



Talking with Kids about College & Career Planning

An HRI eBook for Parents and Caregivers



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eBook Introduction

Although parenting often involves a lot of present-day stress and challenges (alongside happy moments, too!), it also lays the foundation for children's futures into young adulthood and beyond.

Parents and caregivers often feel uncertain about when and how to start talking with their children about their future goals, including college and/or career planning. They may wonder how to plant seeds to help their children start thinking about the future, while also avoiding adding too much pressure or stress.

This HRI eBook offers tips and resources on the topic of Talking with Kids about College and Career Planning. We'll look at some foundational tools that can be helpful at every age, along with some specific suggestions for conversations during the early childhood and elementary school years, middle school, and high school.

Please keep in mind that we use the phrase "college and career planning" as a shorthand for helping young people prepare for life after high school. We recognize that there are many meaningful educational and career pathways, and our goal is to help parents support children in discovering the path that is the best fit for their unique strengths, interests, values, and goals.

Healthy parenting relationships can provide a solid foundation to help prepare children and teenagers for their future “launching” into adulthood. For more general resources on parenting across different stages of life, visit the “How Can HRI Help You Today?” section of our website at <https://healthyrelationshipsinitiative.org/resources/>.

Tips for Talking with Kids About College & Career Planning at Any Age

In this section, we're sharing some foundational tips and tools that parents and caregivers can practice with children of any age as they help their children and teenagers start to think about and plan for their future.

Before sharing some tips, we do want to acknowledge that conversations about college and career planning can be tricky for many reasons, such as the following:

- Parents may not know when to bring these topics up, how to address them, or what specifically to say.
- Parents may feel like they don't understand the current landscape of college and career planning. This may be especially true if parents didn't attend college themselves, but things have changed a lot over time, so even those who attended college may feel confused and overwhelmed.
- There can be a fine line between motivating and inspiring kids versus adding pressure and stress. Depending on how these topics are addressed, they can feel like pressure and heavy expectations for children and teens.
- These topics can bring up differences between parents' and children's goals and values. For example, there may be different values around whether to attend college or go right into a career path, what type of college to attend, and what career path to pursue.

Keeping these potential complications in mind can help parents and caregivers know that they're not alone if conversations about college and career planning feel uncomfortable or daunting. The tips below won't guarantee that all conversations about these topics will go smoothly, but they can help to provide a helpful foundation for positive, supportive conversations across different stages of development.

1. Take time for self-reflection before starting conversations.

As we noted above, the topics of college and career planning can give rise to a lot of values and belief systems for both parents/caregivers and their children. Therefore, a helpful starting point is for adults to take time for self-reflection **before** diving deep into conversations about these topics with their children. This can help to identify biases, expectations, emotions, and questions that could arise during related conversations. Some questions that may be helpful to consider during this self-reflection include the following:

- What can I learn from my own experiences as a child and teenager about whether and how my parents and other adults in my life talked with me about planning for the future?
- What, if any, expectations do I hold about what my child's future will or "should" look like? How might these expectations influence our conversations about the topics of college and career planning? What, if anything, should I keep in mind about how these expectations have been shaped by my family and/or cultural background?
- How would I like to respond if my child expresses goals or plans for their future that are very different from what I hope for them?
- What, if any, "blind spots" do I have when it comes to my current knowledge about topics related to college and career planning? What steps could I take to learn more so I can be well-prepared for having these conversations with my child?

2. Commit to using positive communication skills.

Applying some basic positive communication skills can go a long way to setting the stage for more productive, supportive conversations about potentially sensitive topics like college and career planning. Even with young children and continuing into older ages and stages, adults can take the lead in implementing and modeling healthy communication skills when talking with their children. Here are a few communication skills that we think are especially helpful in these types of conversations:

- **Aim for understanding.** Make it your goal to try to understand one another's viewpoints and avoid jumping to conclusions about what the other person is saying.
- **Listen actively.** Active listening involves making an effort to listen to the other person, focusing on their message rather than planning what you will say next. Aim to listen with curiosity and wait patiently for the speaker to finish.
- **Avoid hurtful language.** Choose your words carefully to help ensure that you use language that doesn't carry any attacks on the person you're talking with.
- **Speak assertively with "I-Statements."** In using I-statements, we speak about our personal experiences, feelings, and responses. When communicating about your feelings and reactions, clearly describe your feelings and the behaviors that are associated with your response.
- **Notice nonverbal clues.** Pay attention to the messages the other person is sending to you via their nonverbal communication. This can unlock clues to their inner experiences and add to your understanding of each other.
- **Be proactive about navigating any conflicts that arise.** Conflicts are a natural part of close relationships, even healthy ones. What often sets healthy relationships apart from unhealthy ones is the intentional use of effective conflict management skills. Check out our HRI YouTube playlist with our video series, [Managing Conflict in Close Relationships](#), for an overview of strategies for navigating conflict in a healthy manner.

