

# PewResearchCenter

FEBRUARY 19, 2015

## The skills Americans say kids need to succeed in life

BY SARA GOO ([HTTP://WWW.PEWRESEARCH.ORG/AUTHOR/SGOO/](http://www.pewresearch.org/author/sgoo/))

What are the best skills for kids to have these days?

In today's technology-driven world, is it best for children to hone their science and math skills to catch up with other countries (<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/02/02/u-s-students-improving-slowly-in-math-and-science-but-still-lagging-internationally/>) that outperform the U.S.? Or is it best for them to be more well-rounded, with strong arts and athletic skills as well? Or perhaps parents should instead focus on encouraging less tangible skills in their kids, such as teamwork, logic and basic communication skills.

([http://www.pewresearch.org/?attachment\\_id=267411](http://www.pewresearch.org/?attachment_id=267411)) Pew Research Center recently asked a national sample of adults to select among a list of 10 skills: "Regardless of whether or not you think these skills are good to have, which ones do you think are most important for children to get ahead in the world today?"

The answer was clear. Across the board, more respondents said communication skills were most important, followed by reading, math, teamwork, writing and logic. Science fell somewhere in the middle, with more than half of Americans saying it was important.

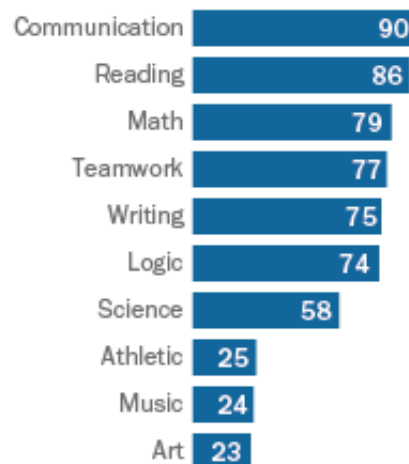
Rounding out the bottom were skills more associated with kids' extracurricular activities: art, music (sorry, right-brained people) and athletics. There was virtually no difference in the responses based on whether the person was a parent of a child aged 18 and younger or not.

But we also found some interesting differences:

- While all Americans were most likely to cite communication and reading skills as most important for today's kids, women were more likely than men to say this. More women said reading skills (88%) matter compared with men (83%), and there was a similar divide on communication skills (92% vs. 88%). On the other hand, men were more likely than women to say that science and math skills were most important. Among men, 63% said science skills were important – a figure 9 percentage points higher than women who said the same. Men were also more likely than women to say that math skills were important (81% vs. 76%).

### The Skills to Succeed

*% saying \_\_\_ skills are most important for children to get ahead in the world today*



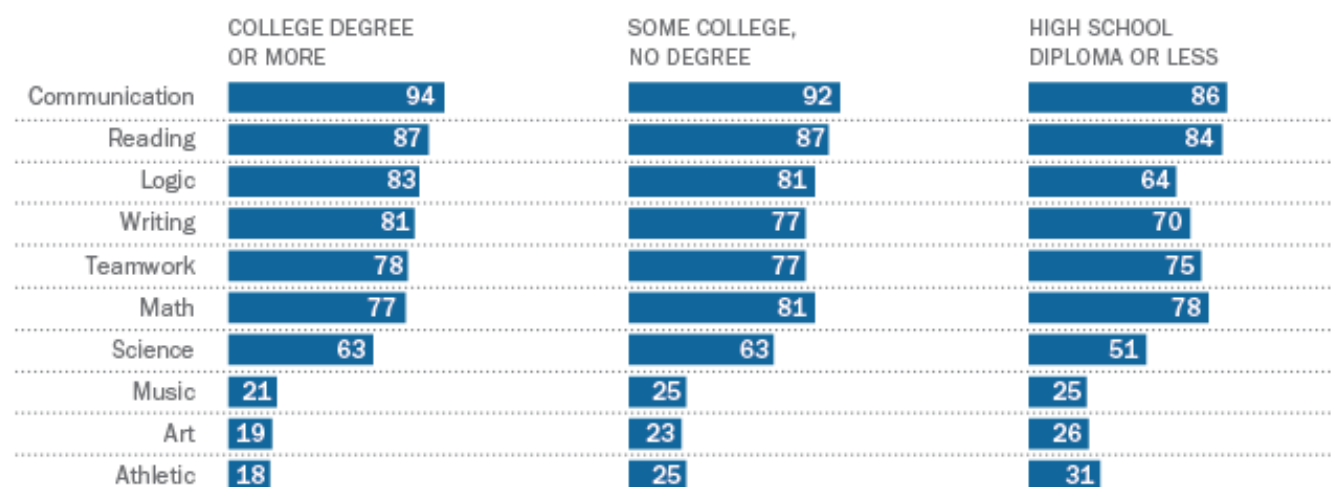
Source: American Trends Panel, Sept. 9 - Oct. 3, 2014. N= 3,154

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

- College-educated Americans were more likely to point to communication, writing, logic and science skills as important when compared with those with a high school education or less. For example, 63% of those with a college degree said science skills were most important, compared with 51% of those with a high school education or less. Some 81% of college grads said that writing skills were most important, compared with 70% among those with a high school degree or less.

