More and more teenagers hold jobs before and after school, on weekends and during school vacations. Having a job has been associated with both positive and negative consequences for teenagers. Working may increase responsibility, self-esteem and independence. Often though, the first jobs available to teens are routine, boring and lacking in positive interaction with adults.

The downside of teen work
Teens often work in the retail sector in businesses such as restaurants, fast food outlets and grocery stores. They frequently earn minimum wage and it is not uncommon for them to work long hours each week. When teens work long hours it can lead to poor school performance, increased drug use and problems with the law.

Studies have found that teenagers who work more than 20 hours a week are more likely to experience detrimental effects in their school, family and personal lives. Adolescents who work half-time or more report higher levels of emotional distress, substance use and earlier first sexual intercourse. Other adverse consequences of long work hours for teens include fatigue, sleep deprivation and less exercise. Teens who work long hours also spend less time with their families and on homework, resulting in poorer school performance.

Working long hours is not the only problem teens might experience as a result of holding a job. Teens tend to spend their earnings on trendy items that don’t contribute greatly to their health or well-being. In fact, job earnings are sometimes spent on alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. In many jobs, youth are exposed to older co-workers who may provide access to alcohol, tobacco or other drugs. And, time spent in a paying job means time not spent in other activities such as volunteering, homework or family events. Weigh these trade-offs carefully.

Benefits of work
This is not to say that all work is bad. Youth who work limited hours are more likely to be employed after high school. When they work limited amounts of time during the school year, teens also have a better chance of earning higher wages after they graduate from high school. They can learn valuable skills that relate to their future job aspirations. Teens may also establish contacts with adult employers who can give positive recommendations in the future.

Work can have positive effects on young people, from teaching punctuality and time management to working effectively with others. It can also provide money for future education. Yet when teenagers work more than 20 hours a week, these useful lessons may be overshadowed by negative effects.

State and federal laws
State and federal labor laws set minimum age limits for minors who work. The U.S. Department of Labor requires that in most cases youth must be at least 14 years old to work. Laws regulate the type of work a minor may perform to ensure minors don’t perform hazardous work. For example, youth are often required to be in their upper teens to be lifeguards or work in construction, but younger teens may be permitted to work as golf caddies or deliver newspapers. Often, teens under 18 are prohibited from holding certain jobs and from operating specific machinery because of safety risks.

State law often limits the number of hours per day and week as well as the times of day that minors may work. The number of hours minors are permitted to work on school days will likely be less than the number allowed on non-school days.
Parents make a difference!

Parents can play an important role in helping their teens select challenging and safe jobs and experience positive benefits from working.

✔ Talk with teens about why they want to get a job. Discuss issues such as how it will affect school performance, and time away from other valuable activities. Give it a trial period to see how the teen manages. Establish standards that your teen should meet in order to keep working. For example, one standard might be that school grades must not drop, if the teen is to continue working.

✔ Discuss job possibilities with your teen. Help think through such issues as opportunities for promotion, how to learn valuable skills that relate to their future goals and the safety of the working environment.

✔ Practice interviewing with your teen. Play the role of the employer and ask your teen questions about their career goals and strengths and weaknesses.

✔ Talk with your teen about job offers. Will this job be challenging or boring? Will the job bring your teen into contact with respected and skilled adults? Will the boss respect your need to limit work hours? What is the employer’s policy on breaks, overtime pay and time off?

✔ Work with your teen to set up a plan for the money earned. Invest a certain percentage for future educational pursuits, and decide what percent can go towards discretionary spending.

✔ Check into the working conditions of your teen’s workplace. Talk with the employer and ask about adherence to laws regarding work hours, safety precautions and so on.

✔ Get information from your state’s department of employment or workforce on rules regarding the type and hours of work youth are permitted. Inquire, too, about any special machinery youth are not permitted to operate. For example, Wisconsin law allows a maximum of 18 hours of work during the school week for 14-15 year olds.

✔ Ask your teen’s employer about the orientation your teen will receive and who will provide supervision and training. For example, if your teen will be working late at night, will he or she be alone or with another employee? Who will that other employee be?

✔ Monitor the number of hours your teen works. If their shift ends at 7 p.m., find out where they will be after 7 p.m., whom they will be with and what they will be doing.

✔ Track how your teen is doing in school. School performance is too important to be sacrificed for work. Although work can be important to development, it should not undermine a young person’s educational success.