Introduction to Work-Life Ready: Navigating Your Job While Parenting Teens

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In my opinion, teenagers get a bad rap.

Teenagers are amazing! Sometimes, I wish we were all more like teenagers.

I have a teenager of my own, and watching him and his friends grow up taught me a lot about life. I've also had the privilege to work with college sophomores for the last 25 years and they've taught me so much. My wife, among her many jobs, coaches young stage performers and directs youth theater, and she has learned from them. Despite the drama and difficulties, I've come to the conclusion that teenagers are amazing.

My biggest piece of advice to parents of teenagers is to start from a place of empathy for what their teens experience.

Seeing things from their point of view can be hard because, often, we still see our children as "ours." When kids are little, they actually are mostly "ours." They are our world, and we are theirs. During early childhood, they only slowly and gently become part of a wider world—extended family, teachers, school, a handful of carefully curated friends, and a few select caregivers.

In the teenage years, however, this tightly constructed world is blown open, and our children are no longer just, or even primarily, ours. They are now part of a wider society, with so many things affecting them, including societal issues like global warming, economic issues and their first jobs, and, especially, their peers, friends, frenemies, and others at school and in their social lives. Parenting a teen is a huge adjustment from parenting a younger child.

Teens live their lives very publicly, and are brave enough to try new things all the time. Teenagers perform at piano recitals and school plays, they play field hockey and run track—voluntarily putting themselves in the spotlight doing things they are quite new at all while they're developing their skills. Succeeding, failing, learning all under the watchful eye of their peers, their parents, and increasingly the entire world through social media. When they fail, they get back up and do it again. They're so resilient.

Consider that in high school, sometimes even the simple act of sitting at a new lunch table, taking a different class, wearing a different style, or "trying on" a new facet of their personality is done under the literal scrutinizing eyes of their peers. Their circle of what they consider peers is also much wider than it used to be—social media represents another crowded, tempting, cliquey global lunchroom full of cool teens showing off and dubious role models applying social pressure. In fact, the Pew Research Center found that both

teens and parents believe that being a teenager today is harder than it was for prior generations—owing to the dark side of social media and technology, high pressures and expectations, and that they feel the world and country have changed for the worse.

Teenagers may start out as "big kids" who are still largely defined by their small group of friends and their families. They quickly transition to something entirely new and vastly more complex. They grow out of old friendships and into new ones. They have their first romantic relationships—which also involves bravery in trying new things (for both good and bad). They're learning as they go, so, of course, they make lots of mistakes, leading to drama, breakups, and heartbreak. They learn, bounce back, and engage in new relationships, once again proving their resilience.

Teenagers today are tempted by all the things that have always tempted teens, plus modern temptations as well. They experiment (even when they shouldn't), they learn. They succeed, and they fail. And they get up again.

Yes, teenagers can be moody, unpredictable, and impulsive. They make really dumb and thoughtless mistakes. They haven't learned to properly calibrate risk and danger. They are ever-changing. They desperately want to be grown up and they want to stay kids a while longer.

Despite all of the chaos they cause, I've long thought teenagers get an undeserved reputation from the rest of us.

In fact, historian Paul Fairie has collected reams of newspaper headlines from the past century or so, observing that certain assertions have been made seemingly forever. (Check out this thread on "today's kids": https://mstdn.ca/@paulisci/109678022716383622). His compilation about how teens are too rowdy, soft, undisciplined, and rude includes almost-identical headlines and arguments from 1921, 1931, 1942, 1955, 1961, 1977, 1989, 1994, 2008, 2016, and 2024. Same as it ever was.

I mean, can you guess who wrote this?
Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in place of exercise; they no longer rise when elders enter the room; they contradict their parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers.

Socrates, in 420 BC!

Being a parent of a teenager is often emotionally fraught. We root for our kids so hard that we sometimes put pressure on them without even realizing it. Sometimes we grip too tightly or hover too close. We try to protect them. Sometimes, we step aside to let them fail. Often, we get shoved out of the way and pushed temporarily to the margins of their lives (they have to learn to be independent, so this is natural, albeit crushing). We need to stay

open-hearted even when it hurts. Sometimes we simply need to ride out the storm. We constantly feel put on the wrong foot. The teenage years are new to us, too. The best we can do is try, succeed, fail, and get back up again. If we're lucky, we pick up on our teens' resilience.

