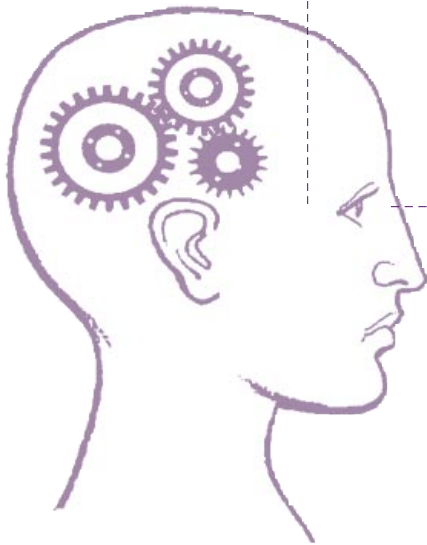


## The importance of



# ACHIEVEMENT

Our society values achievement. We talk about how well our kids do in school. Rarely do we ask how well the classes work for the community good or how loyal the teens are to their families. Achievement becomes more important as the adolescent must choose paths of schooling and future occupation. Those who work with youth are especially concerned about achievement: They see some kids succeed at their studies, while others can't even read by the end of high school. This causes teachers and youth workers to wonder why these differences happen.

Let's take a closer look at why academic success or failure is so vital in the development of an adolescent. Think about a grade-school student. Doing well academically may mean placement in a top reading group, but it is unlikely the key factor in passing or failing the grade. A lower reading group likely reads the same books—only at a slower pace. However, the achievement level of an adolescent can determine the courses he or she may take. This course work in turn may limit choices for schooling after high school. These choices affect career options, future earnings, lifestyle, and even social and emotional development.

As adults, we may know many reasons for stressing achievement. Young teens are only starting to understand them. They are starting to use abstract thinking skills for visualizing how the things they do today may affect their future. The development of these skills helps teens make decisions about schooling and work, based on their plans for the future. For instance, a teen who signs up for four years of foreign language classes after hearing the air force recruiter say "it's required if you want to be a pilot" is using these skills. It is important for adults to promote these skills by having teens focus on how their actions now may affect their future choices for school and work.

# What shapes my child's academic

## ACHIEVEMENT?

When your child already does well in school, encouraging achievement seems like an easy job. But, for many kids, achieving their best is not easy. If you have more than one child, you probably know that different things motivate different kids. It seems that some of them just naturally want to do well. Others find it hard to believe that they **can** do well. Several factors can promote teens' doing well in school.

### Need to achieve

One factor that affects a child's achievement is the "need to achieve." This means how much a person works toward success. The need to achieve is different than having ability in an area. For example, two kids may be equally smart; but, if one works harder, he or she may earn higher grades. How much a person strives for success is called need for achievement.

A strong need to achieve can help your child do well in subjects in which he or she has little "natural" ability. Later in this article, we will discuss what you as a parent can do to strengthen your child's need to achieve.

### Motivation

Another factor that shapes academic achievement is motivation, which comes in two types. Some kids simply enjoy learning and understanding the subject matter. Their urge to do well comes from within: Learning something new is a reward. Other kids work to get other rewards for their performance. Their striving to do well comes from outside themselves. They feel rewarded when the teacher gives them a good grade or others recognize that they have done well.

Kids who feel rewarded just by learning (not by praise or rewards for performing) are more likely to believe they can master new material. They know that they can learn and have confidence that they will go on learning in the future. Kids who need recognition from others tend to have less confidence in their abilities and are more likely to be nervous in the face of challenging material.

### Beliefs about ability

An adolescent's level of achievement also is affected by how much the teen believes in his or her own ability to do well in a subject. If teens believe they can do well, it is easier for them to try hard because they think their efforts will pay off. Even when these kids fail, they come back and try again (usually harder than before) because they believe they can succeed.

Kids who doubt their ability often expect to fail. When they fail, they believe they can do nothing, such as work harder, to change their performance. Failure reinforces the belief that they are not smart, and they question if they should try at all. To them, trying would be wasted effort because they think they cannot learn the material. Thinking this way may result in the teen's doing even less. Teens who put out little effort are more likely to perform poorly despite their actual ability.

As you can see, achievement depends on more than a child's natural ability. Factors such as need for achievement, motivation, and beliefs about ability all have an impact on success. Understanding this may help you come up with ways to help your child achieve. Based on our understanding of these concepts, here are suggestions for supporting your teen's achievement in school.



# How can I encourage my teen to do well in school?



✚ **Set high standards for success.** Encourage your child to set goals and work toward them. Setting high standards lets your child know that you believe she or he can do well. In setting goals for your teen, make sure the goals you set are reasonable.

