

Poland Regional High School's
9th Grade Parent Newsletter

January 28, 2020

Welcome to our inaugural edition!!



A big big thank you!

Thank you, parents, for attending your child's student led conferences this fall. SLCs are a great way for students to begin to reflect upon their academic progress, as well as their long-term and short-term goals. They also provide Roundtable Advisors with a terrific opportunity to meet families and learn more about how they can help support your children. Believe it or not, spring SLCs are around the corner!

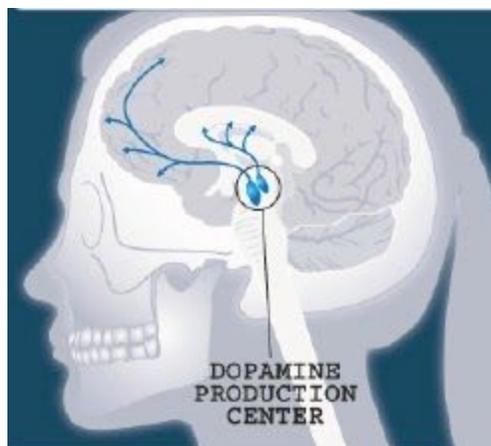
Thank you, also, for taking the time to complete the Parent Survey at your child's SLC. This enabled us to gather very helpful information regarding how we can work together to support students. For instance, nearly 80% of you indicated you would be interested in reading a monthly newsletter that is geared toward parents of 9th graders. So here it is!

Introduction from Mrs. Peinado

For those of you who do not know me, I would like to introduce myself. I wear several hats at PRHS, and hold different titles, such as “RTI Coordinator,” “Instructional Strategist,” and “BARR Coordinator.” What really matters is what I do here to support students. First of all, I oversee our school’s Learning Center, which is open every day from 7:15-3:30 and staffed with wonderful folks who are available to help all students with academics. In addition, I work with teachers and students to help improve the learning experience for students who may be struggling academically. I help students in both individual and small group settings to gain skills necessary for academic success, such as time management, planning, and prioritizing.

In my role as BARR (Building Assets, Reducing Risks) Coordinator, I will be sharing information with parents about topics that are of interest. As the parent of two teens myself, I am fairly familiar with some of the unique struggles that teens - and those who love them - face on a regular basis. I intend to base each quarterly newsletter edition on one of these issues. The parent survey taken during student-led conferences indicated that nearly 50% of you are interested in learning more about **teen motivation**, and so this is where we will begin!

The Science of Motivation



In order for us to understand why motivating our teens is such a tricky business, it helps to have a clear understanding of the brain activity responsible “behind the scenes” when we ask our children to complete a task. Motivation is a mental state that drives people to take action in order to meet a goal. As it turns out, finding the “motivation” to do something involves brain chemistry. Motivation is affected by levels of dopamine in our brain.¹ This chemical travels through neural pathways to the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that is responsible for “executive functions” such as time management, planning, and goal setting. Research shows that dopamine increases when we experience pleasure or anticipate a reward

(www.onemindonebreath.com).

Why does this matter for teens and the people who love them? It may help us to think back to when our children were young. As toddlers, they may have been motivated to eat their vegetables when promised dessert. Later, you might have encouraged them to make their own beds or put their toys away by using a sticker chart. As children grow up, the need for external rewards is replaced by intrinsic rewards, such as the satisfaction of doing well on a test or the encouragement of their teammates when they perform well in their sport. **Scientists have also discovered that dopamine levels in the brain actually decrease when chronic stress is introduced (webmd.com). This means that when individuals are stressed, they may have less motivation to complete tasks.**

¹ (Image from www.blog.idonethis.com)

Science, cont.

The issue of rewards becomes even more complex when we factor in immediate vs. delayed gratification! According to an article in Science Daily (May 11, 2015), most people like immediate reinforcement and have a tendency to place a lower value on rewards that are delayed. For many teens, this means that playing their favorite video games or viewing a friend's Instagram live story is more satisfying than receiving a passing grade on a science test next week. This is the bad news; the good news is that this short-sightedness will not last forever.

The gradual shift from extrinsic to intrinsic motivation, and immediate to delayed gratification, is connected to the development of the brain. The prefrontal cortex is the last area of the brain to develop; the process begins in adolescence and is not complete until an individual reaches their mid-20s. As this area of the brain develops, teens will become increasingly more goal driven. In the meantime, **setting short, incremental goals with rewards built in (i.e. snack/media breaks during homework sessions) can be an effective strategy to support your child.**

So what does all this scientific information mean for us? Read the next section to find out!

Whose goal is it, anyway?

Adults often complain that teens lack a sense of urgency. According to Psychologist Caroline Buzanko (globalnews.ca, 10/30/19), **"Teens do have a sense of urgency. Actually, they have a heightened sense of urgency. The only problem is their priorities are often different from ours."** Buzanko explains that the ability to be motivated and establish priorities are habits that are still emerging as brains develop. She advises parents and teachers to give them some leeway and assist them in prioritizing and setting manageable goals.

