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Giving Teens a Safe, Sane, Productive Summer

Kids in the Summertime

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As I reflect upon my youth and those lazy days of summer, I have fond memories of staying out late, spending hours by the pool, and making many phone calls to determine the when and the where of my next nightly activity. Yes, those were simpler times without worries of curfew laws, skin cancer and Wi-Fi access.

However, as I further ponder those three months of freedom, I realize that my days were not truly carefree. There was work, summer college courses and deep debates with my parents about sleeping too late. And only because of the wisdom that I have now, I see that my parents were right! They 'made' me be productive but, at the same time, allowed me the opportunity for some summertime fun.

While today's teen faces different challenges than my generation, 'old school' parenting strategies still apply. During these academic respites, kids need to increase their physical activity and challenge their mental abilities. If, however, you don't set the stage now, your teen could waste away the summer and create significant family frustration as he lounges all day and engages electronically all night.

Multiple conversations completed in a collaborative manner are the most productive process to negotiate your teen's summer experiences. Avoid spontaneous discussion and provide your adolescent with a specific time to talk. Encourage your teenager to bring his own plan to the table, as he may have insights and ideas that you do not. Begin the communication process by discussing some basic ground rules. Of most concern to many kids is when they have to get up in the morning and when they must return in the evening. Keep in mind that teens need to catch up on sleep, and a later-than-normal wake time makes sense. Rising too late, however, complicates sleep patterns and makes return to school year normalcy a very difficult task. Set consistent and reasonable times.

Curfews can be another source of conflict. Having predetermined times with predetermined consequences can alleviate any arguments about nighttime boundaries. Jointly enacted consequences reduce arguing because the rules and results are already in place.

Also be sure to address the amount of allowable screen time (computers, TV, and video games). Consider parental controls if this is a continued source of conflict and require your child to engage in some type of organized activity that challenges his physical ability.

Now that the rules are in place, it is time to have the conversation about how your teenager will spend the majority of his summer days. Most teens want extra cash, and work experience is an invaluable tool that lasts long after the summer job is over. Unfortunately, finding summer employment in today's tough market is a job itself. Parents need to be supportive. Don't provide vague suggestions such as Get out there and find a job, rather provide concrete and specific guidance as you collaborate and assist. Teens, however, also need to realize that they must get out of the house and pound the pavement; finding a job on the Internet is unrealistic.

If families work together, job hunting can be a bonding experience. Begin the planning process by preparing for the search. Develop a résumé not only for future employment, but also as an internal audit of skills and interests. Your son has never worked before--not a problem. Consider volunteer experience, academic achievements, leadership roles, informal neighborhood work and relevant hobbies that might lead to a job. Use this document for prospective employers and as a handy reference sheet for filling out applications.

The next step is to begin approaching potential employers and applying in person. Today's teen tends to do everything online, but completing an electronic application does not provide a chance to make an initial impression and meet a decision-maker. This 'cold call,' however, can be stressful for young job seekers, so offer to drive or meet afterward. Coach kids to be polite, look others in eye, and get a contact name for following up at a later time.

Phase two is networking; including teens working their connections and parents pursuing their contacts. Since most kids are on Facebook, teens should go online to let others know they are in the market to work. Parents should check with their friends to see if someone might be in need of some summer assistance. Try swapping by employing someone else's child and have them hire yours. Be creative, as these ideas could lead to unique opportunities.

OK, so your anxious adolescent has done everything right--networked, put in applications, spent many hours in pursuit of any employment--but still no work. This teen should consider entrepreneurship because he has the desire to make things happen. A truly enterprising kid could start a grass-cutting business that turns into a snow removal business and expands into a Christmas light installation business, resulting in a nice year-round income.

Growing an entrepreneurial gig starts with identifying a need and having some determination. Encourage your teen to talk to others, and research ideas on the Internet to find his niche.

Lastly, summer should be full of good times, not only for kids, but also for parents. Remember to slow down, plan some family fun, and create memories that will last long after summer tans have faded away. Soon, your kids will be out of the house and--believe it or not--you will miss them. LN

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