



DISCOVERY STUDIO

Family Playbook

2026–2027

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Welcome

Welcome to the Discovery Studio at Invictus: An Acton Academy. Discovery is a learner-driven elementary studio designed to equip each young Hero with the work ethic, relationship skills, critical thinking, and self-management needed to become an independent learner.

This playbook explains both the practical operation of the studio and the learning philosophy behind it. It is designed to help families understand the systems, promises, guardrails, and language that support the Hero's Journey.

A shared journey: The Acton model is most effective when Heroes, families, and guides each understand and keep their promises.

How to Use This Playbook

This is a living document. Studio practices may be refined as the community grows and as we learn from experience. Current announcements and time-sensitive updates will be shared through the appropriate communication channels described later in this playbook.

Philosophy of Our Operations

- Freedom for families. Parents, not schools, are in charge of their families, and we trust families to make their own choices.
- Sanctity of studios as learning spaces for Heroes. We protect safety, concentration, learner ownership.
- Sanctity of parent-child relationships. We will not come between you and your child; our systems are designed to return appropriate responsibility to the Hero.

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Our Mission, Beliefs, Promises, and Core Values

Our Mission

Our mission is to inspire each child and parent who enters our doors to find a calling that will change the world.

Our Educational Philosophy

At Invictus, our philosophy is that clear thinking leads to good decisions, good decisions lead to the right habits, the right habits forge character, and character determines destiny.

Our Beliefs

- We believe each child has a gift that can change the world in a profound way.
- We believe in a closely connected family of lifelong learners.
- We believe in learning to learn, learning to do, and learning to be.
- We believe in economic, religious, and political freedom.

Acton Academy Promises

At Acton Academy, we promise each learner will:

BEGIN A HERO'S JOURNEY. Embrace challenges, learn from failure, and make courageous choices.

LEARN TO BE A CURIOUS, INDEPENDENT, LIFELONG LEARNER. Ask questions, solve problems, set goals, track progress, and build the habits of lifelong learning.

DEVELOP A DEEP RESPECT FOR ECONOMIC, POLITICAL, AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOMS. Experience that freedom comes with responsibility and that individual choices affect a civil society.

CHERISH THE ARTS, WONDERS OF THE PHYSICAL WORLD, AND MYSTERIES OF LIFE ON EARTH. Cultivate wonder through art, nature, stories, scientific exploration, and creative expression.

DISCOVER YOUR MOST PRECIOUS GIFTS AND LEARN TO USE THEM TO SERVE OTHERS. Grow in self-knowledge and use unique gifts in ways that bring joy and strengthen the community.

Our Core Values

The principles that shape how we learn, lead, and engage in community

HUMILITY

We remain teachable, seek honest feedback, admit our mistakes, and recognize that we can learn from anyone.

COURAGE

We choose what is right and necessary even when it is difficult, uncomfortable, or frightening.

INTEGRITY

We tell the truth, keep our promises, and take responsibility for our choices and their effects on others.

CURIOSITY

We ask thoughtful questions, examine assumptions, and approach the world with wonder.

SERVICE

We use our gifts to help others flourish and strengthen our community.

Purposeful Growth

By living these values and holding one another accountable to them, we pursue purposeful growth and become who we are called to be.

Family Promises

As a parent at an Acton Academy, I promise to:

Choose A Hero'S Journey For Myself

The Hero's Journey is for everyone, not just our children. Parents commit to embracing challenges, trying again when they fail, rejecting victimhood, and seeking opportunities to learn and grow.

Embrace Acton Academy As A Self-Paced, Learner-Driven Environment

Parents embrace the variability of real learning and trust their child with appropriate responsibility for education, relationships, and community. Character and habits are cornerstones of learning.

Allow My Child To Fail Early, Cheaply, And Often

Failure is an essential part of learning and the gateway to personal responsibility. Rather than removing struggle, parents see their learner as a Hero capable of acting courageously and solving problems.

Celebrate Progress And Reinforce Responsible Choices At Home

Parents remain curious about progress and create home boundaries that support deep work, creativity, rest, responsibility, reflection, and growth.

Hero Promises

WORK HARD AND PLAY HARD. Give my best effort and celebrate life with joy, curiosity, and fun.

MAKE COURAGEOUS CHOICES. Step outside my comfort zone, face challenges with courage, and stand for what is right.

KEEP MY PROMISES AND TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY ACTIONS. Admit honestly when I fall short and accept the natural consequences, learning and growing from each experience.

The Discovery Learning Design

Purpose of Discovery Studio

Equip each young Hero with the work ethic and relationship skills to be an independent learner.

Elementary Studio Philosophy: Real Work + Challenging Games

An Acton Elementary Studio is more like a close-knit neighborhood than a traditional classroom. Heroes choose meaningful work in reading, writing, math, communication, and studio responsibilities, while earning increasing freedom to participate in collaborative Quests, games, Socratic discussions, and community life.

