

Defining Success: What Teens Need to Thrive



Defining Success for Teens

We all want our children to experience success. But what does that truly mean?

We must thoughtfully consider what is meant by “success”, otherwise we may push our tweens and teens to fit a narrow definition that can get in the way of thriving in the long term. We must be mindful to not mistakenly focus on two common measures of success — the smile on their faces and the grades they produce in school.

Don't Judge By Happiness

Why not? Because it's too easy to make a child happy. Give a 5-year-old a new toy and he beams. Get a 12-year-old a new bike and she is overjoyed. Order a 16-year-old concert tickets and he is in heaven. Similarly, it is too easy to make a child unhappy. Setting limits on a video game can bring a 7-year-old to tears. Setting firm boundaries about curfew for a 15-year-old may trigger resentment, especially if your limits differ from those set by parents of your teen's friends.

Don't Judge By Grades

What's wrong with judging success by grades? They measure only one aspect of a person's efforts. Grades might make young people feel incompetent rather than allowing them to celebrate strengths they possess in areas ungraded. When we judge success by grades, teens may determine their worth by what they have achieved by age 18. This undermines the potential to see that life offers continuous opportunities for growth and self-improvement. They might feel as though they have "failed" merely because they have not achieved placement in the college or training program of choice. When teens internalize pressure to achieve grades, it can undercut the development of some of the very character strengths that predict long term success.

It's not that happiness isn't important. Or that grades are irrelevant. It's that we must gain perspective by looking beyond the young person who stands before us. We must envision the 35, 40, or 50-year-old we are building. When we focus on the future, our understanding of a successful childhood and adolescence broadens.

Young people have a lifetime to achieve success. Our job is not to get them to the finish line, but to prepare them with the character strengths that will launch them into the future.

Strengths Teens Need as Adults

What makes an adult successful? They contribute to the world in many different ways. They have learned to follow the path in which they can best contribute. Our challenge as parents is to guide young people to discover their own strengths.

Let's consider those strengths adults need, while keeping in mind that we are all uneven. Not everyone has or needs each of these traits, but they offer us something to strive towards.

Successful adults need and deserve happiness. Happiness looks differently to a 35-year-old than it did to a 6-year-old. It's not about a possession, a treat, or privilege. Happiness in adulthood is about being satisfied with your contribution. It's about meaning and a sense of purpose. About really feeling you matter. [Happy adults](#) have deep relationships that remind them that their presence makes a difference and that support them when they need shoulders to lean on. [Happy adults](#) feel as though their work life is meaningful.

Successful adults repair our world. We need adults poised to solve problems. We need people who do not avert their eyes when they see human suffering, but who instead reach out with compassion and without judgment. We need adults who are aware and awake and prepared to join with others to build better communities.

[Successful adults work hard.](#) They know that effort produces results to be proud of. They can delay gratification because they view life as a marathon rather than a sprint. They know how to remove obstacles from their path rather than give up. They have [grit](#) — a term popularized by Angela Duckworth at the University of Pennsylvania. Adults with grit have a stick-to-it-iveness that doesn't allow them to give up when problems are not solved quickly. It's a quality that is about so much more than academic success or career planning. It's earned through persevering through life's challenges.

[Successful adults cherish and nurture their relationships.](#) They understand that work is important, but that family is irreplaceable and friendships are critical to balanced lives. They are part of strong, connected communities. They commit to [self-care](#), so they retain the energy to care for others. They have the ability and skills to be independent, but choose to be [interdependent](#).

Successful adults are creative. In this constantly changing world, the best ideas may not even have surfaced. Those who will thrive in this environment maintain the ability to imagine. They are flexible and creative, fully

committed to innovation and open to hearing new ideas.

[Successful adults have collaborative skills.](#) They have the social and emotional intelligence that allows them to hear others' perspectives. Those who effectively collaborate in the workplace take advantage of pooled intelligence, meaning that together they can come up with ideas they never could have arrived at as individuals. They recognize that two heads are often better than one and harness each individual's skill-sets.

[Successful adults honor diverse thought.](#) They know that they will learn from people with different experiences.

[Successful adults never stop learning.](#) In life, it makes them open to wonder. This will keep them entertained and joyous, even when they are 100-years-old. In the workplace, it enables them to experience constructive criticism as a growth opportunity, and not a personal attack. They understand intelligence is gained through work and experience — it is not something one possesses or lacks.

[Successful adults are resilient.](#) Rather than focusing on their shortcomings, they seek growth. Rather than cursing the darkness, they actively seek light. They have a mindset that can tell the difference between a real tiger and a "paper tiger" — something that feels ferocious in the moment, but can do them no real harm. They trust they can get through most things, particularly with the support of others. They are not easily defeated. They know how to bounce back and use adversity and the recovery process as a means to build their strength.

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Slideshow

Nurturing Teen Strengths

Taking time to nurture strengths allows teens to further discover what their unique contributions to society will be. Click

through to review ways you can help young people become their best selves.

Slideshow

Have High Expectations

We must not let our teens feel like they are letting us down as they grow. Rolling our eyes or having low expectations can make them worry about growing up.

Slideshow

Model Overcoming Limitations

We are all uneven -- everyone excels at some things but not others. Show teens ways they can put in hard work and effort to help make up for shortcomings in some areas.

Slideshow

Try New Things

Encourage teens to try out a variety of activities to help them figure out what they're good at, what they may have to work hard at, and where they may want to focus energies.

Slideshow

Cultivate Character Strengths

Nurture strengths of character including gratitude, compassion, optimism and confidence so young people will lead meaningful adult lives.

Focus on the Adult Your Teen is to Become

We must learn to see our tweens and teens fully. Teens deserve parents who care about their short term achievements, including grades. But over-focusing on these short-term measures can undermine some of the very

qualities needed to become a healthy, successful adult.

Thinking about the adults you are raising takes pressure off of you. Your teens' success is not about whether they are happy in any given moment, nor is it about what they do immediately after high school. Young people have a lifetime to achieve success. Our job is not to get them to the finish line, but to prepare them with the character strengths that will launch them into the future.