

ACCADEMIC SUCCESS IN TEENS IS EQUAL TO THEIR ABILITY TO SEE THE FUTURE

By

Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP

Jason, 14 is like most male adolescents. He is into video games, hockey, and, of course, hanging with his friends. If you ask him the classic question adults love to ask teens, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” Jason will reply, “I don’t know—maybe a lawyer or an engineer.”

Like many of his peers, Jason views school more or less as a nuisance—something you have to get through. Although he is intelligent and capable (according to most of his elementary teachers) he underachieves in school. He usually does just enough to get by and rarely studies. Due to his good native intelligence, he has managed to earn C’s, B’s, and even an occasional A in middle school (grades 6, 7, and 8)—all with little or no effort.

While Jason gives lip service to becoming an attorney or an engineer, he usually thinks no further into the future than the upcoming weekend—when he can socialize with his friends. The most futuristic thinking he engages in involves obtaining his driver’s permit about a year down the road.

Jason will start high school in the fall. As usual, he has given little thought to the importance of doing well in high school and is destined to underperform, as he did in middle school. Jason’s parents often try to impress him about the importance of good grades in high school. Like many teens, unfortunately, Jason tends to ignore his parents when they attempt to advise him.

In my nearly 40 years of practice as a psychologist I have had the opportunity to work with three adolescents who graduated at or near the top of their high school class. These students were by no means the most intelligent members of their school. These teens were average to above-average intellectually and were diligent, organized students.

The one outstanding characteristic, I believe, that was common to all three of these students which separated them from their classmates, is that they had vision. They possessed the capacity to truly see the future and were willing to work for it from middle school on.

I cannot tell you how many times a bright, capable, but “visionless” teen tells me that “grades in middle school are not important” or “it’s only my freshman year (in high school); I have plenty of time to bring my grades up.”

Grades in middle school are, in fact, important because they set the stage for how the teen will do in high school. I have never met a teen who earned average (or below) grades in middle school and performed at an outstanding level through high school. As Vince Lombardi, the famed coach of the Green Bay Packers, said: “Practice doesn’t make perfect; perfect practice makes perfect.” That “perfect practice” begins in middle school. Moreover, by doing well in middle school, students are referred to advanced classes in high school, which can improve their grade point average (GPA) and induce colleges to offer them scholarships.

What most “visionless” teens fail to realize is that after their freshman year there are only five, not six, semesters in which to improve their GPA. Students typically apply to college at the end of the first semester of their senior year and are usually accepted—or not—by April of their senior year. Thus, that final semester of their senior year does not figure into the GPA which the colleges use for acceptance and scholarships.

Therefore, if Jason does poorly his first semester of his freshman year, earning C’s and a few D’s, perhaps with a B in PE, he might earn a first semester GPA of 1.8. If he does a little better second semester of his freshman year, receiving C’s and B’s with an A in Band, this might result in a second semester GP of 2.6. If he finally “gets it” beginning his sophomore year, and from that time forward earns A’s and B’s for the remaining five semesters, (which is highly unlikely), he might average a 3.4 GPA over those next five semesters. Doing the math, we have $1.9 + 2.6 + 5 \text{ times } 3.4 = 21.5$, divided by 7, which results in a cumulative GPA of 3.0 at the end of Jason’s first semester of his senior year.

This unimpressive GPA now precludes Jason from any academic scholarships, prevents him from getting accepted at any prestigious college, probably limits him from attending any university out of state, and may even stop him from gaining acceptance into his own state university. Jason may still have a chance to become an engineer or an attorney, but he will now have to work really hard to attain his goal and he (and/or his parents) will have to fund every dime of his education. Jason’s inability to “see the future” at the young age of just 14 closed the door on many opportunities. It certainly is unsettling to

recognize that choices a 13- or 14-year-old makes can affect him/her for the rest of their life.

Parents must begin to talk about “the future” with their children as soon as the child can understand the concept of the future. Waiting to discuss the future when the child becomes a pre-adolescent is too late. Parents should read to their kids before the child is one and do so for the next five to seven years, until the child can read to the parent. Parents should also model being “studious” by reading, writing, doing “paper work,” taking a class perhaps, and doing “homework.” Parents should also speak of their own academic successes—and failures. By implementing these concepts, children may develop a better “vision” of their future which will facilitate the likelihood of achieving it.

Larry F. Waldman, Ph.D., ABPP is a licensed psychologist who has practiced in the Paradise Valley area of Phoenix for 35 years. He works with children, adolescents, parents, adults, and couples. He also provides forensic consultations in the areas of family law, personal injury, and estate planning. He speaks professionally to laypersons, educators, corporations, and fellow mental health professionals. He teaches graduate courses for the Educational Psychology Department for Northern Arizona University. He is the author of “Who’s Raising Whom? A Parent’s Guide to Effective Child Discipline,” “Coping with Your Adolescent,” “How Come I Love Him But Can’t Live With Him? Making Your Marriage Work Better,” “The Graduate Course You Never Had: How to Develop, Manage, Market a Flourishing Private Practice—With and Without Managed Care,” and “Too Busy Earning a Living to Make Your Fortune? Discover the Psychology of Achieving Your Life Goals.” His contact information is: 602-996-8619; 11020 N. Tatum Blvd., Bldg. E, Suite 100, Phoenix, AZ 85028; LarryWaldmanPhD@cox.net; TopPhoenixPsychologist.com.