Back to School: Focus on Juniors

This morning I attended the opening day of a well-known Bay Area high school. The gym was filled with the still palpable energy of summer and anticipation. A very wise Headmaster addressed each class level, trying hard to meet them in their enthusiasm. She arrived at the class of 2013 and said: “Don’t buy the press about junior year being the make-or-break year for your academic life; let the junior year just be your junior year.” Brilliant. Why did she say that? Because she was attempting to do some stress inoculation. In general junior year is the year that students are told it “gets serious,” that “colleges really pay attention to what you do this year,” and that “it’s the hardest year you’ll face in high school.” There may be some truth in these generalizations but they often just reinforce one of the already present developmental responses of juniors to “go underground” and withdraw into their literal and figurative “inner rooms.” Juniors want to withdraw from the prying, evaluative eyes of the adult world, which are perceived to be hell bent on judging their worth and capacity, once and for all. So, junior year is the year that kids go into hiding. It is the year that I’m most likely to hear, “I have no idea what is going on with her; I guess she’s okay, but I can’t really tell. She doesn’t talk to me like she used to.”

Adolescents need to set boundaries with and intensify their need for privacy in relation to their parents and caretakers because the pain of being seen as “incompetent” or unready sends shivers down their proverbial spines. If you don’t see them messing up, they’re not messing up. Plus, if you catch them messing up or appearing immature, you might just take away some of their hard-won freedom. All good reasons to not let you see what they’re thinking, feeling and doing.

Junior year is a year of contradictions. Juniors want to be taken more seriously as adults but don’t necessarily want all of the adult
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They are intensely questioning and doubting adult behavior and choices and more able to correctly read emotional cues of family members than last year. Their empathy is emergent as they earnestly exercise the ability to see through your eyes. Fantastic, right? Not necessarily. They can be even more sensitive to slights and verbal put-downs; they just try showing it less on the outside. The year of contradiction is about looking more mature, more adult, and more sexual on the outside and having more external success while often deepening their risky, dangerous behaviors. Juniors want to do things themselves and often won’t ask for help or they’ll wait to ask until they’re in over their head, because if they show they still need help, they fear don’t have as much leverage to ask for more freedom.

The year of driving. The year of SAT prep. Ugh. And speaking of “more freedom,” junior year is often the year that they use this freedom of choice to question the wisdom or purpose of specific homework, “picking and choosing” what to do or not do. You’re worried about him closing off possibilities for his future, right? But just finding out if his homework is done (or what it consists of), requires a lot more “pulling teeth,” even if the work often finally shows up at a higher level than in previous years. But plagiarism can also “blossom” alongside deeper, more mature work, as academic pressures mount. Cheating seems to peak in junior year, as over 80% of teens nationwide say that they have (on multiple occasions) cheated on assignments. Not surprisingly, teens often cite cheating as a “time-saving device,” necessary to employ because it is just too hard to get everything done and get it done well. The junior year can be especially tough on family relationships, as a junior’s near-permanent facial expression seems to say, “what’s your problem? I’ve got it covered!” Sorry, parents, but it also has to be said that this is a year of big change around bodies and sexuality.

A junior has a much stronger sense of being in an adult body. While “hormones” and mood changes related to hormones are less of an issue, the intensity of mood often increases. Your junior is thinking much more about what comes next, yet needs to appear somewhat “non-plussed” by the whole issue of worrying about the future. The average age of first intercourse is 17, so there is a lot at stake in terms of sexual energy around the house. Juniors are keenly aware of their status among peers as regards their “partnered” sexual activity or lack of it; gossip is abundant but more as a way of gaining and maintaining status. When depression and anger rise up in the junior year, it is, more often than not, connected to relationships and intimate partnering.

