

YOUR Teen

for parents

Why a Gap Year May Be Perfect for Your Teenager



Article by Mimi Roberts with comments from Karin Peeters.

Question: Teenagers who say they need a break before going to college should:

- A. Go to college anyway.
- B. Consider a gap year.

The answer is B. But until recently, the gap year has not been particularly popular in the United States, though it's long been a rite of passage for international students.

A gap year is a structured period of time in which a student takes a time-out from standard academics. Typically, teenagers will work, volunteer, or participate in a formal gap-year program.

A recent survey of 280 students, by the authors of a book called *The Gap Year Advantage*, found that academic burnout and a desire “to find out more about themselves” were the top reasons for taking a gap year. Some just wanted to spend time exploring an interest.

Kari Semel knew she’d take a gap year well before her senior year. “I was a freshman when I decided I wanted to do it,” recalls the Cleveland-area resident. After high school graduation, she headed off to Ghana for three months, where she worked in an orphanage.

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Meanwhile, students like Semel aren’t the only ones in favour of the gap year. Increasingly, colleges are encouraging the experience, in part because of research that finds gap-year students are more successful when they get to campus. For example, an ongoing study at Middlebury College shows that students who take a gap year outperform their peers academically.

That’s no surprise to Marie Todd, an admissions counsellor with Accepted.com. “It’s an opportunity for teenagers to gain focus on their goals, enhance their sense of identity, and renew their energy,” she says. Often, that means students head into freshman year with more maturity, confidence, and even purpose than most teenagers just out of high school.

Angela Blunt hopes that will be the case for her son, who spent his gap year living at home and working part-time at the local library. He’ll start college this fall. “School was always a struggle for him, and he never felt successful,” she says. “Now, he’s so much more confident because he’s had such a positive experience. He’s also more responsible. He’s had another year to grow up.”

Still, for many parents, the idea of a gap year is nerve-wracking. First, there’s the worry that teenagers who take a break from school will be tempted not to return. But about 90 percent of students who take a year off after high school enroll in college the following fall, according to a study by the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. Indeed, most colleges allow students to apply and defer enrolment for one year in order to take a gap year.

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That’s the approach experts recommend—apply and defer. Otherwise, students who don’t apply in advance will have the challenge of staying on top of applications while immersed in their gap year.

So where to start? A gap year can mean traveling abroad, volunteering, taking an internship, or just getting a job at the mall. It can be expensive—some programs can run you up to \$40,000—or it can cost nothing at all. Pre-designed gap year programs tend to be highly structured and can run anywhere from a month to an entire year. These programs also come with the highest price tags (though many offer financial aid). Students can also elect to work full time for one semester to help pay for a semester-long program later in the year.

Some service organizations, like City Year, subsidize a gap year by providing room and board and even a small stipend.

Planning a gap year takes time, so experts recommend teenagers get going early, ideally junior year. Start your research online or look for a regional gap year fair. Your teenager's college counsellor should also be able to help.

“I started with Google,” says Semel. “I found out that the organization Camp Counsellors USA offered gap year programs, and I found the orphanage in Ghana through that website.” The cost to Semel: a flight to Africa and about \$200 a month. The orphanage provided room and board.

Like going to college, a gap year will present challenges. That's to be expected—and even desired, says Karin Peeters, a life coach / psychotherapist and a former gap year student herself. “There's the practical stuff like finding a place to live or a job, and there are emotional challenges like loneliness or feeling homesick,” she says. “But parents should trust in the resilience and resourcefulness of their child. By facing and overcoming these challenges, students develop a confidence they can fall back upon for the rest of their lives.”

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