Interview with Emre Dalkılıç

"The Modern Student's Guide to Discipline, Goal-Setting, and Digital Balance"

Emre Dalkılıç
BMind App Co-Founder, Researcher, Author

What defines a successful student? What are the important factors in success?

A successful student is not someone who only focuses on their career while neglecting communication, socialization, and relationships with their family. Instead, we can define successful people as those who develop themselves both in career and in interpersonal communication, social life, and hobbies. Since we are fundamentally social beings, **working hard on a career while having poor communication with people is not sustainable; it also brings unhappiness and psychological problems.**

In my opinion, the competencies required to be a successful person have not changed for hundreds of years. Those who possess these qualities are still the ones who succeed. **We can define them as discipline, goal-setting, and perseverance.** For example, the main factor that distinguishes a student with good grades from others is discipline— and this is not only valid for students, but also for institutions and countries. The most successful schools are those that stand out with their discipline, and the most successful countries, such as Germany, Japan, and even the USA, are also known for their discipline.

Another indispensable factor is having goals. Even if you are disciplined, if you don't have a goal, it is very difficult to succeed in any area—let alone succeed, it's hard to even hold on to any job. The saying "No wind helps a ship that does not know its destination" is one of the best ways to explain the importance of goal-setting. Many psychological studies conducted in different countries have confirmed this: **people who set and write down their goals are much more successful than those who do not.**

Finally, let's talk about perseverance. We can define perseverance as the combination of being steadfast and working tirelessly. The idea that perseverance is even more important than intelligence is a concept that entered our lives only 10–15 years ago. In the USA, a psychologist named Angela Lee Duckworth developed a test and showed through various studies in different contexts that **successful people are not necessarily the most intelligent, but the most persistent.** That's why my most frequent advice to families and young people is: do not praise your child's intelligence or beauty, but praise their effort. Even if they fail, emphasize that what matters is that they tried.

How can goals be set and discipline developed? We know that the increase in time spent on digital media has a direct impact on lowering young people's success; how can this be prevented?

Setting goals fundamentally starts with knowing what you want—what do I want to be, what do I want to achieve? Psychologists have developed a set of 30 questions about self-awareness and understanding what you want. For example: Do I like money? Who is my role model? What is the thing I enjoy doing even when I'm tired? Based on such questions, determining what you want is important.

After that, you need to write down your goals. This is a very important step. A Harvard University study asked participants if they wrote down their goals. Those who did were seven times more successful than those who had goals but did not write them down. And these goals should not be general—write them specifically and break them down into months, working step-by-step toward them. Also, it's important not just to write them and put them aside but to read them regularly to keep motivation alive.

Developing discipline is something that should start at a young age (around 4–5 years old). The good news is that children are naturally ready for structure and discipline. For example, if you tell a child "we're not going to do this" and then say the opposite the next day, they might respond, "But you said we wouldn't do that." Child psychology loves order and is not open to surprises.

That's why instilling certain routines from an early age will be the first step in teaching discipline. For example: waking up at a certain time, having breakfast at a certain time, studying at set hours after school. But the family also needs to follow these routines; otherwise, the child will stop doing them. Remember, children imitate you above all else.

Digital media has become one of the most serious problems not only for young people but also for adults. From reducing attention span to killing brain cells, its damage is serious. But the basis of addiction psychology is this: when an addiction ends, it needs to be replaced by something else. Think about it—people now spend an average of 4.5 hours a day on digital devices. If all screens suddenly disappeared, what would people do during those 4.5 hours? Most would probably develop another addiction. In the 1990s, people complained that young people spent too much time at coffeehouses playing card games. If screens disappeared today, many would go back to coffeehouses, and then people would complain about that. That's why the important thing is to replace screen time with a hobby they enjoy. This could be a sport, a musical instrument, ceramics, painting—anything.

And one last thing: the world's smartest engineers and psychologists are working at companies like Google, Apple, and Facebook to make us more addicted to our phones and social media. Their goal is to increase screen time. So it's not about lacking willpower; this is a global societal problem. Also, especially with young people, you can't solve it by scolding them, punishing them, or taking their phone away. As I mentioned, the smartest people in the world are working in this field.

