

## How to have Clout with your Kids

By Genevieve Anderson

It was standing room only at the Drew School on February 3 - well, balcony room to be precise. The theme of the evening, "Being the Rare Adult Teens Listen To", had clearly touched a nerve with many Bay Area parents, brought an expert counsellor into his element, and inspired a host of anxious questions. The overflowing auditorium revealed a universal concern: how do you make sure your child still hears your advice and adopts your values when the influence of peers, contemporary culture, even other parents drowns out the sound of your voice? And often this cacophony of outside noise is in direct conflict with your views, making your opinions irrelevant in the eyes of your child.

In 1954, teenagers spent five times more time with adults than with peers; by 2004, this statistic had completely reversed. Why exactly is it so difficult for parents to play a positive role in their teen's life? Jeff Leiken, the speaker, related four factors.

- **Biology**, the easiest to understand and most timeless, dictates the evolutionary necessity for a young person to separate gradually from her parents and hone her 'survival' skills to adapt to the wider, more threatening world.
- **Conflicting values** from pop culture and thus your teen's peer group are constantly bombarding your child with messages that appeal and sell, not protect or enrich. This is particularly true with regard to drugs and sex, where attitudes will always seem to parents to lean dangerously toward the casual side.
- **Academic pressure** and the sheer volume of work that kids must handle today means that schoolwork has overtaken family life, usually straining parent-child relationships and a teen's ability to make room for parental words of wisdom.



- The sense of a **bleak future** ahead (terrorism, Mideast war, climate change etc.) for most teens only adds to the stress they feel and thus the resistance to positive, lasting values from adults.

So, how to be that rare adult teens listen to? Leiken prescribes some key remedies for the insufficient influence we have in our child's life.

### Recognize the benchmarks of development and adjust accordingly.

When our kids were little we could admire their obvious achievements with crawling, potty training, or riding a bike. Now it's harder to see those nebulous moments when our teen acquires maturity around a certain issue or activity. How do we know when our kid is ready to tackle a major assignment alone, ride a bus alone, go to a party or on a trip with friends? When a threshold has been passed and our teen has shown some good judgement, parents should acknowledge it and adapt their rules to recognize the child's increased responsibility. Leiken has very astutely identified those parents who are too busy or too fixated on the negatives to notice when these benchmarks are reached.

### Make consequences real.

Kids make mistakes, sometimes big ones, but if they don't experience consequences and feel real ownership of their error, they will not grow into resilient, responsible adults. According to Leiken, the consequences should optimize the learning potential of the mistake, not only punish or, worse, mitigate the fallout. And parents must follow through.

### Be sophisticated in your advice.

Teens just won't respond to cliches ("you know, when I was your age"), generalizations

("boys can be difficult"), or lectures ("I told you so") - they will simply tune out. Communicate with teens in a way that respects their intelligence, is sensitive to the demands of their contemporary world, and is solutions-oriented. But make sure the practical advice you give is not too prescriptive: rather than say "here is what you do", ask "what do you want as an outcome?".

### Don't assume all is fine.

Leiken believes too many parents rely on the traditional trophies of teen life - good grades, friends, extracurriculars - as affirmation that everything is going well with their child. We also too often accept their withdrawal as normal adolescent behavior, when it can be a sign of trouble. Don't assume and don't back off - rather, trust your instincts when something has changed, even simple communication, and stay close.

Leiken's presentation provoked some engaging questions from the parents, and a couple of surprising answers. In response to a common concern with privacy, Leiken stunned the audience by stating that instantly trusting a teenager was just plain stupid. Teens must earn your trust as well as their privacy - they have no right to it, particularly when their well-being or safety is at stake. So, if you want to check your child's text messages, feel free. And if your child is begging for your trust and some privacy, set targets and make it a hard-won goal.