Choice + consequence is central. Each example, recipe, rubric, reward, and natural consequence sharpens the critical-thinking, self-management, and community-building skills needed for the next studio.

Learning to Learn • Learning to Do • Learning to Be

Dimension	Discovery examples
Learning to Learn	Independent Core Skills • goal setting • work habits • self-paced mastery
Learning to Do	Quests • real-world challenges • collaboration • exhibitions • project management
Learning to Be	Character • leadership • responsibility • relationships • self-advocacy • feedback

Build the Tribe: We Go Slow to Go Fast

At the beginning of the year, the studio intentionally invests in relationships, games, systems, promises, guardrails, conflict-resolution processes, and self-governance. Academics ramp up as Heroes learn the tools and routines that support independent work. If your Hero comes home talking about games, learning has already started.

The Role of the Guide

A Discovery Guide is not a traditional teacher or authority figure who supplies answers. The goal is not to make the path easy; it is to equip Heroes to navigate it.

Guide practice	What it means
INSPIRE	Ask Socratic questions, offer meaningful challenges, and give growth-mindset encouragement.
CONNECT	Know the Heroes, build trust, share appropriate vulnerability, and equip leaders.
EQUIP	Offer tools, recipes, rubrics, systems, examples, and choices — not answers.
UPHOLD	Hold broad guardrails consistently and firmly so freedom can safely grow.

“Never answer questions” means guides resist doing a learner’s thinking and problem-solving for them.

Growth Mindset and Growth-Mindset Praise

A growth mindset is the understanding that abilities and character are not fixed: they can develop through effort, effective strategies, practice, reflection, feedback, and appropriate help. It changes a learner’s relationship with difficulty, mistakes, and “not knowing yet.”

Growth-mindset praise draws attention to choices and behaviors a learner can control — courage, persistence, strategy, concentration, initiative, collaboration, reflection, revision, and progress — rather than labeling the child as smart, talented, good, or naturally gifted.

This does not mean praising every effort or offering constant approval. Praise should be specific, honest, and connected to what the learner actually did. The goal is for Heroes to evaluate their own work and take appropriate pride in growth without becoming dependent on adult approval.

Instead of this...	Try this...
"You're so smart!"	"You stayed with that even when it became difficult."
"Good job!"	"What part of that are you most satisfied with?"
"That's perfect!"	"Tell me about the choices you made."
"That was easy for you."	"What helped you succeed this time?"
"I'm proud of you."	"You worked hard for that. How do you feel about your progress?"
"Don't worry — I'll do it for you."	"This is challenging. What could you try next?"
"You got it wrong."	"That strategy did not work yet. What did it teach you?"
"At least you tried."	"What would you keep or change if you tried again?"

A useful reminder: Praise the effort, strategy, courage, reflection, revision, and progress — not the learner's identity or the product alone.

Sample Daily Schedule

Time	Activity
8:30–8:55	Free Time / Arrival
9:00–10:00	Physical Development (PD)
10:00–10:15	Morning Launch
10:15–10:25	Goals
10:25–11:05	Comms Power Hour — reading, spelling, grammar, writing
11:05–12:00	Core Skills — choose your own adventure within badge pathways
12:00–1:10	Lunch / Free Time
1:10–1:30	DEAR / Read Aloud
1:30–1:45	Quest Launch
1:45–3:00	Quest
3:00–3:15	Gratitude / Reflection Journal
3:15–3:30	Studio Maintenance
3:30–3:45	Closing / Namaste

The schedule may shift in response to studio needs, special events, or the work of a particular session.

Core Skills, Goals, and the Badge Plan

Discovery is self-paced. One Hero may advance quickly in reading and need more time in math, while another may show the opposite pattern. We look for growth and mastery rather than lockstep pacing. Lopsided learning is normal, and growth in self-advocacy, conflict resolution, frustration tolerance, or public speaking may require significant energy alongside academics.

Every Learner Is on Their Own Journey

There is no race to reach the Adventure Studio. Some learners are ready for the next studio earlier; others need more time to build the learning habits, independence, maturity, and relationship skills that will help them thrive there. Moving up is not a reward for being “ahead,” and taking more time is not evidence that a learner is “behind.”

We encourage families to step out of the traditional grade-level mindset and resist comparing one learner's timeline with another's. An Acton journey is intentionally individualized. Some Acton learners may ultimately graduate at 16; others may graduate at 19. The goal is not to move through the studios as quickly as possible. The goal is for each learner to become increasingly capable, responsible, curious, and ready for the next challenge on their own unique journey.

Goal Setting and the Badge Plan

Goal setting is itself a skill: set a goal → try → see what happened → reflect → adjust. Planning horizons lengthen over time from daily to weekly, session, annual, and eventually longer-term planning. The Badge Plan is a multi-year roadmap; Journey Tracker makes ownership visible but does not create ownership.

Parents should not create goals for their children. The Hero does the thinking and proposes goals. The parent role is to review, ask questions, ask thoughtful follow-up questions when appropriate, and support accountability without becoming the project manager.

