices, the value of store brands, how to choose fresh produce, how to interact politely with a cashier and how to bag groceries without crushing the bread. “My friend sits in the car and sends the kids in with money and a short list,” says Ana Kolendo.

How to be a good restaurant customer. How to order from a menu, politely request the check and calculate a tip. Also teach them why you should tip well and be considerate of the server. As Dave Barry said, “A person who is nice to you, but rude to the waiter, is not a nice person.”

How to write — and mail — a thank-you note. What to write beyond “Thank you for the ____.” How to address the envelope properly, write the return address, stamp it and mail it. “I’ve had college-aged interns who didn’t know where to put the stamp,” says Hattie Fletcher.

How to do laundry. What to wash in hot or cold, where to put the detergent, the magic of drying things slightly and then hanging them up (no ironing!). How to fold clothes to pack for a trip. This video is a great laundry primer.

How to shut off the water to a toilet that’s overflowing. Also, how to plunge said toilet, and how to turn off the water at the main household valve.

How to clean the bathroom safely. (Or, why you should not mix bleach and ammonia.) Also, how to scrub the shower, sinks, toilets and floors, and clean the mirrors. Extra credit: Why you should not stand in a puddle of water while blow-drying your hair.

How to tell whether an online article is legitimate. This video provides useful tips on identifying that inescapable fake news.

How to not be a jerk about your cellphone. Why constantly glancing at your phone during a conversation or a meal makes you seem bored and unpleasant. How to turn off/delete unnecessary notifications to maintain your sanity. Why there is no such thing as “private” in any kind of electronic communication.

How to make a few simple meals. Mac and cheese, spaghetti, sandwiches, pancakes and more. For other ideas, check out The Washington Post’s site Voraciously, which helps novices get started in the kitchen.

How to relax when you can’t sleep. I learned this as a drama class warm-up exercise in ninth grade, and only later learned that it is called “progressive muscle relaxation.” This video shows how to do it.

How to chill when you’re freaking out. Start with this list of 14 ways to calm yourself down to help your child acquire this crucial life skill.

How to be a good guest. How to acknowledge your friend’s parents when you enter their home, address all adults as Mr./Mrs./Miss/Ms. until instructed to do otherwise, and try to eat what is put in front you. Also, proper table manners.

How to change the sheets. And how to fold a fitted sheet.

How to recognize the smell of propane and natural gas. Also, what to do when you smell it. These scratch-and-sniff stickers help kids learn how to detect the odor.

How to resolve a dispute. This includes the etiquette involved in writing an email to a teacher, and the value of assuming misunderstanding rather than malice (“I thought maybe this grade was entered by mistake...?”). How to interact with customer service to resolve an issue.

How to make a decision. How to make a list of options, write a pros-and-cons list, ask someone for advice and research alternatives. How to imagine what you would tell a good friend in your situation.

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