3. Remember that each child and teen is a unique individual.

Many parents and caregivers inadvertently make assumptions and hold expectations about their children's potential future college and career pathways. Often, these assumptions and expectations are deeply rooted in a number of overlapping contextual influences, such as adults' own personal experiences, family and cultural expectations, and broader societal trends. Here are just a few examples of what this might look like in different families, and we encourage you to use these examples as starting points for considering if you hold any relevant assumptions:

- *My child's personality is just like mine, so I'm sure they'll follow a similar career pathway.*
- *Not going to college made it more difficult for me to get certain jobs, so I want to make sure that my children all go to college so that they'll have an easier career path than I had.*
- *In our family, it's just expected that women stay home with the children, even if it means leaving behind their careers.*
- *Our cultural norms mean that it's very important to get as much education as possible and enter a field like medicine, law, or engineering.*

As the above examples illustrate, families (and broader communities) can often place spoken and unspoken assumptions on children and teenagers about what is expected for their future career and/or educational journeys. However, it's important to remember that each child and teen is a unique individual, and each one's hopes, dreams, and goals for their future are likely to be unique as well. This is true even for siblings within the

same family! As much as possible, try to support your child with figuring out their future pathway in a way that honors their unique skills, talents, aspirations, and vision for their future.

4. Find a positive balance between making the most of your present-day life, while also focusing on future planning and dreaming.

Parenting often involves walking a fine line between being attuned to what is happening today and also considering longer-term implications and plans for the future. We encourage you to think about this as a “both/and,” rather than an “either/or.” By this, we mean that considering both timeframes is important in the context of parenting. It’s important to be present and enjoy special moments today, while also keeping an eye toward supporting your child’s future growth and development.

In your parenting, remember that not every moment today needs to lead to a life lesson that will have implications for years to come. Stay present in everything from the small to significant moments of life as a parent, as these moments and experiences can go a long way toward nurturing a solid, supportive relationship. Sometimes, it truly is as simple as sharing a snack together or laughing together while watching a funny TV show or movie. As a parent who is starting to consider how to have conversations about college and career planning with your child, be intentional about also staying present and connected in the cares and activities of today.

At the same time, there certainly is value in keeping a longer-range vision in mind in the context of parenting. As we’ll discuss later in this eBook, parents and caregivers can help prepare their children for their futures in adulthood, even starting at the youngest ages. As children grow into teenagers and move closer to adulthood, these preparations often become even more important as “the future” closes in.

An over-focus on topics like college and career planning can start to feel like added pressure and stress for children and teens, and this is also something that can vary a lot from person to person. While some level of urgency can be a powerful motivator, a high level of stress and pressure can potentially backfire and lead to new challenges.

Aim to find a good, healthy balance between a present-day and future focus that feels right for you, your child, and your family, while also keeping in mind that this may need to shift or be recalibrated over time.

5. Connect with credible sources of support.

Families do not have to face the college and career planning process alone. There are a lot of helpful, credible sources of support available that adults and young people can leverage to help them make informed decisions.

We do want to highlight the word *credible* because, unfortunately, there are some bad actors in the college and career planning arena. A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this eBook, but we encourage you to read the [US Federal Trade Commission article on How to Avoid Scholarship and Financial Aid Scams linked here](#) to learn more. Use caution and be sure to check closely into any resources you’re considering to ensure that they are credible, legitimate, and have your and your family’s best interests in mind.

A helpful starting point for connecting with credible support around college and career planning can often be found with your child’s school counselor. Typically, school counselors will have received extensive training in career counseling, and providing resources related to college and career planning is often a part of their job. To learn more, consider reading [The School Counselor and Career Development Position Statement from the American School Counselor Association](#) (ASCA). ASCA also offers a list of Career Development Resources on their website: <https://www.schoolcounselor.org/Publications-Research/Publications/ASCA-Resources/Career-Conversation-Starters>.