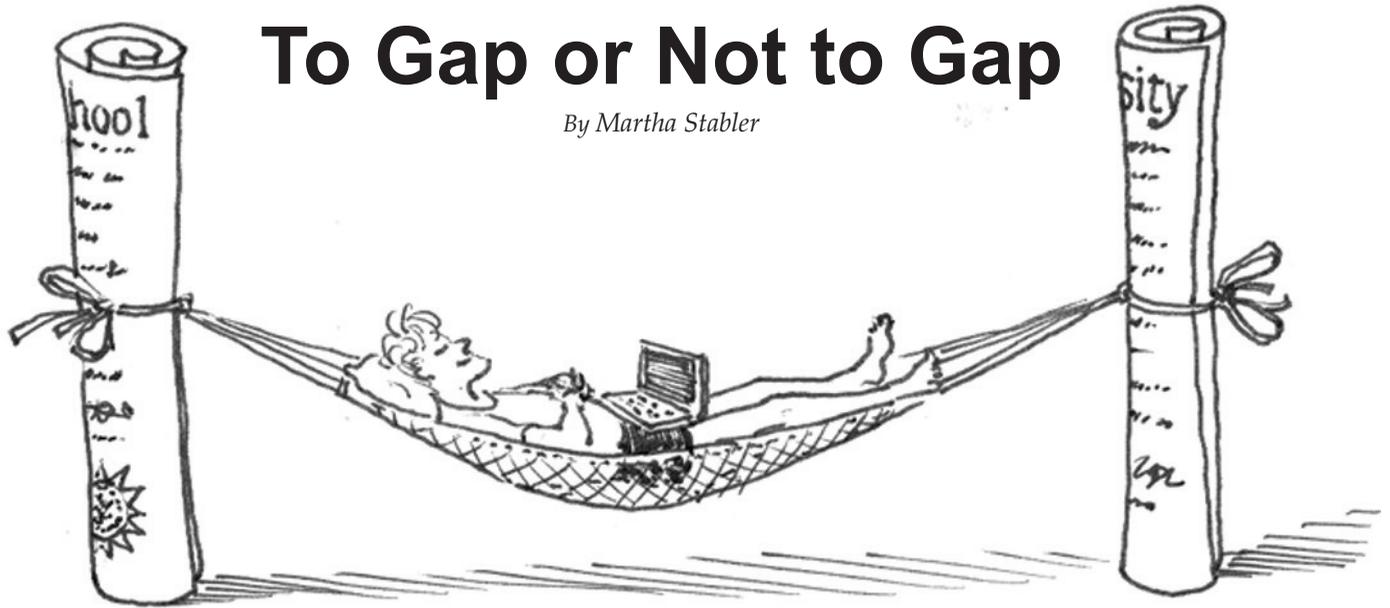
The last pieces of advice of the evening were equally refreshing. In reaction to a number of parental questions and anecdotes relating to adolescent herd mentality (when your teen tells you "everyone does it and everyone's parents allow it"), Leiken urged the audience to stick to their guns. If you have a principle that bucks the trend - and don't always believe that it does - be uncompromising. If you are consistently black-and-white about your values, your child will understand later and eventually come to appreciate it. And if you need reassurance that your values are valid, find your allies; there are bound to be other parents who share your views and will team up with you to reinforce a rule or help look after your group of teens. When a 15-year-old inadvertently caused a destructive party at a friend's house, the consequence was not a grounding but probation: her mother promised to monitor her whereabouts more closely until she could prove more responsible. Almost a year later, the probation was relaxed when the girl began to show real growth in this area.

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# To Gap or Not to Gap

By Martha Stabler



To gap or not gap, that is the question being mulled by many graduating seniors across the Bay Area right now. And it's not just the kids who are debating this option. Parents must also consider the social, emotional and economic issues involved in the decision to delay matriculation to college.

Gap year is a concept borrowed from the U.K. where it is customary for student to take a year after high school to work and travel before continuing on with their studies. Over the past decade or so it has slowly caught on in the U.S. and current figures say that approximately 2% of our college bound students will defer their start in order to take a gap year. As the idea has increased in popularity, a small industry has grown to meet demand. In fact, "Gap fairs" promoting various programs ([usagapyearfairs.org](http://usagapyearfairs.org)) have multiplied fourfold in the past four years. The recent college fair in SF featured dozens of organizations offering a vast array of foreign and domestic travel, service and learning options on every continent. But, before families entertain the prospect of shelling out what can be the equivalent of a semester at college, many will want to know why.

This is the question I set out to answer when my daughter introduced the topic following her November ED acceptance to a small liberal arts school in New England. At first, my husband and I assumed she'd had too much time to think since her sole application had turned into an acceptance a scant 6 weeks after its submission, allowing for an extended period of soul searching and ruminating on the future. My husband, ever the pragmatist, pointed out that delaying college for a year allows tuition to increase (generally in excess of the rate of inflation) and would doubtless mean additional expenses in terms of room, board and whatever other interests our daughter decided to pursue.

Was this creamy filling in between high school and college necessary? In the recesses of our brains lurked a holdover notion from our youth that time off was for "lost, unfocussed" kids who weren't ready for college—an impression shared by many past generations, but one that is being challenged. But surprisingly, the practice was actually promoted in her acceptance letter and on the website of her new college's FAQ's for students, amounting to a tacit endorsement by the school of the tangible and intangible value of the time spent away from formalized

academia before returning to, well, formalized academia. This was a variation on a theme that has not changed for more than a hundred years: grade school to high school to college. Maybe it was time for disruption of the kind that is being credited with revolutionizing everything from art to finance in the 21 Century and, if so, it should be taking hold here. Clearly we needed to know more.

