

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.¹ 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.² 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

To help your child explore who she is:

Expect and be open to shifting

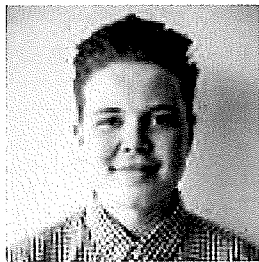
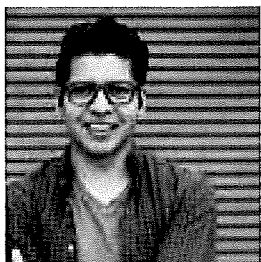
identities. Understand that identities for all of us shift, grow, and change over time. As a parent your role is not to dictate how or when this happens, but rather to accept that it does. Believe your child when she says, “*I am x.*” or “*Y feels true for me.*”

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.



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.⁴

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?

Glossary

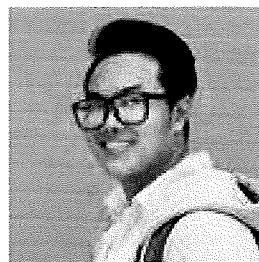
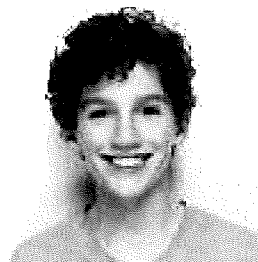
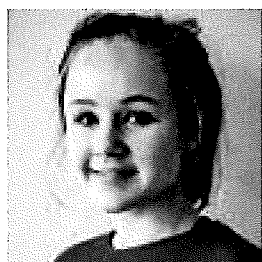
Asynchronous development. When the social, emotional, physical, intellectual, and creative aspects of a person develop on a trajectory that is outside of norms, and at an uneven rate.

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."



- What career paths interest you that you could find ways to explore?
 - How much do you know right now about what it takes to pursue the career paths that interest you?
 - When you think about the environment in which you like to do schoolwork now, what characteristics stand out to you?
- Adjust the language and wording of these types of open-ended questions based on the age of your child.

To help your child pursue happiness:

- Revel in your child's happiness.
- When your child feels a burst of glee, enjoy that moment with them. It's a parenting success, after all!
- Encourage your child to reflect on that moment.
- I encourage my students to listen to their internal voices to identify the feeling of happiness. Ask your child, "What feels so good right now?" "How do you know—from your smile, a feeling of giddiness, or something else?" Part of cultivating good mental health is having the ability to check in with yourself and to experience feelings as something in your control or understanding.
- Model empathy, but discourage feeling dependent on another's feelings.
- Often, children start to relate happiness to how others are feeling: "I know I am happy because my mom is happy, my teacher is happy, and my friend is happy." Instead, model interest and empathy for—not dependence on—your own child's experiences. She, in turn, will develop empathy for others alongside compassion for herself and her own experience of the world.

What makes me happy?

In my work with adolescents, it is important to stress that happiness is a state that we aim for, hope for, and pursue, but it is not something we will always feel every moment of the day. How does this translate to the young people in our lives, especially those who are high-achieving and often feel pressure, experience confusion, and face challenges?

In *Excellent Sheep*, William Deresiewicz summarizes happiness as feeling connected to others and engaging in meaningful work.⁵ If we focus on these two concepts, we can begin to weave identity and purpose into happiness. To feel connected to others, it is important to understand who you are and what matters to you. To engage in meaningful work, you need to have a sense of purpose. Happiness is what you feel when you experience congruence, or when you can say to yourself, "I feel good about who I am, what I do, who is in my life, and how I exist in the world."

