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Carl E Pickhardt Ph.D.

Surviving (Your Child's) Adolescence

Adolescence and Four Skills of Self-Discipline

Learning to make oneself do what needs to be done can be hard.

Posted Sep 19, 2016

One way to think of self-discipline (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/self-control>) is this: the capacity to make oneself accomplish tasks that are hard or unwelcome to do and to resist what is tempting but not wise



“My safety plan is to be OK.”

Source: Carl Pickhardt Ph.D.

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/wisdom> to do.

This blog has to do with self-discipline that adolescents will need to rely on to support functional independence when they graduate parental care.

At the outset of adolescence (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/adolescence>) (ages 9 – 13) the youthful outcry against parental discipline often was “You can’t make me!” because parents wielded ruling authority to which the young person objected.

However, at the end of adolescence, Trial Independence (ages 18-23), the outcry is “I can’t make me!” because now the young person has become their own governing authority, and they must struggle to motivate and direct themselves.

Witnessing this painful self-encounter always reminds me of the words of cartoonist Walt Kelly, “We have met the enemy and they are us.” There is no one to blame but oneself. Such self-enmity can contribute to a lot of older adolescent struggles to responsibly cope as partly exemplified in the average college retention rate of around 50% (see Journal of College Retention). I believe one factor for this high college attrition is a lack of adequate self-discipline of both initiating and restraining kinds.

So, consider what four initiating skills of self-discipline (and their problematic counterparts) might be. Hopefully the initiating skills are practiced and in place by high school graduation so the transition to managing more self-reliance (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/confidence>) can be effectively made, Skills to consider are: Concentration (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/attention>) (against Distraction), Completion (against Quitting), Consistency (against Irregularity), and Commitment (against Defaulting.) Take them one at a time.

CONCENTRATION

Concentration requires paying attention and resisting distraction and escape. Thus the amount of time it takes different young people to accomplish the same amount of homework can vary widely. An adolescent who can pay sustained attention and not be diverted by other distraction, or be lured away by the temptation of entertainment, can get assignments done quickly and efficiently. Another teenager, however, who is easily distracted and vulnerable to escape, can stretch the work out over a much longer time due to frequent interruptions for relief and diversion.

It is far easier to concentrate on what one likes or loves doing than what one dislikes. Thus you can have a teenager who can comfortably spend hours absorbed in playing computer games or social messaging for fun, but who can't stand attending to what feels un-enjoyable or non-rewarding, like assigned work, for more than a very short length of time.

Concentration requires focusing attention. To improve Concentration, for example, practice staying on task for longer periods of time and recognize your increasing attention span.

COMPLETION

Completion requires follow-through from beginning to end, pursuing the objective when it becomes hard or harder to reach. Completion requires persistence in the face of fatigue and frustration. A lot depends on the power of the goal and the dedication of the young person. Some young people with a low tolerance for frustration give up easily when the going gets tough. Maybe they started well-intentioned, but ran out of determination along the way, quitting the result. Other young people, faced with a set-back may buckle down harder than ever to fulfill their original plan.

Completion requires finishing what was begun. To improve Completion, for example, practice breaking the job down into manageable stages and recognizing progress as you proceed.

CONSISTENCY

Consistency requires continuity of effort for an ongoing effect to be maintained -- like academic or athletic performance. Repetition can maintain a level of conduct that matters – turning school work in on time or regularly studying for tests. Routine can become habit forming, productive work habits one result. So one adolescent enjoys feeling physically fit, exercising regularly to keep this regimen in place. A friend, however, who would like “to be in shape,” can’t get himself to adhere to a workout schedule.

Consistency of effort can require tolerance for boredom since repetition for its own sake can feel repetitive and dull. Irregular application is the result.

Consistency sustains ongoing effort. To improve Consistency, for example, schedule your next act of repetition into your daily plan to remind yourself when to do it again.

COMMITMENT

Commitment requires delivering to oneself or others something promised. Commitment is like contracting where one agrees to be as good as one’s word. An adolescent who keeps commitments can be counted on to mean what is said. An adolescent who breaks agreements or promises to self and others not only fails in getting something done, but becomes untrustworthy. “People don’t believe I’ll do what I say, and neither do I.” The young person becomes victim of their own default.

Like a New Year's resolutions, commitments are far easier to make than keep. And when [procrastination \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/procrastination\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/procrastination) counsels avoidance and delay, commitments become harder to meet.

Commitment keeps agreements made. To improve Commitment, for example, notice how good you feel acting like a promise keep and resolve to keep treating yourself well.

ENEMIES OF SELF-DISCIPLINE

Working with last stage adolescents who are having a hard time supporting functional independence, two factors that can make these four self-disciplinary skills harder to exercise are substance use and Internet escape.

When substance use erodes normal caring and interferes with assuming necessary responsibilities, it becomes harder to concentrate, complete, be consistent, and keep commitments to self and others. And the same outcome can happen when escape into online entertainment becomes a preferred alternative to meeting the daily challenges of offline life.

In general, the emotional consequence for inability to concentrate, to complete, to be consistent, or to meet a commitment is not a happy one, like for the able freshman who flunks out of college. Lack of [intelligence \(https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence\)](https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/intelligence) is not the problem; lack of self-discipline is. Frustration, disappointment, helplessness, and sense of failure can result. Hard though self-discipline can be, independent of outcome it is usually worth the effort. "At least I tried." "At least I did what I could."

Since these four skills that support self-discipline are mostly learned through repetition, it is never too late for a young person to get that practice underway. Once operational, resulting patterns of self-discipline can make a significant difference in the older adolescent's life: "I'm finally getting traction," "I'm no longer spinning my wheels," "I'm finding my footing," "I'm catching hold," "I'm making headway at last!"

So, if possible, do your late adolescent a favor. Graduate them from your care empowered by four self-disciplinary work habits.

"I can pay attention to what needs doing."

"I can finish what I begin."

"I can maintain continuity of important effort."

"I can keep promises to myself and others."

For more about parenting (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/parenting>) older adolescents who are struggling with independence, see my book: "BOOMERANG KIDS -- A revealing look at why so many of our children are failing on their own, and how parents can help," (SOURCEBOOKS, 2011.) Information at: www.carlpickhardt.com (<http://www.carlpickhardt.com>)

Next week's entry: Parenting to Support the Twin Purposes of Adolescence

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[you've not given any examples \(/comment/870713#comment-870713\)](/comment/870713#comment-870713)

Submitted by Anonymous on September 19, 2016 - 8:20am

you've not given any examples of how to practise any of these

[Thanks! \(/comment/870731#comment-870731\)](/comment/870731#comment-870731)

Submitted by [Carl E Pickhardt Ph.D. \(/experts/carl-e-pickhardt-phd\)](/experts/carl-e-pickhardt-phd) on September 19, 2016 - 9:42am

Thanks for your suggestion. I have revised the blog per your suggestion.

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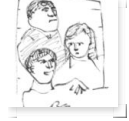


[Carl Pickhardt, Ph.D.](#), is a psychologist in Austin, Texas. His most recent books are: *[The Connected Father](#)*, *[The Future of Your Only Child](#)*, and *[Stop Screaming](#)*.

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