Quests, Exhibitions, and Demonstrating Learning

Quests

Quests are Acton's hands-on, project-based learning experiences. Heroes create, build, experiment, solve problems, collaborate, manage projects, delegate, lead, and work under real constraints. Sometimes the most important learning is not the Quest subject itself, but what a Hero discovers about planning, communication, frustration tolerance, teamwork, or leadership.

Exhibitions of Learning

Each session typically concludes with an Exhibition in which Heroes present work, explain their thinking, answer questions, and receive feedback. Exhibitions are not stage-managed by adults. We want them to reveal Hero learning — including imperfect execution and lessons learned. Guests are expected to offer honest, constructive feedback.

Field Trips: Some Opportunities Are Earned

Invictus is not an “everyone gets a trophy” environment. While some field trips are community experiences for the entire studio, others will be opportunities that learners earn.

The criteria may be connected to an individual challenge, running partners, a squad goal, or a whole-studio challenge. The expectations will be made clear in advance. Not every learner will necessarily attend every earned field trip, and that is okay. These experiences give Heroes a real opportunity to connect effort, choices, teamwork, and follow-through with meaningful privileges.

Other Evidence of Growth

- SMART goals and reflections
- Badges representing mastery and significant milestones
- 360 Reviews / Full Circle Feedback for leadership and citizenship
- Growth in self-advocacy, public speaking, receiving feedback, responsibility, leadership, conflict resolution, resilience, and character

What is easiest to measure is not necessarily what matters most. Academics matter, but we look at the whole learner.

Guardrails, Studio Contract, and Reset System

Studio guardrails are like the guardrails and speed limits on a road: a few firm boundaries allow tremendous freedom inside them. Heroes need room to make choices, experience consequences, repair mistakes, and try again.

Invictus “Big G” Guardrails

- Be kind in your words and actions — no intentional emotional or physical harm.
- Respect property — no intentional destruction of another person’s or the school’s property.
- Tell the truth.
- Treat the Studio as Sacred — do not cause extreme distractions that interfere with the work of the community.

Studio Contract

The Studio Contract is the primary governing document for the Discovery Studio. The community drafts and revisits (and sometimes revises) promises that allow the studio to function as a mini-civil society. Signing the contract is voluntary, but committing to the community’s promises is necessary to remain part of the studio.

Resets Are Not “Bad”

Almost every Hero receives a Reset at some point. A Reset is not a verdict on character. It is a pause, consequence, reflection, and opportunity to learn and try again. Testing boundaries is a normal and healthy part of human development. Sometimes a young person’s job is to test whether a guardrail really holds; our job as guides and parents is to hold it consistently, calmly, and without shame.

Reset Progression

Reset	Consequence / reflection
RESET #1	10–30 minute reset in a designated place. The Hero reflects on the choice and how to prevent a repeat. Parents are only notified of a first Reset if it involved intentional physical aggression.
RESET #2	Reset away from the tribe for the remainder of the day. The Hero strategizes with a fellow Hero and guide and completes a Family Behavioral Check-in at home. Special events may be missed.
RESET #3	Reset at home for at least one full school day. The Hero completes the Family Behavioral Check-in and writes a recommitment letter describing how they will positively contribute upon return.

Three Resets = one Honor Code Violation (HCV). Three HCVs may result in exit from the community at the Head of School’s discretion. Resets begin fresh at the start of each school year.

Celebrating the Return

At Acton, a Hero is someone who gets back up after falling down. The community welcomes repair, recommitment, and return. Mistakes are expected; what matters is what the Hero chooses next.

Communication and Journey Meetings

Each communication tool serves a different purpose. Families are responsible for monitoring Brightwheel, BAND, email, and school text messages and for keeping contact information current.

Tool	Appropriate use
Brightwheel	Brief, immediate learner-specific logistics: absences, early pickups, health information, required forms, and information affecting the learner's day. Not for ongoing conversations about learner concerns.
BAND	Parent-to-parent connection, community announcements, event information and RSVPs, volunteer opportunities, and selected parent education.
Parent Portal	Policies, forms, links, calendars, parent-education materials, and resources families may need throughout the year.
Email	Scheduling a meeting or communicating a specific nonurgent concern that cannot be handled through a brief logistical message.
Text messages	Time-sensitive reminders and urgent schoolwide notifications, including weather-related delays or closures.

Protecting the Guide's Attention

A guide's first responsibility is to the Heroes in the studio. During the school day, guides are observing, Socratically guiding, facilitating launches, and protecting the learning environment. Parents should not expect ongoing Brightwheel or email conversations during studio hours. Please do not pull the guide aside during arrival or dismissal to discuss your child; request a scheduled conversation when discussion is needed.

Parent-to-Guide Boundaries

At Invictus, the primary communication flow is Parent → Learner → Guide — not Parent → Guide. Discovery Heroes are learning to take ownership of their learning, relationships, and problems. When a concern arises, parents should first talk with their learner and help them think through what they can do next. The learner should then communicate directly with the Guide when support is needed.

