

Helping Your Teen Decide What to Do After High School

Helping to prepare your teen for life after high school is one of the most important tasks you'll have as a parent. It can be hard to imagine your baby as an adult. But with the right approach, helping your teen move into adulthood can be rewarding.

Going to college, getting a job, or taking time off are common choices teens face. Here's how you can help your adult-to-be make the best decision.

College or Technical School

Although you may remember starting your own college search in the fall of your senior year, many teens these days need to get started earlier because of the extensive research involved and the deadlines for early admissions programs to competitive programs. In fact, many students begin as early as the fall of their junior year.

A good preparation for your teen is to sit down and start writing – this is great practice for the application process. Teens should list their goals as well as their accomplishments, even if they haven't yet decided on a field of study. Ask your teen to write down a list of:

- academic and personal strengths and weaknesses
- extracurricular activities
- awards
- grade point average (GPA)
- class rank
- SAT, ACT, or AP scores

Next, teens should think about and list the qualities they're looking for in a college: do they want to go away to school, stay close to home, or take online courses, for example?

Armed with this preliminary information, it's time to begin the research. Guidebooks, the Internet, and counselors at school are particularly helpful resources. As your teen chooses potential schools, start visiting campuses and talking with students who go there.

Experts suggest narrowing the choices to a diverse mix of about six to 10 schools where the odds range from low to high for gaining admission. Applications should be filled out completely and neatly, including the essay, which your teen should revise until confident that it's his or her best work. Many schools offer help in these areas.

And don't cross college off the list because you're afraid the tuition will be too steep. Many kids can receive financial help. For info about scholarships and other programs that may help, ask:

- the school counselor
- the colleges' financial aid offices
- your employer, who might offer scholarship programs

Federal aid programs are also available and can be researched online.

Job Options

If college isn't an option or your teen needs extra time to earn money for tuition, going directly into the work force offers many choices and benefits, such as health insurance and tuition reimbursement programs.

Entering the military can be an excellent choice for a teen who feels uncertain about the future. Discipline, earning money, saving for college, learning a trade – all of this is often possible in the armed forces. Veterans are also entitled to many benefits both while in the service and after.

However, your teen should carefully explore all the pros and cons of a military career. After all, if teens don't like the service or if the thought of going to war seems too scary, they can't easily drop out. If your teen wants specific training through the military, make sure the contract he or she signs includes that.

Getting a job immediately after high school remains a good choice. Teens who go this route need to learn how to search for employment, write a resume, and develop interviewing skills.

Many companies reimburse their employees for continuing education in areas related to their employment. Your teen should ask about this benefit through the human resources departments of potential employers.

Another option is an internship. Over the course of a year, your teen could potentially participate in two or three internships to explore career choices. But most internships are unpaid, so planning ahead is crucial if your teen needs to save money for living expenses.

Internships provide participants with the opportunity to learn about many facets of a particular career. They're also a great way to make contacts and develop mentoring relationships.

Taking Time Off

For some teens, taking a year off between high school and the "real world" can be beneficial. This can be a good time to travel, do community service, or even live in a foreign country before the responsibilities of life make it harder to do so.

Community service organizations offer a wide variety of choices that teens can match with their skills and interests. Americorps, for example, offers hundreds of programs across the United States with a small stipend, plus a chance to obtain money for college or vocational training. Many religious organizations provide community service programs as well.

However, teens should keep in mind that a brochure may look different from reality, such as with work and service camps in developing countries. They should expect difficulties but know that the rewards of community service often outweigh the hardships – and can actually change the direction of a person's life. Speaking with previous participants should give a more realistic view than promotional material.

And taking time off doesn't necessarily put a teen at a disadvantage for college admission. For many teens – especially those who choose an internship or international service – it can actually be an advantage.

While researching colleges, find out if they have delayed admissions programs. If not, ask the colleges what their position is on students who take time off and a teen's chances of getting in if he or she reapplies.

It's Your Teen's Life

When the subject concerns the future, some teens may try to shrug it off. Here's how to get the ball rolling and keep communication flowing:

- Really listen to your teen and resist the temptation to provide unsolicited advice. If your teen is struggling to make a decision, a story or two about a tough choice you had to make could be very reassuring.

- Provide respect and support while giving up some control. Trying to direct your teen's future probably won't be a benefit in the long run. This is the time for teens to develop decision-making and problem-solving skills.
- Prepare your teen to be self-sufficient away from home. This includes making major decisions regarding dating, drugs, alcohol, and sex, as well as mastering day-to-day living skills (cooking, cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, paying bills, and managing a budget).
- Don't be afraid to set limits on how much you can financially support a teen who decides to take time off. It's important for teens to learn independence.

Where to Get Help

The Internet is a good starting point for researching information on your teen's interests. Also enlist the help of school counselors, who can help steer kids in the right direction or refer them to other good sources of information.

And don't overlook your local library. In addition to books and magazine articles on subjects of interest, the librarian can be a wealth of information.

There are many associations, both local and national, for thousands of occupations. Find out where they're located and get information how to pursue particular career paths.

Your teen may also be able to attend meetings or arrange to interview people at their workplaces to find out more about what they do. Make use of friends, relatives, or others you know in different industries. After all, there's often nothing more flattering than having someone ask about what you do.

Finally, resist the temptation to lecture and try to remain supportive and enthusiastic, even if your teen keeps changing his or her mind. Your teen needs your positive influence during this transitional time.

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