



GROWING UP EMPOWERED

Helping Kids Step Into Their Best Selves

by Judith Fertig

The plugged-in, stressed-out world that challenges adults can be even more difficult for teens in the throes of hormones, peer pressure and a selfie culture. Parents can help their children thrive and become empowered individuals by nurturing desirable character traits such as resourcefulness, resilience, perseverance, self-reliance, independence, empathy and social competence.

Child psychologist Michele Borba, Ed.D., of Palm Springs, California, is a former classroom teacher and the

mother of three grown children who dispenses advice at MicheleBorba.com/blog.

Her main parenting focus is character education, as reflected in her latest book, *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About-Me World*. “Tune in to what your kids love,” advises Borba. “Then find learning experiences that help them develop traits they need to be happy, productive adults.”

This positive parenting approach—accentuating youthful desires and strengths, instead of deficiencies and weaknesses—helps young people

develop a secure footing in life. “Kids are driven by their hearts,” observes Borba. “A positive parent doesn’t do the cookie-cutter approach, as in, ‘That’s what worked for other kids in the neighborhood,’ nor even reference what the parent did as a teen.” Teens also impose upon themselves, thinking that being trendy, beautiful, rich and famous are valuable life goals. “The positive parent looks at each child as an individual, listens to what really makes them light up, and then supports that.”

Dreaming Big

Landmark Worldwide, active in 125 cities globally, is committed to the idea that people everywhere have the possibility of achieving success, fulfillment and greatness. Corporate leaders praise its programs for helping participants relate, communicate and perform well. Josselyne Herman-Saccio, a Landmark program leader in New York City, remarks, "Every one of us has a dream, yet too many of us choose our path with fear, disguised as practicality. Our kids might get the message that, 'You don't do your dream as your career.'" That thought can leave anyone feeling like something is missing.

After putting off her own career as a singer and ultimately deciding to go for it, Herman-Saccio recorded *That's What Love Can Do* with her group Boy Crazy. The song rose to the top of the pop charts in 1993.

That empowering experience helped her decide to help others—including her own three children—fulfill their dreams. Today, Herman-Saccio leads the Landmark Forum for adults, and the company also offers a version of the course for 13-to-17-year-olds, an interactive, three-day program in cities across the U.S. It helps teens first understand their existing patterns of thoughts and behaviors and then move forward to create new possibilities and face new challenges and discover a new level of power, freedom, self-expression and peace of mind. For a teen to register, a parent or legal guardian must register for or have completed the organization's adult forum and provide permission.

Teens planning for life after high school get help identifying their career passion at schools such as Upland Hills School, in Oxford, Michigan. Its emphasis on experiential learning culminates in a senior project the teen produces, whether it's writing a novel, building a storage shed or volunteering at the local senior citizen center. Each must somehow contribute to the community. Beginning with the student's dream, they must work their way through obstacles, setbacks and all the steps required to bring a dream to reality.



Emotional Literacy/Healthy Risk-Taking

Sometimes parents need to address a teen's longing for friends and social connections. For youths that especially need to nurture their social skills, such as high-functioning kids with autism or Asperger's syndrome, film school might be an answer. At the Joey Travolta Film School and summer camp, in Lafayette, California, kids work together to make a movie; they start with a script, create

sets, operate the camera, act and direct.

At the Hunter School, in Romney, New Hampshire, kids dealing with attention challenges can nurture mind-body awareness, energetic mindfulness and sensory integration. It all helps them get to know themselves and relate better to others.

Outdoor skills can help teens develop healthy risk-taking behaviors, as well as teach resilience, perseverance and self-reliance. SheJumps (*SheJumps.org*), in Salt Lake City, offers young women 6 to 18 years old an opportunity to master outdoor living skills, boost confidence and encourage leadership via collaborating with strong female role models. Fun activities include mountain biking, skiing and trailblazing.

Leadership

Over time, experiential learning can help youths develop leadership skills. Lander, Wyoming's National Outdoor Leadership School, a gap-year program for high school graduates taking a year off before college, offers courses lasting two weeks, several months or even a



full year. Activities include sea kayaking, Alaskan mountain and glacier climbing and wilderness medicine.

Teens already on track and wanting to develop additional leadership skills can tap into motivational speaker and self-help author Tony Robbins' annual Unleash the Power Within youth leadership program event. Groups of youths 14 to 17 years old collectively participate to create individual breakthroughs, move beyond fears and limiting beliefs, accomplish goals and realize true desires. Application requirements include a good academic record, at least 20 hours of community service and a guidance counselor's recommendation. Robbins maintains, "Grow and give is what life is all about."

Service to Others

A way for youngsters 5 to 19 years old to become empowered is by joining a 4-H group in urban, suburban or rural areas. If we envision a farm kid raising a calf to show at the state fair, that's still one facet of today's 4-H, but far from

the entire scope. Founded in 1902, 4-H is a global nonprofit dedicated to learning by doing; specialties now range from computer science and graphic design to leadership, healthy living and the performing arts.

Positive mentoring by adults and developing community spirit ground 4-H clubs, camps and programs. Research by Tufts University's Institute for Applied Research in Youth Development and America's land-grant colleges and universities shows that people with a 4-H background are more likely to give back to their communities than others (see Tinyurl.com/YouthDevelopmentStudy).

For Grammy-winner Jennifer Nettles, of Nashville, 4-H meant learning to perform at an early age, even flying to Chicago to do it. "I don't know that I would be where I am today without 4-H," she says. "Mentors there help you. They helped me with the skills of performing and learning about being on stage; they also taught me the importance of giving back."

Sustainable Sustenance

Growing food for themselves and others can be a great adventure for teens, while fostering resourcefulness, perseverance and ecological awareness. Seventeen-year-old Katie Stagliano launched Katie's Crops, in Summerville, South Carolina, several years ago based on her desire to fight hunger by growing food for people that need it. Today, the enterprise offers grants for youth in any area to start and maintain a local garden, provided they give away the produce to the hungry. The initiative has grown to more than 50 gardens around the U.S.

Both Mobile Urban Growers, in Mobile, Alabama, and Closer to Earth, in Oklahoma City, empower youth through exercising organic gardening skills, environmental and food justice advocacy and personal mentorship.

Empowering experiences for teens don't have to cost a lot or involve travel. "Dream big, but start small. Look around your own backyard, in your community," says Borba. "Teens can learn to pay it forward in all kinds of ways. They can get together with their peers and take on a doable project to help others. They may even need to start by learning to self-regulate and manage stress by getting away from their phones and instead being outside getting exercise."

Casual family activities can provide opportunities for conversations about what teens want in life or what they're worried about, and that opens the door for adults to step up to help mentor and empower their children. "Boys are more likely to talk while they're doing something, like shooting baskets with you in the driveway," observes Borba. "Girls are more likely to talk if it's one-on-one."

Positive parents actively listen and then clarify what they heard from their teens, says Herman-Saccio. This information helps point the way forward, to more interactive dialogue, brainstorming, problem-solving, helpful experiences and eventually, youth empowerment.

Judith Fertig blogs at AlfrescoFoodAndLifestyle.blogspot.com from Overland Park, KS.