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The Big Wait

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Boredom, restlessness, apathy—we can turn these common adolescent traits around if we introduce elements of adult work into teens' school experience.

At first glance, Ray's story seemed disappointingly typical. Although he had been an amiable and eager preteen, his grades began to drop dramatically in high school. In response to parental lectures, he always promised to do better, but never did.

What made Ray unusual, however, was that his lost motivation wasn't the result of drug use, family conflict, or falling in with the wrong crowd. Rather, he could trace the start of his disenchantment with school back to an offhand remark by his dad as the two were washing the family car one Saturday afternoon.

Ray and his dad had been talking about school as they passed the soapy sponge back and forth. Ray was anxious about how he would do in 9th grade that year, and his dad was trying to put things into perspective:

I know you're thinking about this year as counting toward college some day, and that's great, but once you get into college, those grades are going to matter, too. And for me, even after college, in medical school, how well I did still affected what kind of a job I'd get. So this year is just one piece in a much bigger puzzle.

Ray's dad was trying to be reassuring. But as Ray listened, he suddenly realized he wasn't gearing up for a few years' push, but for a slog that would last more than a decade before real results would appear. Ray didn't say much that day, but the thought ate at him: Would studying Charlemagne or cosines or physics tonight really affect his life a decade hence? His report card every nine weeks reflected his answer.

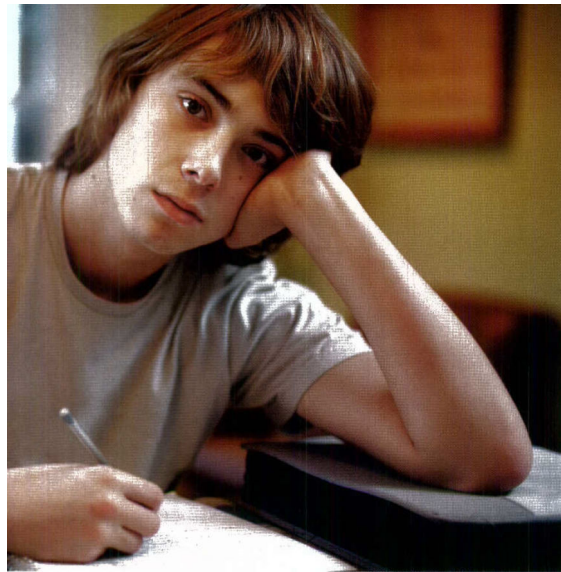
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They are the coauthors of *Escaping the Endless Adolescence: How We Can Help Our Teenagers Grow Up Before They Grow Old* (Ballantine Books, 2009).

The Teenage Twilight Zone

Ray was unusual in being able to precisely describe the root of a problem that many students face: The Big Wait. The problem shouldn't be hard to understand. Most adults on diets find it difficult to pass up that tasty chocolate cake tonight knowing that the results won't appear on the bathroom scale for a few days to a week. Yet we routinely ask teens to study hard each night knowing that the real benefits won't show up in their lives until far in the future.

Of course, the teenage years have always involved some waiting and delay, but lately something has been changing. For most of human history, adolescence was a fleeting phase between the time when a teen first gained adultlike capacities and the time when some adult noticed and insisted that he or she put those capacities to use. Even for the grandparents of today's teens, adolescence was considered to end at 17 or 18. Now, we see 24-year-olds just starting to chart their course as adults (Yelowitz, 2007).



We see teens delaying getting driver's licenses that their parents once raced to obtain; we see delayed financial independence; we even see delayed interpersonal independence, typified by the remarkable 13 times a week that the average college senior now contacts his or her parents (Kennedy & Hofer, 2007). We may have noticed that adolescence now seems to go on forever—but we've failed to notice how this change can affect teens.

Imagine that one morning you wake up to find yourself in a twilight-zone world. Walking outside, you see your neighbor across the street, a surgeon, who remarks that, instead of operating on live patients, he spends his days just cutting up cadavers to practice his craft. As you move through your day, you realize that lawyers now argue only mock cases, plumbers practice repairing fake leaks, and airline pilots fly only on flight simulators. In your own job as a teacher, instead of teaching students, you stand at the front of an empty classroom talking to a video camera. The meaning of your work is gone, and increasingly, you feel bored, restless, apathetic, and even lazy. Then it dawns on you—you're now experiencing the life of a typical high school student!

