

RAISING A TEEN CHANGE AGENT

**7-Step Guide for Parents of
Socially Conscious
High School Students**

M A T T H E W D E S A N T I S

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INTRODUCTION

If you think it's hard raising a teenager, try *being* a teen! It's daunting.

Today's high school students will inherit many major societal issues, including racism, gender inequality, poverty, healthcare inequality, climate change, and food insecurity. In addition to these global issues, students face problems germane to their schools and communities, like cyberbullying, teacher shortages, and programming cuts.

Luckily, teens are resilient, and with the proper guidance and resources, high-achieving students can address these issues today...and in the future!

My work with the Teen Think Tank Project, a research institute for high-potential high school students, is focused on providing them with the resources they need to develop their voices for change. Through this work, I have come to understand where society is failing them. But, more importantly, I have learned what these teen change agents need to succeed in blazing a path forward.

The Teen Think Tank's intensive programming provides me with a unique perspective as I work alongside these teen colleagues on research projects and policy frameworks while simultaneously maintaining my position as a research coordinator, ostensibly making me the "adult" in the room. This relationship allows me to understand these students' needs and adjust my deliverables to meet their expectations.

So, with this guide, I hope to provide parents, teachers, and thought leaders with some of the insight I have gained by working alongside these exceptional teens and provide a digestible blueprint that can help you connect with your aspiring teen change agent.

STEP

FIND OUT WHAT YOUR TEEN IS PASSIONATE ABOUT

Passion is the driving force behind every great advocate, activist, and social entrepreneur.

*"Every great dream begins with a dreamer. Always remember, you have within you the strength, the patience, and the passion to reach for the stars to change the world."
-Harriet Tubman.*

Passion needs to be cultivated, fostered, and activated, but first, it needs to be identified.

What is your teen passionate about? There is only one way to find out. *Ask them.* Teens want to talk about the issues they are passionate about. If your experience as a parent tells you otherwise, you may have yet to tap into a subject your teen is genuinely committed to, and I think it is time to change that!

First, put yourself in their shoes. Take a few minutes to list two or three social issues you remember being passionate about as a teenager. Was it the AIDS epidemic? Was it global famine? The war on drugs? Apartheid in South Africa? Global warming?

Maybe those causes are no longer pressing issues, or perhaps they are more prevalent now than ever. That's not important. What is important is that you once again tap into that feeling of being an adolescent in a world fraught with social dysfunction. Being able to relate to what your teen is going through as they attempt to navigate social justice issues is paramount.



Next, find out what issues your teen is most passionate about. The easiest way to do that is to simply take an inventory of the type of stories, current events, or social issues they find most interesting, compelling, or troubling.

There does not need to be a ton of pomp and circumstance surrounding this exercise. Just pay attention to what they gravitate towards and start to educate yourself on those issues. Follow their cues and ask questions about clubs that conduct activities at school or fundraiser events in your community that are tied to social justice issues. Most importantly, remember that is their cause. You do not need to share their passion for this issue, but you must be open to understanding why a particular issue is important to them.

STEP

2

BE READY TO LISTEN

Asking questions is easy. We ask things of people all the time. As bosses, employees, neighbors, and adult children of aging parents, we constantly search for more information to improve our teams, jobs, communities, and families. However, asking a question and listening to an answer are different things. Therefore, if you are going to be a valuable resource for your teen change agent, you need to be prepared to ask the right questions and be ready to (really) listen to the answers that your teen gives!

It seems easy enough, but when did you last listen to learn? Practicing *informational listening* is crucial because it allows you to understand what your student is saying and feeling. Additionally, it creates a safe space for your teen to feel that their voice is being heard.

When tasked with providing for and protecting our kids every minute of every day of their childhood, it is tough to take a step back and relinquish some control of the conversation when they become teens. However, the only way to foster an environment where a socially conscious teen can thrive is to allow our young adults to control the discourse regarding their passion for social change.

Here are a few tips to help put you in a position to listen to your teen change agent:

Clear your calendar - Getting yourself physically ready to listen is essential. Ensuring you will not be distracted by other enticements or obligations is vital. So, before you start to chat with your teen about the issues they are passionate about, block off some time in your calendar. Put your phone away, close your laptop, turn off the television, and be physically and mentally present for a conversation that will benefit you and your teen.

Check your bias - You are a middle-aged adult. You've got baggage. There is no way around it. Your lifetime of experiences has shaped who you are. While everyone can stand to be a "better person," no one will ask you to abandon who you are and what you believe. However, I will ask you to acknowledge that your teen's experiences differ significantly from yours. Their perspective is shaped by an entirely different universe than the one you grew up in. Recognizing this fact is an integral part of the communication process.

