

PATHBREAKER PARENTING

NEW CONVERSATIONS TO ENGAGE YOUR TEEN
AND EMPOWER SELF-DIRECTED THRIVING



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Dedication

Donna, without my rock by my side, nothing is possible. We wrote this book together during the many hours spent discussing what we might do next to help our two knuckleheads find their way in life. I hope the pages of this book reflect the depth of my love and appreciation for all that you are and serve as a tribute to the countless ways you've enriched my life and the lives of our daughters.

Lauren and Brooke, you each became a purpose the day you were born, and seeing you thrive is the greatest joy any parent could wish for. I hope the pages of this book serve as a testament to the love and lessons we've shared, and spark empowering conversations between parents and teens everywhere.

Prologue

My wife and I raised two daughters, now twenty-three and twenty-six years old. Like you (I hope), we love our daughters endlessly and want to help each of them become thriving (a keyword you'll see a lot in this book) young adults who achieve happiness and fulfillment throughout their lives. And, like you, we were relentlessly pressured to indoctrinate them to a one-size-fits-all path during their teenage years.

My wife and I said “nope” and raised them to ignore much of what the adults in their lives will insist they prioritize, decide, commit to, and complete. We didn't do a few things differently here and there; we did most everything differently through an interwoven series of conversations I share in this book. Even though they are diametrically different humans, each is now a thriving, self-confident, financially independent, and pleasant young adult.

While this book is not a parent brag, context matters. According to the rules in our society, these now-thriving young women were destined for failure; two terrifically unremarkable teenagers on their way to Loserville, population them. Our oldest daughter was even called into the principal's office in high school for a one-on-one lecture about how she was “wasting her potential” by proactively deciding she did not need to go to college (and never wavering).

They both attended school because it's the law and stuff. But neither achieved a single accolade or academic recognition award. Neither played a sport for or in any way represented their school. Neither campaigned for, much less were elected as, class president or anything similar. Neither was the “it” girl, ran in the popular crowd, or was chosen as most likely to be

anything in their senior yearbook. Neither spent a semester abroad, held an internship, or wasted time contemplating what they wanted to “be.” Neither developed what anyone would consider to be a strong work ethic (a total of two part-time jobs in high school). Neither attended a private school or expensive tutoring sessions.

Zero money or time was spent preparing for the SAT (one of them never took it). One never applied to a college; the other applied, was accepted, went for one semester, and dropped out. At twenty-two, when these young women were supposed to have demonstrated proof of academic excellence, perseverance, and obedience by holding a piece of paper that made them eligible for financial success and happiness, neither displayed the slightest bit of conformity.

And it was all by design.

“The most educated
(and in debt)
generation in history
is pouring their heart,
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and a lot of money into
a formulaic path that,
for many, does not
work out as expected.”



SECTION 1

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

It's never been more apparent that the academic-laden, task-heavy, spend-whatever-it-takes approach to raising kids in our society is unnecessary at best and disastrous at worst.

Teenagers are increasingly stressed out and anxious and view their future with such fear and despair that many must be medicated to get through their day. Not surprisingly, these teenagers often become timid and unhappy young adults struggling to find the fulfillment and financial success they were promised. And many enter the real world with crushing debt that acts as a two-ton boat anchor on their hopes and dreams.

This isn't an opinion; it's the reality in our society. But it doesn't have to be the reality for your teenager.



CHAPTER 1

Young Adults Struggle

As a parent, what is the goal? Most of us say the goal is to enable our children to become thriving young adults with a strong foundation that leads to prolonged and, mostly, happy lives. Once our children venture out independently, we hope they secure full-time work, financially support themselves, build healthy relationships, and make (mostly) good decisions while being strong-minded enough to manage their way through life's ups and downs. So, how are we doing? Not very well.