Another way to access college and career planning resources is to seek out credible online resources. As a starting point, we suggest checking out the directories hosted by the following organizations:

- The National Career Development Association: <https://ncda.org/aws/NCDA/pt/sp/resources>
- The National College Attainment Network: <https://www.ncan.org/Web/Web/Resource-Library/Essential-Web-Sites.aspx>
- National PTA: <https://www.pta.org/home/family-resources/college-and-career-readiness/college-resources>

Take your time as you evaluate the relevance and appropriateness of any college or career planning resources as you consider whether they're a fit for you, your child, and your family. And, keep in mind that plugging into these resources can be extremely helpful so that you can feel less alone and more empowered and knowledgeable as you navigate these conversations with your child.

6. Be realistic and open about potential limitations.

Each family's circumstances are unique, and the reality is that some families may experience realistic limitations that could impact their ability to navigate certain aspects of the college and career planning process. As just one example, a parent or caregiver who didn't attend college may not feel that they have enough personal experience to help their child navigate college application processes. As another example, adults who only knew about college as an option after high school may not fully understand the extensive opportunities available through other pathways, such as trade school or military service.

Remember that it's okay to share the limitations of your knowledge and experiences with your child. In fact, doing so can be a powerful opportunity for connection, and adults can be a model of a growth mindset as they seek out information to fill in the gaps in their learning.

Another area in which practical limitations may exist relates to financial issues, especially when it comes to paying for college. As much as possible, try to be open about your opportunities and limitations regarding college, aiming to provide information early enough that it leaves time for a young person to factor any potential financial limitations into their planning processes.

If you are saving for college now, talk about how much and what this means for how much you'll likely have by the time they start college. If you can't save now, be open about this. Talk about whether and how much you think they'll need to look at scholarships and other forms of financial aid. If this is a topic of concern for you, seek out more information from credible sources of information online and seek guidance from a financial adviser. Try not to let there be financial surprises; as much as you can, plan now and talk about what may lie ahead, do so.

Keep in mind, however, that there are resources available in many local communities to support youth with financial limitations to explore and pursue college and career opportunities, such as nonprofit organizations that offer mentors, college tours, and other programming for local youth. Again, your local school counselor can be a helpful starting point for identifying and plugging into these kinds of supportive resources.

Overall, an awareness of initial limitations can lead to opportunities for seeking out resources and supports to help overcome them and increase students' access to a broader range of college and career opportunities.

7. Keep the door open for future conversations.

Rather than considering the topic of college and career planning to be a one-time conversation, it can be helpful to view it through a lens of ongoing conversations that will change and evolve over time. Consider ways that you can directly and indirectly communicate to your child that you welcome these conversations. For example, you might tell them, "I look forward to talking more about these topics with you in the future!" Or, you

might share some personal stories of your own experiences with college and/or your career as a way to keep the conversations going.

Remember that conversations about college and career planning will change and evolve as your child reaches new stages of development. Factor their developmental stage and interests into your conversations. Reassure them that it's natural for their interests to change, and it's okay if they don't have everything figured out right now. This is true even as they reach the age of adulthood - It's likely their interests and goals will continue to evolve and change well into the future.

In fact, it is helpful to think about learning and career development as lifelong processes. As much as possible, try to convey to your child or teenager that you are there for them and hope to be a helpful resource for them as they launch into adulthood. Knowing that you are in their corner is likely to provide a sense of confidence and a foundation of support when they are making decisions, pursuing new opportunities, and learning and growing.

Conclusion

Parenting conversations related to college and career planning can look quite different at different stages of child and adolescent development, as we'll be exploring further in the later sections of this eBook. However, the general tips we've covered above can provide a solid foundation for these conversations across the different seasons of parenting.

Although applying these tips won't guarantee that every single conversation will be smooth-sailing and conflict-free, we hope they will help parents and caregivers feel better equipped and more confident as they navigate this often-sensitive topic that also can offer unique opportunities for support, encouragement, and connection.

Talking about College & Career Planning with Kids: Tips for Early Childhood and the Elementary School Years

It may come as a surprise that college and career planning conversations can start so early! Of course, these conversations likely look very different in the earlier years as compared to conversations with older children and teens. It's important to factor in children's age and developmental stage as a backdrop for these conversations, especially in the early years. As just one example, we do not recommend SAT/ACT studying for young children!

