

Coaching teenagers for better results in school and in life

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Marie Lindvall Wahlberg, About the Author: I have been interested in young children and teenagers possibilities to develop positive self esteem and overall well being for many years. I have also been writing books on the subject and conducting courses for teachers, leaders and parents. In this article I share my experiences with a unique Summer Training Camp aimed at helping teenagers succeed in school and life.

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The goal of positive change

In a statement issued by the Swedish Public Health Organization in 2010, it became very clear how important it is for educators and others committed to performance and life enhancement to work in constructive ways with children and youth.

Research with teenagers in Sweden has shown that an increasing number of Swedish teenagers are using medication for anxiety and depression. A lack of quality time with parents, and in some cases others, is believed to one of the leading causes of increased anxiety and depression in teenagers, together with the pressure for teens to "look good" and "succeed" in school.

In 2002 I began implementing a program to coach teenagers who have not performed well in school. I have done this every year (for the past 8 years) at a unique Summer Training Camp. I work there on a daily basis as a consultant and as a Principal. The reason I have continued to work on this project for children and youth is because of the positive results we are getting.

To witness life changing positive responses in these young people, 13-16 years old, is

very rewarding for me and them. These teenagers (like younger children) are honest and I have a unique opportunity to really learn something of value from them.

Coaching Model

The coaching I have been providing for the teenagers has been based on a few models, like GROW or PRAISE 2. I have also used the Rita Dunn & Kenneth Dunn Learning styles model. The combination has proven to be successful.

Every person has a best way of learning but our unique style changes over time. Learning styles include various approaches or ways of learning. "Learners are affected by

- (1) their immediate environment (sound, light, temperature, and design);
- (2) their own emotionality (motivation, persistence, responsibility, and need for structure or flexibility);
- (3) sociological needs (self, pair, peers, team, adult, or varied); and
- (4) physical needs (perceptual strengths, intake, time, and mobility). (see Rita Dunn website for more info or email the author of this article)

Not only can students identify their preferred learning styles, but the research conducted by Dunn & Dunn also shows that students score higher on tests, have better attitudes, and are more efficient if they are taught in ways in which they can more easily relate. Therefore, it is to the educator's and students advantage to teach and test students in their preferred styles.

At our Summer training Camp, the teenagers take a test to determine their learning style and then we build some of the coaching based on their test results. We work on building self-esteem, setting goals and finding out what makes them feel, and stay, motivated. It has been very interesting to follow these young people for 8 years and have the opportunity to follow up on how they doing, over time, and see how they use the knowledge they received in our coach/mentoring sessions.

My own practice has convinced me that a combination of coach/mentoring together with assess learning styles, has been a great combination for those students I have worked with. They often have a lack of self confidence when I meet them and they explain their “problems” as “problems with concentration” or being “to stupid to learn”. When I ask them how they think that their picture or view of themselves affects their attitude towards learning, they often do not come up with an answer right away. However after having some time for reflection on my question they often comeback with an answer related to who has responsibility for their learning. They do understand that it is their own responsibility, but they do not have the tools to actually do it (act on this responsibility).

By offering the Learning style options, in combination with a dialogue around how to improve studying skills, students have

increased their motivation and feel a sense of joyfulness in learning. Working with these young teenagers and seeing them move along this path has been the best coaching/mentoring moments in my career.

I will share a story with you to put shed light on what I am trying to describe. In 2003, I met a young girl who was 14 year old at our Summer Camp. She looked really miserable at first sight. Her body language that told me all about her self esteem, or the lack of it. When we had our first coach/mentoring session, she confirmed my first impressions in words.

“I am a loser”, she said. I asked her to define the word loser. “I can’t do anything right. I am going to be a dropout in school and I will never reach my goals in life. I will be cleaning other people’s bathrooms”. I replied by saying, “Now we know what you don’t want. Tell me more about what you do want in life and why you feel so certain that you won’t achieve it.

She then me told me about school. How she struggled with the books -“reading without reading” she called it. “You see”, she said. “I read and read but I never remember anything. And when I am in the classroom I am so busy with all interaction going on among my classmates, I never pay attention to what the teacher says. Now I am about to fail in almost every theoretical subject”.

Then she told me about her Dream – about what she really wanted to do with her life. “I want to design cloths in the future” and showed me some of her drawings. They were amazingly good! I suggested that she do the learning styles assessment. “Ok, let’s do the assessment”. We had already talked about the ideas behind this assessment, so she was ready to do it.

The outcome;

This girl found out through her learning styles assessment during her stay at the Camp, that she was strongly Auditory (learning best while listening and by then talking about what she had heard). She also had a strong desire or need to work together with others to get best results. Before she came to the Camp, she tried to read books to learn (but didn't remember what she read) and in class she didn't pay attention. Now she was determined to change this behaviour in order to reach her dream goal so she could get into the design program she wanted to pursue.

She wrote down her 'action plan' in our last session, for how she was going to reach her goals and raise her grades. It took exactly 4 hours of coach/mentoring time to get this girl into a positive state of mind to her enhance her learning and possibilities in life. She accepted the challenge and acted on it in a positive way. She took responsibility for her gaining new knowledge and using new tools for learning.

When she got back to her own school she contacted her teachers and told them about what she had learned and what she wanted to do. That whole year she practiced new ways of gaining new knowledge. She audio-recorded her teacher's lessons and instead of reading books, she started to listen both in class and after on audio materials. She also asked her friends to leave her alone in class so she could to concentrate and learn what she needed to learn.

She became very goal oriented, thanks to her belief in her talent in drawing, her creative ideas for designing clothes and her new perspective. The following year she came back to our Summer Camp with a new and confident look on her face and in her body.

I asked her what had happened since I had seen her last year. She told me that the coach/mentoring sessions, her new awareness of her best learning styles and her ability to use what she learned and apply it in school had made a huge difference. She was been able to make an amazing turn-around with respect to her own future.

With teenagers less self determined than this girl, it is helpful to have a couple of follow-up sessions to follow up on the goals that they set during Summer Camp. We normally do a follow-up but in this case it was not needed.

The goal of the coaching intervention model, combined with learning style assessment, was to create a positive change that would be sustainable in long term, if possible. We want to help the teenagers move towards their own expressed goals. We want to help them to feel better about themselves and about their possibilities in school and in life.

So what happened to the girl with the design dream? Well, I actually met a friend of hers recently, who told me she is now working at her own design company, selling her clothes on-line, and doing fine.

I continue to coach young people and help them understand their best ways to learn. I am convinced from my own experiences, that if they want to use the knowledge we have gained and they have gained - they can change their own lives in meaningful ways. They can gain a better sense of self and self esteem just by knowing they have a new path to follow, if choose to walk that path.

I am writing on my next book on this subject and am interested in similar projects, initiatives or experiences going on in Europe, North America or other parts of the

world. Please email me if you are doing work in this area and would like to exchange ideas and experiences.

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