

# Success is an Inside Job

## Why it is vital that teens set their own target grades



Charlotte Noon

info@charlottenooncoaching.co.uk  
www.charlottenooncoaching.co.uk

Watch  
Video



Education - Success Is an Inside Job  
by Charlotte Noon

**T**arget grades were not treated with the same level of reverence when I started my teaching career. Now, however, it is too often the case that in my first coaching session with a teen, they will introduce themselves as a number. "I am a 4 for English. I need to be a 6," they sigh.

Says who? Where do these arbitrary numbers come from? Their teachers? Somebody who knows them well? Sadly, this is often not the case. The truth is that many GCSE target grades come from tests taken all the way back in Year 6 at the tender age of 11. Yes, *really*. The child's Year 6 SATs results are chucked into one end of an algorithm, which churns out a list of predictions for their Year 11 GCSE results (to be sat when they are 16 years old). The success of the child (and, subsequently, their teachers) is assessed on whether they achieve or exceed those targets.

These target grades seem to be less than helpful, regardless of whether the teen is predicted a low grade or a high grade.

A low target grade creates a ceiling the student often feels they cannot move beyond. When I ask my students what grade they want, they are often embarrassed as they sheepishly admit to me that they would really like a 9, although they have only been predicted a 6, as though they somehow have ideas above their station. The first thing I do is help them to remove that ceiling.

Conscientious students who are predicted a high grade sometimes feel they are 'failing' if they are not consistently achieving this grade, often causing them to adopt an 'away from failure' meta program instead of a more useful 'towards success' program. In a desperate attempt to protect their 'working at' grades, they play it safe – and it narrows their learning. By creating a safe space in which they can stretch, experiment and learn what works and what doesn't, teens can learn that there is no such thing as failure, only feedback, and truly reach their full potential.

Looked at through the lens of the NLP communication model, it is easy to see why a teen could easily become demotivated by their target grade:

- Teen is given a target grade of a 4 (EVENT)
- Teen *unconsciously* looks at this through the lens of "I am not smart" (BELIEF)
- Teen feels dejected and demotivated (STATE)
- Teen makes less effort as a result (BEHAVIOUR)
- Teen feels unhappy and unfulfilled (OUTCOME)

Then comes the barrage of interventions to ensure the students achieve these all-important numbers – the before-school interventions, lunchtime interventions, holiday

**Teens are bombarded with information... But when do they get the opportunity to take control of their own learning?**





**The solution is simple: help our teens create well-formed outcomes that are owned by them, so they can feel energised, motivated and fulfilled.**

such as “I want to be a vet” or “I want to go to university”, instead of “I don’t want to fail.”

Sometimes their goal will be to pass GCSE English and Maths but once they have decided WHY they want to do this, how it fits with their future plans and values, motivation is often so much higher.

### **Question #2: How will you know when you have got there?**

What will it feel like when they have achieved it? What will they see, hear and smell?

Sometimes we write it as “A day in the life of future me.” Sometimes we create a vision board where they cut out

pictures and words from magazines that represent their vision – the bigger, brighter, more detailed and more colourful it is, the more powerful it will be in their unconscious mind. Many teens simply enjoy the opportunity to do a bit of primary school-style cutting and sticking (I know I do!).

### **Question #3: What is the first step towards achieving your goal?**

We expect a lot of our teens. Sometimes they quite simply don’t know how to break tasks down into smaller steps and they feel utterly overwhelmed by it all. Having somebody sit with them and help them to create a plan to reach their goal is a game-changer for most teens (again, this is part of my work that I love).

### **Question #4: Is this goal within your control?**

Teens have been taught to rely heavily on adults. They have been given lessons, given handouts, given workbooks, given homework and had the majority of their time directed by others. Many teens come to me in a panic because their teacher has left, their classmates are disruptive, their work isn’t being marked (delete as appropriate). The key is to show teens what they CAN influence and how, in an age where all the information is there at the click of a button, they can take control of their learning regardless of what is going on around them.

### **Question #5: Is this goal right for you in all areas of your life?**

This is a big one. We often assume that all students value getting high grades in exams, but some see the achievement of a target grade as being in conflict with their own chosen goals. If a teen has aspirations to become a footballer or a dancer or an artist, the time and effort required to gain their target grades in English and Maths may interfere with this. It’s okay to just want to pass. Hearing this validates their feelings.

Teens often get a bad press for being lazy and demotivated. I am yet to meet a teen who is not motivated by anything. If only we gave them the breathing space to set their own goals, we would be preparing them for a life of joy and fulfilment, rather than one where the goal is simply jumping through the next hoop and getting through the day. ■

interventions, after-school interventions. Teens are bombarded with information: PowerPoint presentations, knowledge organisers, past papers, acronyms. The teaching is well and truly taken care of. But when do the students get the opportunity to take control of their own learning and absorb the information at their own pace?

Teens are forced to jump through a set of hoops defined by a system. This is the very definition of extrinsic motivation: engaging in an activity to gain a reward or avoid punishment.

It’s no wonder then that many feel disassociated from their own lives. Sadly, many of the teens I coach have become focused on simply ‘getting through the day’. When I ask them what they want, they often tell me they “must” pass their exams “to get a good job” – most have not considered what having a good job might look like for them personally. They are simply repeating by rote what they have been told by the grown-ups in their lives.

It seems to me that the solution is simple: help our teens create well-formed outcomes that are owned by them, so they can feel motivated and fulfilled.

These days, this forms the biggest part of my coaching with teens – and I love it.

### **Question #1: What do you want?**

Sometimes it can take some of the teens I work with a few weeks to come up with an answer. They are so used to being told what they ‘should’ want that they have no idea what they actually want.

- We talk about what brings them joy.
- They take photos of things they like (anything – colours, landscapes, pictures, signs, social media posts, books, films) over a period of six weeks and we search for themes and patterns.
- We look at times when they were ecstatic and look at what was present in that moment that is absent in their day-to-day lives, and vice versa. (Prime Elicitation, Tad James).
- We use the Neurological Levels and The Hero’s Journey to discover their purpose (Robert Dilts).
- We create a list of their values in life and use this as a compass for what life might look like after exams.

The end result: they choose a goal that is owned by them (not their parents, teachers, siblings or friends) and positively stated,