

ILONA BONIWELL ON FAMILY

With modern-day pressures already high, how do you encourage your teenagers to flourish in life?

“Do your children hate going to school?”

Our family consists of four teenagers and a toddler. Jason, 17; Hugo, 16; Andrew, 15; Pauline, 14; not forgetting Theodore, who is almost two-and-a-half. It's a full house, and over the last few years we've had a lot of huffing and puffing about school. 'I don't want to go to school!', 'I hate school', 'I'm wasting my life there!' When they figured out complaining didn't work, tactics became more sophisticated. We started receiving calls from school to pick one of them up because he had a bad stomach or headache. And the school is a half-hour drive from home or work, and you must be there in person to pick your child up. One hour (carefully timed, I'm sure) after arriving home, the pain miraculously disappeared, leaving the bearer full of energy and ready to go out. Funny, that.

It is a well-known fact that wellbeing decreases dramatically once children enter secondary school, and it continues to decrease year after year up until Year 13 (probably because the light at the end of the tunnel becomes finally visible). These findings seem to be roughly the same in different cultures. Given the rise in pressure and negative emotions, often also accompanied by a drop in motivation, how can we help children get through these years, achieve something and enjoy them? I don't claim to have all the answers, but one thing that worked for us is identifying and valuing our children's talents and strengths, and investing in them.

For Hugo, school was really tough last year – he almost didn't go at all, as the school council advised us that he should re-take Year 10. My husband was devastated, worried that his

son had no academic capacity whatsoever. Of course, he was aware Hugo didn't really put any work in, but to him this reason was secondary to that of innate ability. It was hard to convince my husband (who is not a psychologist) to start looking at Hugo's talents instead, and to challenge the school authority by not buying the 'no academic capacity' message. A few rows later (even positive psychologists are not always positive), I won the argument.

The magic of passion

First, we appealed against the school's decision, and won. Second, Hugo was always passionate about tennis, winning local competitions for years, but had abandoned his training on a whim and didn't dare take it up again for fear of being beaten by his old companions. We put him into a tennis club known for raising champions, and invested in private lessons, as well as group ones. The magic of passion worked – the better Hugo played, the more his marks at school improved and the better he felt about school overall. He may not get five A-grade A-Levels, but at the top half of his year now, he's looking all right. Take that 'no academic ability'...

Far from Hugo being an exception, different versions of the same story played out in the lives of the other three. After managing to enrol Andrew into a week-long acting course in a theatre school in the capital, his motivation for 'real' school rose dramatically, and he is now working hard outside of lessons to earn money for the next acting course. Jason, the eldest, doesn't like any type of authority much, nor anything too organised. What he values instead is having freedom to



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create animations, record funny videos and put them on YouTube. He is seriously creative and – when we give him space to be creative, he blossoms and so does his schoolwork. Pauline's strengths are more social, including empathy, harmony and social intelligence. She has many close friends and is the person all her friends, even her older brothers, come to for any advice relating to matters of the heart. As long as she finds a good balance between the social and the rest of her life, everything runs smoothly for her.

Playing to your strengths

How can you help your kids identify their strengths and talents? You can offer observations and start a discussion with them, or you could take an online test together that will give them some answers. Three such tests are VIA Strengths, Realise2 and StrengthsFinder. The first is free, the other two cost between £10 and £15. All of them have an overlapping core set of strengths, as well as some differences. Another way,

which I use often, is Strengths Cards that offer a comprehensive vocabulary of strengths, together with guiding questions to help the person discover the best parts of themselves. We all sit down together and lay the cards out, then pick out our strengths, and let others pick them out for us too. Living up to our strengths and talents gives us motivation, energy and simply helps us feel alive. As one of the famous strengths researchers, Professor Alex Linley, put it: 'Using strengths is the smallest thing that makes the biggest difference.' Why don't you give it a try?

GOT A QUESTION FOR ILONA? Email ilona@psychologies.co.uk, with 'ILONA' in the subject line

Read *Average To A+: Realising Strengths In Yourself And Others* by Alex Linley (CAPP Press, £11.99)

Visit viame.org, to get free character strengths profiles for adults or young people aged 12-17

Order Strengths Cards, €20 from positran.fr/products