

A Call to Parents

A Family's Guide to High School & College Success



P-04 • Spring 2002

of special interest to... **PARENTS**

Teenagers at Work: Making Work Really Work for Them

Getting a part-time, after-school job is a rite of passage for many teenagers. They—and we, their parents—see getting a job as a sign of maturity and responsibility. But does working really work for high school students? This bulletin lists some of the important questions to discuss.

Society's message: Just get a job

Like heroes in a legend, our teenagers are on a quest: to find out who they are and to make a place for themselves in the adult world.

Developing maturity and responsibility is an important part in the quest. As parents, we try to support this development—but sometimes we go about it the wrong way. Instead of encouraging them to follow their dreams, explore their interests, and acquire the skills and abilities they'll need later, we encourage them to get a job as a token of their progress toward adulthood. Society's message to teenagers is: "Get a job! Get *any* job—just learning to work is what really counts." And they are clearly getting the message. About two-thirds of high school students work during any given school year.

But think a moment about the *kinds* of jobs our kids are getting. Far too many teenagers are spending far too many hours making hamburgers, waiting on tables, bagging groceries—doing unchallenging, low-paying, dead-end work that doesn't contribute anything to their plans for education and careers. A

never-ending source of low-wage workers is just great for the companies that hire them. But do these jobs really help our children make progress toward their goals? Hardly!

"Just learning to work" is *not* what really counts—not for now, and certainly not for the future.

Why do teenagers want to work?

We often think of working high-schoolers as helping to support their families, or at least saving money for college. That's still true in some cases, of course. But more and more teenagers are working to pay for cars, clothes, electronics, and the high costs of "hanging out." As caring parents, we can gently challenge our teenagers to check their motivations as we ask them to think about their choices.

What does it cost to work?

Teenagers often begin by asking what they will earn, but they also need to ask what they will *pay*—not in terms of dollars, maybe, but in terms of time, energy, and chances. Consider:

- Work cuts into time for homework, recreation, and sleep.
- Working more than 20 hours per week during the school year can seriously hurt a student's grades and college prospects.

- Students who work long hours are also more likely to use drugs and alcohol than their non-working classmates.

Meaningless work at minimum wage may not be worth it if the teenager looks at the long-term risks and costs. That's a message we *have* to get across.

Is it safe to work?

We need to teach our teenagers to ask questions about safety at work: What are the dangers and hazards of this job? Will I get training in on-the-job safety and in emergency procedures? Where are the fire extinguishers and first aid kits located? What do I do if I get hurt on the job? These are important, legitimate questions for young workers to ask their employers.

Does the work match their interests?

Jobs that matches teenagers interests and helps them reach their goals can be beneficial. The right kind of work experience can help a teenager learn skills and make connections in a career field. But it has to be *the right kind of work experience for that particular teenager*. That usually means passing up the easy-to-find fast-food jobs and looking long and hard at alternatives.

We need to help our children define their interests and explore their options for meaningful work before they take just any old job.

Are there alternatives to “McJobs”?

Co-op jobs developed by specific school departments are an excellent way to gain entry and experience in a career field. The school's career specialist or technical teachers can point toward meaningful jobs. Community centers offer other good opportunities. Volunteer work can be a rich source of both professional contacts and skill building. Community-service projects can often combine academic and hands-on learning.

Think about it. Which “work experience” has more long-term benefits for a student thinking about veterinary medicine: cashiering at a convenience store, or volunteering at the animal shelter?

Conclusion

What makes the biggest difference for teenagers at work? *We* do!

We can help our teenagers reach their goals, now and in the future, by helping them make wise choices about work while they are in school. The following guidelines can help determine whether an after-school job is right for your son or daughter:

- the job takes 15 or fewer hours per week;
- the work is meaningful and linked to the teen's interests and goals;
- the teen learns more than he or she earns;
- the job is legal and safe;
- the teen handles money wisely (for example, knows how to say no to credit-card offers).

We *can* help our teenagers make good choices. We can help them focus their interests and define their goals. We can advocate for them like crazy. If they do choose to work, we can help them find worthwhile summer jobs or community positions. The *Peterson's* website lists hundreds of summer work possibilities in academics, arts, recreation, sports, wilderness studies, and other areas. Look for places that offer variety, challenge, independence, good adult mentors, and an avenue for making a real difference. That's the kind of job worth having: one that creates a rich opportunity for learning.

Resources and references:

Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform has Failed and what Parents Need to Do*. New York:, 1996.

Peterson's Great Summer Jobs at www.petersons.com

Youth@Work, *Health and Safety Awareness for Working Teens*. Worker Center, AFL-CIO, Seattle.

All in all, our research shows that heavy commitment to a part-time job during the school year ... significantly interferes with youngsters' school achievement and scholastic commitment. Students who work a lot perform worse in school, are less committed to their education, and are less engaged in class than their classmates who work less or not at all.

-Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom*