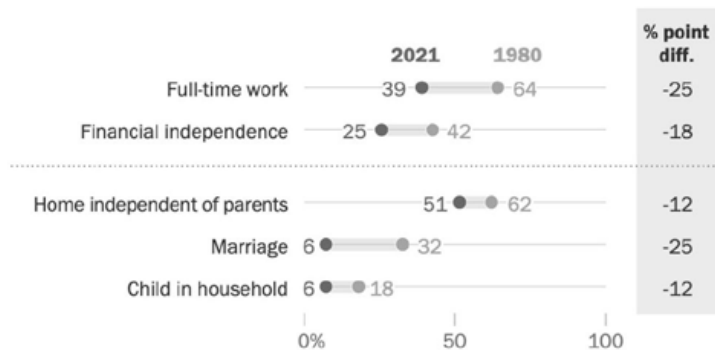
Compared to their peers from forty years ago, far fewer twenty-one-year-olds (Figure 1) reach any life milestone—especially financial ones. By age twenty-five (Figure 2), today's young adults still lag behind on financial milestones; many live with their parents and are far less likely to be married or have children.

There are, of course, many circumstances and beliefs regarding such data. For example, some may not believe in the institution of marriage. Additionally, people can thrive while living with their parents, and only some want to have children. Nitpick if you must, but don't miss the forest for the trees. Young adults are struggling—big time—to financially provide for their needs (housing, food, transportation, travel, etc.), build healthy relationships, and self-direct their happiness.

At age 21, today's young adults lag behind earlier young adults on major life milestones

% of 21-year-olds in the United States who have completed each milestone

Figure 1. Studies like this one show today's twenty-one-year-olds significantly trail their peers from forty years ago.



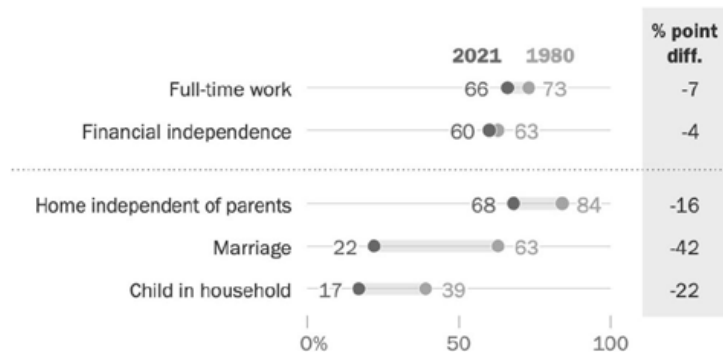
Note: Financial independence refers to having an income of at least 150% of the poverty level for one person in a given year. Marriage refers to being currently or ever married. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1980 decennial census and 2021 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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Today's 25-year-olds are nearly on par with earlier young adults on key financial milestones

% of 25-year-olds in the United States who have completed each milestone

Figure 2. The same study shows today's twenty-five-year-olds are increasingly delayed in achieving life milestones.



Note: Financial independence refers to having an income of at least 150% of the poverty level for one person in a given year. Marriage refers to being currently or ever married. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 1980 decennial census and 2021 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

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(Source: Richard Fry, "Young Adults in the U.S. Are Reaching Key Life Milestones Later than in the Past," *Pew Research Center*, May 23, 2023.)

Not surprisingly, these struggles lead to frustration and unhappiness. While data and research are compelling, what most convinced me is open and honest conversations with young adults. I ask them about their current reality, what was emphasized as a teenager, and how they're doing today. I repeatedly hear four themes during these conversations.

1. My hard-won college degree is not magically opening doors.
2. The pressure to choose a career without real-world experience leaves me feeling trapped.
3. Hard work and dedication aren't leading to the success and moneymaking I anticipated.
4. I constantly chase and fail to meet the expectations I brought with me into the real world.

Not every young adult shares these themes, and some are perfectly content with where they are in life. But, again, there is more than enough evidence that what we're doing is not working— especially when one considers the massive investments being made to prevent this problem.

HEALTH

Why are young people so miserable?

They tally lowest life-satisfaction scores among all age groups of those 18 and older in Harvard-led study, reversal of results of past surveys

BY Alvin Powell
Harvard Staff Writer

SHARE    

DATE September 15, 2022

Figure 3. This article states the degree to which young adults are unhappy is “pretty striking, pretty disturbing.”

