

Dr. Mel Levine at the Menlo Park Terrace School, Metuchen, NJ.



MEL LEVINE

Kids are unprepared for the realities of college and the workplace, says renowned learning expert Mel Levine. He calls it “severe work-life unreadiness” and tells us what you can do to help.

By Jennifer Prescott

When you look at a 10-year-old, do you ever think, “I wonder what he’ll be like when he’s twenty?” Pediatrician and brain researcher Dr. Mel Levine believes that this is not a question for idle contemplation, it’s one we should ask every day. Teachers, he says, have a great impact on how kids will turn out, and they can play a crucial role in setting kids on a productive and successful path.

Dr. Levine, founder and co-chairman of All Kinds of Minds, a nonprofit institute for the understanding of

differences in learning, has gained growing acclaim for his rejection of worn-out “disability” labels such as LD and ADHD, which he has replaced with more thorough diagnoses that measure kids’ aptitudes at a variety of tasks.

In his third book, *Ready or Not, Here Life Comes* (Simon & Shuster, 2005), Dr. Levine talks about the rising number of “start-up adults”—students who emerge from high school or college to find themselves woefully unprepared for the realities of a career. *Instructor* spoke with Dr. Levine about what teachers of all grade levels can do to reverse this trend.

What’s going on today with young adults? How are we failing them?

Our society offers lots of ways to get lost or ambushed along the work-life trail. Role models within a family are an endangered species. We also live in a time when mothers and fathers are



often so fearful that they go out of their way to make sure their kids are sheltered from adversity or hardship of any sort. Additionally, many children aren't equipped with a durable work temperament, having been submerged in a culture that stresses instant rewards instead of patient, sustained effort.

How can teachers help their students better prepare for life down the road?

With a curriculum that addresses the ups and downs of careers and the adult world. Kids ought to be students of adulthood, and read many more biographies. We're seeing a tendency toward children who don't identify with adults.

For example, so much of the really good stuff that gets accomplished, in all different spheres, takes the form of projects. If you're going to put the plumbing into a new house, that's a project. If you're a lawyer taking on a case, that's a project. So, teachers can help kids build what you might call a "project mentality."

In your book, you mention that in a job interview, nobody's going to ask "How are your memory skills?"

One of the problems in our schools is that we place a huge emphasis on memory. When you get out into the career world, memory is one of the least important brain functions there is. Teachers have a wonderful opportunity to teach creativity, problem solving, critical thinking, and what I call evaluation skills: the ability to evaluate products, people, yourself, or ideas in a newspaper editorial. Evaluating job opportunities, for example, is a real survival skill in the adult world.

We should put more emphasis on knowing how to brainstorm, how to become a good problem solver, and how to conceptualize rather than memorize.

How can teachers help kids evaluate opportunities and make good decisions?

Kids ought to find out more about their own strengths and weaknesses. It's what I call "inside insight." It's getting to know



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who you are. We have a curriculum for fifth graders called "The Mind That's Mine," and it helps kids think about their own strengths and weaknesses and actually enjoy having some weaknesses. In a way, realizing your weaknesses might make your strengths stronger.

You often say that kids should find a niche.

If I were a principal, I would ask every kid to pick a topic in third grade and stick with it for three or four years, so that by sixth grade a particular kid has read every book in the library having to do with bees and hornets, for instance. And she's also done some writing, art, and science projects about bees and hornets. When there's a hornet in the girls' room, she's called in for a consultation because she's the local expert. We're not asking her to stop being interested in other things. We're interested in having her practice going in-depth in one thing.

But should young kids already know what they want their career to be?

No, but they should know what interests them and be encouraged to pursue those interests. Learning about animals was my first love. Then I decided to become a physician, but I also really enjoyed doing writing all through school. I also got very interested in philosophy and literature. In a funny sort of a way, my career has pulled together all of those subjects. You often find that an adult's childhood interests converge to give her a career.

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You point out that capable people can fail at work just because of poor social skills.

I've had people work for me who, every time they open their mouths, alienate everybody around them. They have facial expressions that deter relationships. They don't know how to collaborate. They don't know what to talk about, how long to talk, or what tone of voice to use. As a result, they fail in their careers. When a parent says to me, "My child is doing very poorly in school, but she has phenomenal people skills," I say, "Her day will come."

How can teachers help kids learn these important people skills?

We should identify children in elementary school who are not forming good relationships. Make their parents aware of it and also try to work with these kids, give them the feedback they need to improve.

It's difficult to say to a child, "Hey, you lean in really close and you talk loudly in people's faces. Nobody likes it."

That's exactly what you say. And you ask the parents to tell the child, "I understand that you have a tendency to do this." There are only two places where the parents can talk to a child about that: when he's in a car with the seat belt on and when he's in bed in his pajamas. Because if you try to talk about social issues with most elementary school children, they're so sensitive about it, they'll walk away.

Do you think teachers feel pressured to make things fun?

Yes, I do. And I wish they wouldn't. There is an absolute obsession with the word "fun." "I like my second-grade teacher, she's fun." "I like science, it's fun." The criterion for everything is the extent to which it's fun. It's such a stupid word. Why can't we say, "I like my science teacher because he's interesting?" When I go to work in the morning I'm not planning to have a day of recreational activity. But I love going to work because it's so interesting.

I would love a teacher to get up and say, "Okay, this next unit's going to be a lot of work and not much fun. Now

hunker down, you guys, because this is important stuff."

How can teachers begin to use your methods?

A lot of teachers are much further along than they think. Often I hear, "I've been noticing that for a long time, I just didn't know what to call it." Teachers just need

to get into the habit of looking at kids as individuals, to ask questions about every child. Then, they'll be on their way. □

WHAT'S YOUR EXPERIENCE? SEND US A POSTCARD WITH YOUR THOUGHTS ON "WORK-LIFE UNREADINESS." FIVE READERS WILL EACH WIN A FREE COPY OF DR. LEVINE'S *READY OR NOT, HERE LIFE COMES*. FOR DETAILS, SEE PAGE 52.



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