How should the study environment be organized and access to technological devices be managed?

The study environment must be set up with absolutely no distractions—no TV, tablet, or phone. Noise and distracting views also negatively affect the study space.

Access to technological devices depends on the individual and their level of addiction. For example, one of Turkey's top-scoring students I interviewed said they studied for 8 hours during the summer and only checked their phone for 15 minutes after 4 hours of studying. For such a person, it's not a big problem to keep the phone nearby. But recent studies show that even if a phone does not receive notifications, or even if its screen is turned face down, it still distracts and reduces performance on the task at hand.

That's why my recommendation is not to keep the phone in the study room at all. Put it as far away as possible in the house. This is called the 8-second rule: if you don't want to do something, place it at least 8 seconds away from you. Another method is to delete distracting apps (Instagram, WhatsApp, games, etc.). Without notifications, it's much easier to concentrate.

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How can young people transfer school success to life success, and how can they set boundaries with technology to develop social skills?

I think it's more important to balance school success with life success rather than to transfer one to the other. **Life success is just as important as school success.** This can be achieved with family supervision and without losing discipline. Since it is known that in adolescence, the logical part of the brain is not yet developed and young people are pleasure-oriented, balancing study time with time spent on hobbies and friends can only be achieved through discipline and serious time management.

Setting boundaries with technology will become much easier if they find a profession they love and have a hobby. The brain's functioning is connected to the release of happiness hormones. Phones trigger these hormones artificially through notifications and messages. If we help young people find true happiness in sports, music, theater, painting, or similar areas, their screen time will decrease. Similarly, if they have goals in a field they love and have written them down, their phone usage will decrease because they will be getting serotonin from other sources.

How can students benefit from artificial intelligence positively, and how can they set limits?

Artificial intelligence is a very new field with many regulations yet to be established, so it still has a long way to go. Benefiting from it positively is also related to the brain. Like all muscles, the brain is made up of cells that develop when exercised and challenged. **Using AI for tasks that require your own thinking can be very harmful.** A recent study in the USA showed that when young people used ChatGPT, no brain activity was observed, whereas those who learned by writing and studying had significant brain activity—as it should be.

My recommendation is that young people use AI as an assistant but make all decisions themselves in areas such as decision-making, analysis, and strategic thinking. Setting limits varies from family to family, but a total ban would be the worst scenario.

How can families and teachers help young people set these limits?

Families and teachers should definitely work together on this. For example, all generative AI sites (ChatGPT, DeepSeek, Claude AI, etc.) keep records of past queries. This way, it can be checked whether homework was done with generative AI. If a teacher asks a question in class similar to one given as homework, those who actually did the homework themselves will be able to answer easily, while those who didn't will struggle. On the other hand, in China, AI teachers have already been developed. They can adapt their style based on the student's learning status and mood. I think such applications, when used together with a real teacher, can be very beneficial for student development.

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Emre Dalkılıç is a graduate of Eskişehir Osmangazi University. During his university years, he won three scientific article awards in the field of economics—two among university students and one at the national level. He has volunteered with various non-governmental organizations, where he has served and continues to serve as a Board Member, Founding Board Member, and Advisory Board Member.

In 2004, Dalkılıç began his career as an editor at TurkishTime magazine, conducting hundreds of interviews in Turkish and English with some of the world's and Turkey's leading economists, politicians, and business leaders. He has worked as an editor, managing editor, and editor-in-chief at various magazines. From 2014 to 2019, he served as Turkey correspondent for AIM Group, one of the most renowned global companies in media research, based in the United States. His articles there were read by top executives of technology giants such as Facebook, Google, Yahoo, and Microsoft, as well as newspapers like The New York Times, The Sun, and Herald Tribune.

Dalkılıç is also the author of Nasıl Kazandılar? (How Did They Succeed?), a book analyzing Turkey's top university entrance exam scorers from 2000 to 2020. He delivers seminars about the book to families and students in schools and at various events.