

Commentary...

Building teens' happiness on a solid foundation

By Mitchell L. Luftig, Ph.D.
Guest Columnist

How do young people learn to be happy adults, with a positive sense of well-being? Most of our youth will figure this out on their own. By the time they graduate from high school they will possess a firm grasp of both their interests and personal strengths, and will select college majors, start technical careers, or launch their own businesses in fields that capitalize on their abilities.

However, some of our youth won't find it as easy to transition into adulthood. Rather than building their future upon the foundation of their interests and strengths, they are more likely to turn to other avenues that promise them happiness — but won't actually lead to a sustained sense of well-being.

I have worked with vulnerable youth who lean heavily upon social comparisons to determine their relative worth as human beings. Do others go out of their way to talk to them, "friend them" on Facebook, appear with them in Snapchat and Instagram photos, or post positive comments on their social media page? Has their popularity been undercut by cyberbullies? The amount of happiness insecure youth believe they deserve as adults hinges upon how popular they think they are.

Vulnerable youth will try to change themselves from the outside in hoping that by matching their appearance and behavior to an arbitrary social standard they will be deemed to be more popular, liked and accepted by others. However, when one's self-worth is dependent upon how one is perceived by others (or at least how one thinks one is perceived) it provides only a shaky foundation upon which to construct one's adult life.

Advertisers want our youth to associate happiness with buying the products they are marketing. The message to young consumers is that owning the coolest and newest will bring them pleasure, impress their friends, and maybe even transform them into a more attractive person. Young people who choose this route will find themselves on an endless consumer-driven treadmill, never quite catching up with true happiness.

Driven to succeed, some young people may find themselves working long hours and postponing happiness until hired for their dream job or when they earn a major promotion. However, research indicates that employees who find ways to be happy in their present lives are actually more successful in their careers than those who postpone happiness to "work hard." The employees who are happy in their present lives retain greater motivation and they also approach their work with more creativity. And those who postpone happiness discover that when they finally achieve their goal, their brain quickly substitutes a new goal and so any happiness they anticipated is fleeting. When we earn enough money to pay our bills and have enough left over for leisure activities, a further increase in wealth results in only modest gains in our happiness.

A popular belief in child-rearing is that children who embrace their own uniqueness and "specialness" will necessarily possess high self-esteem. Parents may try to impart this belief through overindulgence, accepting their children's limited involvement in chores and family life, and by swooping in to rescue them when they are faced with the consequences of their poor choices.

But does feeling special

about themselves really help children to thrive during difficult times? What happens when teachers and employers expect dedication and hard work, want young people to demonstrate teamwork, and expect them to learn and grow from their mistakes? What happens when the rest of the world withholds the applause they have come to expect until warranted by their effort? The feeling of specialness drains away, leaving them without a solid basis for their self-worth.

A better way to achieve happiness is to start from the inside out by identifying individual strengths and talents and using them as a foundation for the future.

Researchers have identified six universal virtues: Wisdom, Courage, Humanity, Justice, Temperance, and Transcendence. Evolution has hard-wired these virtues into our biology because they promote the kind of excellence that has enabled humanity to solve the most challenging problems that threatened survival.

Twenty-four character strengths provide the psychological ingredients for displaying the six virtues. Identifying and expressing character strengths contributes to well-being and increases self-acceptance, autonomy, progress on goals, physical health, passion, and resilience.

The six virtues and the 24 character strengths that facilitate their expression are:

Wisdom: Creativity,

Curiosity, Judgment, Love of Learning, Perspective, Courage: Bravery, Perseverance, Honesty, Zest. Humanity: Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence. Justice: Teamwork, Fairness, Leadership. Temperance: Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation. Transcendence: Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality.

The top seven character strengths in a person's profile are referred to as signature strengths. Sit down with your teenager and read through the list of character strengths. The two of you can identify their signature strengths because these are the ones they find easiest and more natural to

apply, they feel essential to who your teen is as an individual, and they find their use to be energizing. Your teen can also take a free online survey at viacharacter.org that will list all 24 character strengths in their profile from the strongest contributor to their well-being to the weakest.

Once your teenager knows their character strengths, they can practice applying them across all areas of life.

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