
WITHIN REACH

Conversation Starters

The best way to begin career exploration may be by talking to your child about your own career. Just everyday conversation. Unless you have taken your children to work, they probably know little about your work history.

Talk about what you do at the job you have now, and how each job you've held prepared you for the next one. Discuss what you liked most and least about each job. Be sure to include the education and training that you needed. Describe how your job has changed over the years. Be honest about mistakes you've made and your hope that your children will benefit from your own experience.

When talking to your children about your experience, they may ask tough questions or even openly disagree. That's not necessarily bad! It may mean they are thinking about what they want for their own futures. Encourage that.

Overcoming Obstacles

Children often enjoy talking about possible jobs. The future seems wide open and full of adventure. But as they get older, they may become more excited about the present or immediate future (e.g. their classmate's party on Friday night) than the long term. This is normal. Teenagers can enjoy living "in the now" while still chasing their dreams.

A good rule of thumb: Rather than starting a whole new conversation 5 out of nowhere about their long-term future, when your children are talking to you, listen closely for opportunities to steer the conversation in that direction. Help them connect the dots between the homework they may not feel like doing tonight and living the life they want for the future.

Remember, you're not saying "no" to your children's dreams. You're encouraging them to pursue not just one dream, but many.

It's up to you to point out the value in all work, to show the grit behind the "glamour" of more "popular" occupations, to discuss the hard work and perseverance needed to be successful in seemingly "easy" occupations such as singing, dancing, athletics, medicine, architecture and so on.

It's challenging to deal with the teen culture but it is also necessary and fulfilling. You've got to be persistent and work in small doses at a time when helping your child explore education and career options. You also need to take time to teach your child how to make decisions thoughtfully.

How to Approach Career Exploration

We recognize and respect diversity. People come in all shapes and sizes with different interests and goals in life. When it comes to career planning, one size does not fit all. But it is also true that the market has greater need for some occupations than others, meaning that jobs may be easier to find in some fields than others. Success in today's economy involves matching individual interests with a career

choice that has high employer demand. Helping your children learn more about their own interests and the world of work can prepare them for their future choices.

Here are some opening suggestions to make the career exploration process fruitful for both you and your children:

- **See career exploration as a gift.** It's an opportunity to know your children better. Discussions of interests, dreams and goals are inherently intimate and may draw you closer.
- **Take advantage of "teachable moments."** You don't always have to set aside "career exploration time." Running errands, watching TV and talking about the day can lead to informal lessons about the work world.
- **Select an approach that will work best for your children, not for you.** Don't worry if your children's methods seem scattershot to your logical brain. The goal is to help them find their own way—not your way!
- **Encourage your children's curiosity.** When your teenagers' express interest in a profession you might find uninteresting or unsuitable, be careful about saying no. Shooting down ideas during the exploration process can limit your children's creativity and discourage them from honestly sharing with you. Encourage them to gather information and decide for themselves. The results may surprise you!
- **Prepare for resistance.** Just because you're fired up about career planning, doesn't mean your child is. Teenagers can be uncommunicative—especially when the stakes are as high as planning for the rest of their life (or at least a good chunk of it). Resistance doesn't mean they aren't listening or don't care. Just respond with patient persistence.
- **Stay positive.** The world of work today may seem more uncertain than in the past but there's no point in scaring your children more than they already are. Don't make the future sound horrible or the past sound perfect. Instead, focus on your children's opportunities and help them adopt a can-do attitude.
- **Pay attention.** Observe your children as a teacher or sociologist might. How do they play, work, interact with others? What do they enjoy or dislike? What you learn will aid your children's career search and help you start the conversation.

If you follow these suggestions, you'll be in the proper state of mind to help your children plan their future. This may seem like a challenge, but the rewards you reap will make it worth the effort.