

Reprinted with permission from the December 2008 issue of *Parents Still make the difference!*®

Build memories by celebrating the milestones in your teen's life.

Ancient cultures had traditions for marking milestones in a young person's life. In our culture, high school graduation is about the only such celebration. Finding ways to mark other milestones in your teen's life can be a great way to build wonderful memories.

A birthday celebration, for example, can be more than just a cake and a few gifts. Plan a meal that includes your teen's favorite foods. Decorate the table with things that reflect your teen's interests. Have each family member offer a special wish.

Look for other times you can celebrate. She earned her first A on a chemistry test. She passed her driver's test. She made the cast of the spring musical. All these can be causes for a small celebration. Enjoy a cup of tea or hot chocolate. Eat dinner by candlelight.

Letters make a wonderful way for you to mark a milestone. Write her a letter telling her how proud you are. Share your hopes for her future. She may never remember the gift she received for her birthday--but she'll probably keep your letter forever.

Give your teen three strategies for taking effective notes in class

In order for your teen to get the most out of her study time, she needs to know how to take good notes in class--where the teacher covers the most important information--the material most likely to be on the tests!

Give your teen these tips for taking notes:

- Listen for the main ideas. Anything the teacher repeats more than once or writes on the blackboard is important enough to go in your notes.
- Keep it brief. Use a system of abbreviations and symbols but make sure you remember what they mean. (If your teen is skilled at text messaging, she may want to use those abbreviations when taking notes in class.)
- Review your notes--right after class, if possible. You'll be better able to fill in something you missed, and more likely to remember the information come test time.

Encourage your teenager to focus when studying

Teens are constantly distracted--and that's very obvious when they sit down to study. If your teen seems unable to sit still, he's not alone. One way to help your teen focus is to teach him to write tasks down. A written list can motivate your teen to get to work faster--and to stay on the task at hand. Help your teen learn to manage his time:

- Daily--with a to-do list. Suggest that he write down all the assignments he has to do that day. After he has done this, he's ready to create a schedule. Does he know his attention span is shot after 50 minutes of studying? Then he should plan for short (five- to 10-minute) breaks every hour.
- Weekly--with a planner. Encourage him to plan out his time for the upcoming week--his classes, appointments, meetings, practices, family dinners, etc. Then he can fill in his study time. Seeing that he has to stick to this schedule if he wants to go out on Friday night may motivate him to stay focused.
- Monthly--with a calendar. A wall calendar can help him plan for long-term assignments. He can break down big assignments like science projects or term papers into shorter steps. Giving each section of the project a due date will make the large task feel less daunting.

Make sure your teen is safe while using social networking sites

A recent Harris survey found that teens spend about 10 times more time online than their parents think they do. Often, they may be on social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook. These sites can be a great way for teens to stay in touch with friends. They can share photos and thoughts. But there can be a downside to these social networking sites. Teens sometimes believe they can say anything online. They don't think about the consequences of their actions.

Here's how you can help your teen make the best choices while on social networking sites:

- Limit online "friends." The page your teen creates can only be viewed by people she classifies as "friends." Often, teens give a "friend" classification to people they don't know at all. One good rule to set for your teen: Choose only friends you'd know how to contact in real life.
- Remind your teen that nothing can ever be completely removed from the Internet. She should think carefully before posting anything that would damage her reputation or her friendships.
- Talk about values. Remind your teen that if she wouldn't do something in real life, she should avoid doing it online.
- Stress safety. Your teen should never post information that would allow someone to locate her in real life. She should also not arrange to meet anyone she has only met online.
- Help her keep the balance. Online friendships are great, but be sure your teen spends time with friends in the real world.

Are you helping your teen become self-reliant?

One of the toughest jobs facing parents of teens is helping their children learn how to stand on their own. Here's a quiz to see how you're doing.

___1. I try to involve my teen in setting the rules. He is learning how to negotiate.

___2. I've taught him basic life skills, such as doing laundry and balancing a checkbook. I encourage him to take responsibility for himself.

___3. I demonstrate--and teach--time management. I have helped my teen learn how to organize big projects so he meets deadlines.

___4. I have encouraged my teen to take a speech course. Adults who are comfortable speaking in front of a group have more confidence.

___5. I've tried to teach him good decision-making skills. I set limits but encourage him to make decisions inside those boundaries.

