
WITHIN REACH

Occupation Exploration

Career exploration begins with your children's awareness of different occupations and ends with selecting one or more occupations that your children will want to pursue after (and perhaps during) high school.

There are two ways to explore careers. One is to investigate and the other is to experience. Your children should do both.

If talking with your children about the future and dealing with all the previously discussed issues seems challenging, take it in small bits. You need not go through the whole career exploration process in one sit-down. You and your children may review and revise interests, work activities, career and education alternatives again and again until all the pieces fit in a way that makes sense to both of you.

It is important, however, not to let your children have only general career goals, once this process is complete. When they say, "I want to be a businessperson," ask for clarification. Do they want to be an entrepreneur or work for a corporation? If so, in what capacity? What does "business" mean? Your children should understand the significant differences in educational requirements and earnings among occupations within a given field. The goal is to identify specific occupations that are a good fit for your children and merit further exploration.

Keep It Light

Career development is a life-long process and few things are set in stone. As parents, we know that plans change—whether we want them to or not. Children don't always understand this.

Explain that your children's interests, likes and dislikes will expand and change as they read about occupations, take new classes in school and gain real-life experience through volunteer work, part-time jobs, extracurricular activities at school and so on.

Help your children incorporate those experiences and perceptions of career exploration. Share your own experiences of work interests, work values and your career path—both tips to follow and mistakes to avoid!

If necessary, remind yourself that change happens. If your child explores an occupation that you dislike or expresses interest in vastly different areas, let it go for now. Your child may want to be a heart surgeon and a Broadway star. But eventually this "plan" will change. Trust your child. You may remember having a similar experience yourself!

Career Investigation

Serious career investigation means learning as much as possible about a particular occupation—from duties and salary to working conditions and educational requirements.

You might start with a job that your children have talked about already. Ask questions such as:

- Do you know how much money people who work in this field make?
- Do you enjoy doing the specific tasks that occupation requires?
- Do you know the amount and type of training required for this job? Where would you get that training?

Your children's responses will tell you a lot. If they have no answers, don't worry. You're just starting at square one, and you can help your children find additional information over time.

Encourage your children to collect information, even if it is just browsing the Internet. The goal is to teach your children how to investigate careers and assess the results.

What to Learn about an Occupation

Plenty of resources are available for people who want to learn about specific occupations. Some of the best are *Next Steps Idaho's Career Search* (NextSteps.Idaho.gov/browse-careers), the *Occupational Outlook Handbook* (available at any library or online at bls.gov/ooh), the Kids Page at the Bureau of Labor Statistics website (bls.gov/k12) and real people in that profession.

So, what do you need to know? Here are the basics:

- duties (skills, knowledge and abilities required)
- salary (new, vs. experienced)
- working conditions (environment, hours)
- education, training and licensure required
- advancement opportunities
- projected openings (long-term)

You and/or your children can explore careers in various ways. Some examples include:

Interview someone who works in the field of interest. Ask about duties, pros and cons of the job, educational requirements, the "fun" parts, the tedious tasks and more. This is often referred to as "informational interviewing." The interview can offer great information and helps children develop a skill—interviewing—they may use often in the future.

Job shadow someone who works in a field of interest, which provides a taste of what a job actually entails. They spend several hours or a day following around someone in an occupation that interests them. If your child's school has no job shadowing program, set up some shadowing yourself.

Compare two or more occupations in the same field to identify the differences in responsibilities, education and income. Examples include a nursing assistant, licensed vocational nurse and registered nurse; a drafter and engineer; or a physician's assistant and a physician.

Attend the school's **Career Day** or **Career Fair** and summarize the pros and cons of three careers of interest.

Review the results with your children. Make sure they understand the difference between anecdotal information and market data. One person's experience with a job may not reflect the typical experience for most people.

Work Experience

One of the best ways to teach your children about the world of work and to help them explore careers is to put them to work. Your children will gain first-hand experience in the tasks and duties of an occupation. They will also appreciate the dignity in work.

Work experience can begin at an early age. And it doesn't have to be paid work. Here are some suggestions to get your children started:

- **Assign age-appropriate chores.** Make sure that the tasks are done to the best of your children's ability.
- **Encourage your children to volunteer** whenever possible.
- **Encourage your children to play sports or participate in the arts,** such as dancing or music. They will learn discipline, the rewards of effort, teamwork and perseverance—qualities that will help in the workplace.
- **Have your children take a part-time or summer job.** It's best if the work somehow relates to their field of interest. Any job, however, will help foster your children's work ethic. But remember, no job should take precedence over your children's academic performance.
- **Make sure your children know that entry-level positions can provide the crucial first step in their professional lives.** If they can demonstrate trustworthiness on the job with fewer responsibilities, they are more likely to be given additional ones. Plus, taking an entry-level job helps students develop good work habits and contacts that can pay dividends throughout a career. This, plus continuing education and training beyond high school, are fundamental building blocks for future success.

Combined with occupational investigation, work experience can ensure that your children understand the world of work and form some clear ideas of the work that might suit their tastes.

Once your children narrow their choice of careers down to just a few, it's time to start investigating the education and training needed to make those careers into reality.