This protects the learner's agency and keeps the Guide from becoming an intermediary between parent and child. Parents should contact the Guide directly when there is a true safety concern, serious immediate harm, or another situation that reasonably requires adult-to-adult communication. For transparency, Sarah should be copied on parent-Guide email communication.

Parents can support this process by asking:

- What have you already tried?
- Who do you need to talk to?
- What could you say to your Guide?
- What is within your control?
- What do you think your next step should be?

Journey Meetings

Journey Meetings are best held at home between the learner and their parent(s). We have found that learners are often most at ease, open, and reflective when these conversations take place within the parent-child relationship. Families can use the learner's goals, badge progress, Journey Tracker, and reflections to celebrate growth, discuss challenges, and identify areas the learner wants to strengthen.

Parents or learners may also choose to schedule up to two Journey Meetings per school year with the Discovery Guide or Sarah for additional support, perspective, or conversation. We will not discuss a learner with a parent without the learner present, so any Journey Meeting that includes the Guide or Sarah will also include the learner as an active participant.

Logistical Information

Arrival

Drop-off is 8:30–8:55 a.m. Heroes are welcomed with a handshake, eye contact, and greeting. If a Discovery Hero arrives during a Socratic launch, they wait outside the discussion circle until the launch is complete. Being on time protects an important part of daily learning.

If your child has not arrived by 9:00 a.m., we will see them the next school day. Exceptions may be made for extenuating circumstances; contact Sarah through Brightwheel. Please schedule appointments later in the day or during session breaks rather than in the morning whenever possible.

Dismissal

Dismissal is at 3:45 p.m. Discovery Heroes come outside to meet their pickup adult. If someone else will pick up your child, or if early pickup is needed, make sure your child knows and send a Brightwheel message. A Hero must never leave campus without confirmed acknowledgment from the school. Please pick up your learner no later than 3:55 p.m..

Chromebooks and Supplies

Each Discovery learner needs a Chromebook and headphones for online learning platforms. All learners are provided an @invictusleander.org email address, and we ask that all school-related work be completed while signed in to that school account. Devices brought from home must have appropriate safety measures enabled. Invictus also uses safety tools through its Google Education environment. Families should provide a nutritious lunch, snacks, and water bottle daily. Heroes may bring books for DEAR and are responsible for personal belongings.

We prefer that Chromebooks remain at school during the school week so they are consistently available and ready for learning. A learner may take a Chromebook home when they want to continue working on a learning goal or project. Because these devices belong to the family rather than to Invictus, families may choose to have their learner bring the Chromebook home more regularly if they prefer.

Technology Guardrails

- Technology supports learning and is used only on guide-approved sites.
- Carry technology with two hands and use it on a flat surface.
- Use only your own device.
- Put technology away at the designated time and never leave it outside.
- Technology is not used during free time unless specifically approved for learning or Quest catch-up.
- Approved music and recreational learning games depend on current studio systems and earned freedoms.

Technology misuse may result in temporary loss of device privileges according to current studio agreements and systems.

Cell Phones: Cell-Phone-Free Studios

Discovery Studio is a cell-phone-free learning environment. Learners are not permitted to keep or use cell phones in the studio during the school day.

If a learner brings a cell phone to school, it must be placed in the designated cell phone basket upon arrival and remain there until dismissal. This protects attention, relationships, play, and the learner-driven work of the studio.

Health, Attendance, and Safety

Required Records and Screenings

Families must provide a birth certificate and either an immunization record or affidavit of exemption by the first day of school through Brightwheel. Certain health screenings are required based on a learner's age. Families will be contacted when vision, hearing, spinal, or other required screenings are due and will receive instructions for submitting documentation.

When a Learner Must Stay Home or Be Picked Up

- Temperature above 100.4°F
- Vomiting or diarrhea
- An unexplained rash
- Symptoms or behavior indicating the learner is too unwell to participate safely and comfortably

Returning After Illness

A learner may return after being free from fever for at least 24 hours without fever-reducing medication. Learners must also be free from vomiting and diarrhea for at least 24 hours. A learner with an unexplained rash may return once the rash has resolved or a healthcare professional has determined that it is not contagious.

Medications

Any medication administered during the school day must be given directly to a guide by a parent or guardian and accompanied by a completed Medication Authorization Form. Prescription medication must remain in its original pharmacy container, labeled with the learner's name and dosage instructions. Over-the-counter or topical medication must also remain in its original container and may not be administered without written family authorization.

Head and Neck Injuries

Families will receive a Brightwheel notification following any head or neck injury, even when the incident appears minor. If the injury appears significant, the learner shows concerning symptoms, or early pickup may be needed, the family will also receive an immediate phone call. Emergency services will be contacted first when urgent medical attention is required.

Absences

Send a brief Brightwheel message or email if your child will be absent. We recognize that parents, not the school, are responsible for deciding when their child attends. At the same time, we have found that arriving on time and attending consistently supports stronger learning outcomes, relationships, participation in studio systems and collaborative work, and momentum in a learner-driven environment.