✚ **Reward academic achievement throughout childhood.** Each time your child accomplishes something new, celebrate! You don't need to offer rewards of money or gifts. Just show that you are very proud and excited about what your child is learning. Remember that accomplishments that now seem minor to you were a very big deal when you were young. Also, showing your own enthusiasm to kids when they achieve something new helps excite them to achieve more.

✚ **Encourage independence.** Kids need to be allowed to try things on their own. They can learn important lessons this way. They learn more by trying something themselves than if you do the work for them. Sometimes they need to try and fail. This gives you an opportunity to encourage them not to give up after failing. Your adolescent needs to learn that often the key to success is a willingness to work hard and keep trying.

✚ **Practice authoritative parenting.** In the newsletter issue on school transitions, we talked about general parenting practices that are good for teens. We said kids do best when their parents are very warm to them and also make appropriate demands of their behavior. When experts look at how kids who succeed in school are parented, they find that parents are both warm and demanding with their kids. This style of parenting is called authoritative. In using it, parents send a message to their kids that they believe in them and their abilities and that is why they have high expectations for their behavior. In addition, though, there is a message to the teen that parents will always love them—even if they fail.

In sum, kids whose parents use the authoritative style have a higher need for achievement than other kids, especially when their parents encourage academic success. These kids are motivated to do well because they find learning rewarding. They also have confidence in their abilities. These three factors help teens with authoritative parents work harder in school and do better academically than other kids.





# Planning for the future

## Helping teens plan careers

Making decisions about a career is a process, not an event that occurs on a given day or week. Parents hope their children will become happy, productive adults with good jobs. Many parents, though, aren't always sure how to encourage this process. First, we must understand that throughout their childhood and adult years a person's future career is shaped by many aspects of our society. These influences include one's own personality and gender, one's social background, and knowledge acquired about the job market. Neighbors, friends, peers, teachers, clergy, family, TV, music, and the pastimes a person picks also can have an impact.

Parents are one of the strongest influences. A word of caution is in order here: Adolescents pick up both positive and negative signals a parent sends about his or her own career. For example, one teen decides not to be an accountant because her mother complains all the time about the negative parts of her job. You, too, may convey feelings of boredom, too much stress, or frustration to your teen, who may not realize that almost all jobs have both good and bad points.

In choosing a career, people go through several stages. Many younger adolescents are in the awareness and exploration stages. As they go on into the teen years, they will enter the "trial" stage many times, trying out different jobs. Your role is to encourage your child to learn about and explore many types of jobs.

## Job trends in the 90s

One problem youth face when making career plans is how to get correct information about labor market needs and pursue a specific career. To help, you can recognize how our labor market and society have changed so that you don't give your child outdated information.

First, the types of jobs available are increasing and changing. In 1939, the U.S. Department of Labor's *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* listed 17,500 job titles. That list now has doubled. During that same time, about 3,500 jobs became obsolete. Realize that your child needs help to search out this information because it changes all the time.

Another change in our work force is how we view careers and jobs. At one time, people chose a career or job for a lifetime. Now, there is the tendency to change jobs and even careers many times during a lifetime. This pattern was once viewed in a negative way but now is seen as showing flexibility. No longer must parents stress to their children that a career choice is a lifetime decision.

The third change we see is the ongoing education of our work force. Even formal education doesn't stop at age 22. In our country, more than one million people between the ages of 30 and 34 went to college in 1992. Youth need to know that they'll probably continue education and training throughout their careers.



## How can I help my teen plan and explore careers?

Because each teen is unique, a parent may need to try various strategies to promote exploration and planning for careers. Point out your adolescent's strengths and talents when he or she asks "what do you think I should be when I grow up?" Make it clear that happiness with a career choice is more important than becoming what one's parent would like.

✚ **Encourage your child to think of many possible careers.** Don't ask "what do you want to be when you grow up?" Ask "what careers are you thinking about?" In this way, you'll let your teen keep his or her choices open. This approach also shows that it's O.K. to be undecided. A few persons may know when they are in grade school that they want to be doctors and then follow that path. But, more likely, an adolescent will not know what he or she wants to be when he or she grows up. Remember, even adults agonize over whether or not they should stay in a particular job!

✚ **Encourage your adolescent to take part in activities that let him or her observe workers in different jobs and settings.** Your teen might also ask people, including you, about their jobs. This task should be seen as seeking information—not advice. Make use of your friends in the occupations your adolescent is thinking about. A strong interest in a career may warrant a request to visit their job sites.

✚ **Help your adolescent explore hobbies and other leisure-time activities that are productive and useful.** Sometimes such pursuits lead to career choices. For example, volunteer work with young children may help a teen decide to be a nursery school teacher. Likewise, work in a hospital or a veterinary clinic may help teens see what it is like to be a doctor or a veterinarian.

