

# Where's the Passion?

Helping your teen find it is a gift that lasts a lifetime.

BY PATRICIA BERRY

**T**eens hear it constantly—find your passion. It's as if one or two talents or skills are the magic pills for success, in school and in life. High-school guidance counselors suggest that a worthwhile hobby is just the ticket for getting into a good college.

The truth is, it can be. A special interest is fulfilling, it may impress admissions officers, and it could lead to success in college and beyond. But for teens with ADD, finding that one special thing can be a challenge. Where do they begin? How can they pick just one activity when they enjoy so many?

"The busy ADD mind has a great capacity for dabbling in a variety of activities, and not going deep in any one area," says Theresa L. Maitland, Ph.D., coordinator of the Academic Success Program for Students with LD and ADHD at the University of North Carolina. ADD kids have trouble selecting one or two standout pursuits. The quiet reflection needed to shorten the list of possibilities—what Maitland calls "being still with oneself"—does not come easy for them.

Filling a teen's days with tutors and life coaches certainly doesn't help. "We focus too much on our teens' weaknesses, and not enough on uncovering talent or passion," says Maitland. "We are all naturally good at something."

Giving teens time and space to think about what makes them feel good about themselves is one way parents can nurture the process. Another is helping them discover clues about what their passions may be. Your teen has to do the hard work of finding and cultivating her talents, but your support—and the good sense to back off at times—will keep your teen on task.

## Rate His Interests

"Each person has unique talents and gifts—it's just a matter of teasing them out," says Maitland, who specializes in helping high school and college students stay on track with their academic and extracurricular pursuits. She

often refers students to Richard Chang's book, *The Passion Plan: A Step-by-Step Guide to Discovering, Developing, and Living Your Passion* (Jossey-Bass), to help them mine their talents.

Chang suggests asking your teen to make a list of "passion candidates." Have him think about the things he likes to do. Hobbies or objects he's chosen for his room may spark ideas. Is there a guitar leaning in the corner, reminding him of a love for music, for instance? Or a museum poster that reflects a liking for painting or art? If so, encourage him to imagine participating in these pursuits. What do his heart and body tell him when he thinks about each activity? When is he alive, exhilarated, enthusiastic, energetic? When is he bored?

Have your teen rate each interest—say, from 1 to 10—and then rank those on his list. Some interests or passions likely will reflect current pursuits. Others may suggest careers—a useful list for the student contemplating college or vocational school. Maitland suggests that a teen talk to people other than Mom and Dad, who know her *too* well. Getting the reaction of a grandparent, a family friend, or a beloved teacher to your teen's passion list will inform the exercise. For example, an aunt may recall the puppets your daughter made for her cousins one year, and the hours she put in assembling each one. Such memories may deepen your teenager's thinking about a particular pursuit.

## Key into His Personality

The things teens get in trouble for can be clues to their passion. The teen who talks too much in class, or who bosses his teacher and classmates around, may be a born organizer, well suited to starting a high school club or leading a management team. The teen who neglects her schoolwork to play outdoors may prefer nature to

## READER TIPS PROMOTE PASSION

If a new interest—in anything—springs up, I encourage my son to read books about it.

—Heather Kline-Kelm, Redford, Michigan

Pursue interests alongside your child. Play an instrument together. Ski together. Do home repair projects together. Listen to his ideas without passing judgment.

—Tom B, Boston

I let my son try different things, and I never let him give up in the middle of a first exploration. Many times my son winds up liking something that he wanted to give up on.

—Christine De Vany, Washington, Utah

My kids always knew their own passions. But I do recommend the book *7 Kinds of Smart*, by Thomas Armstrong, for thoughts on discovering new passions and developing old ones.

—Pat, Maryland



being at a desk. Such feelings are not talents, but they could be the foundation of a passion.

"Look at the things kids gravitate to and ask, 'Could those be the seeds of life passions?'" says Maitland. If you saved your teen's elementary-school report cards, dig them up for clues. Comments from teachers can point out patterns. For instance, a student's doodling throughout the day back in second grade may be the beginnings of his cartooning for the school paper. Perhaps he'd enjoy drawing classes, to hone his skill.

### Think Beyond Oneself

Knowing what you love isn't the full answer. An athlete, for instance, may love track, and discover it's not the running he enjoys, but being part of a team and having the structure of practices. "Passion frequently lies in being a part of something bigger than oneself," says Maitland.

Maitland counsels a college student who "discovered that she felt most alive when she was

traveling to foreign countries and meeting people of different backgrounds." She has decided to take her love for other cultures into the business world, to help company managers cultivate diversity among personnel.

### Search for Talent

Passion and talent don't always go hand in hand, but they evolve together. Nineteen-year-old Morgan Miller, who has ADD, grew up without a specific talent, not unlike many kids with her condition. "I was mediocre at most things," says the Montclair, New Jersey, native. "I wasn't a really good dancer. I wasn't the best softball player.

"I needed to find something I could feel confident about," she says. Eventually, it came to her: "I realized I love working with kids," Miller says. "And it was something I knew I was good at. It was my passion. You work at your passion, and it becomes your talent." Now the Goucher College sophomore is intent on pursuing a career in children's television. So momentous was this self-discovery that Miller chose passion as the topic of her college application essay.

### Keep an Eye on the Prize

When passions begin shaping students' goals, other pursuits will start to seem like burdens.

Maitland works with a student who wants to work for Doctors Without Borders. While he enjoys the science classes that he needs to get into medical school, he hates history, which seems irrelevant to his goal.

Maitland encourages the student to keep his internal dialogue—what she calls "self-talk"—focused on the positive. "He uses self-talk to stay on track with the required courses he doesn't care for," she says. This ongoing conversation helps the student get past the frustration of history class—what he sees as a waste of his time—and use it as a stepping stone to accomplishing his goal. He plasters images from Doctors Without Borders brochures on his history notebook, as a reminder of his objective.

Maitland says her teen clients teach her a lot about living their life. "Some people with ADD are incredible at doing only what they love. They could be my tutors," she says. She understands why students don't want to take required courses that have nothing to do with their major or their life goals.

"They tell me, 'I don't have much time on earth. I only want to do what I'm passionate about.'" Who can blame them? **A**

PATRICIA BERRY is a freelance writer based in Montclair, New Jersey.



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