

Is My Teen Lazy or Just Confused?

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- “My teenager is so lazy.”
- “I can’t get my son to fill out his college applications.”
- “My daughter is so smart, but she just isn’t applying herself.”
- “My son is thinking about dropping out of college and I think it’s because he doesn’t want to put in the work it takes to get good grades.”

I hear these kind of comments so frequently from parents calling me and wanting help with their “lazy” teenagers, that I decided to write this guide to explain why laziness might not be the problem your teen is dealing with. It could be that your daughter is dragging her feet about committing to a specific college, or your son may be talking about quitting college simply because they feel overwhelmed and confused about their direction. Their behavior may look like a lack of motivation, but usually indicates they just don’t know what they are supposed to do next. They are being asked to make some very important decisions about their future but often have no strategy for sorting through all their options and picking the best path.

Note to Parents: Be advised that sometimes “laziness” can be mistaken for depression, so please have your child evaluated by a doctor if you see signs of depression such as lethargy, not caring about anything, sudden mood changes, etc.

What *IS* Your Child Doing?

Very often parents will call me and say the following: “My child isn’t doing anything! He sits around playing video/computer games for hours.” In this case your child is doing something, it just may be something that you view as a total waste of time. However, you need to consider what your child is actually doing when he plays these games. Can there be any redeeming value to playing video/computer games?

I believe that video game playing may indicate that your child has some natural talent in problem-solving, analyzing, strategizing, managing, and/or constructing, designing, and visualizing things in three dimensions. These are all abilities that may be utilized when playing various computer/video games. For example, I once had a student tell me that he loved playing *SimFarm* (a computer game in which players build and manage a virtual farm.) To be successful at the game, the student had to develop a budget, make investment decisions, allocate resources, etc.

I have had other students tell me that they enjoy certain games because it allows them to design things, build things, develop political strategies, manage their “kingdoms,” create story lines and plots and so on. Obviously, not all computer/video games are good for your children to play, and you know when they are spending too much time playing games.

However, if your son or daughter seems to be drawn to a particular game, you need to ask them why they like it. What skills do they think are necessary to be successful in the game? Ask them to describe their strategies for winning the game.

Next you can look for ways to use those skills in a real-world situation. For example, the young man who enjoyed playing *SimFarm* described how he enjoyed managing and allocating resources. He ended up using these abilities when he volunteered at the food bank in his community. If your son or daughter likes creating plots and developing story lines when playing video games, they may want to volunteer at your local library to assist with literacy and story-time projects geared for at-risk children.

What's Important to Your Child?

Start paying attention to things your child points out, notices or makes comments about. What does your child say needs to be fixed, changed or done differently? For example, if your daughter attends an event and then comments that the event wasn't well organized, you need to ask about her comment. She may have a natural talent in organizing and managing. Ask her to explain what she would have done differently if she would have been in charge of the event. If your son comments that he thinks a particular building in your town looks interesting, ask him what he likes about the building. If he begins to talk about the architectural details and design of the building, he may have a natural talent in working with shapes and designs.

When I am counseling with college students, I usually ask them this question: "What's wrong with the world?" I have been amazed at the answers I have heard through the years. One young lady told me that the road systems in Africa were a big problem. I asked how she noticed this and she told me that each summer she took a mission trip to Africa and it bothered her when she saw how ineffective the transportation system was. She said that all kinds of food and medical supplies went to waste because they weren't delivered in a timely fashion. She had already started thinking of ways to solve this problem.

Following are some questions you can ask to gain insight into which type of issues, problems or challenges are important to your child:

- What do you wish you could do something about?
- What needs are going unmet in our world today?
- What is the most pressing issue facing our society?
- What is it you hear people discussing that makes you want to jump in and say something?

You need to understand what issues or situations are important to your son or daughter because it is these concerns that can serve as motivators for getting your child active. Instead of wondering if your child is lazy, help them find volunteer opportunities where they can contribute toward helping solve the type of problems or issues they see as being important.

Volunteer, Try Things Out, Do Something

Sometimes I talk with young adults who tell me they are afraid to do anything because they don't want to make a mistake. They put off making decisions about college and their future because they are trying to figure out exactly what they will be doing the rest of their life before they take a step. Following are 2 points I emphasize with these students:

First, you cannot know your **destiny** but you can get a **direction** and start down your path. Instead of worrying about what may happen 10, 20 or 30 years from now, focus on identifying your next step. For example, there is no way I could have known when I was 21 that I would end up as a college and career counselor, being a published author, speaking at a women's conference in Israel, being a wife, mother and all the other wonderful things that have happened one step at a time. Each one of these opportunities came about because I was willing to try things out; I was curious, I was willing to volunteer my time, or because I noticed something that needed to be done differently and I was willing to do something about it.

