

Extension Update

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PREPARING FOR THE FUTURE

During the adolescent years, youth begin to think more and more about what they want to achieve in life. They begin to form opinions and make plans about their future school and work goals.

Young people now have more options than ever before. Less than fifty years ago, the number of different life options available to youth was highly limited, based on gender, social class, ethnicity, and also because society was less complex. There simply were not as many different types of jobs in existence.

Planning for the future can be exciting for teens and parents. It can also be stressful. Both teens and parents have the same goals in mind: they want the teens to grow up to be happy, healthy and successful.

Yet it is impossible to be sure what will make someone happy in the future. The array of choices can be overwhelming. Adding to the pressure is the fact that decisions made during adolescence have important implications for future goals. Teens also will develop new goals as they continue to mature. As a result, they may decide to completely change directions even after some important decisions have been made.

Decisions about which courses to take and what career to pursue are important because they are likely to affect values, self-esteem, earnings, and life satisfaction in the future. Fortunately, the brain develops during adolescence to help prepare youth to make thoughtful decisions about their futures.

The cognitive changes during puberty give teens the ability to see long-term consequences of the decisions they make. Teens also have typically developed the ability to think logically. Teens can think about their futures by asking themselves questions that will take them through several levels of decision-making.

For example, a teen might think, “If I take advanced biology, then I will go to college and major in marine biology. I could then work at an aquarium and live in California, where I’ve always wanted to live.” Even the most thoughtful plans often are shaken by unpredictable events, but teens who have learned to think about their options will be better able to handle unexpected bumps in the road.

Finally, research shows that adults influence children’s achievements by their attitudes and behaviors. For example, when adults send a subtle message that science courses are valuable, youth hear the message and have motivation to achieve in science.

Regardless of ethnicity or gender, if students believe a certain skill or course is important and that they are capable of learning it, they will be more motivated. Motivation is directly linked to better performance.

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