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THE BLOG LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR HIGH SCHOOL

Investing in the Teen Futures Market

Students at Santa Monica High School play Dream Leader, a board game designed to challenge kids to think longer range than the next two minutes and have fun while doing it.

By Joe Robinson, Contributor

Stress management, productivity trainer, speaker, author, "Work to Live"

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It won't be a bulletin to any parent or teacher, but teens don't think the way you do. They lack a sense of a tense handy for risk management, the future, a realm as foreign to most high schoolers as a slide rule.

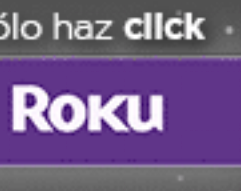
It appears it's not entirely their fault. Researchers have found that teen brains don't have a fully activated prefrontal region, the area that handles higher cognitive tasks, such as decision-making, goal direction, and the weighing of pros and cons. Instead, the emotional lower brain dominates, which can lead to impulsive behaviors we all know too well--speeding, dropping out of school, drugs, sexting. One in five teens have sent a nude photo or suggestive text or email, according to one survey. What were they thinking? They weren't. They were on impulse.


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We know that young people who feel they have a future will be less likely to engage in risky behavior, so why not train kids how to think about what they would like their futures to look like? That's the idea in a lively classroom at Santa Monica High School as I join the action in progress. Some 40 kids, sitting at desks in groups of four, are thinking very out loud about stuff that usually doesn't make it past the instant gratification of the emotional brain-- how do you find out what you like to do? How can you get a dream? How do you stick to a decision no matter what others say? It's all part of a learning experience called Dream Leader, a board game designed to challenge kids to think longer range than the next two minutes and have fun while doing it.

I don't see any of the sullen faces we're led to believe our classrooms are filled with. No coolness. I see engagement, as kids respond to real-life scenarios and questions that encourage initiative, goal-setting, and problem-solving. In one group a boy in a hoodie says he could get around tight money to pursue college by getting, "what you call that-- a scholarship." One girl offers her idea on how to get a dream: "See what you can do in the community. Start locally and get ideas." Other Dream Leader players weigh following your heart versus conforming to what others think. "You need to stick with your idea and not let anyone affect it," says a brown-haired girl. When the kids answer questions honestly, their peers respond with a shout of "success!" Anyone faking it or dissing themselves or anybody else gets a shout of "bash!"

Somewhere along the line we became a nation of spectators, under the spell of screens all day and night, bringing up legions of lookee-loo's who don't participate in their lives or develop the initiative required to innovate and grow economies. I spent the last couple years investigating this syndrome and how adults can escape it for a book, *Don't Miss Your Life*, out later this year. We can't start early enough to get future adults thinking, for them and for all of us, with strategies that can break through the receptacle model of learning to a more participant one.

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"You can zone out just watching all the time," says Teresa, "but this game shows that if you participate, you can get more out of your life." Miriam, clad in a maroon t-shirt, chimes in. "It makes me think more about how what I'm doing now can affect my future and that people can't hold your hand all the time."

At a post-game debriefing, Jill Esplin, who co-created Dream Leader with game designer Sue Baechler, opens the class up for discussion. "A lot of people don't want to think about the future," says Esplin, a motivational speaker who does workshops on youth motivation and leadership. "I hear 'one day, when I'm older,' 'when I get to college,' 'when I have money.'" She goes to the whiteboard and asks the class what it takes to put a dream into effect: "Action!" they holler, and she writes it down.

Esplin asks them what their dreams are. "I want a job that helps others," is the very unexpected first answer from a girl in a white top. "I want to do something I really like and don't care what people say," says another student. "I want to travel," says the next kid.


The dreams tumble out, one after another. The prefrontal lobes have been activated. So has a conversation that could make a big difference in how engaged kids are in school and disengaged from impulsive behaviors that can short-circuit lives before they begin. At a time of rising dropout rates--30% nationwide and more than 40% in some urban districts--and panic that we're not turning out enough grads trained to meet the demands of the 21st century, maybe it's time to help kids activate what researchers say is the best motivator of all--themselves, through internally generated goals and interests. More dream leaders beat dream watchers any day.

For more information: <http://www.dreamleadergame.com>; Jill@leadingforlife.com; www.HerffJones.com, distributor of Dream Leader

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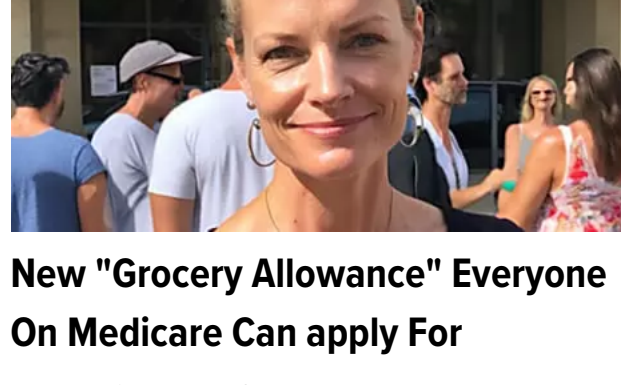