Communication style matters - Do you ever feel like you and your high schooler speak different languages? You are not alone. There are a variety of communication styles, and most people have a hard enough time understanding their own communication preferences, let alone that of their still-developing teenage child. The good news is that you do not need to be a communication expert to be able to effectively talk with your teen change agent about the issues they care about. Still, you must acknowledge that your teen's communication style may differ, and it is your responsibility to accommodate your teen's needs.

If you can put aside the time, be willing to acknowledge your personal biases, and know that your teen may have a different communication style than you, then you are well on your way to being able to meet your teen where they are on their journey to becoming a teen change agent.

STEP

UNDERSTANDING DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES

They say it takes a village to raise a teen change agent. Luckily, there is a village of advocates, activists, and subject-matter experts at the Teen Think Tank Project that have helped me understand how to assist teens in becoming change agents. One of my favorites is Connie Whitman, MBA.

Connie is a communications expert, best-selling author, educator, and mentor to dozens of Teen Think Tank Project alums. Just as importantly, she is a mom, having raised two socially conscious young adults of her own. She knows better than anyone that communication is vital to any successful relationship, especially with your teen change agent.

In her book, *Communication Techniques: To Help You Present, Persuade & Win*, Connie and co-author Dr. Mary Ann H. Pellegrino help readers understand the basics of various communication styles and how we can improve our ability to convey information to one another. Most relevant to our discussion of raising a socially conscious teen is the idea that improved communication goes hand-in-hand with emotional intelligence, a key component of becoming a change agent.

Connie outlines different communication styles that affect how we process information, shape our beliefs, convey our thoughts, and drive our actions. For example, maybe your high schooler is an insightful and supportive *Heartfelt Advocate*. Or they may be a *Precise Assessor* who is a self-disciplined problem solver. Perhaps, they are a creative yet logical *Observing Designer*.

When communicating with your high school student the vital thing to remember is that your teen's communication preferences will cause them to process information differently than those around them, including you. So, when talking to your teen about social justice issues, be cognizant of their need to communicate in a style that is productive for them.



Regardless of their preferred style, the critical thing to remember is that your aspiring change agent may have a style that differs significantly from yours. Acknowledging that fact and making the proper accommodations during your conversations with them will help give your teen the opportunity and confidence to discuss their passion for social justice.

We recommend that you improve your communication style by reading Connie's book. However, even if you do not take a deep dive into developing more effective communication techniques, embracing the fact that you and your teen may have different communication styles is essential in their growth as a change agent.

STEP 4

FOSTERING FACT-BASED DIALOGUE IS ESSENTIAL

Great! You are ready to encourage your teen to talk about their passion for social justice in a meaningful way, but what will you talk about? That's the million-dollar question!

You are a parent. You've been there, done that. You can certainly offer much to a discussion on real-world issues, but remember that this is not about you. It's not about documenting your beliefs or cataloging your experience. Instead, it's about fostering an environment that elevates conversation beyond anecdotal accounts and opinion-based positions.

Don't get us wrong. Your experiences are valuable; however, they are most valuable to *you*. The process we are discussing today is helping your teen develop *their* passion, find *their* voice, and forge *their* path as a change agent. So, you can put yourself in the best position to help them succeed by remembering to allow discussions surrounding social justice issues to center on fact-based dialogue and research-backed information.

While this may seem easier said than done, you can become a purveyor of fact-based conversation by utilizing these three simple tricks:

Start conversations with “I read” instead of “I think.” When you do this, you signal to your teen that the discussion will be based on an objective analysis of facts instead of parental interpretation and interjection. (It’s probably not hard to guess which of these propositions is more appealing to your teenager.)

Be sure that your sources are reliable. Let’s face it, most popular media sources are biased. Checking the validity and efficacy of the information you use to communicate with your teen is step one in creating a productive dialogue about social justice issues. (Google's *Fact Check Explorer* is a tool you can rely on to accomplish this.) Additionally, referencing news sources that are inherently unbiased or apolitical facilitates the type of dialogue that your teen change agent is looking for. (Allsides.com is an excellent resource to identify which news sources provide the most balanced and unbiased information.)

Introduce research-backed information. If your high school student seeks opportunities to become a change agent, they will likely embrace the opportunity to dive into materials and resources outside popular media and mainstream consumption. Introducing them (and yourself) to Google Scholar is an easy way to access research-backed resources that will elevate the conversation that your teen is seeking.

You do not have to share your teen's passion for change to encourage their maturation; however, you must create a foundation for dialogue based on fact and devoid of overt commercialized bias if you want to empower them.

5 STEP

HELP YOUR TEEN DEVELOP A PROFESSIONAL NETWORK

“If you look around the room and find that you are the smartest person, it is time to find another room.”

We are particularly fond of this saying at the Teen Think Tank Project. It reminds me constantly to evaluate the company I keep. Am I spending time and energy with folks who will challenge, educate, and push me intellectually, personally, and emotionally?

