How to teach a child a life skill (without doing it for them)

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Show it, do it together, watch, then step back. A four-step way to teach any life skill, from tying shoes to doing laundry, and the ages most kids learn each one.

The quickest way to teach a child a life skill looks like the slowest: show it, do it together, watch them do it, then step back and let them do it badly for a while. Almost every skill a child needs between a first spoon and a first drive can be taught that way, and almost every one goes wrong for the same reason: the grown-up does the hard part, because it's faster.

This week I built Peabody Life Skills: fifty life skills, from using a spoon to a first driving lesson, each one a step-by-step lesson a child can follow on their own. Peabody (peabody.kids) is free through the end of 2026, and Life Skills needs no sign-up at all. Writing fifty lessons in a row meant finding the shape they all share, and that shape is the best answer I have to the question of how to teach one.

Why it's so hard to stop doing it for them

Because doing it yourself works, today. Tying the shoe takes you four seconds and takes them four minutes, the bus is coming, and nobody wants a bed with a lump in it. The cost only shows up later, when a nine-year-old still can't tie a shoe, and by then it's a bigger deal for everyone.

The fix isn't patience in the abstract. It's choosing one skill, picking a time when there's no rush (a Saturday morning, not a school morning), and following the same four steps every time.

The four steps

1. Show it, slowly, in the same order every time. Narrate as you go: "Cross the laces. Tuck one under. Pull." Sit beside them, not facing them, so your hands move the way theirs will.
2. Do it together. Their hands, your words. Or split the job: you do the first half, they do the last step, because finishing feels best. Next time they do the last two.
3. Watch, and say less. This is the hard one. Let them get stuck for a moment before you help, and when you help, point to the step rather than taking over.
4. Step back. Let them do it with nobody watching, and leave their version alone. A bed they made beats a smooth one you fixed, and fixing it teaches them not to bother next time.

Grown-ups who teach for a living sometimes call this "I do, we do, you do". It works for a cartwheel, a load of laundry or a phone call to grandma alike.

Break it into steps a child can hold

A skill feels impossible when it's one big thing and easy when it's nine small ones. Every Life Skills lesson is split into steps of a single sentence each, like these for tying a shoe:

- Step: 1 · What to do: Cross the laces to make an X.
- Step: 2 · What to do: Tuck the top lace under and pull both ends tight.
- Step: 3 · What to do: Make a loop with one lace: a bunny ear.
- Step: 4 · What to do: Make a second bunny ear.
- Step: 5 · What to do: Cross the two ears and tuck the top one through the hole underneath.
- Step: 6 · What to do: Pull both ears out to the sides.

One action per step, said in words a five-year-old knows. If a step needs a paragraph to explain, it's really two steps. When a child gets stuck, it's nearly always on one step, so you only have to re-teach that one.

Make practice something they can count

"Practise your shoes" goes nowhere. "Tie it three times in a row" is a goal a child can see themselves reach. Each lesson ends with a number to count: catches in a row, seconds a yo-yo spins at the bottom of its string, mornings this week the bed got made. Small, honest numbers, written down, show a child they're getting better long before they feel it.

Keep the dangerous part yours

A life skill doesn't have to be handed over all at once. Unloading the dishwasher can start at five while the knives stay a grown-up's job. Scrambling eggs at ten means you stand at the stove the whole time. Some lines don't move with practice: the American Academy of Pediatrics says children should be at least 12 before using a push mower and 16 for a riding one, and Safe Kids Worldwide says children under 10 should cross the street with an adult. In the Skills lessons, every step near a stove, a blade, a road or a bottle of detergent is marked for a grown-up, and Peabody says so out loud before reading it.

When kids usually learn what

Children vary a lot, so treat these as typical ages, not deadlines:

- Age: 1 to 2 · A first skill to teach: Use a spoon and an open cup
- Age: 3 to 5 · A first skill to teach: Wash your hands and get dressed
- Age: 5 to 7 · A first skill to teach: Tie your shoes and make your bed
- Age: 7 to 9 · A first skill to teach: Load the dishwasher and count money
- Age: 10 to 12 · A first skill to teach: Do a load of laundry and make a budget
- Age: 15 to 18 · A first skill to teach: A first driving lesson, with a learner's permit and a licensed adult

The whole list, all fifty with their sources, is in life skills by age, and the household jobs are in chores for kids by age.

What it looks like in Life Skills

Each of the fifty lessons opens on a card: the ages, how long a practice takes, a safety strip and a list of what to gather. A tap starts the steps, one at a time and full screen, with Peabody reading each sentence aloud, so a child who can't read yet can still follow along. "I'm stuck" shows a tip for that step. Thirty-two of the lessons also have a how-to video from another channel, which plays only after a tap, in YouTube's privacy-enhanced player.

For grown-ups there's a skills checklist: pick an age, tick what your child can do, and it shows three to learn next. It prints for the fridge and keeps nothing anywhere but your own device. Kids can try a fifteen-question quiz on staying safe and doing things themselves.

Questions parents ask

What life skill should I teach first?

Whichever one your days are already full of. For a toddler that's a spoon and a cup; for a five-year-old, dressing and hand washing; for an eight-year-old, a chore they can own. One skill at a time, until it's boring, then the next.

My child gives up when it gets hard. What helps?

Shrink the step and the goal. Do all of it but the last step for a week, then the last two. Count small wins out loud, and stop while it's still going well.

Should I pay for chores?

Families split on this. A common middle path is that everyday jobs are part of living in a family, and extra jobs can earn money, which is a good start on a first budget.

Free at peabody.kids/blog/how-to-teach-kids-life-skills