When children are young, it can be helpful to think about college and career planning at a more conceptual level. Often, this might look like simply helping them to understand what a career or job is, what college is, etc. Ideally, conversations at these stages are more like "planting seeds" than they are fully formulated plans and goals. And, it is helpful to focus on supporting a child in exploring and developing interests that nurture their curiosity and excitement about the future.

A few key messages that can be helpful to focus on conveying to young children include the following:

- People go to work for a lot of reasons, including to provide financially for their families, to make a difference in their communities, and to help solve problems that exist in the world.
- There are many different kinds of jobs and careers. Different types of jobs and careers typically involve different types of training and education. Some jobs have specific educational requirements, such as going to college, graduate school, or a trade school.
- Learning is something that people can do throughout their entire lives. The type of school they may be attending now (e.g., preschool, elementary school) is one form of learning, and education and learning can look different at different ages and in different settings.

These messages can be shared both directly and indirectly. As just one example, parents might consider simply pointing out different types of workers in various settings where children already go when they are out and about (e.g., in a dentist's office, there are dentists, hygienists, people who help with billing, and people who schedule appointments and greet patients as they are entering the practice). As another example, parents could model lifelong learning by reading books, taking classes, and sharing new things they learn with their children.

Below, we'll share four practical tips for talking about college and career planning with younger children during early childhood and the elementary school years:

1. Let children's interests guide the way.

Young children often develop strong interests in topics that excite and engage them. These interests could relate to activities they're involved in (e.g., a sport or hobby), but they could also grow out of things they see in the everyday world around them, such as a child who gets really excited about insects or animals. Some of these interests will likely be a passing phase, but others might turn into long-term passions that may or may not connect to their future career pathways.

When preschool and elementary school children develop these interests, parents and caregivers can lean into them and find ways to connect them with conversations about college and career planning, although at an appropriate developmental level. At this stage, it's important not to get overly technical about details that might be intimidating to young children, but rather to help nurture curiosity and opportunities to understand the

concepts that (a) interests can be grown into careers and (b) different jobs typically have different training and educational requirements.

As an example, let's consider a young child who becomes very interested in animals. There are many ways that the adults in this child's life can nurture this interest, such as by reading books about animals, watching movies together about animals, or visiting places in their local community where they can observe different jobs and careers related to animals, such as a zoo, science museum, pet store, farm, or veterinary office. In these settings, parents and caregivers can find opportunities to mention different types of educational and career opportunities related to the various jobs that exist in each setting. For example, they may talk about how a pet store owner likely has had to learn how to run a business, whereas a veterinarian has attended veterinary school after completing college.

Again, it's important to find the right balance between enjoying the present moment and talking and thinking about the future. It's wise to keep these conversations upbeat and subtle with younger children and avoid communicating a sense of pressure for the child to pursue a specific career or educational pathway. Instead, even brief mentions of these topics that align with children's interests can help to nurture their sense of curiosity, while also laying a foundation for more detailed conversations on college and career planning-related topics as children grow older.

2. Seek opportunities to visit college campuses and work settings.

There are lots of reasons why many schools offer students field trips as part of their learning experiences. This includes the power of learning by seeing and experiencing things directly, rather than simply reading about them in a book or watching educational videos. Parents and caregivers, too, can build on this idea of "field trips" and connect it to early career and educational exploration with younger children.

Consider seeking out opportunities to visit college campuses and work settings, as well as engaging young children in conversations before, during, and after those visits. Think creatively, especially about planning visits that are likely to be fun and engaging for younger children. Examples might include attending a sporting event or arts-based program at a nearby college campus or taking a behind-the-scenes tour of a local factory that offers them. It could even be as simple as walking or driving by a home or business where construction is happening and pointing out the different types of workers and what they are doing.

Although it's possible to spend more money on different types of programs where young children can visit colleges and work settings (e.g., summer camps), keep in mind that many of these opportunities are available for free or at a low cost. Sometimes, even events that involve costs (e.g., visiting a museum) have opportunities for discounted or free admission (e.g., community days where admission fees are waived). Consider connecting with local parenting groups and publications to seek out activities and events in your area.

