Resilience Project #3: Teenagers and Identity Development

Over the course of our lives, our identity—Who am I? How do I fit in?—is constantly evolving. This is a long, drawn-out process of synthesizing all of the following components (and then some, no doubt):

- Desired career or work path (*vocational/career identity*)
- The degree to which one is liberal or conservative (*political identity*)
- Spiritual beliefs (*religious/spiritual identity*)
- Whether one is single, married, divorced, a parent, etc. (*relationship identity*)
- The degree to which one is intellectual or driven (*intellectual, achievement identity*)
- One's sexual orientation (*sexual identity*)
- Where one is from and the degree to which he/she identifies with their cultural heritage (*ethnic and geographic identity*)
- What one likes to do—sports, music, hobbies, etc. (*interests*)
- Personality characteristics (introversion/extraversion, calm/anxious, friendly/hostile, etc.) (*personality*)
- Body image (*physical identity*)

A**dolescence is prime time for establishing one's identity**. The developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst, Erik Erikson, proposed a theory of life-long psychosocial development, which he broke down into eight stages. In Erikson's view, questions about identity are virtually universal concerns during adolescence, and the choices that young people make begin to form the core of what the individual is about as a human being. At this stage--as adolescents are bridging the gap between the security of childhood and the independence of adulthood--they are trying to figure out who they are, what really matters to them, where they are headed in life, where they fit in the world. **They are trying out different roles, experimenting with personalities, exploring their options.** Many of these identities are short-lived: they may dress preppy one day, goth the next; they were sure they wanted to be Pre-Med last month, today it looks more like Communications is what they really love. Who knows what tomorrow will bring?

As teachers, parents and counselors, our job is to encourage and support their exploration and give them the confidence to experiment (in appropriate and healthy ways). Sometimes, supporting a teenager means letting go of our own hopes and dreams about who s/he will become. The best practice is to be patient with what may, at times, seem irrational or frivolous, and trust that, in the end, these young people will develop into exactly who they are meant to be.
(Sources: *Life-Span Development*, twelfth edition, by John W. Santrock and *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, eighth edition, by Gerald Corey)

**For a fascinating exploration of identity development, we strongly recommend Andrew Solomon's recent book, *Far From the Tree: Parents, Children, and the Search For Identity* (Scribner, 2012). Here's what the *New York Times* said about it: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/25/books/review/far-from-the-tree-by-andrew-solomon.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

The Staples Resilience Project is an ongoing initiative by the Staples Guidance Department. These emails are just the beginning. We welcome your feedback.
-Victoria Capozzi, vcapozzi@westport.k12.ct.us
-Leslie Hammer, lhammer@westport.k12.ct.us
-Deb Slocum, dslocum@westport.k12.ct.us