Friend of TTTP and former NBA star, activist, and author Mahmoud Abdul Rauf imparted similar wisdom to the Teen Think Tank Project's first-ever research cohort.

“ If you want to be moral, hang around someone moral. If you want to be an activist, hang around with activists. Why? Because there is a lifestyle associated with that way of life. There is a language associated with that. So the more you hang around with those people, the more it rubs off”

-Mahmoud Abdul Rauf

“Great advice! But how do I help connect my teen with internationally known activists and best-selling authors?” - Every parent everywhere.

For those who do not have world-renowned thought leaders and advocates in their contact list, the easiest way to cultivate these relationships is to join the Teen Think Tank Project. Our program is built on the premise that the best way to solve the societal issues we face today is to empower the individuals who will inherit them tomorrow.

To do this, the Teen Think Tank Project introduces teen change agents to subject matter experts who are champions of social justice. Specifically, advocates for racial equity, climate justice, health equity, gender equity, financial security, voting rights, and mental health who share TTTP's vision have lent their time and talents to the cause and made themselves available to program participants to create an environment where change agents can thrive.

As much as we love the Teen Think Tank Project and all it offers, it is not the only way to help socially conscious teens develop a network that ensures they are not the “smartest person in the room.”

It is my experience that thought leaders and subject matter experts, especially those committed to issues that negatively affect society, are willing to create connections with high-potential teens who share a passion for the work they are doing on the academic level. Therefore, an enterprising young teen with a search engine, a penchant



for knowledge, and an email address is only a few clicks away from connecting with some of the leading change agents in the world.

Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg may not have the time or energy to respond to every email she receives from teen climate activists looking to connect with her; however, there were 8.65 million articles about climate justice on Google Scholar at the time this guide was published. So we'd say it is a safe bet that if you encouraged your teen to read a few of those articles and helped them craft professional emails reaching out to those authors (with a specific question or two about one of their published articles or studies), a few would respond. It's worked for us!

The critical thing to remember is that your teen needs a network of respected, inquisitive, like-minded, and socially conscious individuals to learn the skills required to become a change agent.

STEP

GET OFF THE SIDELINES

So, you have made yourself available to your teen change agent. You've heard them and helped them develop their passion. You assisted them in conducting research and building the networks, but is that enough?

To answer that question, we paraphrase renowned human rights activist and award-winning author and educator Dr. Richard Lapchick: *Not really.*

In 2021, the Teen Think Project's Co-Founder Kelly Nagle sat down with Dr. Lapchick as part of the *Here's the Problem* podcast series on racial equity. During that chat, he spoke about what called him to pursue a life dedicated to social change and his 45-year career fighting racism across the globe. The most compelling advice he offered young change agents looking to impact the world (whatever their passion) is that they must be willing to get involved and do the necessary work to affect society positively.

“ You don't need to be on the frontlines, but you need to get off of the sidelines. ”

-Dr. Richard Lapchick

The idea that you must do something rings loud and clear for us. Action precedes change. Nevertheless, you and your high-potential teen should be mindful of a definite hierarchy of action.

Volunteer - Encourage your teen to dedicate meaningful time and energy to a cause they care about. They can do this by volunteering with a chapter of a national nonprofit or local organization whose mission aligns with their passion. Groups working for social justice are often understaffed and require the generosity of those in the community to get the job done. Often the most valuable resource for these organizations is time and staffing. Websites like *Volunteer Match*, *Idealist*, and *Just Serve* are great resources for teens seeking to align themselves with a local organization that could benefit from their passion. (A bonus, these organizations are a great way to meet and connect with the advocates and thought leaders who can help your teen achieve the goals discussed in Step 5 above).

Donate - Help raise money for organizations doing the work your teen is passionate about. Nonprofit organizations rely on the generosity of donors to continue their missions. If you or your family have the means, donate to the local chapter of an established charity whose mission is to further a cause your teen believes in. If you cannot donate, encourage your teen to organize a fundraiser to bring awareness and money to a cause they care about. This is best done in conjunction with the volunteer efforts mentioned above; however, if, after careful consideration, it is determined that volunteering (in-person or virtually) is not possible for your teen, fundraising is a viable next-best solution.

Shop - Another way to help your teen participate in a social justice initiative is to purchase goods and services closely aligned with the cause they care most about. Consumers can significantly affect social change by only supporting socially-conscious companies. Find out which products and brands are doing their part to improve the world, and encourage your friends and family to support those businesses. Whether buying from Black & Brown-owned businesses, purchasing only sustainably-sourced goods, or patronizing companies that have committed to supporting social justice issues, your family can do your part to foster your teen's passion for good.

