

Kids start their own businesses

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NEW YORK — Ben Casnocha was 12 years old when he stumbled upon a business idea. After encountering filthy seats at a San Francisco 49ers game, he wanted to file a complaint with the city but found no way to do it. Frustrated by the lack of customer service available to the public, he decided to take matters into his own hands.

Casnocha went online and read about other entrepreneurs. Then he created Comcate Inc., a software company that helps city governments manage customer service complaints. Now, eight years later, Comcate serves more than 85 cities, counties and school districts in the United States and has more than 5,000 users.

Though his vision at the time might have seemed far beyond his 12 years, his actions are no longer uncommon.

"When you're old enough to turn on a computer, you're old enough to start doing something," Casnocha says.

Casnocha is part of a new generation of tweens and teens who are using their increasing access to information and resources on the Internet to become "kidpreneurs." Though some are still in braces, these young people are taking their futures into their own hands, and are not letting their age stand in the way. Nowadays they even have their own conferences, while a growing number of public schools around the country are adopting curricula designed to encourage them.

Just the beginning

We're "at the cusp of what I would consider an evolutionary tsunami of youth innovation and entrepreneurship," said Norm Goldstein, CEO of By Kids for Kids, an organization that turns kids' ideas into patented, marketable products.

He should know. At the age of 11, his daughter, Cassidy, invented "Crayon Holders," a patented drawing device that makes it easy to draw with broken crayons. Since the product began selling, it has made a profit well into the six figures (the company will not release actual numbers) and is now sold at Wal-Mart stores around the world, as well as in other retail outlets and online catalogs. Since founding By Kids for Kids in 2003, Goldstein has filed 42 patents on behalf of other child inventors.

"There are organizations that have started to embrace the notion that kids matter," says Goldstein, who believes this is all just starting.

More than a quarter of young people would like to or have already started their own businesses, according to a July 2007 survey conducted by Harris Interactive in which nearly 2,500 Americans ages 8-21 participated.

These young people are taking what they know -- computers and simple Google searches -- and teaching themselves how to create Web sites, market their products and manage finances.

"You don't have to be 45 to reach the heights in corporate America," Goldstein says. "You don't have to be in your 30s to be an entrepreneur."

When Najee McGreen was in 8th grade, he took his passion for computers and created Techmaster Computer Works, a computer repair business to serve people in his community of Brooklyn, N.Y. A year later, after noticing that a lot of his peers knew nothing about computers, he added a youth apprenticeship program to teach elementary-age kids about computers. Now six years later, McGreen's company has 13 employees who custom build, sell and repair computers for people throughout New York City.

At its peak, in 2004, before he left for Johns Hopkins University in Maryland, his company grossed approximately \$7,000. In the coming years, he hopes to expand it even more.

Many elementary-age children are learning about entrepreneurship at school. Putting business and entrepreneurship in terms that young children can understand allows them to see opportunities at a young age, said Catherine Hutton, CEO of The BizWorld Foundation, an organization that creates entrepreneurial curricula for students in all grades.

Working in groups, students learn how to start and run their own simulated businesses, incorporating concepts of design, marketing, manufacturing and selling. A separate investing curriculum teaches students how to set financial goals, create a diversified portfolio and track their investments. Starting in 2003 with just a handful of volunteers in Silicon Valley, the number of classrooms using the curriculum has grown to 1,300 nationwide, ranging from 3rd grade all the way through high school.

But mainly, kids are looking to their peers for inspiration. These days, kids are growing up in a culture dominated by YouTube, Google and Facebook, all of which were founded by people in their 20s.

Making their futures

"High schoolers are seeing kids just a few years older than them becoming billionaires," said Tom Phillips, public relations representative for the National Foundation for Teaching Entrepreneurship, an organization that helps young people from low-income communities build entrepreneurial skills.

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