✚ **Help your child learn how important school work is for later job decisions.** Show how such subjects as reading, math, and communication are used in almost every job. In other words, help your teen grasp the connections between school and their future career.

✚ **Encourage your child to talk with teachers and counselors about career plans and hopes.** Discuss what they learn, and share your own views. If your adolescent discusses career plans with a teacher or counselor at school, seek out that person and ask questions like these: Given my child's strengths and weaknesses, do you think this career is suitable? What are the best schools for pursuing this field of study? What is the employment outlook for this career? Your talking with both your adolescent and his or her advisors can help all involved assist your child in career decisions.

With these strategies, you can help your teen consider many career paths before deciding the one that is right for him or her.



## Helping a child improve

As you think about teens and academic achievement and career decisions, you probably realize that adolescence is a time of increased decision making. Adolescents make many choices—school courses, friends at a new school, careers, whether or not to drink alcohol, whether or not to get a part-time job, and many others. Adolescents are better in making decisions than younger children but less experienced than adults.

As an adolescent makes the transition from being a child dependent on you to being an independent adult, he or she needs strong decision-making skills. Parents and other adults little by little must increase the independence and responsibility given. Sometimes an adolescent's requests for more freedom (in areas such as dress, curfew, and choice of friends) may seem like a demand for total freedom. Although a gradual increase in freedom is needed, it is important to keep in mind that an adolescent also needs clear limits and rules.

### How much freedom?

One way to gauge how much autonomy to give your teen is by looking at areas your child has been involved in. Did he or she seem to use good decision-making skills? Making decisions in today's fast-paced world is both an art and a science, even for adults. Adolescents encounter many choices each day, most they've never had to deal with before. Research tells us that teens are better able to make good decisions, and think of long-term results of their behavior, when they deal with familiar issues. It's harder, however, to decide in areas where they have little experience. For example, your teen may show very good judgment in choosing to spend time with a friend or do another activity. Your teen probably has faced these decisions since he or she was a small child and is quite skilled in this area. On the other hand, in decisions about sexuality or drug use, he or she may have very poor skills because these are new issues. Remembering all the changes adolescents are going through and the new situations they face helps us realize that they are trying to decide about many unfamiliar issues.

# ▶ decision-making skills



## How can I help?

Making major decisions is hard to do, even for older youth and adults. To help teens improve these skills, parents and other adults must let them practice. Teens also need opportunities to discuss realistic situations for which they may need to make decisions. Through discussion, teens can learn effective means of making decisions.

You may want to encourage your adolescent to practice the decision-making process described here. You'll probably want to start with issues that are less controversial or threatening, just to provide practice. For example, your teen could use this process to decide which after-school activity to sign up for. Here are the steps many people follow in making a decision:

- 1- **Define the problem.** You can explain this as taking the steering wheel in a car. If you don't take control of the wheel, you drift along without direction. Defining the problem helps a person identify what he or she really wants to accomplish and if the problem really belongs to someone else.
- 2- **List and examine all the choices.** There is more than one way to solve most any problem. We must remind ourselves and our adolescent to be open to all possible solutions. Examining choices involves identifying them and then exploring each one.
- 3- **Consider the consequences.** This means consider the good and bad things that can happen with each choice. These outcomes may affect the person making the decision or others. Ask questions like these: Will it hurt someone physically? Will it hurt someone's feelings? Will it break the law? How will it benefit me or others?
- 4- **Identify your values and goals, and compare them with the choices.** Help your adolescent specify what he or she believes in and wants from life. Identifying values and goals can guide our choices.



- 5- **Decide and take action.** Allow your adolescent to make easy, low-risk decisions to get used to the process. Later, your teen can move on to tougher decisions.
- 6- **Evaluate the results.** Ask what happened as a result of the decision. Compare these results with the original problem and goals. Looking at these results can help in defining other problems and making new decisions.

Practicing the decision-making process can help your adolescent make increasingly effective decisions. Allowing increasingly greater responsibilities, practicing the decision-making process, and giving opportunities to discuss realistic situations can help move your adolescent toward more responsible decision making.

## Suggested reading

*"Have You Done Your Homework?": A Parent's Guide to Helping Teenagers Succeed in School*, by Julia Hahn (1985); New York: Wiley.

# GATEWAY

GATEWAY is a publication of the University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service. Your comments and suggestions are welcome. Please address your correspondence to Nina Mounts, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, 905 South Goodwin Street, Urbana, Illinois 61801. Phone 217.244.7356. Fax 217.333.9061.

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