That high schools succeed at all under these conditions is a testament to teachers' creativity, initiative, and perseverance—and to teens' tenuous faith in adult assurances that all this “work” will someday pay off.

Making Adolescence More Adult

The good news is that once we recognize how the Big Wait affects teens, we gain a new leverage point for tackling many problems that we may have come to view as wired into these students' behavior. Teachers and schools lie at the epicenter of the Big Wait, and they feel the shocks regularly; but they are also in a unique position to provide solutions.

Anthropologists who have studied adolescents in hundreds of other societies provide an important clue to those solutions. They've found that problems such as juvenile apathy, rebellion, and delinquency are largely nonexistent in societies that routinely ask teens to engage with adults in adultlike work (Schlegel & Barry, 1991). The notions about hormones and immature brains that we sometimes cling to as explanations for adolescent problems don't predetermine teen behavior in those societies.

Rooted in the experience of such societies, and of our own society not long ago, solutions begin to emerge. Our students will come alive if we can reintroduce elements of real adulthood into their teenage years.

How do we do this? We can start by asking, What motivates us as adults? What makes us take our work seriously and put in effort even when it's hard? The answers can be distilled into what we call the four Rs of an adulthood-oriented approach to teen learning: *relevance*, *real-world feedback*, *responsibility*, and *respect*. These terms are not new, but when we view them from the perspective of adult motivation, we may begin to see our students differently.

Relevance

The teacher's first task in any class is to let students know why they should bother to learn the material. “Because your grades are important” just won't go far with most teens. If we're really going to engage them, we need to take on the mission from day one of showing them how what they're learning may someday be useful in the adult world.

Over and over, we've found that teens don't need much to hang on to in this regard. They begin to wake up when we provide even scraps of evidence that what we're teaching is relevant to their lives. The simple act of a teacher saying not just, “Learn this,” but “Here's how, specifically, it could help you,” sends a powerful message to teens that they are being treated as adults and might want to start acting the part.



For example, a high school physics class might bring in an engineer or research scientist, or an English class might bring in a writer or editor, to talk about the range of ways these successful adults actually use what students are learning. One world history teacher with whom we've worked requires students to follow current events for homework every day, telling them, "The *only* reason to learn anything about world history is because it helps us understand what's going on today" (Allen & Allen, 2009, p. 209).

Another history teacher faced the challenge of engaging her students in learning about the post–World War I period (not the most intrinsically fascinating era for most students). She

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approached it by asking her students the following question:

"Imagine you've had a big end-of-year standardized test and you've been slogging through studying for it for weeks and then you take it, and it's incredibly long and hard and painful. How do you feel at the end of it?"

"Exhausted. Shot. Worn out," students replied.

"That's the United States after World War I," the teacher noted. She went on, "OK, what do you want to do then?"

"Party!" said one student, and others quickly joined the cry.

"OK, so you enter the Roaring Twenties and it's party time. You party and party and party all night—then what happens?"

"You crash!" they replied, as though the answer had been planted.

These students now had a way of understanding and remembering the period leading up to the Great Depression. They had been introduced to the intriguing notion that adults may at times act in the same irresponsible ways as they might—and maybe they weren't so different from these adults. Even though it was just an analogy, the students could now connect what they were learning to their own lives. The course came alive. Even a nod toward making the course material relevant had gained their attention to a remarkable degree.

Real-World Feedback

As adults, we're used to getting quick, meaningful feedback for our efforts. If a teacher prepares poorly for a class, the feedback comes almost instantaneously as students grow restless; when the same teacher tutors a student after school, a smile of comprehension is its own reward. Teens rarely get this kind of feedback except from their peers. Is it any wonder that many teens worry more about the immediate reaction their new jeans will receive in homeroom than about the far more delayed and abstract feedback they'll get from failing to pay attention in history class later that day?

One solution is to provide more immediate feedback—from rapid turnaround of quiz grades to continual in-class checks on comprehension. But we've also found that when we bring just a bit more adult-world feedback into the classroom, teens eat it up.

One of our colleagues dropped a small bombshell into the high school English class she taught. She announced that she was going to exchange favors with a professional writer friend who had published a number of nonfiction magazine articles: The teacher would do some editing for the writer, and the writer would read and evaluate the students' final research papers as he would any written project that came across his desk. The students were instantly intrigued, curious, and more than a bit intimidated by this upcoming brush with the adult world. Was their work good enough? Would they be judged harshly? These questions led to several intense class discussions about what kind of writing succeeds in the adult world.