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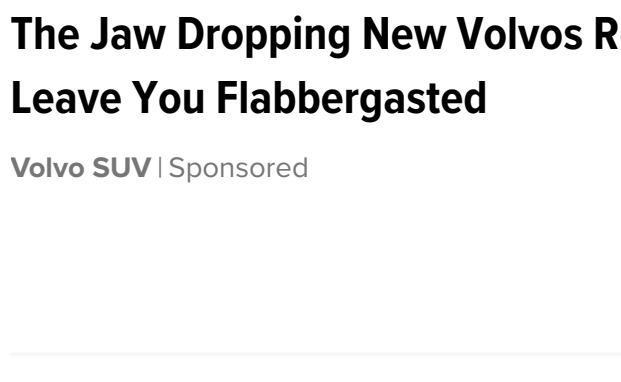
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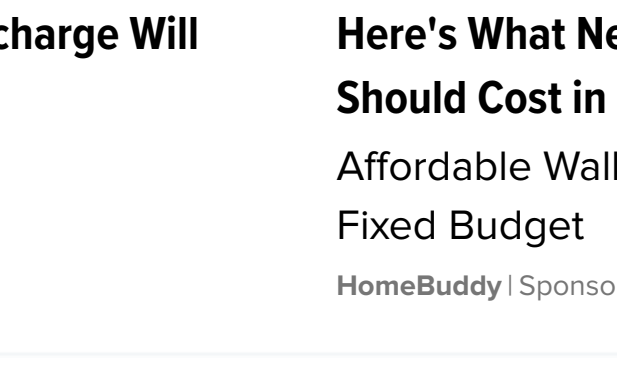
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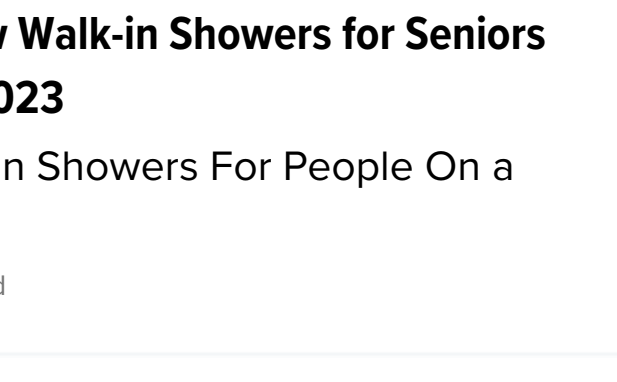
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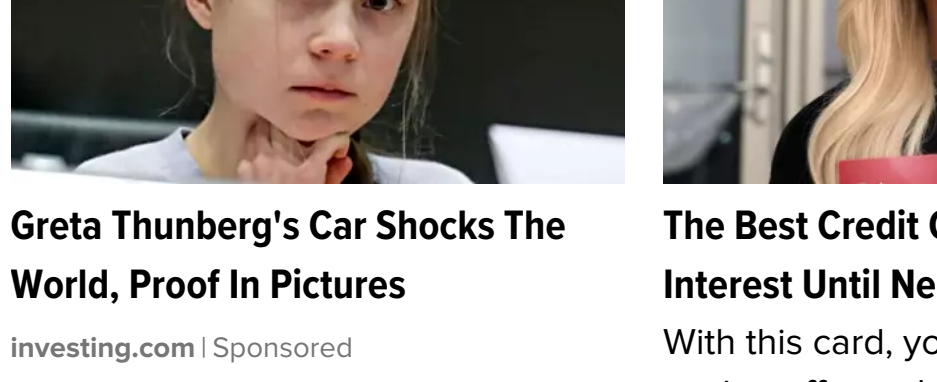
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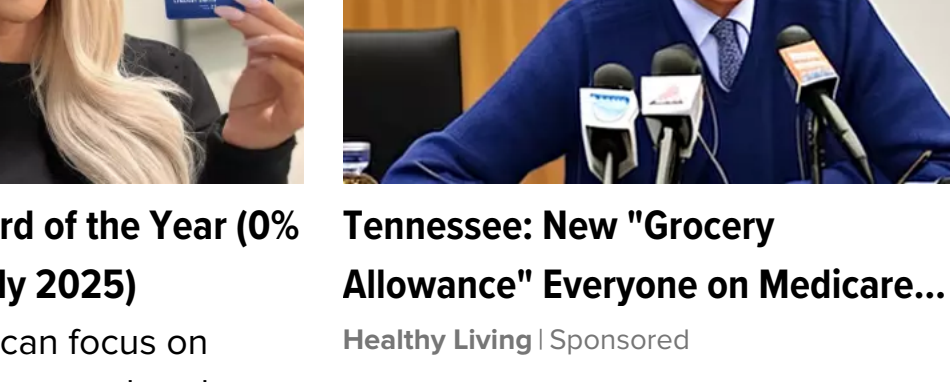
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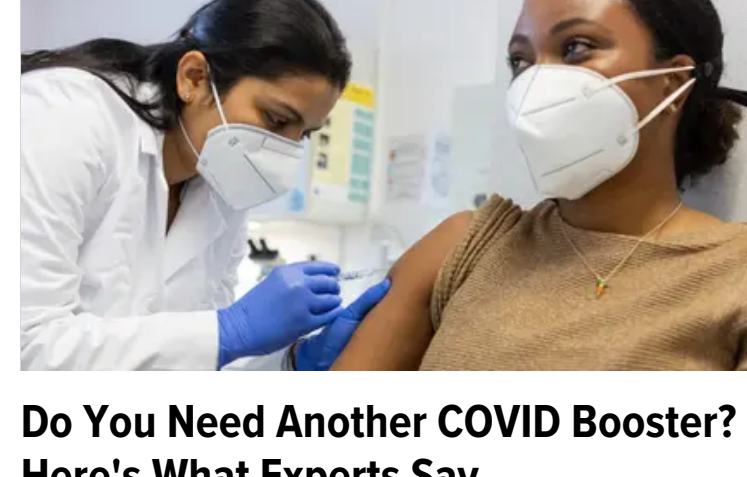


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