

Five things your high school student should know about careers

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Think high school is too early for your child to start thinking about a career? Not at all—in fact, the earlier the better.

In research conducted for my upcoming book, to help young adults discover their interests and strengths while designing a portfolio of experiential learning to make themselves more marketable to employers, I interviewed 100 Gen Y's about their school to career experiences and the lessons they learned in the process.

My key finding?

Those who began experimenting with their interests as early as high school—through internships, jobs and volunteer gigs—were on a successful career path by their late 20's. Those who didn't tended to struggle and feel unmoored for a longer period of time.

So what's the best way to get started?

Here are 5 things your child needs to know about careers as soon as possible:

1. Whatever you find interesting is a clue to your career path.

As a parent, you know how important it is to enjoy your work. And chances are your job, assuming you like it, includes focusing on things that interest you and that you find enjoyable. You can help your child think about the things he likes to do, and you can make it a project to Google interest areas with the term "career" after them. You'll be fascinated to see that there is a career associated with virtually any interest you and he can come up with.

2. Having a mentor is critical to career success, so find one as early as you can.

A mentor is an individual, usually older, always more experienced, who helps and guides another individual's development. This guidance is not done for personal gain, but typically because the mentor wants to encourage those interested in his profession, sees potential in a younger person, wants to leave a strong legacy, practice his management skills, or a combination of some or all of these things.

Mentoring is used in many settings. Although it is most common in business, it can be used in any career path. Having good mentors throughout one's career is a tremendous asset.

If you're assertive in helping your child find mentors beginning in high school, he will be ahead of the game. A mentor can come from virtually anywhere. Your child shouldn't overlook his teachers and advisers while he's in high school.

Interested teachers can do a lot more than simply support kids in the classroom. Mentors can be teachers, but they can also be guidance counselors, administrators or coaches.

Other mentors may be a relative or to be more specific, a clothing designer or writer your child admires. They might be a business owner, a doctor or a physical therapist.

In other words the sky's the limit, but the onus is on you and your child to figure out how to connect with the right people. Don't worry so much about age—it's more about the mentor's experience and approximation to your child's interest.

Your child should get in the habit of identifying mentors throughout her career. Among those I interviewed, mentors were critical in helping with internships, and internships frequently lead to full-time jobs after college.

3. Experimenting with internships is the best way to gain exposure to a possible career.

The only way to really find out if a career path is right for you is to try it out. It's easy to think you might want to hang your hat on a particular career path only to find yourself disillusioned by the reality of actually doing the job.

Whatever ideas your child has about a career, make sure she tries it out through internships—more than one, if possible. Between the school year and during the summer, there are numerous opportunities to try something out in multiple environments, making contacts all along the way.

While many internships are paid at the college level, it is more challenging, although not impossible, for high school students to find paid internships.

Your child may have to supplement an unpaid internship with a paying job at the same time. However, if her skills are more specialized she can get paid, particularly if she has served as an unpaid intern in a similar capacity in the past.

4. Networking is still the number one way people find careers and jobs.

At all stages of life, networking is the key to staying connected to where the jobs are.

First, here's hoping you're modeling good connecting skills for your child; encourage him to be in touch with interesting people both through social media and in person.

While it should be obvious to understand the importance of arriving on time for work and knowing how to make good conversation with adults, these are lifelong skills that needs to be fostered... right now!

Believe it or not, likeability is the number one reason why people get hired, so help your child understand how to project a friendly, helpful, positive persona. -- Knowing how to communicate easily and effectively will serve him well in whatever career he eventually winds up choosing.

5. Start your research early and make it a priority.

The job market continues to change at a rapid rate, and research skills are a hot commodity. Your child should know how to navigate the online world to gather the data and ideas he will need in any field.

Encourage him to spend time researching career paths and help him invigorate his research through one-on-one conversations with those in a field of interest. Conducting background research and generating ideas on how he can be helpful to organizations is an important skill he will use throughout his career.

Spending the time to conduct thorough background research will always keep him a step ahead of his peers, and now is the time to hone those skills.

With some help and encouragement from his parents, your child will develop the tools and skills that will serve him no matter what kinds of curve balls the economy throws in the future. And it's never too early to start.

Allison Cheston is a New York City-based career adviser who works with mid-career executives and young adults who are in high school, college or are recent graduates. She blogs on career issues for young adults at *In the Driver's Seat*, as well as at *Forbes.com*. And she blogs for mid-career professionals at *The Examiner*. A marketer and inveterate networker with a background in executive search, Cheston is the author of an upcoming book designed to help young adults from late high school through college

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