

# Navigating the Teenage Voyage: The Power of Coaching & Mentoring

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This article highlights a pressing problem and a powerful solution: the vulnerability and turbulence of teenage years and the role of coaching and mentoring as a steadying force. Our ideas and stories draw from over two decades of working with students in a teaching, tutoring, coaching, and mentoring capacity. Our experience has shown that skilled coaching and mentoring can support students' academic success and shift the trajectory of their lives in remarkable ways. Read on to learn how Lou the Coaster and Anxious Annie went from sinking to sailing.

As we know, the teenage years are filled with dynamic growth, self-discovery, and the pursuit of independence. And yet many forces can hinder a teen's healthy development. The waters of the adolescent sea are choppy and murky – fluctuating hormones, immature brains with short-term outlooks, unrelenting social and academic pressure, a bombardment of social media, and feeling the weight of a troubled world without the inner resources to cope. Frankly, the teenage years seem to be a more difficult voyage these days. Do you sense this too?

Adolescence is a crucial and formative period that shapes young individuals into the adults they will become. As teens venture down this tenuous path, they explore and experiment with identities, come to know and live their values, and embrace their individuality. During this stage, it is also common for teenagers to resist or tune out parental input. Sound familiar? Their oppositional behavior pushes away the adult support they need while simultaneously serving an essential purpose: to individuate. Individuation, the primary developmental task of adolescence, propels them to become captains of their ships.

Despite teenage pretenses of self-assuredness, our experience reveals that these emerging captains still yearn for understanding, positive reflection, and support that confers a sense of empowerment. How do teens get this support? Caring adults outside the parental unit are indispensable crewmembers to provide this critical attention. However, even caring adults are overextended in today's busy world, too often leaving teens under-resourced to captain their ships. We have discovered that weaving coaching and mentoring into the tutoring relationship steadies the boat. This steadying allows teens to successfully raise their sails and navigate the headwinds of the high school years. Can you think of an adult outside of your immediate family that helped you raise your sail?

Mentorship isn't just a concept; it's a life-changing experience. Let's explore its profound impact on teens like 'Lou' and 'Annie.'

## **The Big Shift of ‘Lou the Coaster’:**

[Story by Marc]

‘Beverly’ reached out to me worried about her son Lou’s falling grades and overall well-being. Remote learning had thrown ‘Lou’ off-track, and Beverly, as a busy professional, struggled to support him. This story highlights Lou's shift from coasting to flourishing, thanks to a renewed engagement from entering the feedback loop of motivation and success.

In our initial sessions, Lou and I tackled math while discussing his passion for the Warriors, playing sports, and his friends. My genuine interest in Lou’s world helped establish a personal connection and a foundation for me to coach him as we went along. Setting his own goals was one of the keys to assisting Lou in finding sustained motivation and engagement. And even though his goal was high, it relieved him of the pressure he felt from his parent's expectations.

We discovered later that part of Lou’s response to pressure was to disengage and coast along. But his strategy did not provide relief because he felt even more weighed down as he fell behind in his schoolwork. I supported Lou in his goals as he began to take matters into his own hands and become captain of his ship. With a bit of encouragement and a few habit changes - like not jumping into social media after returning from soccer practice (his idea!), Lou was on his way to greater engagement and feeling more empowered.

Lou soon began to get A’s on his tests. His success buoyed his spirits, making staying engaged and motivated easier, though he still did not love school. Lou began to know himself as someone adept in math, and success soon became his new standard. He discovered that the path to remarkable results in math required only about 20% more effort and greater consistency. This insight was essential learning for Lou. He became better at playing the game of school and felt relieved for having made this leap.

## **The Evolution of ‘Anxious Annie’:**

[Story by Michael]

‘Annie’ came to me with a longstanding, tenuous relationship with math. Somewhere in her elementary school years, she received consistently unsupportive feedback from one of her teachers and had many frustrating experiences learning math in middle school. This experience fueled a strong inner critic, insisting that Annie wasn’t good at math. She developed a paralyzing anxiety when approaching the subject.

In our work together, we slowed things down. At the beginning and throughout each session, we paused to take a few deep breaths together. Annie soon developed the skill of sensing her

anxiety as it lived in her body: a shortness of breath, a constriction in the throat, a sinking, nauseating feeling in the stomach. After a minute or two of noticing these sensations, she reported a dissipation of their intensity. She felt less anxious, and her mind relaxed a bit.

From this place of greater ease, she became more engaged. We discovered a lightheartedness in learning, reframing ‘mistakes’ (or ‘fails’ as she liked to say) not as a moment for harsh self-talk but as simply part of the learning process, an opportunity for growth. We laughed more at the silly ‘mistakes’ and celebrated her breakthroughs. Her mathematical reasoning started to grow healthy roots.

As the months went on, I noticed that Annie started to find satisfaction in the problem-solving process, whereas there was only anxiety and aversion before. She would take an extra dose of delight in getting the correct answer. Math still wasn’t her favorite subject, but she reported starting to like math for the first time. Parts of it just started to ‘make sense’ for her. Her relationship with the subject transformed significantly. A positive feedback loop of increasing capability and self-confidence gradually replaced the negative spiral of anxiety and self-proclaimed ineptness.

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As you’ve read through the stories of Lou and Annie, mentoring can be life-changing. They both experienced growth in confidence, self-regulation, resilience, results, and even shifts in their identities. These outcomes are consistent with what we know is possible through skilled mentoring and coaching. These relationships offer a haven for adolescents, allowing them to explore crucial issues such as self-esteem, emotional well-being, academic goals, purpose, belonging, and leadership development. So, let’s provide teenagers with the support they need to weather the storms of adolescence and confidently sail into their adult lives. Let’s nurture our youth to become tomorrow’s leaders.