Over the following month, I read everything I could find on the topic; which amounted to a growing body of thoughtful and impassioned gap year support often by admissions directors at the nations "top" schools. Curious about what was happening here in the Bay Area I began an informal "survey" of high school admissions directors, and parents of high school and college students. My research methods would make any scientist blanche but this wasn't science. I sent out emails, asked at cocktail parties, on the sidelines of sports events and during carpool. Whose kids were thinking about taking a gap year? Why? What would they do? Whose kids had done it? What did parents think and what did the high schools whose job it has traditionally been to prepare students to enter college, think? Well, the results didn't just surprise me. They completely changed my view and attitude on the practice. Here's what I discovered.

- A significant majority of parents and college counselors at independent high schools in the Bay Area whom I surveyed said they strongly supported the idea of a gap year believing the benefits outweighed the risks. Most felt that time off would allow students an opportunity to re-charge, recover from academic burn-out and re-focus before jumping into another intense academic environment.
- Virtually every student who responded cited "burn-out, mental and physical exhaustion and academic fatigue" as reasons behind wanting to take time off. Most felt that the time away from the rigors of the classroom would bring perspective and maturity. In his excellent essay *Time Out or Burn-out*, Dean William Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, Harvard College writes: "...the pressures placed on many children probably have the unintended effect of delaying a child's finding herself and succeeding on her own

terms. Parents and students alike profit from redefining success as fulfillment of the student's own aims, even those yet to be discovered. Burnout is an inevitable result of trying to live up to alien goals. Time out can promote discovery of one's own passions."

- Jon Reider, Director of College Counseling at San Francisco University High School, sent me the following: I have NEVER seen a student who regretted doing it, if only as a break from the academic routine of the past 12 years, and especially the past 4. They ALWAYS return to school refreshed, refocused, and motivated. Often, they have found a goal to study for or an intellectual problem they want to solve. My sample is quite large after 28 years in admissions and counseling. It is close to a law of nature.

To many, the idea of deferring college brings anxiety. For those parents who are opposed, or open to, but not "sold" on the concept, the fear of their child going off track, losing momentum and even, not going back (to school) is the primary source of concern. Indeed, counselors at two large public SF high schools cited a fear of students not going on to higher education as their main objection—gap year as a gateway to future of drifting and unemployment. Still, the evidence available shows that this fear is unfounded for the majority of students. A recent study puts at 90% the number of students who matriculate after a gap year. In order to decrease the risk of dropping-out, most high school college counselors recommend applying and gaining admission to college before requesting a delay.

**However, data collected by colleges with significant numbers of students taking gap years report that not only do they have higher college GPAs than those who don't, their grades are better than would have been predicted, based on their high school performance. At Middlebury College in Vermont and the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, for example, undergraduates who had taken a gap year before enrolling in college had, on average, a GPA .1-.4 higher than would have been expected.**

And then there is the question of what a gap year should be. My inquiries produced a spectrum of gap year activities with service and travel the most common but including forestry work, farming and a variety of interning in an array of fields. Most parents and the majority of high school counselors felt that structure was imperative with a carefully mapped out plan important to success. Surprisingly, others disagreed.

"From a college's point of view it really doesn't matter," Mr. Clagett said (articles referenced below). "They can stay home and eat bonbons if they want...Gap time – regardless of what one does – combats the "let down" a student feels once arriving on campus, Mr. Clagett said. "There can be this feeling of 'now what?' And that can lead to lower achievement, to lower self-esteem. Gap programs nip that in the bud." In Jon Reider's opinion, "...it may be less important WHAT [they do] with the year than that [they] simply [are] not in school. Colleges have seen this too, over and over, which is why they are so lenient about granting deferrals. They really don't think you can make a mistake."

It's important to recognize the role that economics play in gap year decisions. Up until recently, having the luxury to take time

out in any form was available mainly to affluent kids from upper middle class families who were not concerned about financial aid or the additional costs that accrue from travel, room and board and increases in tuition.

This came up in many responses from students, parents and high school counselors. One counselor wrote: "The drawback for me is the socioeconomic inequity. Unless a student is working, it costs money – often a lot of money – to take a gap year. And, because it costs money, the programs that offer a structured gap year program market to relatively privileged kids." Most parents and kids felt the gap year opportunity was far more accessible to kids from wealthy families. Several students said that although they could count on financial support during their time off, they felt obliged to work for at least part of the time to contribute to travel and other activities.

There are alternatives to expensive programs such as Servas USA/International (free once you have been accepted and paid the fees) and a number of NGOs across the globe that provide room and board to youth volunteers, but airfare, visas and other travel expenses can be costly. In addition, low cost programs such as City Year and National Civilian Corps run by AmeriCorps are highly competitive with many more applications than spots.

