

“Grown-ups can find the very idea of business terrifying; children have none of these inhibitions...”

The 12-year-old tycoons

KidsMBA founder, Professor Mark Watson-Gandy, explains why children need to learn business skills

School teaches kids many life skills. It teaches them how to add, read and write, about osmosis and savannahs, but school doesn't teach them the know-how and hard skills we will need later in life – things like:

- How to do our books
- How to sell and market
- How to budget
- How to raise finance
- What a company or a partnership or guarantee or a mortgage is, and what legal consequences they carry with them
- How to give good customer service

It is somehow assumed they magically will get this as they step, blinking, into grown-up life. It is hardly surprising that 50 per cent of new businesses fail in the first five years in the UK.

But I can't imagine children would be interested in business, you say. Yet children have no problem negotiating ways to earn extra pocket money. And they trade cards and toys in the school playground.

Yes, but my child is only interested in sport and music. He's not really interested in that sort of thing...

If your child sees his career as a footballer, he needs to know that the reason he gets a million-pound salary is because he is earning his professional life's earnings accelerated into a few short years. Knowing how to budget becomes important, especially when he retires at the grand old age of 32. And it becomes important that he is comfortable about maximising those earnings by, say, striking advertising deals.

Let's suppose after deafening your neighbours with his drum kit, it all takes off. He, or she, will need to know about marketing the group, entering into contracts about concerts and taking on agents, copyrighting and licensing the music and lyrics, collecting royalties, trademarking the band's logo and merchandising. Suddenly it looks awfully like a business.

You can pique even a bored 12-year-old



attention when they realise this is just about how they could get the biggest pay day out of their dreams.

Yes, but isn't a 12-year-old too young to learn this sort of thing?

People seriously underestimate children. Grown-ups can find the very idea of business terrifying; children have none of these inhibitions. If things are new, interesting and exciting, you will capture a child's attention.

The star performer from a KidsMBA course in Ecuador a few years ago was only 10 years old. Between 12 to 15, children are developed enough to understand complex concepts. They are also enjoying a brief respite before they get caught up in GCSEs.

But how can you make something like learning accounts and bookkeeping exciting? Take the child sitting in a lesson with glazed eyes, quite incapable of understanding his teacher's basic lesson. Minutes later, in the playground, the same child is capable of understanding and applying complex rules to play a game with his friends.

If you make the lesson a game, it becomes interesting. If things are made pacey, children don't have time to get bored. If they are doing things, it doesn't feel like they are being taught. Learning becomes discovering. And if children feel they are achieving, they will work harder and you will build their confidence.

So what is the story of KidsMBA?

As an insolvency barrister, I was horrified to discover that many of the businesses I saw failing did so not because they were based on a bad idea but because of basic mistakes. I realised that business skills were so fundamental to succeeding in life; they needed to be taught before children left school.

The course took three years to write and the input of a panel from a range of disciplines, from real-life entrepreneurs to experts in law, education, banking, and accountancy. Today, KidsMBA has licensees in 15 countries.

But is teaching children about business worth spending money on?

As parents, we know that education is the best gift we can give our children. Money gets all too quickly spent. Toys end up discarded and broken. Chocolates and sweets give a fleeting pleasure. Holidays are far too soon a distant memory. But education is a gift that lasts. Our children may not always appreciate it at the time but it gives them something that lasts far longer. And what better gift than helping them have the best chance in life?

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