Visits like these can be valuable opportunities for young children to learn about possible educational and career pathways, and they are also valuable conversation starters between parents/caregivers and children. It's often helpful at this age to keep these conversations fun, enjoyable, and curiosity-focused. For example, consider talking about what was different and similar between two different colleges (e.g., a large public university and a smaller private college) or two different work settings (e.g., a doctor's office and a construction site) you've visited. Remember that children might be most (and least) impressed by details that seem small or silly to adults, such as the uniform a worker is wearing or the food they ate while attending an event at a local college. Talking about these impressions can be a fun way to make these visits more memorable.

3. Talk about your own experiences and values related to learning and work.

Both during everyday moments and on special occasions like the "field trips" discussed above, look for opportunities to talk with your child about your own experiences and values related to learning, education, and

work. Younger children especially may be very interested in hearing stories from your younger days, and showing them pictures from around those times can be a good way to bring these stories to life.

You might consider sharing stories about whether you and other family members attended college and how decisions were made about this, as well as about what it's been like to have different types of jobs from your first job until today. Try to focus on stories that will entertain or spark curiosity in your child, such as by telling them about unexpected things you once did in an early job or about a professor or boss who had a big impact on you.

In addition to sharing stories from the past with your child, you can also share with them about your present-day experiences and goals. For example, you might share a funny story over dinner about something that happened at work that day, or perhaps you can let your child in on a big work- or school-related goal you're working toward, such as finishing a degree or seeking a promotion at work. Be mindful of the direct and indirect messages you're sharing with your child as you talk with them and in front of them about work and school. For example, if you only talk about negative work-related experiences in front of them, you might convey that working is an unhappy part of life. While honesty is an important quality that parents and caregivers often want to instill in their children, an overly negative focus on work might inadvertently demotivate a child when they think about their own future work life.

Finally, when possible, take advantage of opportunities like Take Your Child to Work Day or other ways that your child might see you in action as you work and learn. These kinds of conversations and experiences can lead to interesting, impactful conversations that often spark curiosity and excitement for young children.

4. Consider opportunities to make connections between work and rewards.

In addition to helping young children have opportunities to learn about different educational and career pathways, the preschool and elementary years can be a time when young children can begin to make connections between working and rewards. Of course, young children might benefit from opportunities to experience work leading to more external rewards, such as receiving money after completing tasks around the house or working hard on a school project and earning a good grade on it.

Parents and caregivers also can help instill appreciation for more internal or intrinsic rewards from working hard, such as the good feelings we can have after working hard to complete a difficult task or by doing work that directly helps another person (e.g., shoveling the driveway of an elderly neighbor after a snowstorm). Adults can reinforce this message by modeling their own sense of satisfaction after completing a difficult task, such as by saying, "I feel proud of myself that I didn't give up, even when I felt confused and frustrated while assembling that piece of furniture." They can also convey this message by praising a child for their hard work on a chore or school assignment.

It's natural for different families to hold different values around the connections between working and rewards, so take time to consider the values that you hope to instill in your child, and then seek out opportunities to do so through modeling, conversations, and storytelling.

Summary

Talking with younger children about college and career planning can feel a bit daunting, but these conversations can help to keep a focus on the more fun, interesting aspects of learning and work during these early stages of children's development. Aim to help nurture a sense of curiosity in your children, while also helping them to make connections between their interests and questions today and possible future educational and career pathways that they may one day be interested in pursuing.

Talking about College & Career Planning with Kids: Tips for the Middle School Years

Middle school is an exciting stage of development. As children move toward adolescence, they often begin developing a stronger sense of who they are, what they enjoy, and what they hope their future might look like. Although many young adolescents will change their minds about future educational and career goals many times over the coming years, middle school is an excellent time to help them begin exploring possibilities in a thoughtful, encouraging way.

Rather than expecting middle school students to make firm decisions about their futures, consider this stage an opportunity to expand the conversations you began during the earlier years. Aim to nurture their curiosity while also helping your child make stronger connections between their interests today and the educational and career opportunities that may one day be available to them.

Below are six practical tips for talking with middle school students about college and career planning.

1. Increase the dialogue about the future.

As children enter middle school, they are often ready for deeper conversations than they were ready for during the preschool and elementary years. Continue looking for natural opportunities to talk about learning, work, and future goals during everyday life.

