

Working with Teens Tips & Conversation Starters

While the teenage years often get a bad rap, this is a deeply formative time for young people. The experiences they have—especially ones that are hands on and in authentic relationships with adults—really do change their brains!

Keep In Mind:

The quality of a child's early childhood years (pre-birth through the age of five) is considered a sensitive period and sets the foundation for children's long-term health. Adolescence is considered a second sensitive period and is equally important to young people's growth and development but in different ways.

For instance, the brain's long-term planning and decision-making center called the Prefrontal Cortex is just coming online. That means that the students with whom you are engaging are just beginning to look out over the horizon and learning how to develop strategies for their future. Help them by talking about your own journey and how you got to where you are.

Friends and outside adults can play an outsized impact at this point in student's lives. It is natural for young people to rely less on (and even be in conflict with) their parents and look for connection in other places. This means that adults who show genuine interest in and offer support to young people can be foundational in how they think about their future.

It's a time where hands on experiences form stronger neural networks. Opportunities for youth to try new things and take on new challenges are particularly important now. Are there opportunities for you as an employer to introduce young people to new challenges?

Risk taking during adolescence is heightened but can be for good things like exploring new ideas or trying something new. This is a great time to engage young people in thinking about how they can make a difference to their community or asking for their perspective on what they might change.

Emotions are heightened which impacts what they remember. That means that when adolescents are engaged in ways where they really care, it can have significance to them that shapes their future journey. Don't underestimate the power of small but powerful moments on how a young person thinks about themselves and their future!

Conversation Starters:

- Ask questions to learn about a young person's goals for the future
- Don't assume students know what they do best. Questions you ask can help them figure it out by shining a light on some of the things they enjoy.
- Don't assume youth know strategies to achieve goals – explore with them what might work and what strategies you used.
- Share success stories and examples about how you overcame adversity on your journey.
- Help youth practice thinking about the next opportunity to use their strengths to take a step toward the future. What are strategies that you have seen work?
- Encourage students to practice setting achievable short- and long-term goals across a variety of domains. What worked for you along your journey?

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