Families receiving Texas Education Freedom Account (TEFA) funding are also responsible for complying with any attendance reporting requirements connected to the program. Invictus will maintain attendance records and provide families with the information needed for TEFA reporting. Only families participating in TEFA are required to provide this attendance information for state program accountability.

Family Commitments and Parent Policies

Socratic Socials

At least one parent from each family must attend two of the three Socratic Socials offered each school year.

Family Plan and Family Meetings

Families commit to creating a Family Plan and holding at least one Family Meeting each month. Invictus provides materials and a template to help families begin.

Heroic Parenting Quests

Each family receives a Journey Tracker account to access Heroic Parenting Quests. Approximately three Quests will be assigned during the year. These are designed to guide intentional growth for the family, and families are expected to participate.

Personal Responsibility for Property

Families are responsible for repairing or replacing school property damaged by their learner. Whenever developmentally appropriate, the learner should participate in repairing the harm or making restitution.

Tuition

- Tuition is due in full on the first day of each month.
- A \$10-per-day late fee begins after the fifth day of the month.
- Learners may not attend school if payment has not been made in full by the tenth day of the month.

Parent Concerns

Before contacting the school about a concern, families should review the applicable Parent Policies and Family Promises. In Discovery, communication should generally flow Parent → Learner → Guide: parents should first help their learner identify the problem, consider the tools available, and communicate directly with the Guide when support is needed. Please do not pull the Guide aside during arrival or dismissal to discuss your child. When a true safety concern or another matter reasonably requires adult-to-adult conversation, email to request a scheduled conversation. Approach conversations in a spirit of curiosity and partnership, remembering that context, patterns, and perspectives may exist beyond a learner's retelling or a single moment in time.

Responsibility and Value Creation at Home

Over time, we have noticed that learners and families who align most naturally with the Acton model often give children meaningful responsibility at home. These learners are accustomed to contributing to the family through regular chores or responsibilities rather than experiencing the home primarily as a place where adults do things for them.

We also see value in allowing children to work for some of the extras they want. A child does not need to be given every special item, experience, or upgrade simply because they ask for it. Earning money, creating value, saving, making trade-offs, and purchasing some of their own special things can build ownership, competence, resourcefulness, gratitude, and an understanding that effort creates value.

For families interested in practical ideas for cultivating this mindset at home, we recommend the book *The Value Creation Kid*.

Limited Recreational Screen Use and Delayed Gratification

We have also found that learners tend to get more from the Acton experience when recreational screen use at home is limited. Highly stimulating, instantly rewarding entertainment - especially endless scrolling, short-form video, social media, gaming, and passive television viewing- can easily crowd out boredom, reading, outdoor play, face-to-face relationships, creative work, and the practice of sticking with something difficult.

The research in this area is still developing and not every kind of screen use affects every child in the same way. However, excessive digital-media use has been associated with difficulties in attention, self-regulation,

sleep, well-being, and learning, and short-form video viewing has been linked in adolescent studies with lower sustained cognitive performance and academic delay of gratification. For this reason, we encourage families to be intentional about the amount and type of recreational media their children consume.

Just as important is giving children regular opportunities to practice delayed gratification. We live in a world where many desires can be satisfied almost immediately - fast internet, on-demand entertainment, autoplay, one-click purchases, and algorithmic feeds that deliver something new every few seconds. Developing brains are especially responsive to reward and novelty, while the systems involved in mature self-control are still developing. Children therefore benefit from real-life practice of waiting, saving, working toward something over time, tolerating boredom, and persisting when the reward is not immediate.

At home, this might look like saving for a desired purchase, earning privileges through contribution, waiting for a planned family experience rather than immediately replacing it with another form of entertainment, completing responsibilities before recreation, or simply protecting regular stretches of life from constant digital stimulation. These are small ways to strengthen patience, attention, perseverance, and the capacity to work diligently toward something meaningful.

Helpful Online Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics: [How to Make a Family Media Plan](#) - practical guidance for setting family media boundaries and screen-free times.
- [The Lost Art of Boredom: How Screen Time is Killing Creativity](#)

Parent Tools: Coach, Don't Rescue

Empathy does not require taking ownership of the problem. Begin by listening. A simple response such as "That sounds frustrating" can communicate care without immediately deciding who is right or what should happen next.

A useful question is: "Do you want me just to listen, or would you like help thinking through what you could do?"

Role	Typical response
Rescuer	Fixes • explains for the Hero • removes consequences • takes ownership
Coach	Gets curious • asks a few useful questions • returns ownership
Challenger	Names reality • holds the boundary • believes the Hero can do hard things

Before the Guide: Studio Tools

- 3B4G: Brain, Book, Buddy — then Guide
- Peace Table / conflict resolution
- Town Hall: issue + proposal
- Hero Bucks and studio accountability systems
- Appeal or improve the system when something feels unfair
- Direct self-advocacy and fellow travelers

Discomfort is not the same thing as danger. True safety concerns require adult intervention. Ordinary frustration, conflict, unfairness, and struggle often contain the very experiences through which competence, agency, resilience, and antifragility grow.

