

7 Things Parents and Teachers Should Know About Teens

EDUTOPIA JUNE 8, 2015 Maurice Elias

Summer is approaching, and many teenagers will be freed up from the structures and restrictions of school. What will now come to the forefront for them? What's at the core of their lives? Reality TV? The summer concert scene? Life at the malls? Sun and sand at the beach? Chatting and texting? Sports? Some may think this covers the list. But those that do are giving teenagers far too little credit.

The late Rachael Kessler spent a great deal of time talking to and working with adolescents. Her special interest was how deal with what she referred to as life transitions and "passages." Some are large, like leaving high school, starting a job or starting college, leaving college, living on one's own, and coping with the impact of family trauma such as severe illness, death, or divorce. Some are linked with religion, such as Bar or Bat Mitzvah or Confirmation.

Rachael found that these passages are pivotal moments in the lives of both teens and their families. How are they handled?

What Teens Think About

Generally speaking, Rachael believed we give adolescents far too little credit. The passages in their lives are moments when they ask themselves important questions, such as these:

- How does my life have meaning and purpose?
- What gifts do I have that the world wants and needs?
- To what or whom do I feel most deeply connected?
- How can I rise above my fears and doubts?
- What or who awakens or touches the spirit within me?

Those of you who live with teens might be wondering if Rachael had been working with teens from this planet. Indeed, she had. What she found is that adolescents are lacking in forums for exploring and expressing many of these questions and the deep feelings that they invoke.

Many teens do get caught up in the media- and video-generated culture of glitz, personality, entertainment, and consumption. It's hard for them not to. Advertisers spend tens of millions of dollars to put images in front of teens (and their parents) that will lead them to think first, "What do I want?" and not, "How can I help?" or "Where am I headed?" or even, "Where are my family, peers, or community headed?"

Rachael asks us to think about how we organize events to commemorate passages, fully aware of the way that popular culture pushes teens, parents, and educators to create spectacles or high-energy blowout events. Indeed, the kinds of "passage" events that Rachael designed were meant to create a process of reflection and, often, redirection of activities, away from the concerns of "childhood" and toward the "deeper" questions surrounding transition to adulthood.

But in our current culture, the connection between these celebrations and the passages they commemorate is not clear, nor are they a bridge to greater reflection and adult responsibility and capability.

What Can Parents and Educators Do?

While parents and educators may have a hard time addressing issues of soul and spirit with their teens, it can help to be aware of some ways into the hearts and minds of young people that can make a difference. Here is what Rachael Kessler suggests in her landmark book, *The Soul of Education*.

1. Positive Belonging

Teens' memberships can be a source of rich, deep connections for them. They need this kind of influence in their lives. Organized youth activities are an important forum for teens to explore these deeper questions.

Parents need to look out for camps, religious and non-religious youth groups, teen tours, and local youth centers and recreational programs that provide time for teens to come together with sensitive leaders to talk about questions generated by their life passages.

2. Silence and Solitude

For some teens, this is an important way in which they take a break from the pressures of everyday life.

3. Reflections on Life

Questions that they ask about life and their futures are best treated emotionally, not through information. In addition to talking with you, see if there is an older sibling, grandparent, member of the clergy, or respected educator that they might talk with as well. Educators can design writing projects around these questions, with peer sharing.

4. Joy and Play

Teens need to have fun, and certainly not alcohol- or drug-induced fun, but genuine fun with other peers that they will remember and be proud to talk about the next day. Fun is not frivolous.

5. Creativity

Encourage creative exploration even if it does not seem "practical" or "career oriented." Creativity develops the soul.

6. Linking to the Large

Help teens identify with greatness and see greatness within themselves. Focus them on their potential, not their limitations. Expose them to truly inspiring figures in history and in various fields of endeavor.

7. Shape the Passages

Work with teens to prepare for their passages and focus on the meaningfulness of it, at least as much as the celebration. Start to prepare in advance, and look at how the positive aspects can be continued well after the event.

Parents, educators, and teens can think about what the passage is a passage *to*, what the meaning and implications of the passage are, and what new expectations this might create for the teen and how others treat him or her.

You can learn more about Rachael's approach at the website where her cherished colleagues continue her inspiring work, Passageworks.org.