

From the New York Times:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/25/jobs/25career.html?_r=1&sudsredirect=true

Career Couch

Helping Teenagers Find Their Dreams

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN

Published: October 24, 2009

Q. What, if anything, can parents of high-school-age children do to guide them toward their true professional calling?



A. Some parents are apt to put pressure on their children about choosing a first career, thinking that it will determine the course of their lives. Yet as adults, we often reinvent ourselves more than once, moving among professions. So whatever your children choose now won't necessarily define their future.

"I see many teens who jump on the first career track that someone recommends just to avoid being directionless, only to find themselves miserable a few years later," said Tamar E. Chansky, a child-and-adolescent psychologist in Plymouth Meeting, Pa., and author of "Freeing Your Child From Anxiety."

Ms. Chansky says it's best to have conversations with teenagers about their strengths and interests, rather than a specific career, and then to listen to what they have to say. "If the parent is putting out all the ideas, you wind up with the parent's dream, not the kid's," she said.

You may feel compelled to give career advice because you see particular talents in your child, but parents are more limited by their own experience than they think, said Steve Langerud, director of career services at DePauw University in Greencastle, Ind. As well-

meaning as the advice might be, it “doesn’t take into account what’s going to be available to your child in the future,” he said.

“The market is changing so fast there may be careers that exist when a student gets out of college that simply didn’t exist when they started,” he added.

It can be more effective to have children look at themselves functionally. Rather than asking, “What do you want to be?,” pose these questions: “What skills do you have? What kinds of people do you like to work with? In what kind of environment?” This is a way to think about a career without necessarily naming it, Mr. Langerud said. “You describe yourself in a functional way and then figure out what that’s called and if people get paid to do it,” he said.

Q. Discussing the future and potential careers can be overwhelming for a teenager. How do you break down the process so it’s less daunting?

A. Robert Hellmann, a career consultant in private practice in Manhattan who teaches career development courses at the School of Continuing and Professional Studies at [New York University](#), suggested an exercise called the Seven Stories. In it, young people offer 20 examples of times in their lives when they enjoyed doing something and felt they did it well.

“Pick the top seven stories, the ones most meaningful, and you both look for patterns across them,” Mr. Hellmann said. “As a parent, you can help by asking things like: ‘What is it that you enjoyed about this? What do you feel you did best? Why did you do it? What was your relationship in those activities with other people?’ Write down those answers. This gives your child an opportunity to discover for themselves what they are good at and what they want to do.”

Q. How do you steer your children toward meaningful work experiences, internships or mentors?

A. You can certainly help make connections and introduce them to those with advice and information, but your teenager needs to be the one who takes action, said Joan E. McLean, associate dean for academic advising at Ohio Wesleyan University in Delaware, Ohio.

“Part of guiding high school juniors and seniors toward their calling,” she said, “is allowing them to find that calling, to see what best suits their still-developing values and interests.”

If your child wants to be a professional singer, he or she might shadow a singer or a voice coach to see what that person’s life is like, read biographies of singers and talk to those in the profession about the needed education and what they did to build careers.

“That’s the research,” Ms. McLean said. “Then your child experiments, maybe joining a community singing group or participating in summer musical theater. At any step they can change direction. I think finding what you don’t want to do is as important as finding out what you do want to do.”

If you fear that your child is choosing a profession at which success seems highly unlikely — either because of a lack of talent or because it’s unrealistic — bite your tongue, Mr. Hellmann said. “Don’t say, ‘that will never happen’ because you really don’t know that,” he said. “Your child will discover soon enough if they aren’t cut out for what they are choosing.”

Q. What if your teenager has no idea what career to pursue and no desire to discuss it?

A. That’s the time to back off, Ms. McLean said, because some students just aren’t yet ready to explore questions about their future. “They will figure it out eventually, as long as you bring it up periodically and leave open the possibility of a dialogue,” she said.

Remember that it’s rare for 17-year-olds to know exactly what they want to do in life, Ms. Chansky said. “Help them identify the things they do know about their likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses,” she said. “This will show them they have some information, even if they don’t have it all,” and they can eventually translate that data into potential career pathways.

E-mail: ccouch@nytimes.com.

Correction: October 26, 2009

A previous version of this Q. and A. misstated the name of the School of Continuing and Professional Studies and misspelled, in one reference, the name of Robert Hellmann, a career consultant in private practice.