(Source: Alvin Powell, “Why Are Young People So Miserable?,” *The Harvard Gazette*, September 15, 2022.)

The most educated (and in debt) generation in history is pouring their heart, mind, mental wellness, and a *lot* of money into a formulaic path that, for many, does not work out as expected. Young adults often feel disillusioned and frustrated because they were misled, only to be called entitled by those who misled them.

CHAPTER 2

A Misguided Path

While theories abound about the cause of this problem and why it continues to worsen, I believe much of it relates to how teenagers are raised and what they're led to believe. The adults in their lives—from parents to coaches to guidance counselors to family members and beyond—indoctrinate teenagers to the critical importance of a “path” that must be followed, no matter the costs.



At its core, the path centers on avoiding uncertainty by presenting the illusion of known outcomes. Teenagers, constantly inundated with media signals about how volatile and dangerous the world is, find comfort in a “just do what you’re told, and it will all be ok” mentality and are indoctrinated into a worth-it-at-all-costs, step-by-step path.

You’ll be all set if you follow the rules, do what you’re told, complete the assignments, and accumulate the required credentials. Even better, the path includes a handy-dandy grading system that means you know how you’re doing and what you’re capable of. If you make As, you’re smart and will be successful. If you make Bs or Cs, either you’re not reaching your potential and need to shape up or accept that you can only achieve limited success. If you make Ds or—God forbid—Fs, you will likely be a loser who lives paycheck to paycheck.

What could be better than a simple, rules-based system in which you always know where you stand and how much potential you possess? What could be better than an input-output-based system in which the more effort, time, focus, and money you invest, the more successful you will be when you exit it? What could be wrong with that, everyone asks?

What’s wrong is that teenagers—constantly goaded on by the adults in their lives—maniacally focus on completing assignments, taking tests, chasing grades, stockpiling achievements, and hoping to be accepted by a “good” college. Suppose they ever stop to question it all and ask why they’re relentlessly forced to comply and perform. In that case, they’re reminded it’s all for their own good. “We just want you to be happy,” they’re told.

Time, stress, anxiety, money, worry, and effort are all *required* because college is more than a fantastic experience where you forge lifelong friendships, establish a network, and have fun. Upon graduating, you possess the credential that unlocks eligibility to attain your potential and, most importantly, financial success. With the credential, the world is your oyster, and without the credential, you’ll always be limited. And how do you not just attain but *maximize* your potential and financial success? Simple. The more

prestigious the college that bestows your degree, the more unlimited your potential and financial success.

If we're being honest with ourselves, that is the snake oil we're selling to kids, right?

Teenagers aren't mentored and guided to explore, experiment, and conduct activities that cause them to feel innately accomplished and fulfilled. They aren't encouraged to be a kid, have fun, and gradually decipher what lights them up on the inside. They aren't empowered to self-direct their learning, expectations, and mindset. They aren't inspired to experience what things cost, dabble in value creation, and construct a lifestyle they choose. There is no time for that nonsense!

They must focus on getting into a "good" college because maximizing their potential and making lots of money will lead to happiness. Said differently, compliance in the present will result in happiness in the future.

With that directive in mind and lacking a solid case to dissuade the jury, they pour their time and energy into checking boxes, hanging out with friends, and desperately seeking distractions. And that leaves no time, much less guidance, to develop one core and critically important capability. They exit the path and enter the real world with little to no ability to *self-direct their happiness and fulfillment from the inside out*.

And for most of them, that dormant volcano eventually erupts.

CHAPTER 3

The Requirement Lie

Teenagers are relentlessly implored to follow and excel on the path based on a known and unquestioned fact: a college degree is *the* key that unlocks unlimited earning potential and higher job satisfaction throughout their career because the best jobs and promotions *require* a college degree. And even if the requirement were to become less prominent, the college experience and induction into the “degree club” is too compelling to ignore. It’s what successful people do.

The college industry is damn good at marketing their snake oil, it all makes for a compelling argument, and almost everyone takes the bait. Except here’s the thing:

It’s a lie.