The Economic Benefits of Academic and Career Preparation

Introduction

In an increasingly complex and specialized global economy, education and training beyond high school are crucial to the ability of high school graduates to earn a self-sufficient living and to support a family. Without such education and training, high school graduates are more likely than ever before to see the options for their future narrow as the number of good jobs available to people with only a high school diploma dwindles.

In order to succeed in college, students must graduate from high school ready for the demands of postsecondary education. ACT research (ACT, 2006, 2007) highlights the importance to all high school students of taking a rigorous core preparatory curriculum regardless of whether their intent is to enter a workforce training program or a four-year college or university after graduation. In addition, ACT believes that students should start career planning as early as middle school, by learning about their interests and their academic strengths and weaknesses as they begin to consider postsecondary and career options (ACT, 2005).

How can we tell whether all of this planning and preparation ultimately matters? Long-term change in salary is a strong indicator of career success and economic well-being. A recent study (Neumann, Olitsky, & Robbins, 2007) examined whether the long-term earnings of first-year college students can be predicted by 1) their academic preparation in high school, as measured by ACT Composite score; and 2) the degree to which their career interests fit their planned choice of career.

Economists have previously studied predictors of salary attainment (e.g., Mincer, 1974), focusing on constructs including educational level, ability, and occupational choice (Blackburn & Neumark, 1992; Ehrenberg, 2004). Research such as the National Education Longitudinal Study has also shown an association between salary attainment and measures of general intelligence regardless of education level. And Tracey and Robbins (2006) demonstrated a relationship between career interest and measures of college outcomes, such as cumulative grade point average, retention, and graduation status. But to our knowledge, researchers have not until now examined academic preparation and career-interest fit as predictors of salary attainment.

The Study: We surveyed alumni from more than 300 colleges and universities who had taken the ACT® test in high school and earned college degrees. We asked the 2 survey participants about their college experience, their current work, and their current salary. The data obtained from the surveys was then linked to data on participants' ACT Composite scores, demographic characteristics, high school accomplishments, career interests, and educational and career aspirations. (This information had been collected in high school at the time the participants took the ACT.)

Findings

1. As ACT Composite score increased, average salary also increased.
2. As the amount of agreement between participants' stated career interests and their stated career aspirations increased, average salary also increased.
3. These relationships held for both male and female participants, regardless of college major or ultimate educational attainment.

Conclusion: The positive relationship between ACT Composite score and earnings, and that between career-interest fit and earnings, speak to the importance of academic achievement and early career planning in the future economic well-being of our workforce. Not only do college readiness and early career planning directly affect success in postsecondary education but, just as important, they predict long-term salary attainment, regardless of gender, college major, or ultimate educational attainment.

The results of this study reinforce the economic imperative for all high school students to become ready for college and a career. We already know that students who are ready for college are more likely to enroll in college, less likely to need remedial coursework during their first year of college, more likely to succeed in their college courses, and more likely to earn a college degree (ACT, in press). Now, we also know that students who are ready for college are also more likely to earn higher long-term salaries after college graduation.

In addition, career planning is important for all. Career interests and tentative career plans begin to form as early as sixth grade, gradually developing and taking shape over the middle school and high school years. Age-appropriate career assessment, exploration, and planning activities encourage students to consider, and focus on, personally relevant career options. Educators, counselors, and parents can have a positive influence on the educational and career aspirations of students by following a few basic guidelines, outlined below.

In middle school:

- Begin talking to students about their academic and career interests. Help students begin to identify broad career fields consistent with their interests.
- Help students begin to understand the connections between academic coursework, college, and future career.

In high school:

- Assess career interests, spend time reviewing the assessment results, and help students make sense of the results in light of current self-knowledge.
- Show students how to use career-relevant information (e.g., interests, abilities) to engage in focused career exploration.
- Help students learn how to use sources of college and career information, e.g., the ACT DISCOVER® program, the ACT student Web site (www.actstudent.org), information interviews.
- Help students identify school coursework and postsecondary educational plans that will prepare them for their career goals.
- Periodically assess students' academic strengths and weaknesses and evaluate in light of developing educational plans and goals.

In college:

- Encourage undecided students to complete a career-development course early in college.
- To prepare for workforce realities in a changing economy, encourage students to become aware of the variety of occupations they can enter with a degree in their major.
- Encourage career-relevant activities (e.g., internships) that enhance the academic experience.

Greater agreement among career interests, career aspirations, and career choice is associated with higher long-term career earnings. When students' career interests are identified early, there is a greater chance that they can inform students' career aspirations and influence their ultimate choice of career.