***How Do We Help Kids Make Better Choices? Let Them Practice***

In her Wall Street Journal editorial, What's Wrong With the Teenage Mind?, University of California at Berkeley psychology professor Alison Gopnik highlights two key areas of the brain that dictate adolescent and human development: (1) emotion and motivation and (2) control.

She cites Berkeley paediatrician and developmental psychologist Ronald Dahl who uses the perfect metaphor to describe adolescence: "Today's adolescents develop an accelerator a long time before they can steer and brake."

It's not unlike the concept of "failing forward" that Peter Sims describes in Little Bets: How Breakthrough Ideas Emerge from Small Discoveries. He writes: "The operating principle for seasoned entrepreneurs who push ideas into the market as quickly as possible [is] to learn from mistakes and failures that will point the way forward."

Teenagers, according to Gopnik, "overestimate rewards [...] and find rewards more rewarding than adults do." She continues: "What teenagers want most of all are social rewards, especially the respect of their peers."

How do we work with students to build in the "control system" that balances the "emotion" system?

According to Gopnik, we help to create and enable experiences. She writes: "You come to make better decisions by making not-so-good decisions and then correcting them. You get to be a good planner by making plans, implementing them and seeing the results again and again. Expertise comes with experience."

The short of it is that this journey of moving through experiences to gain expertise is slow, steady and filled with bumps in the road.

Trial and Error

Decision-making grows stronger each time a child has to figure out a tricky situation on his or her own -- making a poor decision, facing natural consequences for the poor decision, and then reliving a similar situation again, with a new set of choices gathered from the first unsuccessful experience. For some kids, it may take several of these unsuccessful experiences before they figure out the successful framework to make different and more positive choices to arrive at a more fulfilling conclusion that propels them in the right direction.

These situations crop up each and every day at school, at recess, at lunch, on the bus, in extracurricular activities, and in email and other forms of electronic media. There is no way for adults to be present in each and every one of these settings, and we should not be there for every interaction, because if we are, kids will never have the room to gain those experiences they need for their healthy development.

As author Michael Thompson notes, there is nothing that adults can do to make a child's undirected "play" better.

As parents and educators, we need to allow kids to "practice, practice, practice" in order to learn, and we need to avoid the temptation to come to their rescue each time kids make a misstep.

As Gopnik shares in her article, "The answer to the tourist's question 'How do you get to Carnegie Hall?' 'Practice, practice, practice.'"

We need to remind ourselves that, as parents and educators, we need the practice of letting go, stepping back, and being present when we need to be. Timing is perfect as we ready ourselves for the unstructured, serendipitous summer months.