

Reluctant moms and dads

by Rod Machado

Suppose I told you I could get your child to enthusiastically study geography, math, physics, chemistry and psychology. After you had my head examined, would you be interested? Oh, and as a bonus I can get him or her to hang out with highly motivated, well-educated older people who are good role models because they don't do drugs or spray graffiti, and they have a great work ethic.

You're still with me, aren't you? Then let's talk about the value of allowing a responsible teenager to take flying lessons.

Perhaps you're one of those parents (or perhaps you know one) who is reluctant to let your teenager take up flying for one or all of the usual reasons (generalized anxiety, cost, competition for the family airplane). Although you may have compelling reasons for feeling as you do, I'd like to offer a different perspective on why you should enthusiastically nurture and support your child's desire to fly. More specifically since you're probably a pilot already and likely open to the idea, I'd like to offer you some ammunition that might help you convince reluctant non-pilot parents that flight training for their child would be the best educational investment they could make.

Social science research now says that a teenager's peer group has as much (if not more) influence on the development of that individual's values as his or her parents. For this reason alone, it's reasonable to consider that flight training might confer a powerful developmental advantage on any young adult with an interest in airplanes. After all, the moment a person begins flight training, he or she immediately starts associating with an entirely new peer group that emphasizes the value of rules, rituals, and responsibilities.

Most of the individuals your child encounters during flight training are highly motivated, educated, and dedicated people, and most of them also will be older and more mature than your child. Think about it. Suddenly your teenager starts singing the praises of someone over age 30 who values education, self-discipline, self-study, and self-reliance. Even in your wildest dreams as a parent, could you imagine that your teenager might seek out and spend time with such people, especially since these folks aren't probation officers? Could you imagine having some influence over the new friends your offspring makes? Go ahead, pinch yourself so you'll know it's true.

There are few things as sad as young people without a sense of purpose or passion in their lives. Sure, they may be good kids, but they're also bored, and boredom provides absolutely no developmental advantage whatsoever.

Nature and teenagers abhor a vacuum (or a vacuum cleaner), so this void is going to be filled with something. This is the primary reason young people should be exposed to as many new and novel ideas as possible (specifically ideas that don't involve puncturing, piercing, or indelibly coloring parts of the body). You hope that such a worthwhile pursuit clicks and triggers a burning desire – the Holy Grail for most parents – deep in their child's psyche. If there's any chance that flight training will trigger a passion for learning in your child, then you owe it to him or her to explore the idea. It may just change the way they look at the world. It may also disabuse your child of the notion that being tossed into a mosh pit at a Radiators From Space punk rock concert and bodysurfing a wave of human hands is Nirvana itself.

Another reason to consider flight training for an interested teenager is that it's an honest way of developing self-respect. For the past quarter century the self-esteem movement in this country professed that simply making young people feel good about themselves was the key to generating productive and responsible behavior. We have seen this phenomenon in physical games where nobody loses because a score is seldom kept (thus, nobody has their feelings hurt) and everybody wins because you get a trophy for just showing up. Lack of self-esteem was even touted as the real reason behind the irresponsible and criminal behavior of young people. Social science, however, has shown this premise to be false. In fact, most of the really bad boys and girls in prison aren't short on self-esteem. Scientifically speaking, criminals score extremely high on self-esteem scales. It turns out that the value of self-esteem as it applies to improving someone's behavior is determined primarily by how it's earned, not whether it's conferred.

Telling young people to have pride and self-respect simply applies a veneer of feeling good but doesn't teach them behaviors that both generate and sustain self-respect. In the end, the common sense view prevailed: People appreciate more deeply what they legitimately earn, not what they're given (or told they should have). Learning to fly an airplane is a responsible, authentic means of generating pride and self-respect. Give an interested teenager flying lessons, and you'll teach him or her that study discipline, and practice are personal qualities to be admired and acquired.

If you're hesitant about allowing your child to take flying lessons (or are the doting aunt, uncle, grandfather, or grandmother), I hope you'll consider what I've said, and give the gift of flight. When you learn something new, you become something new. So give your child a chance to become something new by introducing him or her to aviation.