College can be a wonderful experience with lifelong friendships, knowledge attainment, and other benefits. No doubt. But, as you’ll learn in Section 3 of this book, the insistence that the best jobs and promotions require a college degree is a lie. How do I know this? Two reasons.

First, Figure 4 is a screenshot of the actual job description for the role our oldest daughter, Lauren (now twenty-six), was promoted to in 2022 at a Fortune 200 company. Despite never spending a minute in a college classroom, much less possessing a college degree, she is now six years into a high-paying career and landed a role she was repeatedly told, as a teenager, would be inaccessible without a

Required

- Bachelor's degree in a relevant field preferred (Human-Computer Interaction, information design, communications, Computer Systems, etc.)
- 3+ years of experience in UI/UX design
- Proficiency using UX and prototyping tools (Axure, Sketch, Adobe Creative Cloud, InVision, etc.)
- Experience with WCAG accessibility standards
- Proven effectiveness in working as a member in cross-functional teams which include business analysts, designers, researchers, developers, and product owners
- Experience with Agile and/or lean philosophy and methods
- Design experience for both web and mobile
- Ability to create wireframes as well as visual design comps
- Portfolio examples of sketches, workflows, interactions, and end state work
- Up-to-date with the latest UI trends, techniques, and technologies
- A user-centered approach in design perspective and practice
- Excellent verbal and written communication skills
- Positive attitude and be able to work effectively in a team
- Strong sense of accountability and drive to get results
- High attention to detail but able to work quickly to meet deadlines
- Ability to solve problems creatively and effectively
- Maintain a user-centered approach in design perspective and practice
- Must be legally authorized to work in the United States for any employer without sponsorship
- Successful completion of interview required to meet job qualification
- Reliable, punctual attendance is an essential function of the position

Preferred

- IAirline experience
- Preferred CISSP, CISA, or CISM
- Understanding of HTML, JavaScript & CSS

Figure 4. An example of the typical job description used to convince teenagers that a college degree is required for “good” jobs.

college degree. As I’ll explain later, she didn’t even take the SAT because she knew at sixteen that she would skip college and never wavered throughout high school.

I know what you’re probably thinking: “A bachelor’s degree is listed right there in writing as the first required item. If she didn’t go to college, did she lie about her credentials, circumvent the process, or misrepresent herself?” Nope, none of that was necessary.

As I’ll explain in this book and walk through step-by-step in the final section, she was taught at a young age to ignore what people tell her is supposedly required to land a good job or be promoted because most human beings do not refer to credentials when they make decisions about who they value. She was also taught that requirements like a college degree and years of experience are mostly filtering mechanisms used in online application systems (I’ll explain later). As a result, she started her career as a UX/UI Designer at twenty, landed her dream job at twenty-three, and is

consistently told she will have no limitations in her career. She loves her job, has zero debt, and earns more than the average Harvard graduate at the same age.

Second, I know it is a lie because we spent time online entering search phrases such as “How to become a _____ without a college degree” and discussing the results.

How to Become a Financial Advisor Without a Degree

Jun 16, 2022 — **Working as a financial advisor does not require a college degree**, although most people working as financial advisors do have four-year degrees.

How To Get Into Marketing Without a Degree [Career Guide]

Aug 31, 2022 — **Can You Become a Marketer Without a Degree? ... Yes.** Many experts in the field didn't have marketing degrees when they got their first job, and ...

How To Become An Interior Designer Without A Degree?

So, to answer the question, **yes, indeed, it is possible to become an interior designer without getting a degree in design.** It is more about having the required ...

10 Sales Jobs You Can Land Without a Degree in 2023

Sep 8, 2022 — **No, you don't need a degree to work in sales.** You can get into sales without a college degree, though it does help to have completed a relevant ...

Figure 5. You and your teenager can learn how to enter almost any career without a college degree via an online search.

Sit down with your teenager and enter anything you want—engineer, nurse, accountant, interior designer, marketer, salesperson, business owner, financial adviser—and you’ll find what we found. Are there certain jobs that, by law, require specific certifications? Absolutely, and I will cover that, but make no mistake, a college degree is rarely required to land almost any job.