Monsters on the Parent Hero's Journey

Acton Parents are on a Hero's Journey, too. Sometimes the hardest part of a learner-driven environment is noticing the “monsters” that tempt us to rescue, rush, compare, or take over a journey that belongs to our child. Naming these patterns can help us respond with greater awareness and courage.

The Monster of Control

The urge to manage outcomes, solve problems, direct relationships, or make sure our child's journey unfolds the way we think it should.

The Monster of Perfection

The belief that mistakes, messy work, resets, disappointing exhibitions, or poor choices mean something has gone wrong. At Acton, these experiences often become the raw material for growth and transformation.

The Monster of Comparison

The temptation to measure our child against another learner, a sibling, a traditional grade-level expectation, or an imagined timeline. Comparison can pull our attention away from the learner's own growth and unique journey.

The Monster of Impatience

The desire to speed up growth because we can already see what our child could do if they would simply make a different choice. Ownership, maturity, and self-direction develop through experience and often take longer than adults would prefer.

The Monster of Projection

The tendency to view our child's experience through the lens of our own childhood wounds, fears, failures, or unresolved experiences. A situation that feels especially threatening or painful to us may not feel the same way to our child. Before stepping in, it can help to ask: “Is this about my learner's experience, or is something from my own story being activated?”

The goal is not to become a detached parent. It is to notice when one of these monsters appears, get curious about what is driving our reaction, and choose a response that strengthens rather than replaces our learner's agency.

Parent Coaching Question Bank

Use one or two questions that fit the moment. The goal is not to interrogate your Hero or lead them to your preferred answer; it is to help them think while keeping ownership of the problem.

Start with empathy

- What happened?
- How are you feeling about it?
- Do you want me to listen, or help you think through options?

Clarify the problem

- What part of this is actually bothering you?
- Whose problem is this?
- What do you wish were different?
- Is this unsafe, or is it uncomfortable?

Return ownership

- What do you think you can do next?
- What part of this is in your control?
- What choice did you make?
- What would you do differently if you could replay it?

Remember studio tools

- What tools do you already have?
- Have you tried 3B4G?
- Is this something for the Peace Table, Town Hall, an appeal, or direct conversation?
- Who could you ask for help without handing them the problem?

Look for another perspective

- What do you think the other person might say happened?
- What information might you be missing?
- Could two things be true at the same time?
- What promise or guardrail might be involved?

Move toward action

- What is one courageous next step?
- When will you do it?
- What will you say?
- What will you do if your first strategy does not work?

Reflect and grow

- What did you learn from this experience?
- What worked? What did not?
- What would you keep or change next time?
- What are you proud of in how you handled this?

Remember: sometimes the most powerful response is not another question. Listen, validate the feeling, express confidence, and allow the Hero time to decide what to do.

How to Engage Your Learner

Curiosity is different from monitoring. The goal is to communicate: “I am interested in your journey,” not “I am managing your journey.” Choose questions naturally and allow conversation to unfold. Some learners talk more while riding in the car, walking, cooking, or doing another activity together.

- Was there a time you felt pushed out of your comfort zone this week? Tell me about that.
- What do you think was the most important work you did today? Why did you choose that?
- Tell me about something that made you laugh in the studio today.
- What book are you reading for DEAR or a badge book? Would you recommend it? Is there a book you would like us to read together?
- What writing/communications challenge are you working on this week?
- What is your biggest challenge in Quest this week?
- How have you shown kindness in the studio today?
- Who has shown kindness to you?
- Where do you think you — or your studio — were at your best today? What do you want to do better tomorrow?
- Which Core Skills goal did you focus on today?

- Tell me something you failed at today. How did you feel about it? What would you do differently?

It can help to share about your own week, including your own struggles, courage, failures, and growth. Keep the conversation relational rather than turning it into an interrogation. A learner who is naturally more reticent does not necessarily need to be “fixed.”

Parents on a Hero's Journey

By Jeff Sandefer

Below are answers, testimony and tips gathered from Acton parents and owners all over the world to equip and inspire you on your Hero's Journey as a parent:

What should I do as a parent if my Hero has an issue in the studio?

Great question. Our goal is to arm heroes to solve their own problems, without parental intervention. So:

1. Ask your hero for permission to become involved before you do anything.
2. Resist the temptation to email a Guide or Head of School unless it is a matter of serious, immediate harm. ** Guides are asked not to respond directly to parent emails, but to follow a process that equips the hero to solve his or her own problem**.
3. **Ask your hero whether they should approach another hero, the Tribe, a Guide, or the Owner with the issue and help them frame the issue in a positive light.**
4. If the issue remains unresolved, offer your hero choices rather than directing the next step. Ask whether they would like to write an email to the Tribe and copy the Guides, expressing the concern and a proposed remedy, or put the issue on a Town Hall slip so it can be discussed by the studio at the next Town Hall.
5. If the issue is a personal one between heroes, ask your hero to initiate a Conflict Resolution. If they need support, encourage them to ask or email a Guide.
6. If the issue is serious and remains unresolved, a hero may call for everyone involved to meet to address the issue, and parents are welcome to observe but not participate. We've found requiring everyone to be in the same room discourages mixed messages and triangulation, and often de-escalates issues.