Ask open-ended questions such as:

- "What kinds of activities have you enjoyed most lately?"
- "Have you learned about any careers that sound interesting to you?"
- "What do you think you might enjoy doing one day?"

Keep in mind that these conversations are meant to explore possibilities, not pressure your child to make decisions. As their interests grow and change, allow the conversations to grow and change as well.

2. Help your child discover their strengths and interests.

Middle school is an important time for young people to begin learning more about themselves. Encourage your child to notice which classes, hobbies, extracurricular activities, and volunteer experiences they enjoy most. Rather than focusing only on what they are "good at," help them think about *why* certain activities are especially meaningful or enjoyable.

Consider how each child's unique qualities may actually point toward future strengths and opportunities. For example, a child who is especially sensitive may grow into someone with exceptional empathy and helping skills. A young person who enjoys organizing projects may discover strengths in leadership or management. Helping children recognize and appreciate their unique strengths can increase their confidence while also expanding their vision for possible future careers.

Likewise, if your child has shown a long-standing interest in a hobby or activity, use that interest as an opportunity to explore related careers. A love of music, animals, technology, sports, art, or helping others can all become starting points for conversations about the many different educational and career pathways connected to those interests.

3. Begin connecting today's choices with tomorrow's opportunities.

Middle school is often when students begin making academic and extracurricular choices that can influence opportunities later in high school and beyond. Although these choices certainly do not determine everything about a child's future, they can help open doors to new experiences and interests.

Talk with your child about how selecting certain classes, participating in extracurricular activities, and developing positive study habits may lead to additional opportunities later on. If they express interest in a particular career field, consider exploring together whether there are middle school or future high school courses that would help them continue developing those interests.

The goal is not to create pressure or communicate that every decision is permanent. Instead, help your child understand that thoughtful choices today can create additional possibilities for tomorrow.

4. Introduce different educational pathways and talk openly about finances.

As children grow older, they are often ready to begin learning more about the many different pathways available after high school. Continue reinforcing that there is no single "right" path for every student. Depending on their interests and goals, future options might include college, community college, trade or technical schools, military service, apprenticeships, or entering the workforce while continuing education in other ways.

The middle school years also can become a good time to begin simple, age-appropriate conversations about the financial aspects of education. Children often hear that college is expensive, but they may not understand that scholarships, grants, work-study opportunities, savings plans, and financial aid can help make education more affordable.

These conversations can help children develop hope while also encouraging realistic planning for the future.

5. Explore different college environments without focusing on finding the "perfect" college.

Middle school students often enjoy imagining what life might be like after high school. Rather than asking, "What is the best college?" consider asking questions that help your child think about what kind of learning environment might fit them best.

For example, would they enjoy a large university or a smaller college? Would they like to stay close to home or experience living farther away? What kinds of clubs, activities, or programs sound interesting to them? You might also introduce them to the wide variety of educational institutions that exist, including community colleges, faith-based institutions, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), technical schools, and public and private colleges.

These conversations can help broaden children's understanding of the many opportunities available while reinforcing that different students thrive in different environments.

6. Help your child develop hope, resilience, and strong relationships.

As children move through middle school, they may begin comparing themselves to peers or worrying about whether they will be successful in the future. Parents and caregivers can play an important role in helping them maintain hope and perspective.

Remind your child that obstacles and disappointments are a normal part of learning and growing. A difficult class, a disappointing grade, or not making a team does not define their future. Instead, these experiences often provide opportunities to develop perseverance, problem-solving skills, and resilience.

At the same time, continue building a happy, healthy, safe relationship with your child. College and career conversations are not just about preparing for the future; they are also opportunities to learn more about one

another. As you discover more about your child's interests, strengths, questions, and dreams, your child is also learning that they have a trusted adult who is interested in supporting them along the way.

Summary

The middle school years provide an important bridge between childhood and adolescence. During this stage, parents and caregivers can help children move from simply imagining the future toward actively exploring the many possibilities available to them. Continue encouraging curiosity, asking thoughtful questions, celebrating your child's unique strengths, and reminding them that they do not need to have everything figured out right now.

As we'll discuss in the next section, conversations during the high school years often become more focused on making decisions and preparing for the transition into adulthood. By building a strong foundation during the middle school years, parents and caregivers can help these later conversations feel more informed, supportive, and encouraging.