The good news is that, recognizing the value of gap year, some colleges such as Princeton and UNC Chapel Hill now offer fully subsidized programs to low-income students. Tufts will offer incoming freshman the opportunity to do a year of virtually all expense-paid international or national service before starting college.

Like all life decisions, each student and family will decide what is right for them, but as the gap year option grows in popularity and practice, it may soon become as commonplace here as it is abroad, and for good reason. As Anna Quindlen's daughter remarked, it prevents the four C-s, a narrow cycle "from cradle to college to cubicle to cemetery."

#### Further Reading:

*Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation*, William Fitzsimmons, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid, Harvard College and colleagues, (Harvard website, 2011), <https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/preparing-college/should-i-take-time>

*As Jan. 1 Application Deadline Nears, an Argument for a Yearlong Breather*, Robert Clagett, New York Times Blog: The Choice (Dec. 27, 2011) (<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/27/clagett-gap-year/>)

*The Gap Year: Breaking up the "Cradle to College to Cubicle to Cemetery" Cycle*, Rebecca R. Ruiz, New York Times Blog: The Choice (Sept. 24, 2011) (<http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/the-gap-year-breaking-up-the-cradle-to-college-to-cubicle-to-cemetery-cycle/>)

*Delaying College to Fill in the Gaps, Sue Shellenbarger*, Wall Street Journal (Dec. 29, 2010), <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052970203513204576047723922275698>

# Top Dog - Playing to a Teen's Success

By Kathleen Bisaccia

On the evening of November 18 parents were treated to a talk by Po Bronson, co-author (with Ashley Merryman) of "Top Dog: the Science of Winning and Losing." Bronson and Merryman's approach to the subject is as journalists instead of scientists, and therefore their findings are able to take into consideration an element of reasoning and personal feelings. The conclusions drawn by Bronson and Merryman were interesting and a bit controversial.

Bronson initially posed the questions, Why does one child rise to an occasion while another crumbles? And how can creativity be nurtured in today's competitive environment? Bronson related some statistics about today's teens – although 60% have jobs, 70% volunteer weekly, and 40% are politically active – seemingly indicia of success – today's teens are also stressed and burned out from the pressure. Conversely, there remain a sector of teens who are apathetic and unprepared for the competitiveness of today's teen life.

To the teen, being a teenager feels like they are waiting for their real life to start. Many of the risks/decisions they make are based on this feeling.

Bronson's work for his book followed a group of students from the ages 12 to 27. There were a few common themes that Bronson and Merriman wanted to test: (1) the results of Peer pressure, and (2) communication with/fighting with parents. First, with regard to peer pressure, the conclusion was that it isn't such a bad thing, as the teens who showed they were susceptible to peer pressure were shown to have great relationships when they were in their twenties, because they were highly attuned to the thoughts and feelings of others. Notably, those who were not susceptible to peer pressure actually had a much lower GPA, perhaps due to the fact that they did not care what anyone else thought, even with regard to doing well in school. The key to being successful while still caring about peers was the ability to succumb to peer pressures while still standing up for your own values and beliefs.

With regard to relationships with parents, although our kids really love us, they do not hesitate to lie to us. 70% of parents interviewed by Bronson said that their teens could tell them anything; only 4% actually do. The teens don't necessarily want to lie, but they want to "keep upsetting facts away from" us. In fact, in the words of one the interviewed teens "it is important for some things to be none of your business." Bronson says that in order for a kid to have a successful relationship with their parent while still lying (as they do) will take some work. Parents should try not to have an overabundance of rules, and have only certain areas that they insist on not being lied to (e.g. where their teen is going to be). If this approach results in some arguing, then that's actually good, says Bronson. In fact, arguing is a sign of respect; a sign of disrespect is lying. So if a teen is arguing about a particular rule, that means that they are respecting and regarding your authority to make that rule. Sometimes, suggests Bronson, giving in a little to your teens and letting them be "a little right" is critical to your relationship.

Bronson's next point bolstered the idea of letting teens be right or "win" and argument sometimes, because physically the teen brain is stimulated by excitement and uncertainty. They crave risky behavior. It is a parent's responsibility to put 'good risk' opportunities into their lives – like jobs, auditions, sports and summer programs.

In fact, teaching teens that stress is OK is important for them. Stress before tests has been proven to improve test scores, and having that little extra energy before an event is a positive outcome of stress. Bronson suggests you don't constantly tell kids that stress is bad. Finally, Bronson found that teens have to be able to risk losing. If teens have been told during their lives that losing isn't so bad, they will be encouraged to take risks and as adults may benefit from this risk-taking – and end up On Top.

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