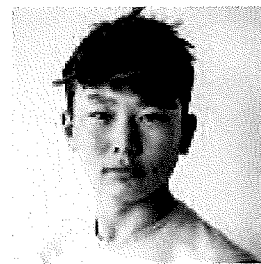
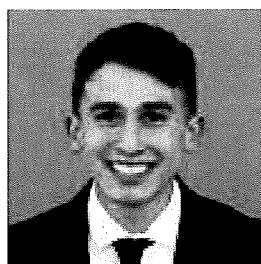
Supporting your child's identity development and sense of purpose are key factors in supporting her pursuit of happiness, especially during the emotionally and physically tumultuous teenage years. Parenting isn't easy; neither is growing up. ☺

Resources

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- Lab, H. (2015, February 19). How to help kids find their way in the world [Blog post]. Retrieved from <https://www.huffingtonpost.com/hopelab/purpose-how-to-help-kids-find-their-way-in-the-world>
- O'Brien, D. (2009, November 10). Family matters: How to help gifted children become well-rounded. *St. Louis Post Dispatch*.
- Webb, J. T., Gore, J. L., Amend, E. R., & DeVries, A. R. (2007). *A parent's guide to gifted children*. Tucson, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Author's Note

Kathryn Grubbs is an academic adviser at the Robinson Center for Young Scholars at the University of Washington in Seattle. Prior to her current position she worked as a middle school/high school



counselor for 8 years, most recently at a residential high school for gifted students outside of Chicago. Besides her work in schools, she has experience in college counseling, inpatient and outpatient mental health, homeless supports, and domestic violence programs. Kathryn has presented at WCGTC, NAGC, NCSSS, SENG, and WAETAG and provides professional development locally to parents, teachers, counselors, and administrators.

Endnotes

¹ Daniels, P., & Piechowski, M. (2008). *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

² Erikson, E. (1959). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY:

International Universities Press.

³ McLeod, S. A. (2014). *Carl Rogers*. Retrieved from www.simplypsychology.org/carl-rogers.html

⁴ Wapnick, E. (2015, April). *Emilie Wapnick: Why some of us don't have one true calling* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.ted.com/talks/emilie_wapnick_why_some_of_us_don_t_have_one_true_calling

⁵ Deresiewicz, W. (2015). *Excellent sheep: The miseducation of the American elite and the way to a meaningful life*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

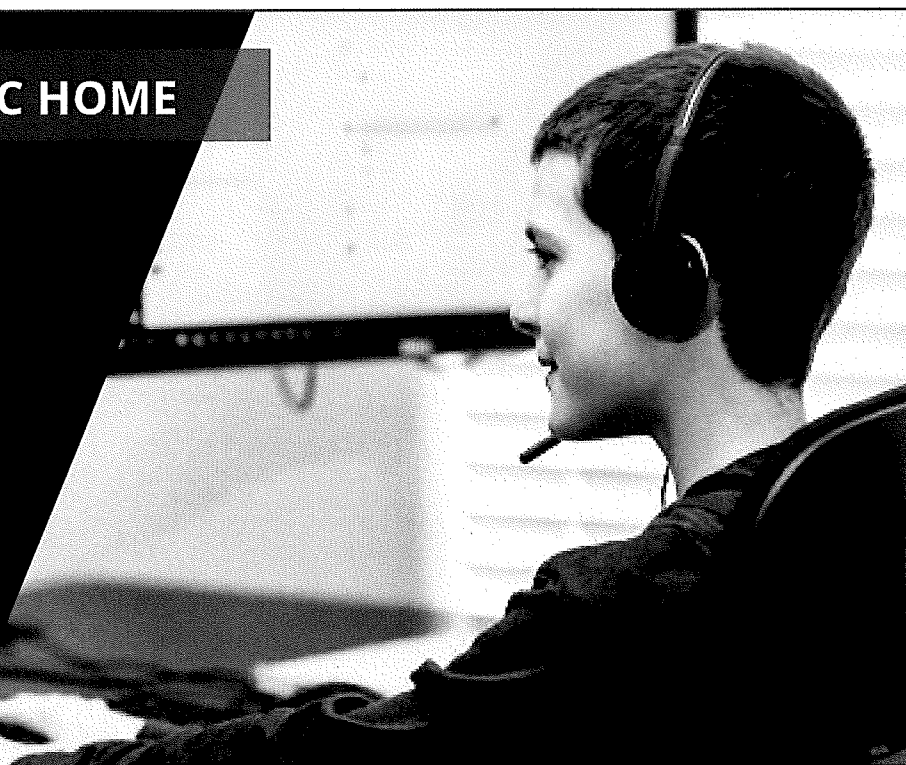
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