

The Price of Apathy

Research indicates that students who do well in high school generally find more open doors to better colleges and higher paying jobs. It would seem, then, that every teen would want to do his or her best to ensure a bright future. Instead, many teens have become apathetic toward things that they should consider important. This indifference often leads to unfinished homework, missed practices, or poor school attendance. Although apathy in high school is an age-old problem, the stakes are higher in this highly competitive world. Understanding the roots of apathy and learning to help teens find a clear focus, maintain a positive attitude, and develop good study habits can improve the chances that those students will ultimately succeed in high school and beyond.

Where does apathy begin?

All teens voice their frustration with subjects or workload at some time during their high school careers. Their protests are often accompanied by, “I don’t want to go to school today,” or “I’m tired of doing English.” This is completely normal. The problem arises when that occasional complaint becomes the norm.

The dictionary defines apathy as the lack of feeling or emotion, or the lack of interest or concern. Students are not born apathetic. Small children begin their school careers filled with hope and enthusiasm. But something happens along the way that changes their focus away from doing well in school. What causes the change?

The root of the problem may be at home, at school, among friends, within the teens themselves – or any combination of these factors. The problem can be reinforced in the media where television programs such as the *Degrassi* series feed the idea that ignoring homework or skipping class is OK. Consider some of these scenarios that turn students away from their goal of doing well at school:

- The economic downturn costs a teen’s parent his or her job. Financial concerns mount and relationships are stressed. Home becomes a difficult environment. The student becomes overwhelmed trying to balance changes at home with the pressures of school.
- A new group of friends or a new activity demands time away from homework. That pep rally, football game, and homecoming dance will take a big chunk of the weekend. Will it be less homework or risk losing social acceptance?
- A teen feels like a misfit in high school. Musical tastes, clothing styles, or personal beliefs do not align with others in the classroom. Feeling like an outsider, the student looks for acceptance outside of school.

- After years of academic success, a high schooler cannot grasp calculus or struggles in AP Spanish. Unaccustomed to failure, the student makes jokes and stops trying.
- After years of marginal grades, a teen succumbs to the idea that no level of effort will bring success—so why try?

The list goes on and on. The truth is that the causes of apathy are as unique as the individual students. Whatever the cause, the end result is the same—young adults begin losing interest and stop performing their best.

Signs of apathy

It is important to understand why a teen loses concern for school, but it is even more important to recognize that something is changing in the first place. Few students suddenly stop caring. It is generally a gradual process. Watching for early signs can help head-off a problem before it becomes truly serious.

- Routine illness—Barring a legitimate health issue, teens may complain of minor illnesses such as headaches or upset stomachs to avoid school.
- Declining grades—The report card arrives and Bs are now Cs, and the teacher comments suggest a lack of effort.
- Change in attitude/behavior at home—Teens may sleep, spend time on video games or the computer, text or call friends, or even do household chores rather than getting around to doing homework. Responding to parents’ suggestions to get down to business, teens may become depressed, evasive, defensive, or even belligerent.
- Missing class—Frequent visits to the nurse’s or guidance office, routinely tardy to class, or skipping class are signs of something wrong.

Addressing the problem

Some problems are little; others are much larger. Regardless of the size, few problems go away on their own. This is a critical time to help your teen work through the issues and get back on track. Consider a few simple ideas such as:

- ***Sit down and talk to your teen.*** This is an opportunity to uncover what your child is thinking. Look for the reasons behind your son’s declaration that “school stinks” or your daughter’s insistence that she “hates school.” This is a time for patience. Your teen is frustrated by something and might have a hard time expressing why. Watch out for smokescreens such as, “I never liked that

subject,” or “That teacher can’t teach.” It may take several conversations over a period of time to sort out what is happening.

- ***Seek solutions in small steps.*** Boldly declaring that your teen will improve—or else—may have an undesired result. As teens begin to assert their independence, ultimatums may lead to even greater conflict. Try to mutually agree on little ways that you can help keep your child on track. This is a great place to talk about goals. If your teen has academic or career dreams, discuss the small things that you can work on together to make those dreams a reality.
- ***Speak to your child’s teacher.*** If the problem centers on one class, then meet with that teacher. You may discover that friends are distracting your child in class, the material is too difficult, or that your teen has a conflict with the teacher’s teaching style. You might even discover that your teen can’t see the screen in the front of the class and needs new contact lenses.
- ***Meet with a school guidance counselor.*** The guidance office can help resolve many school issues. Maybe your teen’s interests lie with art rather than science. Simply adding art electives and dropping that upper level science course may do the trick. Perhaps there are personal issues that impact your teen’s ability to focus on school. Ask for help finding ways to keep your child engaged and excited about school. Guidance staff can often recommend resources to help.

Don’t panic

For as long as teens have attended school, they have struggled with apathy. A quick check of the Internet reveals articles and scientific papers on the topic going back decades. Take heart; just because your teen is showing early signs of disinterest does not mean that he or she is planning to drop out of school. It may simply mean that it is time to begin asking questions.

Additional resources to combat teen apathy

There is no magic pill that will suddenly erase a teen’s apathy. Motivating a high schooler takes time, dedication, and hard work. Here are a few resources more to help in the process.

Internet

- “Parents Play Vital Role in Teenagers’ Education, Try These Ideas to Help Your Teen”—a handy one-page reminder of things parents can do to keep teens focused. (<http://www.pacer.org/mpc/pdf/mpc-73.pdf>)

- “Parenting Teens Resource Network”—a Website offering ideas for everything to do with raising and understanding teenagers. (<http://parentingteensresourcenetwork.org>)
- “Parents as Partners”—an online PowerPoint presentation offering ways for parents to become involved in their teens education (https://www.michigan.gov/documents/PasP_PwrPt_142652_7.ppt)
- “Parenting Teens”—A commercial Website covering tips for parents, teen troubles and the like. (<http://www.parentingteens.com>)
- Parents-and-Kids” Lots of practical information including college admissions data, AP and SAT study tools, and ideas for maintaining good health.

Books

- “Drive: Nine Ways to Motivate Your Kids to Achieve” by Janine Walker Caffrey, Ed.D. “Drive” outlines nine specific steps proven to beat boredom and foster self-motivation and resourcefulness. Filled with quizzes, anecdotes, and practical strategies, “Drive” helps parents turn "Generation Me" into "Generation Move."
- Michael Riera’s “Uncommon Sense for Parents with Teenagers” by Michael Riera—A child’s growth is too often misunderstood as a phase to be dreaded instead of enjoyed. Riera tackles some of the newest issues facing parents and teens—text messaging and the Internet, changing driver’s license requirements, fad diets and exercise—and gives a second look to the old standbys—alcohol and drugs, academics, sex and dating, sports and extracurricular activities, eating disorders, making friends, single parenting, divorce, and more
- “The Complete Idiot's Guide to Parenting Your Teenager” by Kate Kelly—Navigate adolescence successfully with your teen. Feel confident about knowing when to lay down the law, when to bend the rules, and when to let go. In this Complete Idiot's Guide find solid information on becoming an effective and respected parent; friendly advice in an easy-to-understand format; tips, definitions, and warnings to help you along the way; and clear illustrations that show you exactly what to do.