What if my hero is unhappy?

Our promise is to equip and inspire your hero to find a calling that will change the world. Struggles and difficulties are part of the journey.

We are encouraged by research showing we all have a natural set point for happiness, and tend to revert to that level no matter what the circumstances – so chasing happiness often is a dead-end journey. An Acton Academy focuses on long term satisfaction and fulfillment rather than momentary happiness.

As parents, we've found our heroes grow most when we comfort them and listen empathically, validate the feelings, but do not try to solve the problem ourselves or allow blame to be cast on others. "I hear you. That must be so hard. I trust you to find a way to solve this on your own and can't wait to hear how you did it" seem to be the most powerful words we can use as parents.

If your goal is to have a child who is happy all the time, an Acton Academy may not be the right place for you.

What if my hero is facing a problem that makes me especially anxious?

Our heroes take extremely difficult situations in stride every day, it's life. Most of our hearts would break if we knew the challenges heroes quietly and bravely overcome.

We've found that when an event makes us especially anxious – like social anxiety or bullying --- it is more likely about an unresolved issue we faced in childhood than a problem our hero is confronting. However, once a hero senses our concern, he or she may consciously or unconsciously return to the topic, because it brings attention and comfort.

So, if a situation makes you particularly angry or anxious, before reacting ask: "Is this more about me or my hero?"

I'm very frustrated because I keep emailing Guides and never receive an answer or resolution.

Guides are equipped never to come between a hero and their parents. Our job is to let parents parent; let heroes learn to solve their own problem in a safe environment; and as Guides ensure the guidelines and processes the heroes create are respected and not altered.

All emails sent to any one Guide or Owner are immediately copied to all Guides for transparency and so everyone is on the same page. Plus, we keep track of the number of emails we receive from each family. As a yardstick, the average Acton Academy parent sends one or less emails a year about a specific incident regarding a hero.

Why can't you force my hero to _____?

Many of us wish our hero would spend more time on handwriting or spelling or Math, and when he doesn't, long for a learning community or school to require the behavior.

Unfortunately, learning doesn't work this way. Someone has to want to learn, if deep learning is to occur.

We've found that Growth Mindset language and praise – and most of all patience – work better than criticism. We also have systems at Acton Academy to reward hard work and growth by rewarding effort (Weekly Points), excellent work (Badges) and leadership (Full Circle Feedback) with more freedom.

What if my hero simply refuses to work hard?

This is a difficult question, because human motivation remains one of the great unsolved mysteries.

Our studio systems, modeled after companies like Google, are designed to reward effort, excellent work and leadership with more freedom. For those struggling, increasingly higher amounts of effort and goodwill to remain in the studio. We even offer ways to provide grace and a chance to start over.

When we still see motivation issues as parents, the three most likely suspects are:

Distraction: Is your hero, like most, drawn into social media, games, web surfing or other types of cheap distraction?

If so, as a parent, you may need to strictly limit access to these distractions. While extrinsic rewards have their limits, some parents have found tying electronic access to Weekly Points will increase motivation.

When in this situation, we often ask ourselves if we are fiddling with our own iPhones instead of paying enough attention to those around us.

Resistance: Sometimes it just takes courage to take the first step. Encouragement and modeling are a powerful tool here, and we would highly recommend *The War of Art* by Stephen Pressfield, perhaps even listening to it on the way to school for older heroes (there is a bit of racy language, but only in a few places.)

We often ask ourselves when we see resistance in our heroes, when was the last time we took a difficult and courageous first step in front of our family?

Victimhood: Often heroes gain attention and solace by playing the part of the victim, and almost all families have some form of the [Dreaded Drama Triangle](#). We highly recommend listening to the book, *The Power of TED*, as a family or watching the videos, and committing to use the language of empowerment instead.

At the very least, while being empathetic we refuse to allow our heroes to blame others or circumstances. If you were born in America and attend an Acton Academy, the lament that "life is unfair" rings hollow.

When Victimhood is the issue, we ask if we are modeling negative or blaming language ourselves, or playing the part of a Rescuer or a Persecutor.

What if my hero gets a third reset and has to spend a day at home?

If our hero has to go home for a day, this is a powerful opportunity for deep learning. Everyone makes mistakes, including harming others, but when discovered and called-out, it gives us a chance to encourage deep introspection.

As parents, we've found it far more powerful to reexamine our Family Mission and Plan, look explicitly at facing resistance; remove distractions and disavow the Victim.

What if I'm worried about how my hero is progressing?

