

Teen Success Starts with Setting Goals

How do kids and teens become successful? Trial and error (or as we call it in *The 8 Keys of Excellence, Failure Leads to Success*) is one way. Another way to help adolescents get a taste of success is by orchestrating small victories upon which they can build. I call this the Success Model. The more they experience success, the more they discover what's so great about themselves.

An exercise we use at SuperCamp, which you can do at home with your son or daughter, enables them to explore their own strengths. We have each camper write "I am... " and then challenge them to see how many times they can complete the sentence. "I am a son." "I am fast." "I am funny." And so on. Self-knowledge is a powerful confidence-builder. It's also a lens. It helps people discover the passions that can keep them motivated for a lifetime.

Even though it was years ago, I still love to tell the story of a girl, Erin, who was an inspiration to us and to all the other campers in the program. She showed us how much is possible when your attitude is right.

Erin came to the program in a wheelchair. She'd been in a car accident at a young age. Most of the program proved no challenge for her, but day five is Outdoor Adventure Day, when teens climb a thirty-foot pole, do trust falls, and walk aerial obstacle courses. Of course Erin was excused from these activities, so we were amazed when she wheeled over, tugged on one of our sleeves, and told us she wanted to climb the pole. We didn't want to discourage her from trying, but we couldn't imagine how she'd do it. So when she went for it, we stood nearby, supportively cheering her on.

She had little or no strength in her legs and used her arm muscles alone to reach the top of the pole. It took her a long time and a lot of effort; but she did it.

Erin became a celebrity not only to the campers but also to the facilitators and adult leaders. She was the model of commitment and determination - what a person can do if she really believes in herself. Erin wanted to climb the pole. She didn't let a little thing like not being able to use her legs stop her!

Our passions and dreams are the real motivators in our lives: the things we want deep down. Young people are no different. When we or they act from these motivations, nothing stops us. It enables us to look at the obstacles that are keeping us from our goals as things to be overcome, rather than as barriers.

No dream ever comes true, no obstacle is ever overcome, no goal is ever reached without focused action. Yet young people are seldom specifically taught how to set and pursue goals.

They may not have a strong sense of what a goal really is. We define goals they see as a plan for action. It's about translating promising ideas into useful, acceptable applications. Or to put it in simpler terms, it's a plan to use your great idea.

Of course we're talking about worthwhile and realistic goals here, specifically the ones that will get teens and even pre-teens to their stated dreams. While we want them to reach for the stars, it does make sense to point out that there are practical goals and those that are long shots.

Encourage your son or daughter to begin the goal-setting process by formulating a specific plan of action. Have him or her analyze several possible ways to reach each goal and consider sources of assistance and resistance. What most young people discover is that they're capable of setting goals in several arenas of their lives: personal, school, career, family, social, and others. It helps to sort goals into short, medium, and long-term timeframes.

Challenge your son or daughter to be clear on the purpose for going after each goal. If the goal is to ace AP Chemistry is it in order to get a good grade, or is it to make it into Stanford's chemistry program? Getting the A is a happy byproduct of doing great in class, but it's not the main objective.

Part of the challenge for parents is to find out what teens and pre-teens think of their own potential: "Who am I?" "Where can I see myself going in life?" "What's the most incredible life I can think of living?" At its heart, goal-setting is about knowing who you are and what you're about. The only reason for goals to exist is to help us apply ourselves to the world at large. Self-knowledge is at the bottom of it all.

The difference between the life that you have and the life that you want is merely a matter of responsible choices.

One of the most powerful Keys of Excellence is the Commitment key. Something incredible happens when we commit to something. We lock ourselves into a course of action. Once we make a commitment, we discover all kinds of resources we didn't know were available. It's powerful stuff.

Making a commitment to achieve a goal, no matter what it takes, means people have to become the masters of their own internal dialogue. This one's a toughie even for adults because we're often not even conscious of the things we say to ourselves. Often, we've gotten so accustomed to telling ourselves certain things that we're barely aware we're doing it. But our brains believe the things we tell them, so when we're trying to replace old behaviors with new ones, we have to be ready to counter those old messages.

Just as negative habits can limit a person's ability to overcome challenges, positive habits can expand them. Many have found that they can flip their negative self-talk by adding "up until now" to a negative phrase whenever it accidentally pops out. If a student is used to saying, "I stink at math," he or she should quickly add, " - up until now." This phrase forces the past back where it belongs: in the past. In other words: "I can't do it - YET! But I will soon!"

Some teens have found that when a negative thought creeps up they can overcome it with a positive one. They can replace "I'll never run a mile in five minutes" with "I know I can do this."

When they feel themselves giving in to fears and doubts, they sometimes find it helpful to do a redirect. Instead of giving any more thought to the negatives, they can focus all their thoughts and energies on the very next step toward their goal. It's all about action. Instead of wasting time internally, they can focus on doing whatever it takes to grab that next rung on the ladder.

It's not too early as a teen or pre-teen to have a specific vision and goals for life. This awareness of even possessing a vision and writing down goals helps young people tap into their greatness and start believing in themselves.