The essays, when they came in, were the best this teacher had ever seen. When the papers came back, some of the students were intrigued, some chastened, and a few were quietly thrilled at the response to their work. A number of parents remarked on how motivated their children had been by the assignment. The students had simply been given a chance to get a smidgen of real feedback about how their work might fare in the adult world, and they had responded accordingly.¹

Responsibility

Can a few hours of student time invested each week reduce school dropout and failure rates by 50 percent? We wouldn't have believed it either had we not conducted years of evaluation of the Teen Outreach program (www.wywantop.org), which involves young people in meaningful volunteer work and then links this work to classroom discussions led by a facilitator once or

Teens are thirsty for the chance to be treated as adults.

twice a week. In carefully controlled studies comparing participating students with those who wanted to participate but lost a lottery and had to wait a year for slots to open, the program achieved consistent and dramatic reductions in school dropout, suspension, course failure, and even teen pregnancy rates (see Allen, Philliber, Herrling, & Kuperminc, 1997).

¹See "What Kids Learn from Experts," on p. 64 of this issue, for more in-depth discussion of providing real-world critiques of student work.



Teen Outreach works because it gives teens a vision of themselves successfully taking responsibility in the adult world. Even, or perhaps especially, the students who are only modestly capable academically get to shine in their efforts to help others. One supervisor at a child care site described one of her student volunteers, Tonya, a shy, unassuming 11 th grader who'd struggled in school for years: "When Tonya comes in on Tuesday mornings, to the kids she's like a rock star!" Gaining that sense of competence in handling adult responsibility, and reflecting on that experience in classroom discussions, helps teens start seeing themselves as future adults. As a result, they *want* to be prepared to enter that adult world.

The idea is simple and generalizes beyond this one program: Teens, like adults, enjoy being counted on and feeling helpful and important. Once we tune in to this idea we can engage them in hundreds of ways in school, asking them to take responsibility for everything from designing classroom displays, to handling sports equipment, to helping prepare materials for lessons. As we give teens more responsibility in school, they typically rise to the challenge and begin to behave more responsibly.

Respect

What the first three Rs share in common is that they all involve treating teens—even young teens—more as fledgling adults than as large children. Teens instinctively recognize when they're being pulled toward adulthood—and when they aren't. The middle school teacher who addresses her students as "boys and girls" turns them off before she even gets started, the same students would be surprised, but also a little proud, to be addressed as "ladies and gentlemen."

More important, though, we show teens respect by putting them in charge of their own learning. For example, what if we routinely expected teens to accompany their parents to parent-teacher conferences? Immediately, this would eliminate the classic problem of the disgruntled parent returning from a conference only to confront a teen full of excuses and explanations about questionable-sounding “misunderstandings” that he or she promises to clear up the next day. More to the point, though, involving students puts them in the role of being directly accountable for their actions. And a tough conversation with a teacher and parent is harder to blow off than a letter grade on a piece of paper every nine weeks. As adults, personal accountability, as much as anything else, often motivates us in our daily work. Teens are no different.

Water for the Thirsty

These four Rs will be little more than a useful mnemonic unless we take to heart the lesson that underlies them: *We must begin to see and treat teens differently.* Not as large, hormone-crazed children destined to fight us but as adults-in-training—adults who are legitimately frustrated and restless at feeling stuck in a seemingly endless holding zone.

There are many ways we can start to put adulthood back into the teenage years (see Allen & Allen, 2009). We can do it through daily teaching practices, such as those we've described in this article. We can also do it by making big-picture changes: for example, by enabling students to combine high school and the first two years of college, as many schools in the Early College High School Initiative do (Hoffman & Webb, 2010); or by implementing exit exams that would allow teens to graduate from high school as soon as they've mastered essential material, as recommended by the National Center on Education and the Economy (2007).



Again and again, we find that teens are thirsty for the chance to be treated as adults. And like parched plants given even a bit of water, they quickly spring back to life, with much of the energy and enthusiasm we recall from their younger days, when given a chance to begin acting like adults. The techniques we need to bring about this transformation aren't hard to discover or implement once we recognize teens as beginner adults. That recognition makes all the difference.

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