

The Gap Year as a Growth Opportunity: Especially Worth Considering for Students with AD/HD

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Many students would benefit from taking a gap year between graduating from high school and starting a two- or four-year college program. In the past few years, gap year programs have gained popularity in the U.S. In addition, colleges and universities have come to see taking a gap year as a positive experience for incoming freshman. A gap year “is publicly promoted at some of the most well-known universities including Harvard, Princeton, Tufts and New York University.”¹ Many high school students who take a gap year still apply to college during their senior year; they then defer admission in order to participate in the program.

Oftentimes, parents wonder if taking a gap year will derail their teen and encourage the student to avoid college altogether. A survey of 280 students who took a gap year found that nine out of 10 of them returned to college within a year.²

What Are the Types of Gap Year Experiences Available?

Gap year programs offer a diverse and interesting set of options for students. A consortium of gap year programs called USA Gap Year Fairs lists nearly three dozen separate opportunities. These offerings run the gamut: City Year “is a non-profit organization that unites young people of all backgrounds for a year of full-time service...As tutors, mentors, and role models, these diverse young leaders make a difference in the lives of children and transform schools and neighborhoods.” while Dynamy is the “oldest residential internship program in the country...the Dynamy Internship Year integrates full-time monitored internships in over 240 organizations with urban and backcountry leadership experiences, personal and college career advising, city apartment living and optional college seminars.”

Other programs offer Spanish language study and travel within and around Barcelona, or small group learning adventures in Asia, Latin America, and Africa which emphasize authentic cultural immersion and rugged off-the-beaten path travel. One intriguing program in Australia “helps young people with a sense of adventure and working holiday visas to obtain employment on land or in rural Hospitality.”³

While many of the gap year programs in the consortium charge a student who enrolls, City Year provides a small stipend to their corps members, and the Australian program gives students the opportunity to earn a salary which can offset the program’s costs. In addition, students and their parents can plan an individual gap year without enrolling in a formal program. This gap year plan can be customized to that student’s interests, learning needs, and goals. Furthermore, if a student has a summer job and wants to keep working for an

¹ “Why Gap Year,” <http://www.usagapyearfairs.org/why-gap-year>. (Accessed 12/12/2012)

² “More US Students Taking ‘Gap Year’ Break,” http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40032510/ns/travel-travel_tips/t/more-us-students-taking-gap-year-break/#.UOsJNnfNuZE. Research by Karl Haigler and Rae Nelson, authors, “The Gap-Year Advantage.” (Accessed August 29, 2012)

³ Excerpted from a handout, “Gap Year Opportunities Fair,” Sunday, January 10, 2010.

extra school year, and is able to do so, this work experience itself can be considered a “gap year” activity.

Why Might a Gap Year Have Specific Benefits for an AD/HD Teen?

Often students with AD/HD are less mature than their same-age peers. Also, teens with AD/HD usually have Executive Function deficits that make it difficult for them “to resist temptations in favor of longer term goals, plan and organize activities, direct their attention and persist to complete a task.”⁴ An extra year in between high school and college, to mature and to be fully immersed in an exciting and structured program, could be just what an AD/HD teen needs.

Craig Brandon, a former college journalism instructor and author of “The Five-Year Party,” states “most American eighteen year olds are simply too immature to live by themselves.” He recommends a gap year as one good option for students who don’t really know what they want to study, have less than stellar study skills, and are currently demonstrating a lack of self-discipline or difficulty with self-control. “In my experience,” he says, “students who were only a year or two older than their peers in the traditional eighteen-to-twenty-one age group were much better students and stood head and shoulders above the crowd in terms of how much interest they showed in class.”

How Can Parents or Teens Learn More About Gap Year Opportunities?

In summary, taking a gap year might be a good option for your teen, particularly if he or she has AD/HD. Investigate gap year programs that suit your child’s interests, provide structure, and are well managed. The website for USA Gap Year Fairs, www.usagapyearfairs.com, is an excellent resource. It includes locations and dates of gap year fairs across the U.S., along with information about the gap year programs that participate in them.

⁴ Guare, Richard Ph.D., and Peg Dawson Ed.D. (2004) “Executive Skills in Children and Teens – Parents, Teachers and Clinicians Can Help.” *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter*. 20.8 (Aug 2004): 5-7.