

Identity, Purpose, and Happiness: Helping High-Achieving Adolescents Find All Three

By Kathryn Grubbs

The teenage years can be difficult, filled with questions, emotions, and decisions. For high-achieving adolescents who may experience asynchronous development or experience the world more intensely, these years can bring about intense emotions, feelings of isolation, or difficulty understanding the injustices of the world. As parents, we may try to protect our children from experiencing the same level of teenage stress we felt only to hear the common reply: “You’re not me!” While it’s natural to take this as a cue to disengage and parent implicitly, parents must provide explicit support of teenagers as they figure out who they are, what they will do as adults, and what makes them happy.

Who am I?

This question of identity rules the lives of most adolescents in one form or another, even if it is not readily apparent. Identity development is about making what feels true inside align with what is accepted outside. As an adolescent works to make sense of the world, she is also trying to find and understand her place in it. This may encompass gender expression, racial identity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, academic ability, cultural background, and more. An adolescent may feel pressure to conform or take on certain identities from parents, friends, relatives, school, community, media, culture, and beyond. High-achieving adolescents may not want to conform to societal pressures—a decision that can bring about more social isolation or rejection. As a parent, you may—quite naturally—want your children to conform to a certain ideal, with the hopes that your child will be happy and accepted in life.

In fact, adolescents can be great at fitting in, but that does not mean conforming is without strife. Self-actualization occurs when a person’s “ideal self”—or who they would like to be—is congruent with his “actual self.”³ We are all constantly aiming toward a state of congruence, moving back and forth between our ideal and actual selves. For adolescents, this dual self-experience is often just coming into consciousness, and for advanced learners, the realization of having a dual self-experience may show up at even earlier ages.

What will I do?

As adolescents develop, their identity exploration will extend to the type of work they are interested in pursuing, or their purpose. As Emilie Wapnick reminds us in her TED Talk “Why Some of Us Don’t Have One True Calling,” asking your child what she wants to be when she grows up can feel overwhelming not just because your child may not know, but because it may feel like she has to choose one thing.

Wapnick introduces us to the term multipotentiality which is an experience high-achieving adolescents may have of wanting to pursue many things at once or over time. As a counselor and advisor working with adolescents, I love exploring purpose and future career options with my students. I try to keep in mind that the skills, experiences, and jobs of the future may not exist today. This realization helps me stay open to our changing world and pushes me to support a range of options that my students may be considering, rather than trying to help them speed up, narrow, or limit career pursuits.

Furthermore, today it is common to have multiple careers over a lifetime rather than stick with one field until retirement, as our parents and grandparents might have done. With this in mind, the questions become more about what your child wants to pursue first, rather than what your child wants to focus on for the rest of her life. Working in a university setting, I like to remind my students that while there are certain expectations they will have to fulfill to graduate—like choosing at least one major—they don't have to choose the career path now that will interest them for the rest of their lives.

For parents, it may be difficult to not push for more or provide the guidance that you received or wished you had received as a child. Just as with identity, these messages may come across as limiting or frustrating rather than helpful and supportive. Parents may worry about their kids making money, being employable, finding job prospects, and gaining prestige. To ensure you are supporting your child in finding their purpose, here are some questions I use when working with high-achieving students:

- What academic areas are you drawn to when you aren't doing required work?
- What activities do you enjoy outside of school?

To help your child explore who she is:

Expect and be open to shifting identities. Understand that identities for all of us shift, grow, and change over time. As a parent your role is not to dictate how or when this happens, but rather to accept that it does. Believe your child when she says, "I am x." or "Y feels true for me."

Ask open-ended questions. "What do you believe?" "How do you know?" "What makes you think that?" Asked with curiosity and openness—and not as a form of interrogation—these questions will help you understand how your adolescent identifies herself.

Advocate for your adolescent. Instead of limiting identity choices based on your worries or beliefs about what is acceptable, be a supporter as your high-ability child figures out how she fits into your family, your community, and the larger world.

Glossary

Asynchronous development. When the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative aspects of a person develop on a trajectory that is outside of norms, and at an uneven rate.

Identity. Who you are, and the characteristics that distinguish you from others.

Intensities. Feelings, emotions or traits, where one experiences the world more vividly than others through various senses.

Multipotentiality. Having the talents or skills to pursue many things at once, or over time.

Self-actualization. When a person's "ideal self"—or who they would like to be—is congruent with her "actual self."