While some people will consent and agree that it might be possible to land a job without a college degree, their position hardens when it comes to maximizing potential and financial success. “Sure, you might be able to land a job,” they say, “but what about promotions and reaching the highest levels of a corporation? What if you want to be a senior executive or company CEO? *That* is

why a college degree is critical. It removes all ceilings.”

We’ll go deep into this topic later, but let’s quickly address that position by returning to Lauren’s journey (so far). Now, six years, four roles, and two promotions into a career she was repeatedly told in high school would require a college degree, she’s never felt the need to hide anything or hope no one noticed the missing required credentials on her resume. And never, not once, has anyone presented it as an issue or problem in an interview or evaluation because—drumroll please—*nobody* cares.

Why? Just think about it from a personal perspective.

If you rely on someone to do meaningful work and she consistently delivers beyond what’s expected, has a great attitude, and gets things done—would you value her? Would you find yourself looking for ways to keep her around? Would you give her formidable problems to solve?

Yeah, me too.

Suppose you pondered how she acquired her technical skills, developed a stellar attitude, and learned the importance of creating value for others. Would you care that she didn’t follow the conventional path? Would you place some ceiling on her if you discovered she chose not to go to college and, instead, self-directed her learning?

Yeah, me neither.

Would you even be impressed that she became so valuable by *not* doing what everybody else did? Would you want to know how she did it? Would you hope her self-confidence and originality rubbed off on her coworkers?

Yeah, me too.

It’s how we all operate. You likely celebrate those who do things you assume couldn’t be done. You wish you could be the maverick who thumbs their nose at conformity; you cheer for the underdog and love to see the little guy stick it to the big guy. But then, you stop daydreaming and return to insisting your teenager comply. Finish their homework. Complete another college application.

Study extra hard for their biology test. All the while convincing yourself it's for their own good.

You're the parent, and your job is to ensure your child does what's required because you couldn't live with yourself if they're released into adulthood without the option to maximize their potential. With that in mind, perhaps reluctantly, you become a taskmaster. You poke, prod, cajole, prompt, and remind. When you fail to get through, and an important task or assignment isn't complete, you swoop in to complete it. If they're at risk of getting a bad grade on a project or significant exam, you beg them to focus. If necessary and/or possible, you do the work for them. All because they don't know any better, but you do.

Here's the thing, though. Instead of mentoring and guiding your teen to flourish across all life domains, embracing confident self-direction, and priming them for a thriving future, you are pushing all your chips to the center of the table based on a playbook that became obsolete at least two decades ago.

It's time to make a change.

CHAPTER 4

Start New Conversations

This book unleashes you from an obsolete and irrelevant role. Your task-mastering days will soon be a thing of the past as you start new conversations that foster a shift in parental roles, empowering you to become an enabler while allowing your teen the autonomy to navigate as a self-directed individual.

Your new conversations have one thing in common with the old ones.

The Path	New Conversations
Be a kind, responsible, helpful, respected, contributing member of society	Be a kind, responsible, helpful, respected, contributing member of society

Otherwise, everything will be different.

The Path	New Conversations
Learning is done to you	Learning is something you choose to do
Financial success leads to happiness and fulfillment	Happiness and fulfillment lead to success
Fixed mindset: Present as smart (i.e., grades) and don't risk being perceived as otherwise	Growth mindset: Don't present as anything; try stuff, be curious, fail often
Fear uncertainty and seek formulaic outcomes	Embrace uncertainty and excel at zigging
Life can be a plan with steps to execute	Life is a roller coaster, throw your hands up
Invest and commit based on averages	Averages do not apply to individuals
Completing tasks assigned by others is a valued skill	Task proficiency is table stakes; be a linchpin
Conformity is a sought-after character trait	Conformity is boring, make a ruckus
Mistakes go on your "permanent record"	Make mistakes as often as possible
Your potential has a ceiling	Your potential increases daily
Risk is dangerous and unsafe	Risk is doing things without known results
Credentials prove you're persistent and hardworking	Most credentials are lazy filtering mechanisms
What do you want to be?	What do you want to try first?

