



Life Actually

By Kari Kampakis

Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child

Several years ago, my friend's daughter *really* wanted to be chosen as "Swimmer of the Week" at their country club. It's an honor bestowed weekly to one child per age group in the summer.

Parents will sometimes call the club to request that their child be picked, but my friend didn't want to do that. She wanted her daughter to win the award through hard work and perseverance. And so she told her child, "When you get this award, you'll know you earned it. You'll know I didn't have anything to do with it."

It took her daughter *two summers* to be named "Swimmer of the Week." As you might imagine, she was so proud of herself when her efforts finally paid off. But the biggest surprise came at the summer's end when she received the Coach's Award at the banquet. This award was based on hard work, attitude and performance.

To this day, this child still gets recognized for her work ethic by teachers and coaches. She receives honors like "hardest worker award" and team captain. And while I'm sure her work ethic is part of her nature, I'm also certain that her nurturing at home has played a big role as well.

My favorite parenting motto has always been, "Prepare the child for the road, not the road for the child." The most popular article I've ever written, "10 Common Mistakes Parents Today Make," was based on this philosophy, and based on the response it received online, I believe many parents embrace the same philosophy. Even so, it's hard not to be a Snowplough Parent. It's hard not to clear every obstacle in our children's path so they can be happy *now* — getting what they want exactly when they want it.

But when we constantly clear the road for a child, we make their life too easy. We don't allow them to build life-coping skills they'll need down the road to handle life's hard realities. Because at this point in time, our kids face Little League stress. They face rejection, disappointment, and adversity on a small and age-appropriate level (generally speaking).

One day, however, our kids will experience Big League stress. Their rejection, disappointment and adversity will be adult-sized. And unless they learn healthy ways to cope with Little League stress, and experience the pride and confidence that comes from pushing through an obstacle and emerging stronger on the other side, they'll never be prepared for the Big League.

Our job as parents is to help our kids not need us. We have 18 years to pack their suitcase, 18 years to slowly equip them to handle life as self-sufficient adults. And while love is *irrefutably* the most important gift we give our kids, true love wants what's best for a person long-term. It thinks beyond instant gratification and short-lived happiness. It values character and commitment over trophies and quick fixes.

There is a reason why college administra-

tors often call today's students "teacups" — too fragile to cope with normal life challenges. There's a reason why psychologists are seeing a record number of 20-somethings who are depressed and don't know why, as they claim they had magical childhoods, their parents are their best friends, and they never experienced tragedy or anything more than normal disappointments.

It's because we live in an age of parenting where we do too much for our children. We concentrate so hard on creating magical memories and removing obstacles to keep our kids happy that we oftentimes fail to cultivate qualities like character, patience, perseverance, determination and resolve that they'll need to be happy, successful adults.

The kids I most enjoy watching grow up aren't the ones always in the limelight. No, I have a soft spot for the underdogs, those kids who work harder than their peers because they have to and stay motivated when nobody is watching or cheering them on. Because these kids are building resiliency. They're discovering early that the best way to deal with a brick wall is to learn how to scale it instead of looking around for someone to make it disappear.

I admire my friend for letting her daughter wait two summers to earn "Swimmer of the Week" when a phone call offered an easy shortcut. And I guarantee the pride her daughter feels when she sees that trophy — a symbol of her sweat and tears — is vastly different than the ambivalence she'd have toward a trophy her mom once helped her secure.

It isn't trophies that build a child's self-esteem, but rather *the stories behind the trophies*. After all, when children leave home at age 18, trophies stay on the shelf in their childhood bedrooms. But the stories of how the trophies were earned? Well, those get packed in their suitcase.

Preparing a child for the road means thinking about what their suitcase needs. So as I pack my kids' suitcases with love, faith and affection, I also try to save room for resiliency and character — both acquired by facing obstacles, failures and disappointments. I try to remember that every suitcase needs a healthy mix of warm memories and hard lessons.

Whatever my kids' suitcases contain, I hope they learn to carry them with pride. I hope they represent the security of home *and* the security of knowing they can handle the real world.

Most of all, I hope I can love my kids enough to not make their life too easy. It's a tall order for any parent who wants their child is happy, but one we must all consider in order for our kids to reach their fullest potential as adults.

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