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URGENT

GUEST COMMENTARY: Testimonials key to reaching our youth

Jená Bellezza Sep 15, 2017



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Have you noticed the drive today for youth engagement?

The norm has always been to tell them what not to do. My problem with this method has always been we've often then not followed through with alternative behaviors, among which they can choose to replace the behaviors they are being told to abandon.

Or better yet, why don't we encourage them to come up with their own alternative behaviors?

I think part of the problem is our belief that all youth need to be parented, that is, told what to do. As a culture, we even view learning as telling kids what they need to know and do.

May I suggest a paradigm shift here?

Sure, children need to be filled with information. They come here empty vessels waiting to be filled with pertinent data so they may fulfill their reasons for being.

But I've learned what children do with data progresses as their brains develop, and that the older a child gets, telling does not motivate as well as experiencing.

Have you ever watched a tween or teen's reaction to a testimonial — someone sharing with them their life experience around a behavior or topic?

It moves them to process the behavior rather than just follow a directive. They pick up something relevant to them, and due to that relevancy, what they learn then triggers the buy-in required to forgo their current behavior for an alternative.

Directives, on the other hand, eventually get tested, meaning kids often end up trying out the behavior they've been directed not to do just to see if it's really as bad as the adult says.

So why am I sharing all this with you?

There are a lot of issues in our culture today of great concern to parents, administrators and even legislators.

But recently, I had the pleasure of viewing some of Lake County's own youth filming a public service announcement on prescription drugs. The reason I say pleasure is instead of a somber, directive tone and message, the youth presented an uplifting insight into a day in the life of teens today — specifically, what happened when they stumbled upon one of the many challenges life throws at us, the choices they made to get through it and how they overcame it.

The impact it left on me was that what seems OK, even natural, in life may have dire consequences. Rather than run from those consequences, do something constructive about them, including letting others know about them.

Like, "Dude! I tried this, and trust me, you don't want to do this! It like downright sucks!"

In the end, our actions are all a choice. But what I learned from this PSA is that if you want to get a serious message to today's youth, testimonials given in the context of just living life have such a greater impact on our actions than directives.

Adults, what I'm charging you with here, in order to get youth engagement and buy-in, is to give them your testimony, and not your directive.

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