These conversations are not about coddling your teenager, bending to their will, or letting them do whatever they want. Instead, these conversations establish a new mindset, release pressure, and create space for ongoing and constructive dialogue. You and your teenager will adopt a growth mindset, prioritize new behaviors and goals, and invest time, energy, and money differently. I encourage you to put this book down and start your first conversation right now (then pick it back up; we've got work to do!).

From this point forward, we will pivot and take a new approach to your development.



- *You will not be pressured to follow a one-size-fits-all path because you're a unique individual capable of designing (with our help) your journey.*
- *You will not be forced to learn things against your will because you will be too busy developing the ability to confidently self-direct your learning.*
- *You will complete tasks assigned by others when necessary, but your priority will be proficiency at setting and achieving your tasks.*
- *You will not believe you must become eligible for financial security. You will, instead, establish and learn to fund your desired lifestyle while everyone else chases credentials.*
- *You will not expect happiness and fulfillment to be a by-product of financial success. You will take the opposite approach.*
- *You will not blindly assume college is the best option after high school. You will energetically explore all the options.*
- *You will not waste time stressing over what you want to "be" because it is a pointless exercise. You will, instead, focus on what you want to try first.*

We will embark on this journey together, and I/we will help and enable along the way. But, make no mistake, this new approach puts you in the driver's seat with me/us riding shotgun. You will be newly empowered as we focus on two core goals.

First, you will build foundational and transferable traits and skills that make you universally invaluable and always in high demand. Second, and most importantly, you will learn how to self-direct your happiness from the inside out and become empowered to achieve your interpretation of success, no one else's.

I can't wait to get started.

These conversations are *not* for people who crave safety and a formulaic “just tell me what to do, and I’ll do it” approach. Some people are convinced the path is the best way to succeed and be happy. Some people believe the upside of college is priceless, no matter the individual. I get it, but this approach is not for those people.

These conversations are *not* for the rule follower who struggles with swimming upstream while everyone in their social circle floats downstream. If fitting in is your jam, this ain’t for you. Trust me. You will be overwhelmed by the criticism and judgment that come with thumbing your nose at the path’s most zealous followers and champions.

And, last, these conversations are *not* for the parent who lacks the time or desire to be a true mentor. If you expect or need the “system” to dictate how your teenager invests their time and energy with you in a taskmaster role, this is a waste of your time.

These conversations *are* for someone who knows that being safe and formulaic is overrated at best and soul crushing at worst. You don’t want your teenager to grow up avoiding risk and playing it safe; you want your teenager to become a fierce, confident, self-motivated badass.

These conversations *are* for someone with the emotional intelligence and self-confidence to stare down those zealous path followers and say, “Hold my beer.” They will come at you like a spider monkey (*Talladega Nights* reference there; I hope it landed), but you will stay calm, avoid direct eye contact, and refrain from feeding them.

These conversations *are* for someone ready to dedicate their time and energy very differently. While your friends and peers will fret over homework, test scores, and flawless applications, you and your teenager will bond over insightful, enriching, and stimulating interactions as you plant, water, and fertilize seeds.

And, last, these conversations *are* for someone not seduced by a quick fix. This approach is meant for the parent of a twelve(ish) to sixteen(ish)-year-old with hundreds of days and tens of thousands of hours to work with. You are not rushed, beholden to fictional deadlines, or the least bit apprehensive about uncertainty. Instead, you’re cementing an indestructible foundation and helping your teenager build the floors of a burgeoning skyscraper.

I break it all down into four sections after this one. In Section 2, I share eleven short anecdotes that drove my belief system and conviction. In Section 3, I walk through and dismantle the path step-by-step because it’s essential to understand what’s being done to your teenager. In Section 4, I help you build the right mindset in yourself and your teenager to enable new conversations and a new journey. In Section 5, I provide the details on what conversations to start holding and how to best invest your and your teenager’s time, energy, and resources in a far more impactful way.

Without further ado, let’s get into it.

“I learned life is entirely unpredictable. Thinking you can plan everything out is fruitless. But, on the flip side, my daughter taught me one thing with complete and final certainty: mindset is *everything*.”