The second thing I tell students who are afraid to make choices and decisions about their future path is that it's easier to direct a **moving** object than a **stationary** object. In other words, it's easier to steer a ship that is out in the open waters and moving than a ship tied up and anchored in the harbor. This basic principle applies to our lives as well. Being willing to try things out, volunteer or investigate topics that interest you, greatly increases your chances of finding a meaningful career/life path. For example, after I graduated from college I took a job in human resources doing interviewing and recruiting. I was living in Houston at the time, and read about a one night seminar being offered by a gentleman who was on staff with Richard Bolles, author of *What Color is Your Parachute?* (a book about job hunting and career changing). I attended his seminar and realized that I was more interested in helping people with career/life planning issues than in interviewing and recruiting, so I got the additional education and training I needed to make a career change. After I had been career counseling for several years, I began to notice how much it bothered me to hear young people so confused about finding their college and career direction, so I began researching and writing about this topic. My first book was published and I started speaking at parent and teacher conferences throughout the country.

I have had some really wonderful opportunities come through my volunteer work as well. My church helps support a number of ministries in Israel. I became very interested in this work and a few years after I became involved, I was asked to speak at a women's conference in Israel. I feel blessed to have been able to experience a number of really exciting things throughout my life, but none of these things would have happened if I hadn't been out doing something and making myself available for opportunities to find me. I have also lived my life believing that I should make my plans, but I trust God to direct my steps.

Overwhelmed by Options

Sometimes I hear high school and college students tell me they feel overwhelmed by all the options available to them. They have been told that “they can be anything they want to be,” and as a result it feels like there is an infinite number of choices. While this may sound liberating, it more often than not sends students into a spiral trying to find the one “right” path. If every option is really an option for you, how would you ever find the exact right thing? What if the thing you pick turns out not to be the best option?

For the past 3 years I have spoken at a Leadership Conference for high school students in the San Antonio area. I start off my presentation by asking, “How many of you have heard that you can be anything you want to be?” Every hand in the room usually goes up in agreement. I then say, “Well, I really want to play tight-end for the Texas A&M football team, but no matter how bad I want it, I don’t think they will let a woman my age play.”

Most of the students tell me that it is a relief to hear that there are in fact limits to their options. If your child is having a hard time picking a college major, it may be a relief to know that there are only a limited number of college degrees available. Granted there are hundreds of degree plans, but at least there is a finite number of options. You can’t major in underwater basket weaving if you can’t find a school that offers it.

Do What You Love

Another confusing thing students often hear is that they should find a career that they **love**. Well-meaning adults say things like, “Do what you love, the money will follow,” or “Take your passion and make it happen,” or “Your Dad and I just want you to find a job where you will be happy,” or “Your Mom and I have given up a lot for you to go to college, we want you to be successful and happy.”

I’m afraid some students are confused about their direction because there is so much pressure and emphasis on being in a job that makes you happy and they wonder how they will find this utopia. Some students have remarked, “What if I end up doing something that doesn’t make me happy? After all the emphasis on my happiness, I would feel guilty if I didn’t **love** my job.” The idea that their first job right out of college will be their ultimate job is unrealistic. Finding a job or career that you enjoy is a process.

No one wants to work in a job that they hate. However, is it realistic to think that work will be the primary source of your fulfillment, and that you can find a job where you will be happy all the time? I really enjoy my job. I enjoy counseling, speaking, teaching and writing. However, I hate bookkeeping, marketing, and cleaning the bathroom at my office. The majority of the time, I love what I do, but it is still work, and when I have a bad day or have to do those things I don’t enjoy, I have to keep this in mind.

Do Your Design

In the example I shared earlier about my interest in playing Aggie football, you can probably guess that my unique design does not fit being a tight-end. Besides the fact

that God designed me as a woman, He also designed into me certain things I do well and enjoy doing, none of which would be utilized in a football career. I enjoy counseling, public speaking and teaching. I am also bothered by the fact that so many young people are confused about how to get a direction for their life. It's important to me that my work contributes to helping solve this problem.

I believe that God has designed into everyone a desire to help fix and repair certain problems that exist in our world. That's why I encourage you to ask your child "what's wrong with the world?" What type of problems, issues or challenges do they want to work toward helping solve or make better? How do they want to use their natural talents to make a difference in someone else's life?

Instead of focusing so much on encouraging our children to find some ideal job where their happiness is the primary focus, I think it would be a relief to them to hear that we want them to find a career that will allow them to work on issues and problems that are important to them. If you really are worried that your child might be lazy, find out what motivates them to want to take action and then help them find volunteer opportunities where they can put their motivation and natural talents to work. One way to get this started is to have your child look at a few of the websites devoted to volunteering such as www.volunteermatch.org; www.idealists.org; or www.globalcitizens.org. Ask your son or daughter to look through the volunteer options available and tell you about the ones that are the most appealing. You might be surprised what you find out about what's really important to your child and what type of problems and issues motivate them to want to take action.