More important than measurements on a hero's journey are the questions a parent asks a child every day. One of our parent's nights culminated in a list of powerful questions we can ask our young heroes to prepare them with the character to embark on a hero's journey. Here is that list:

Questions that seek understanding:

- "What's the best thing that happened today?"
- "What's the most challenging thing that happened today?"
- "What did you discuss at launch this morning?"
- "Did you learn anything new about yourself or your calling today?"
- Asking "Why?" Listening, then asking again. Variation: "Why do you think...?"

Questions that discover and reinforce heroic character:

- What did you do that was hard today?
- What did you do that was kind today?
- What did you do that was [character trait] today?
- What did someone do to you that was [character trait] today?

Questions that follow up on challenges or goals:

- "What goals did you set today?"
- "Did you submit that town hall request today?"
- "Did you ask [name] to go the the peace table today?"
- "Did you ask someone for a hero buck today?"
- "Did someone ask you for a hero buck today?"

Quests are like dessert. If your hero is struggling, verify that the required effort is being put into Core Skills first.

What if my hero says she just can't learn from Dreambox/Lexia/Khan? (or another adaptive online program)?

Many parents worry that without a teacher it's impossible to "learn math." We've found just the opposite: Khan Academy is incredibly powerful and requires users to learn to think critically, from a number of perspectives, mastering a far broader set of mathematical approaches.

In contrast, many traditional math teachers simply ask students to repeat a limited number of simple algorithms as homework. And despite what we might hope, seldom do traditional schools deliver powerful theoretical insights.

Heroes who have a hard time with Khan Academy typically struggle because they do not do the work or refuse to watch the videos. It is likely they would find the lectures of most traditional math teachers even more boring.

So, if your hero is struggling, start by making sure she is spending 45 minutes a day, every day. Encourage her to watch the videos, every time, and only afterwards to seek Socratic help in the studios. We've also found as parents that sitting beside a hero who is doing Khan provides encouragement.

Why don't heroes have teachers at an Acton Academy?

Heroes at an Acton Academy have access to all the great teachers in the world, from Sal Khan to Richard Feynman to a YouTube video to the squad mate sitting beside them. We equip heroes to hire or engage a teacher whenever they need one, rather than to be captive to a boring teacher-as-authority figure.

Young people are so accustomed to being under the authority of adults that we have found it impossible to have a Guide serve as both a Socratic role model and an authority figure, which is why guides simply do not answer questions. This, however, does not mean that guides do not offer support. We use Growth Mindset language and respond with challenging, thought-provoking questions to empower heroes to find the answers to their questions.

Teaching and learning are not the same thing. Our main job is to provide the inspiration, tools and processes for heroes to solve the difficult challenges we offer, until he is ready to find his own challenges.

Why don't we teach science like a regular school? What if my child learns an erroneous concept or principle?

Science taught in traditional schools – textbook memorization and repeating tired experiments -- bears little resemblance to science in the real world.

While it might make us feel better to have our child make an "A" on an AP Biology exam by correctly repeating scientific jargon and facts, any knowledge tends to be ephemeral. Our approach is much more a "learning to do" process to encourage deep learning.

If your hero claims he is missing basic concepts, it's likely he is skipping important links and simulations in a challenge, and would be just as likely to tune out in a science lecture. We like to ask our hero about how a Quest is going, and use those discussions to generate more interest.

Occasionally, a hero will misstate an important principle. Of course, this happens in traditional classrooms as well, and easily is corrected in time if you are interested in the subject. Most world class scientists, like Richard Feynman, do not focus on being right, but rather posing powerful questions.

Why aren't exhibitions more polished, with a clear presentation of all the information that's been taught during the session?

In Exhibitions it is the responsibility of heroes to deliver an excellent value for parents and guests, so our events are not stage managed by adults. We ask parents and visitors to offer frank criticism as well as praise and to direct it to their heroes and his or her peers.

What if I don't understand a studio system like Badges, Hero Bucks, or Freedom Levels?

First, ask your hero. If your hero says she doesn't understand the system, it's more likely she just doesn't want to discuss it. Heroes are more than happy to explain how the studio works to newcomers.

Next, commit to complete one of the Heroic Parenting Quests to answer your own question or read through one of your hero's badges versus the requirements.

How do I know my hero will succeed at an Acton Academy, especially when it's hard?

We believe almost any young person can succeed at an Acton Academy, and more importantly, the heroes agree.

The key question is whether we are committed to our own Hero's Journey as parents, which means trusting our heroes to solve their own problems, even when the world seems unfair. The future of Western Civilization may well depend on it.

I hope you enjoy what we've learned together so far, and look forward to many more adventures ahead.

Closing

Discovery is a place where Heroes practice becoming capable, curious, competent, courageous, responsible, and increasingly independent members of a tribe. We are grateful to partner with families who are willing to choose their own Hero's Journey, trust the process, hold the guardrails, coach rather than rescue, and let their children do the growing.

We do not invite families to an easier journey. We invite them to embark on a heroic one.