

What Parents Can Really Do to Help Prepare Their Teens for Success

While reading about the student-led climate protests last week, a statement jumped out at me from the 16-year-old Swedish activist, Greta Thunberg, who is credited with launching the walkouts that occurred in over 100 countries. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Thunberg, who says she was a shy but good student who was overcome for years with adolescent depression, claims that her climate work has added fulfillment to her life. She says: “I’m happier now...I have meaning. I have something I have to do.”

Teenagers Crave Purpose

Regardless of how you may feel about climate activism, the key message to parents is that school can be stifling and anxiety-inducing for many teenagers who crave and need meaningful work. Adolescents are meant to come of age within the adult world, surrounded by a diverse group of mentors and engaged in authentic, real-life pursuits. This gives them both experience and personal reward.

Instead, teenagers today are spending more of their time confined in school and school-like settings than ever before. Teenage employment has plummeted, with part-time jobs abandoned in the all-out quest for academics and college admissions. Summer jobs, once a signature activity for teens, are no longer valued. Schooling has become the priority—even in summer. In July 1985, only ten percent of US teens were enrolled in school; in July 2016, over 42 percent were.

Thunberg also isn’t alone in her teen depression. Mounting data show skyrocketing rates of adolescent anxiety, depression, and suicide over the last decade. Some researchers point to technology and social media as the culprit, but they ignore other, recent cultural trends—like more time in forced schooling and less time engaged in jobs and meaningful work—that could be contributing to adolescent strife.

Job Experience Could Be A Solution

In a recent Harvard EdCast podcast interview, Julie Lythcott-Haims, former dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising at Stanford University and author of the book, *How to Raise an Adult*, said that she has heard from several admissions officers that they, regrettably, rarely see work experience described in student essays or otherwise touted on college applications. Young people and their parents now believe that academics and extracurriculars are more important than good, old-fashioned teenage jobs.

Not only is this increased emphasis on school over work likely contributing to teenage

angst and disenfranchisement, but it is also not serving them well for the adult world they will ultimately enter. A report by the US Chamber of Commerce Foundation revealed that employers are disappointed that today's highly-schooled graduates lack basic proficiency in simple tasks like drafting a quality email, prioritizing work, and collaborating with others. Other studies have found similar results, with employers frustrated by their new hires' lack of communication skills, poor problem-solving and critical-thinking abilities, and low attention to detail.

While parents and teachers may think that piling on academics is the key to adult success, the lack of genuine work experience can be more hindrance than help for today's young people. If parents really want their children to have a meaningful and successful adolescence and adulthood, they should consider trading a well-schooled life for a well-lived one. They can encourage their teens to get jobs and gain beneficial work experience—and make sure that their kids handle it all independently, learning through trial and error. As Lythcott-Haims warns in her book:

Helping by providing suggestions, advice, and feedback is useful, but we can only go so far. When parents do what a young employee must do for themselves, it can backfire.

In addition to encouraging part-time work, parents can also help their teenagers to develop an entrepreneurial mindset that focuses on customer satisfaction and value creation. By looking at her job (even if it's in retail or food service) from an entrepreneurial perspective, a teen can learn a lot about business and value-creation and may be inspired to become an entrepreneur in adulthood. Unfortunately, entrepreneurship is woefully neglected in schools and standard extracurriculars.

As parents look ahead to summer vacation, they may want to pause and take a closer peek at their teenager's plans. Will she spend those warm months getting ahead on her AP classes? Will he do a foreign language immersion program that will look good on the college transcripts? Maybe getting a job or learning how to think like an entrepreneur would be a more beneficial and rewarding way to enjoy a summer—and a life.