

But She Won't Get Off the Couch!: Ideas for Fostering Constructive Leisure

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A deep interest involves a personal connection between a person and an activity or area of study (Dewey, 1913; Hidi & Renninger, 2006). For example, some adolescents are interested in cooking, others are interested in sports, and some are interested in math. A person with interest is both excited by the activity and concentrates on it. This is a winning combination for the development of knowledge and skills. Not to mention, interests feel good and contribute to forming a positive identity. Each individual has interest in something; it's a matter of cultivating it, and middle school is an excellent time for that.

Most parents want their middle school students to have interests beyond activities that involve sitting in front of a screen (e.g., playing video games, watching television, surfing the web). But, how is this possible? Here are a few ideas of how to identify and nurture potential interests,

Identify ideas and activities that are already important to your child. Evaluate what your adolescent cares about by noting what he/she chooses to do or talk about already. Maybe he really likes a particular home-cooked meal. Maybe she wants to redecorate her room. Maybe he loves hanging out with his dog. Maybe she likes riding her bike. Maybe the only thing you think your child cares about is video games—there is opportunity there, too. Listen for topics from school that you hear about (e.g., “Did you know that hurricanes start in Africa?” or “Do you know how the Neanderthals kept warm?”). These are all clues to what interests your child.

Make it active. Take one of these things that your adolescent cares about and think of a way to get him or her involved in pursuing it more deeply. Get him in the kitchen to learn how to cook the favorite home-cooked meal, get her refinishing furniture that you already have, have him study the dog's behavior, teach her how to give her bicycle a tune-up. For the video-game fanatic, maybe a computer programming class is in order. Think of a way for your adolescent to start doing whatever he or she already cares about.

Make it social. Interests develop best when they are engaged in with other supportive people. This might mean that you will have to learn how to refinish furniture or figure out how to change break pads on the bicycle with your child. Initially, your adolescent will enjoy fumbling through things with you. As he or she develops more knowledge and skills, you might be able to enlist the help of a friend or neighbor who has particular expertise. Finally, your adolescent might like to share what he or she knows or can do with younger children. By making the activity social it is both more fun and can contribute positively to how your adolescent views him or herself.

Finally, be patient and persistent, interest takes time to develop.