The ability to establish a goal and follow through on achieving it, known as "goal-directed persistence," is an essential trait for teens to be able to visualize their futures and determine the intermediate steps necessary to achieve their goals. This is also one of the last executive skills to develop. Fortunately, this is not news for despair! Adults can help build these skills by trying some of the tips and tricks listed below. The key, however, is to proceed with caution! Many teens are eager to solve their problems for themselves, and may initially reject assistance. They not be ready to acknowledge that they have a problem and do not even see the need for help. Furthermore (and one of the most frustrating things for adults to acknowledge), children may have very different goals for themselves than the ones we have for them. Although it may well be true that the grown-ups know best, we will make little progress in supporting teens if we do not have their buy-in.

According to Guare and Dawson, authors of the book "Smart but Scattered Teens" (2013 p. 82), there are several important guidelines to keep in mind when talking with your teen:

1. Be prepared to negotiate and compromise;
2. Convey that your intentions are to help the teen accomplish something beneficial to them;
3. Focus on how the desired changes will boost the teen's independence;
4. Be clear in your own mind about why it is important to address the problem.

Goals, cont.

Guare and Dawson also provide guidance on how to teach your teen to persevere. First of all, they recommend working on a goal that a) your teen is already invested in, and b) there is little conflict associated with. For example, instead of focusing on building your child's perseverance in learning a challenging skill, why not start with learning to cook a meal? This way your child can practice persistence in a way that produces less stress within your household. For goals that your teen does not appear to care about, Guare and Dawson suggest finding incentives to motivate them.

Tips and Tricks to Motivate Your Teen (FYI: These work for adults, too!)

Now that you have a better understanding of the brain science behind motivation, let's discuss some practical strategies you can share with your teen so they can increase their productivity.

1. **Attend to personal wellness.** Teens are notorious for not getting enough sleep. It is super important for ALL of us to get adequate sleep, nutrition, and exercise in order for our brains to work at maximum capacity.
2. **Make sure you have established buy-in.** This may involve some negotiation and compromise with your teen. Be sure to avoid engaging in power struggles, since this will likely lead to increased frustration for everyone! It may be helpful to convey to your child that the efforts they make now will lead to increased independence in the future. Teens value independence; give them opportunities to practice setting goals and making decisions and help them see the connection to their future.
3. **Create a sense of urgency.** One of the best ways to do this is to set small, incremental deadlines and stick with them. Another important tip is to create a picture of what the final outcome will look like. This might involve a sample of a completed paper or project, or visualizing what it will look like when the goal has been met.
4. **Start Small.** High school students can expect to receive long-term assignments in their classes. Since teens are still developing their executive skills (organizing, planning, managing time, etc.), they may need some assistance in managing these tasks. It can be very helpful to break these assignments into smaller, more manageable tasks. Very often, experiencing success on these leads to the increased motivation needed to complete the project.
5. **Take breaks.** Have you ever heard of the [Pomodoro Technique](#)? I use this method all the time when I am doing a task I don't enjoy very much (like cleaning my house!). The technique involves awarding yourself breaks during your work session. For example, for every 25 minutes of work time you put in, give yourself a 5 minute break.

Rewards vs. Punishments

For another mini-science lesson, read on!

Dr. Tali Sharot, a neuroscientist at University College London, has extensively studied the effect of using rewards and punishments to motivate people to change their behaviors. Her focus has been on campaigns that promote healthy behaviors, such as smoking cessation and hand-washing in medical facilities. She has found that threats (“You’ll get lung cancer!” “You will catch the flu!”) can actually have a negative impact on changing behaviors. She attributes this to humans’ tendency for flight behavior when they feel threatened. Our brains tend to shut down when we hear messages that frighten us. In contrast, we tend to listen more carefully to positive messages and engage in reward-seeking behaviors. In her [Tedx Talk](#) (click link to view!), Sharot shared the results of a recent study conducted at a US hospital. She reported that when a camera was installed to track how frequently medical professionals sanitized their hands - and individual staffers’ statistics were posted on an electronic board - compliance with sanitization rules increased from 10% to 90%!

Perhaps the most relevant piece of information Sharot’s Tedx Talk revealed is the fact that teenagers are worse at learning from bad news than any other age group (studies examined people ranging from age 10-80), whereas people in all age groups benefit equally in learning from positive messages.

What does this mean for us? Guare and Dawson (2013, p. 92) pointed out that some tasks take more effort to complete. They explained, “When we put off household chores, it is not usually because we do not have the skill to perform them. Rather, some tasks seem more effortful than others, and although we may eventually get to them, we are more likely to procrastinate about doing them.” The authors added that we often hope someone else will get to the tasks before we do. 😊 When, as in this case, the teen has the skills but not the motivation, they may need an incentive to get the task done.

Guare and Dawson explained that in order for an incentive to serve as an effective motivator, it should meet the following criteria:

1. **Involve and activity or item that your teen values.** This will increase their investment.
2. **Match the demands of the task.** If the task is too much and the pay is too little, the system may fail.
3. **Occur frequently, at least in the beginning.** Remember the toddler and the sticker chart? The sticker was a small, immediate reward. However, the child could later cash in their accumulated stickers for something bigger, like a treat or a book. Immediate reinforcement is more effective for a person who lacks motivation to complete a task.
4. **Be attainable.** One of the biggest mistakes teens make when asked to set goals is to make ones that they know they can’t possibly meet. Make sure your teen is setting themselves up for success. They can always set higher goals later!