Care - No doubt taking notice and conducting oneself in a manner that signals that change is needed are essential steps in the maturation of a teen change agent. As a parent, you should do everything possible to encourage this metamorphosis. However, simply being aware of the need for change is the least effective option. To paraphrase our good friend Mahmoud Abdul Rauf (a devout follower and scholar of Islam), *those who see unjust action should change it with their hands; and if they are not able to do so, then they should change it with their words; and if that is not possible, then with their heart—but know that this is the weakest of faith.* Recognizing a need for change is a legitimate step in becoming an agent of change, but it is only the first step.

Get more information on the *hierarchy of becoming an agent of change* with this great resource.



STEP

ENCOURAGE A GROWTH MINDSET

If you have ever espoused the benefits of practice to your teen, then you are a purveyor of a growth mindset, which is an excellent start to raising a teen change agent.

As a parent of a college-bound teen, you are probably interested in learning that as colleges continue to abandon the requirement for standardized testing, they are looking for alternative evaluation criteria and placing a premium on *growth* and *potential* when admitting teens. In particular, Harvard University identifies individuals who will inspire those around them during their college years and beyond.

This concept is known as a *growth mindset* - the capacity of a student to believe that their abilities are not set in stone even if they struggle with specific skills. Individuals can learn and do better through hard work, dedication, and the acquisition of new skills.

One of the best indicators of the potential to achieve a *growth mindset* is the presence of *intellectual humility* - recognizing that there are gaps in one's knowledge and that one's current beliefs might be incorrect. In short, if your teen understands that their ability to acquire knowledge, information, and perspective is variable and not fixed, they will develop the capacity to improve not only their position & circumstance but inspire and elevate those around them.

No segment of society exemplifies *intellectual humility* better than a change agent. By nature, those interested in exploring social justice issues know that gaps in our community need redress. They are also committed to doing the work necessary to educate themselves and those around them on improving the circumstances of all.

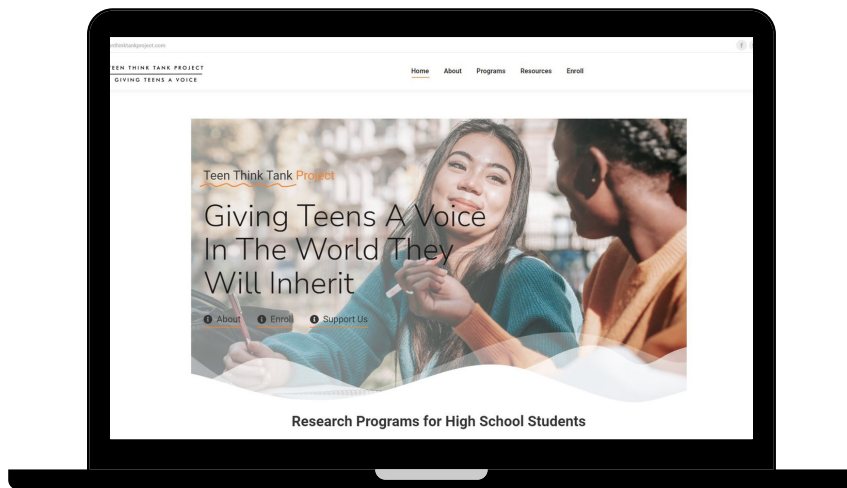
So, whether you are interested in helping facilitate an environment where social issues can be addressed, or you want to provide the best opportunities for your college-bound teen to exhibit the growth potential that college admission counselors will find desirable, then fostering your teen's desire to become a change agent will put them in a position to succeed.



BONUS

STEP

GET INVOLVED IN THE TEEN THINK TANK PROJECT



The Teen Think Tank Project creates opportunities for high-potential teens to develop intellectual humility and maximize their growth potential. Whether joining our *Change Agent Academy's* 12-week/60-hour research cohorts, participating in our *Social Entrepreneur Incubator*, or taking one of our leadership workshops, your teen can start to acquire the information, network, and mindset needed to become a teen change agent and achieve all the benefits that go along with that!

You can learn more about the Teen Think Tank Project and see how its programs can help your aspiring teen change agent *develop a voice in the world they will inherit.*





MATTHEW DESANTIS

CO-FOUNDER OF THE TEEN THINK TANK PROJECT

Matthew DeSantis is the Co-Founder of the Teen Think Tank Project, a student-run think tank that provides high-potential teens with the skills, resources, and professional connections needed to address the social justice issues they will inherit from previous generations. Matt blends his experiences as a facilitative mediator and educator to develop hands-on co-curricular programming that is conceptual *and* practical. His work with the Teen Think Tank Project allows him to partner with both exceptional teens looking to develop their voices and thought leaders who eagerly empower these teens on their journey to become agents of change. Matt is a proud alum of Syracuse University and a graduate of the Catholic University of America's Columbus School of Law. He resides in Asbury Park, NJ, with his partner Bernadette Sheehan. When he is not working with high school students, you can find Matt watching Orange basketball, running along the boardwalk, and catching a concert at the Stone Pony.