In this book, and in other books from Parent Ready, we have experts and peers sharing practical advice backed by legitimate research to help you navigate these turbulent years and be the best support you can for your teenager while maintaining your sanity.

In this volume, there are chapters about issues teenagers often face, and by extension, these are issues that you, as a parent of a teen, also need to face head on. We discuss how the teen years change family dynamics, family budgets, and family priorities. You'll learn some lessons and get great advice on how to navigate home life while adjusting to the unique pressures brought on by the teen years—brought to you by psychologists, family counselors, and other experts, most of whom are also navigating teen parent life.

This book also serves a second very important purpose.

There are a lot of books on parenting, and there are lots of books on career advice. But it is very rare that parenting books also address career concerns. It's even rarer to find a career book that addresses the intersection of work and family. Considering how inescapably linked work and life are, I think this lack of integration represents a huge blind spot! As a result, most parenting books and most career books are far less effective than they should be. (I'm proud that one of my previous books, *The Working Dad's Survival Guide: How to Succeed at Work and at Home* (2015), focuses on both, helping fathers navigate both career and parenthood.)

The fact is, on a given workday, most adults spend about eight hours at work, eight hours sleeping, and eight hours attending to our family and other responsibilities. Considering this, I think it's long past due that books relating to parenthood discuss how parenthood intersects with managing our careers.

I'm proud to say this book will fill this gap.

In addition to the emotional whirlwind of our teenagers, we parents also face a new set of time demands and work-family conflicts. Logistics, planning, time management, and financial planning become incredibly important.

Many teens are involved in multiple after-school activities. Getting them where they need to go as "Mom and dad's taxi service" can sometimes feel like an all-consuming task. We need to juggle their schedules, as well as that of our work, leading to sometimes impossible trade-offs and very hard choices. Plus, the pressures we face on the emotional side of parenting our temperamental, multidimensional teens can lead to distractions and

interruptions that hold us back at work. We won't always get it right, we'll try, we'll fail—but hopefully we can emulate our teenagers and learn to be resilient.

When we had younger kids, our coworkers and managers loved to hear about them (or at least tolerated our cute toddler stories), and tended to be at least somewhat understanding when our kids' needs came in conflict with work hours. Not so anymore. No one wants to hear about our teens' angst or acne, and we feel awkward sharing if our teen has struggles (no one has sympathy for when your teen gets suspended for vaping in the locker room!). Coworkers, bosses, and work cultures are less supportive when work and parenting demands clash. But we still need the time and support to be present parents for our teens.

Further, at this point in our lives, most of us are midway or further into our careers, where we have significant work responsibilities. We care about doing a good job, providing for our families, doing right by our customers, bosses, direct reports, and clients. So many rely on us. We're also thinking ahead to the finances that might be required for our children's college educations, our family's healthcare, and our own retirements (which are coming up sooner than we think).

Some of us are challenged by caring not only for our teens and younger children, but also for our elder parents or others who need us. Happily, many of us have good partners in our spouses to share in the workload. Others face the challenges of solo parenting or co-parenting with an ex after a messy divorce. None of this is easy. Doing it all at work and at home sometimes feels so daunting to be impossible.

To help you with your work and teen-parenting demands, this volume includes chapters written by business school professors who have long studied the intersection of work and family (and incidentally, teach older teens/young adults as part of their jobs). Others are penned by human resources professionals who have helped scores of employees navigate their work-life challenges, and by best-in-class organizational consultants who have helped managers and employers better support their employees.

They provide helpful and actionable advice on protecting family time from the creeping demands of work as well as time management and partnering with your teen, co-parent, and others to make it all work. They offer guidance on constructing appropriate boundaries so that you can attend to work demands and advance in your career without neglecting things at home. They also discuss juggling being a parent to a teen with other caregiving responsibilities. Finally, they provide perspective on how workplaces and managers can be more supportive of employees facing work/teen challenges, how we can leverage these resources, and how we can support our coworkers and peers. All this to help you navigate the dual challenges of parenting teens and succeeding at work.

More than any one great piece of usable advice (and this book has tons!), I think the main lesson of *Work Life Ready* is that, even though it might be hard at times, parenting a

teenager while balancing work and family is not impossible. We can succeed in both roles. We can rise to our challenges. We will fail, succeed, and learn. We'll become increasingly resilient. Navigating these new challenges and emotionally uncertain waters will make us feel almost as if we were teenagers again.

And, if I haven't made it clear by now, that can be a good thing, as I think teenagers are amazing!

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