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Raising a Person, Not a Resume: Helping Your Teen Achieve a Satisfying and Successful Adulthood

By Lisa Greenberg, PhD

Resumes, unlike people, can be made to look perfect, and too many of us as parents are trying to create perfect resumes, rather than flawed, yet wonderful people. When we focus on whether our child has scored a goal, taken an AP class, or otherwise done something that will shine on a college application, we are creating a resume rather than a person. In doing so, we are telling our children, even if not in so many words, that what is important is what they do and not who they are.

What is the danger in this? Without intending to, we risk creating young adults who are too dependent on external feedback, and not sufficiently able to manage their own lives. We risk creating people who have not developed a sufficient sense of who they are, what they value, how to work to attain goals they have set for themselves, and how to manage disappointments along the way. Young people raised in homes where external achievements are over-valued may be more likely to cheat to get the only grades they think their parents will accept; they may be particularly vulnerable to peer pressure because they don't have a clear enough sense of their own values; they may have trouble choosing careers and relationships because they've learned too little about their true abilities and values. None of this is what we want for our children.

So how can we do better? We can start by taking seriously the decades old and much validated research that authoritative parenting is best for kids, that is, the best parents are warm and loving while having high standards, and, perhaps most challenging today, supporting their children's autonomy.

As authoritative parents, we allow our children to make more of their own decisions and to accept the consequences of these decisions, even if we fear a dent in an otherwise sterling resume. My role is to love and enjoy my children, but also to offer few judgments, either positive or negative, in order to help them learn to manage their own behavior and make their own judgments about their actions. My role also includes making our home a place where my children feel supported and loved but not invaded or controlled. I can also help by modeling thinking and talking through decisions and demonstrate both the joys and stresses of a functional adult life, with the goal of being a good role model for my children. This being said, if my son chooses not to study for a big test and does poorly, the consequences are his to manage. He might appreciate my sympathy or my willingness to brainstorm possible approaches to the situation, but the problem and the solution are his.

For many of us, parenting in this way requires controlling our own anxiety. We worry about our children making mistakes that will haunt them, about their safety in a seemingly ever more dangerous world, or about them not succeeding financially in a difficult economy. We worry about them being unhappy, or, harder to admit, about them not providing us bragging rights. As parents, and as people, we are entitled to our worries, but we owe it to our children to manage our worries ourselves, or with the help of other adults. Difficult as it can be, it is our job to not make our children responsible for our well-being, as we are not responsible for theirs.

Parenthood offers both deep joys and profound challenges. For many of us, it can be a challenge to allow our children the freedom to explore, to take risks and to make mistakes. Happily, however, pushing ourselves to tolerate our own anxieties and our children's imperfect resumes, often leads to the enormous joy of seeing our children gradually develop into delightful and effective people.

Lisa Greenberg, PhD is a licensed psychologist in practice in Madison, New Jersey. She has many years of experience in treating people from early adolescence through old age. Dr. Greenberg has a particular interest in working with adolescents and their parents. She is frequently quoted in the media on issues involving teens and families, and also enjoys speaking to community groups about these topics. For more information about Dr. Greenberg, please visit her website, at www.lisargreenberg.com.