## Public Says Communication Skills Are Most Important, But Educational Differences Emerge on Writing, Logic and Science

*% of U.S. adults who say \_\_\_ skills are most important for children to get ahead in the world today, by educational attainment*



Source: American Trends Panel, Sept. 9 - Oct. 3, 2014. N= 3,154

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

([http://www.pewresearch.org/?attachment\\_id=267412](http://www.pewresearch.org/?attachment_id=267412))

- Older Americans, the cohort who are likely to be grandparents of today's children, are more likely than younger adults to say it is important to stick with science and math. Some 64% of adults ages 50 and older say science skills are important to get ahead, compared with just over half (54%) of younger adults. There was a similar gap between older and younger adults when it comes to math skills (83% vs. 74%) and a smaller gap on reading skills (88% vs. 84%). Younger adults put a higher emphasis on logic, with 77% saying it was important for kids to get ahead compared with 71% of adults ages 50 and older who said the same.
- When we looked at differences among adults based on the political party they identify with, there was as much agreement as disagreement about the necessary skills for today's youth. Democrats and

independents were more likely to say science skills were important, with 61% and 59%, respectively, citing that skill, compared with just 52% of Republicans. Democrats and independents also put a higher value on learning about music, a skill that just 17% of Republicans agree would be helpful for kids to succeed.

On the flip side, Republicans (78%) and independents (77%) were more supportive of logic skills, compared with 70% among Democrats.

- There were some slight differences when it comes to race and ethnicity. Compared with others, whites were less likely to say that music, arts and athletics were important for children. On each measure, there was at least a 10 point gap between whites and blacks or Hispanics. For example, 36% of Hispanics and 35% of blacks said arts skills were important to get ahead, but just 19% of whites said the same. Similarly, 42% of Hispanics and 34% of blacks said athletic skills were important, but only 20% of non-Hispanic whites said the same. And about a third of blacks and Hispanics, versus only one-fifth of whites, cited music as an important skill.

*Note: This survey was conducted through Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel*

*(<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/12/how-pew-research-conducted-the-polarization-survey-and-launched-a-new-research-panel/>), a nationally representative panel of randomly selected U.S. adults. The survey was conducted Sept. 9-Oct. 3, 2014, among 3,154 respondents and had a margin of error of 2.7 percentage points. Topline results can be found [here](#)*

*([http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/02/Topline\\_W7\\_panel\\_Q37\\_Oct2014.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/files/2015/02/Topline_W7_panel_Q37_Oct2014.pdf)).*



Sara Goo (<http://www.pewresearch.org/author/sgoo/>) is a senior digital editor at Pew Research Center.

**POSTS** | **EMAIL** | **@SARAKGOO**

---

## 5 Comments



**Josie Holford** • 22 mins ago (#comment-649991)

I wonder what people mean by the skill of communication?

Are they thinking of the ability to answer a telephone at the call center and provide help-desk information? Public speaking? The ability to write clear directions on the machine tool package or on a recipe page?

Or do they mean communication as in the ability to convey information, context and feeling to create meaning in compelling ways that persuade, leave a lasting impression, lead to connection, learning, and changed thinking and behavior? As in effective storytelling for example.

If the latter then of course there is no need to apologize for art and music. It is in studying music and art that these skills are developed.

Quality arts program teach a critical set of intellectual habits and skills that are rarely addressed in the other areas of the curriculum. They are critical because they have been identified as crucial to the students future development as thinkers and people. I.e. communicators.

[josieholford.com/how-the-arts-de...](http://www.josieholford.com/how-the-arts-deepen-student-thinking/) (<http://www.josieholford.com/how-the-arts-deepen-student-thinking/>)

In other news- asking people what they think about anything absent of context, appropriate information and time to think often leads to results that many find distressing and unfortunate. But then the question was about end-result skills. It was not about curriculum content, habits of mind, process, understanding and appreciation.

[Reply](#)



**Doug Shaw** • 1 hour ago (#comment-649990)

Interesting stuff thanks for sharing. I think it's sad that art features so low on the scale. I think we are all artists, our work is our art.

I am curious what kids would have to say about this, any chance you could run the research by asking a group of children what they think? Why should adults know best about what kids need – that is a question I am asking myself.

I often learn useful things from children, for example here's a simple drawing my daughter Keira made to explain 'how to be kind'.

[stopdoingdumbthingstocustomers.c...](http://stopdoingdumbthingstocustomers.com/good-thinking/how-to-be-kind-by-keira/) (<http://stopdoingdumbthingstocustomers.com/good-thinking/how-to-be-kind-by-keira/>)

I can't imagine many adults summing up the question as clearly as this, can you?

Cheers – Doug

[Reply](#)



**Alden** • 16 hours ago (#comment-649975)

Somewhat surprised that reading wasnt scored higher by everyone as with good reading skills you can learn most of the others . My example is came to the U. S. from another country and passed the GED with a grade 8 educ. because i always read a lot and didnt squeak by , lowest mark was 70 . Not bragging, just on reading .

[Reply](#)



**Sara Mayfield** • 18 hours ago (#comment-649961)

I agree with the previous comment. Too many people do not understand our system of government or the history of its development. Additionally, the lack of geographic knowledge of the world and the interconnections that bring change: physical, human, and economic: are not understood by too many people.

[Reply](#)



**Tom Bates** • 19 hours ago (#comment-649957)

I am appalled that social studies was of no consideration. It causes me yet more concern for the future of our once great nation.

[Reply](#)