

# Showing Up is Half the Battle



For the past several months, I've been sneaking away from work early every Thursday afternoon to coach my daughter's Science Olympiad team.

Those of you who read this column regularly know that I'm a supporter of STEM education programs, and I've encouraged you to participate in those programs wherever possible. You may also remember my daughter Renee, who has participated in a number of STEM-related events and activities over the past several years.

Science Olympiad is an academic competition with regional, state and national contests. Each school assembles a team of students who have to tackle a wide variety of science-related topics. Some of the events are strictly knowledge-based, while others are more engineering-oriented, project-building events.

Renee, an eighth grader, is on the team for her middle school, and I volunteered this year to help coach her and several other students for one of the events. In my case, that event was Anatomy & Physiology.

I know what you're thinking. He's not a doctor. He never went to medical school. What does he know about anatomy? I was thinking pretty much the same thing several months ago. It's what most parents would probably think. But it doesn't matter. I realized very quickly that my job wasn't to be a teacher. It was to be a guide.

When your kids are little, you can teach them about anything, because in the beginning, you know more than they do about every possible subject. But that changes as they get older and smarter. They learn about things you never knew, and they become interested in subjects you never even thought about. While it may seem scary when you realize they've become smarter than you, it's also a joy to see them grow.

I had no illusions about being an expert in this subject area. So mostly what I did was find resources for them to use and help them get organized. I narrowed things down and pointed them in the right direction. I compiled practice tests so they would have a better idea what they needed to know.

Sure, I wish I had more knowledge to share. And truth be told, I wish I could have done a lot more coaching. Now that we're on the eve of their regional competition, I feel like I didn't do enough to help prepare them.

But at least I showed up, and I'm pretty sure that's made a difference.

This morning, when I got in the car to drive Renee to school, I noticed that she had a stack of index cards among her school things. I figured they were for one of her classes, but when she had to run back in the house because she forgot something, I picked up the stack and flipped through them. It turned out that they were flashcards, and they were full of information about the nervous system, sensory organs and the endocrine system—Renee's Science Olympiad subjects. More importantly, I recognized most of the content on the flashcards as having come from the practice tests I had prepared.

Renee has always been academically self-motivated. She likes learning things. So I can't really claim any credit for her desire to be prepared. I never even suggested that she should study or make flashcards. She did that on her own. But I wonder how invested she would have been in the whole thing if I weren't involved, too. While I'm confident she would have done her best no matter what, I'm also confident that my participation hasn't hurt, either.

We hear all the time about how important STEM education is, especially in industries like ours. But hearing about it is one thing. Doing something is another. It doesn't take much. The hardest part is just showing up.

So once again I encourage you to do whatever you can to foster interest and enthusiasm for STEM subjects in whatever young people you encounter. Maybe you can even find a worthy excuse to leave work early.