What can you do, besides booking a yearlong cruise? Well, stay close. They’re going to push you away, as parenting expert Mike Riera reminds us, but they don’t want you to go away. They need to see you handling your own stress and admitting your own vulnerabilities lest you give them the strong message that “hiding” and “handling it on your own” is actually the grown-up way of managing stress. They need to have you help them problem-solve and analyze past failures, but without judgment. Problem solving needs to be very matter-of-fact, with little emotion attached to it. If the way they tell you about or think about their problems unnerves you, save it for later. They don’t need or want to hear you say how worried you are or how immature they’re being. They need “unemotional problem-solving support” or they’ll just hide their problems from you completely. Let your kids know you believe in them, even as you offer counsel. An old Jackson Browne lyric comes to mind, in thinking of the junior year: “Don’t confront me with my failures; I had not forgotten them.”
Dear Michael,

Our teenage daughter seems to have very distorted thinking about how much effort she has to put into school, in order to succeed. She also has really distorted thinking about many, many things in life, and this troubles me. She thinks she will get into a good college even though she doesn't work hard and her grades are mediocre. She thinks she should have all summer just to relax and hang out with friends. She thinks we should pay for all kinds of expensive things, and that she deserves them, but she doesn't earn any money herself and is not motivated to do so. She is almost 18. Did we spoil her? Is it my fault? What am I supposed to do?

Signed,
Is My Daughter Nuts?

Dear “Is My Daughter Nuts,”

Hi there! I’ll just jump right in here. What you’re calling "distorted thinking" in your teenage daughter is epidemic in the United States, especially among more affluent teens. However, before anyone rushes to judgment too quickly about the cause(s) of these distortions, it is worth considering whether there are any other extenuating factors.

First, teens with attentional difficulties or learning disabilities often have this kind of "distorted" thinking that focuses on the most optimistic possibilities and is extremely short on considering the very real obstacles or challenges to reaching a goal. Oftentimes the "over" or "unrealistic" optimism is a cover for some really intense anxiety about the future or about the teen’s abilities. If your daughter has Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD), this distortion is rooted in the very biology of the disorder, and isn’t her “fault,” even if it is her responsibility. Next, in my practice I often encounter teens with this attitude of entitlement and misperception about the necessity for "hard work" because these teens have often been rescued during difficult challenges and overindulged in the past, so that they come to expect that they are "too big to fail," if you’ll pardon the economic metaphor. This is called "overindulgence" and its what I would consider one of the most pervasive and influential mistakes in parenting. Overindulgence is about giving our kids too much, too soon or giving them something or doing something for them in order to meet our own needs, rather than their needs. Doing this violates a core parenting principle of the very wise psychiatrist and parent educator Rudolf Dreikurs who cautioned parents never to “do anything for your child that they can do for themselves.” It’s not that, you say? We never do her work for her; we’ve always had high expectations and communicated those to her; we expect her to clean up her own messes, and to find her way through a wide range of academic and other life challenges; we’re there for her, but we don’t spoon feed her. Okay. Then it’s more complicated, and likely isn’t going to be solved in an email. You might consider speaking with a therapist who specializes in adolescent development or even just asking your daughter directly, but without blame or a "tone" in your voice about the discrepancy between her actions, attitudes and her own hopes for herself. Her answer will tell you a lot and lead to next steps for you.

It could be that your daughter has come to believe what researcher Carol Dweck refers to as the fallacy of intelligence as a “fixed trait.” Kids who believe they’re smart and that being smart is a condition of their birth, not their hard work, often stop trying when the going gets tough or just expect things to go their way. I have no idea if that’s going on with your daughter but it seems to be going on with a lot of students who have come to depend on global praise and things going well for them because they’re “good” or “smart.” Dweck writes in The Chronicle of Higher Education, “I'd like to change that culture...[because] hard working is what gets the job done. You just see that year after year. The students who thrive are not necessarily the ones who come in with the perfect scores. It's the ones who love what they're doing and go at it vigorously.”

We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for “Ask Michael” should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com
Selected Resources on Parenting


*Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project.* M. Ito et al., The MIT Press, 2009.


*Uncommon Sense for Parents of Teenagers.* Mike Riera. Celestial Arts, 2004 (Orig. pub. 1995).

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**About Our Organization…**

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles and web resources; and program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts.