

WORKING WITH TEENS

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The following are a few suggestions for effectively tutoring a disadvantaged youth, specifically a teenager or young adult. While the prospect of working with an older kid may be a little daunting, it is also an opportunity to engender the most dramatic and rewarding success in helping make a difference in someone's life. In reality, I believe everyone's version of the following list will be different, so I urge you to follow your instincts and foster a method of tutoring that works best for you. For me, these five general guidelines have helped me the most and I hope they can at least work to get you started:

1. Prioritize making a connection. As anxious as we are to dive into book reports, homework, and state testing, it is rare to find a teen who will instantly share our enthusiasm. If you do find yourself at the table with a frowning, monosyllabic teen, or a teen who is miraculously never assigned homework, don't be discouraged. Instead, use this initial opportunity to make a connection. Allow yourself to stray a few paces away from that odious math assignment and seek out some common interests. Art, music, current affairs and sports are wonderful examples, and sometimes even good conversation starters (As a tutor, a discussion about politics can be a clever way to slip in a little history or current affairs teaching).

This is also a great place to shamelessly show off anything "cool" or interesting about yourself. Suddenly, you're not just some tutor, but a Lakers fan, cat lover, pilot, artist, gardener, poker expert, musician, cop, movie executive, horse enthusiast, or whatever it is that you are! Be shameless, but also be sincere. If you're a generally funny person, be funny, if you're generally not, that's okay too. Just be yourself and trust that they'll be areas of mutual interest with your teen to help form a bond. While being cautious to keep the conversation from being too personal, or drifting into darker past events, it is still possible to learn each other's personalities and character and thereby create a strong foundation to place the tutoring itself upon.

I suspect the above is naturally true for most teens, regardless of background, but keep in mind that a disadvantaged youth has usually been subjected to a series of unique and damaging obstacles that create a greater array of negative associations with their academic self. Bouncing from school to school, distractions from a turbulent home life, resource-starved school districts and unsafe environments all work to push a child off track with education, which creates a larger sense of insecurity and doubt. It is no small task to convince a teen that this can be reversed, or that you're someone dedicated to helping do so. In fact, several weeks may go by before there is any true momentum with his or her education. However, when you consider that you're working to undo years of negative reinforcement, a few months is suddenly a very reasonable timeline. Plus, it can often happen a lot quicker.

2. Establish clear goals and reinforce them often. In my experience, this is the single most effective way to keep a student on task with his or her studies (as well as helping us retain clarity in our vital role of tutor in addition to our mentoring duties). When getting to know your student, search for what dreams or goals they may have. Do they want to be an architect or a teacher? Do they want luxury, or to travel often, or make a difference in the world? Is there a college they like in particular or perhaps they just want to focus on passing high school? If nothing else, does he or she want to gain control of their own environments? If you can latch onto any of these kinds of aspirations, then you can map out every action as something working toward that goal, regardless of how far behind the student might be. This is a classic application of the reliable "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step" adage. Even the loftiest ambitions can be traced back to present day in the form of "well, first thing we need to do is pass this test, so that you can pass this class, so that you can graduate high school, etc...."

It is not uncommon for this to start slowly (you'll notice a theme) but, again, virtually every teen we help has a lot of additional factors to work through before comfortably pursuing hopeful objectives. This is why it is so important to constantly reinforce the desire for these targeted goals. Field trips, books, magazine articles and online links are a few examples of effective ways to keep an eye on the "destination," while simultaneously succeeding in the simple, immediate steps to get there. From this perspective, even rudimentary exercises on sentence structure or basic reading can be seen as "steps on the path." Often, as these initial tasks are completed, again regardless of how simple, they serve to acquaint the student with feeling successful in pursuing goals and thereby generate more motivation to keep going. For this reason, it is imperative that we relentlessly support any forward motion, regardless of how often the particular goal may change. Indeed, going from aspiring doctor, to lawyer, to astronaut, to ninja and back to doctor seems like a perfectly teenage thing to do. This brings me to my next point.

3. Keep that whole "teenager" thing in mind. No doubt, it takes courage attempting to tutor a disadvantaged teen. However, in my experience, the bulk of that courage is needed to handle the "teen" part more often than the "disadvantaged" part. Peer pressure, identity formation, self-image issues, popularity challenges and puberty are just a few examples of the distractions working behind the scenes of any given tutoring session. Of course, this is not to dismiss the reality that our youth have additional needs, but rather when we see disinterest, poor attitude or insecurity toward education, we shouldn't automatically assume we can't relate. Better still, that it is actually perfectly normal to struggle in relating to a teenager! It is also helpful to remember that our teens enjoy the same things most kids do: video games, television, texting, fashion magazines (I'm guessing), movies, comic books, and so on.

Honestly, it is often difficult to distinguish between behaviors motivated by being a teenager or being disadvantaged. Depending on where the placement is, how long he or she has been there, what kind of staff, family or peer connections are in place, or what unique circumstances brought it all about, there is an overwhelming spectrum of potential levels of stability and normalcy in the teen's daily life. In reality, it will always be a unique combination of both. As tutors, however, we can be just as effective in helping bring about academic and personal successes regardless of how these challenges arise. Moreover, sometimes the adversities your student has experienced can create a maturity that dramatically helps develop a motivation for academic success.

4. Praise constantly. This is as straightforward as it sounds, but it also takes on an additionally vital role in the context of helping disadvantaged teens: they deserve more because they have typically received so much less. Even if it seems like your compliments are being ignored, even if they're met with a cynical look or rolling eyes, use praise every chance you have. I can think of nothing more important or effective than praise. It can be for how well he or she dresses, how courteous it was to call and reschedule, how impressive it is to see goals pursued, and so on. Never give praise falsely, but take the opportunities to spotlight positive things whenever possible.

This also proves to be a very effective device when working on schoolwork. When facing an issue that needs attention, begin with praise and work from there. For instance, if a paper is in dire need of revision, a statement like "I really love what you did with this sentence here; let's see if we can make the rest of it work like that" or "I think this idea of yours is brilliant, but I wonder if there's a way we can make it even more clear" will offer a lot more traction than jumping toward problem areas directly.

This brings up the importance of being positive in general. As you work to cultivate an environment that's conducive for learning, a great deal of what is needed relates to your student feeling comfortable and safe. As mentioned before, an unavoidable characteristic of the population we help is that these teens have endured a great deal of negativity and shame already. The further we can drag our student's ideas of education and self-worth away from these negative precepts, the more we can assist in his or her educational attainment. Admittedly, this can be tricky when it is necessary to administer criticism or "bump" a student back on track and we can only do the best we can. However, I've seen that once some rapport has been built (even slowly) it becomes far easier to suggest improvements. Most importantly, we just need to be aware of how much progress can be lost with any kind of "you did this wrong" sentiment.

5. Go easy on yourself. What you are trying to do is not easy, especially in the beginning, and there are several critical factors that are completely out of your control. On the other hand, it is not an exaggeration to say that you have the chance to fundamentally improve the direction of a youth's life forever. So, when trying to negotiate between these two competing sentiments, it is vital that you keep a healthy perspective on what you can do. As every situation (and every teen) is different, the best we can hope for is that our consistency, reliability, support and help will be accepted. For some this happens nearly immediately while others take a while before getting off the ground. Sadly, there will also be those youth who will absolutely refuse to accept help at that time, even if you do everything perfectly right, and it falls upon your intuition and judgment to discriminate between a "rough start" and a "no start." For this reason, it is necessary that you keep yourself protected and simply go easy on yourself.

For instance, do not be discouraged if it seems your student isn't connecting quickly. Chances are, this has very little to do with you. You don't need to know the details of a youth's story to imagine why he or she might be reluctant to readily embrace new help. Instead of worrying that you're not "cool" enough or looking inward for something to change, just continue to be yourself and see if there's a difference in the coming weeks as your student realizes you're really there to help. As stated earlier, there are ways of working to establish a connection during this phase, but also keep in mind that you can only do so much without the cooperation of your student. Given that you're offering your time to help improve the lives of homeless teens, you can pretty much take heart in the fact that you're awesome, even if your student is a little slow to notice. Give it some time.

It is also very important to be kind to yourself in regard to your ability to tutor as well. Something not yet mentioned about working with teens is the pesky fact that they may bring home advanced homework or are chipping away at concepts we've long forgotten. This is okay; you do not need to know everything and you certainly shouldn't pretend to (a savvy teen will see through that in a heartbeat). Instead, such instances can be solved by turning it into an opportunity to demonstrate how to find answers online or in a textbook. If the problem is more advanced than that can remedy, then School on Wheels is a wonderful resource for finding a fellow tutor that is strong in a particular subject. In reality, your efforts to help solve the problem with your student are what matter and your student will see that.

Sometimes the connection is immediate and the progress starts pressing forward on the first day. Other times it takes a great deal of time before progress can begin lurching forward. Regardless of how it takes off, once it does the results can be utterly inspiring and rewarding. Really, all the advice above distills down to a few simple concepts: be patient, be consistent and be yourself. The rest will follow.