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How to Change a Teenager's Life

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Have you ever wondered how you could positively change an adolescent's life, perhaps inspire a career or fuel a young person's desire to make a difference in the world? While parents are a huge part of kid's lives, research shows that other adults play equally significant roles.

Children develop as the result of many experiences and relationships. Adults help kids learn, overcome obstacles, and understand that positive values can be lived each day. Whether you are a parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, teacher, civic leader, clergy member, sports coach, after-school program leader, or a person who just happens into a child's life, you have the ability to inspire!

Natalie, age 18, described her role model as a person with "a clear sense of what is important to her, putting forth the effort to improve and create things that will make a difference." When Samira, also 18, feels "lazy, tired, or just plain annoyed," she thinks of her role model and "is motivated to start working again."

Research studies have long shown a correlation between role models and higher levels of community engagement in young people. Positive role models are also linked to self-efficacy, the ability to believe in ourselves. In fact, the young people who participated in a recent research study admitted that unless they learned to believe in themselves, they would not have been capable of believing they could make a difference in the world!

Role models come into young people's lives in a variety of ways. They are educators, civic leaders, mothers, fathers, clergy, peers, and ordinary people encountered in everyday life. This study showed that being a role model is not constrained to those with fancy titles or personal

wealth. In fact, students were quick to state that "a true role model is not the person with the best job title, the most responsibility, or the greatest fame to his or her name." Anyone can inspire a child to achieve their potential in life.

Natalie and Samira were part of a study on how young people develop the skills, abilities, and motivation to become engaged citizens. They and 42 other college students recalled stories of their childhoods and adolescence and the kinds of people who inspired them.

The top five qualities of role models described by students are listed below. These qualities were woven through hundreds of stories and life experiences that helped children form a vision for their own futures. Next time you are in the presence of a teenager, ask yourself, "Could I inspire this young person to make a difference for themselves and others?" If you have these five qualities, the answer is probably "yes."

1. Passion and Ability to Inspire

Role models show passion for their work and have the capacity to infect others with their passion. Speaking of several of his teachers, one student said, "They're so dedicated to teaching students and helping students and empowering students. That is such a meaningful gesture. They are always trying to give back to the next generation. That really inspires me."

2. Clear Set of Values



When adults live their values in the world, children take notice. It helps them understand how their own values are part of who they are and how they might seek fulfilling roles as adults. For example, students spoke of people who supported causes from education to poverty to the environment. These adults showed them through their own action how to become advocates for social change and innovation.

3. Commitment to Community

Role models are *other-focused* as opposed to *self-focused*. They are usually active in their communities, freely giving of the time and talents to benefit people. Students admired people

who served on local boards, reached out to neighbors in need, voted, and were active members of community organizations.

4. Selflessness and Acceptance of Others

Related to the idea that role models show a commitment to their communities, students also admired people for their selflessness and acceptance of others who were different from them. One student spoke of her father, saying "He never saw social barriers. He saw people's needs and acted on them, no matter what their background or circumstances. He was never afraid to get his hands dirty. His lifestyle was a type of service. My father taught me to serve."

5. Ability to Overcome Obstacles

Young people develop the skills and abilities of initiative when they learn to overcome obstacles. Not surprisingly, they admire people who show them that success is possible. One student shared a story of a young man she met in Cambodia on a service-learning project with her school. "He is an incredibly hardworking individual who has faced unimaginable obstacles in his life, yet continues to persevere to support his family and encourage his community. He survived the Cambodian genocide. He earned his education in a system where those who succeed are the ones who bribe officials. He has dedicated his life to give back to his community. Wow! What an individual; and the best role model!"

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