Talking about College & Career Planning with Kids: Tips for the High School Years

As students enter high school, conversations about college and career planning often begin to feel more immediate. Decisions about classes, extracurricular activities, work experiences, and plans after graduation may carry greater significance than they did in earlier years. At the same time, teenagers are continuing to learn more about themselves and may still change their interests, goals, and plans many times before adulthood.

Although these conversations may become more detailed during high school, it is still important to remember that your role as a parent or caregiver is not simply to help your teenager make decisions. It is also to provide encouragement, guidance, and a supportive relationship as they navigate this important season of life.

Below are six practical tips for talking with high school students about college and career planning.

1. Keep future planning in perspective.

As graduation grows closer, it can be easy for conversations about grades, standardized tests, college applications, and future plans to become the primary focus of family life. Although these topics are certainly important, try not to let them overshadow your relationship with your teenager.

Continue making time for conversations that have nothing to do with school, college, or careers. Enjoy activities together, celebrate everyday successes, and remind your teenager that your love and support are not dependent upon their grades, test scores, or future plans.

Maintaining a strong relationship creates a foundation that makes difficult conversations easier and helps teenagers feel supported during what can be a stressful stage of life.

2. Help your teenager explore strengths, interests, and possible pathways.

By high school, many students have begun developing clearer interests, strengths, and long-term goals. Continue encouraging your teenager to reflect on the classes, activities, volunteer experiences, hobbies, and jobs they find most meaningful.

Career interest inventories and other career exploration tools can be excellent conversation starters during these years. Consider taking an inventory together or asking your teenager to share and discuss the results with you. Rather than viewing these tools as providing "the answer," think of them as opportunities to spark conversations about your teenager's interests, personality, values, and future possibilities.

Continue reinforcing the message that there are many different pathways after high school. College may be the best fit for some students, while others may thrive through community college, technical or trade schools, apprenticeships, military service, or entering the workforce while continuing their education in other ways.

3. Look beyond grades and test scores.

Grades and standardized tests often receive significant attention during the high school years. Although academic achievement is important, it is only one part of a student's overall development.

Many colleges, universities, scholarship programs, and employers are also interested in how students have contributed outside the classroom. Encourage your teenager to become involved in activities that genuinely interest them, whether through athletics, the arts, student organizations, jobs, volunteering, faith communities, or leadership opportunities.

Rather than trying to build a "perfect" résumé, help your teenager seek experiences that allow them to grow, develop leadership skills, build relationships, and discover new interests.

4. Continue talking openly about educational options and finances.

As high school progresses, conversations about paying for education often become more concrete. Continue discussing your family's financial situation openly and honestly to the extent that it impacts your teen's future decisions, while also emphasizing that financial limitations do not necessarily mean educational opportunities are out of reach.

Take time to learn together about scholarships, grants, work-study opportunities, financial aid, community college pathways, and other resources that may help make education more affordable. Helping your teenager understand these options can replace uncertainty with hope while also encouraging thoughtful planning.

Remember that different educational settings work well for different students. Continue discussing the types of colleges, training programs, or work environments that might best fit your teenager's interests, learning style, goals, and values, rather than focusing on finding the one "best" school.

5. Expect disagreements and use them as opportunities to strengthen communication.

As teenagers become more independent, differences of opinion between parents and teenagers are both common and expected. Conflicts may arise about grades, study habits, extracurricular involvement, future goals, educational pathways, finances, or how much emphasis should be placed on planning for the future.

When disagreements occur, try to approach them with curiosity rather than judgment. Listen carefully to your teenager's perspective, even if it differs from your own. Look for opportunities to understand before trying to persuade. Use respectful communication, speak calmly, and remember that conflict itself is not the problem. Healthy relationships are strengthened by how conflicts are managed.

Although parents and teenagers may not always agree on every decision, approaching these conversations with mutual respect can help preserve trust and strengthen the relationship throughout the decision-making process.

6. Encourage mentors for both teenagers and parents.

No family has to navigate college and career planning alone. High school is an excellent time for teenagers to begin building relationships with trusted adults who can provide guidance, encouragement, and practical advice.

Depending on your teenager's interests, mentors might include teachers, school counselors, coaches, employers, faith leaders, extended family members, or professionals working in careers they hope to pursue. Students can also benefit from talking with older students who have recently navigated college applications, technical training, military service, or other post-high school experiences.

Parents and caregivers can benefit from mentors as well. This is especially true if you feel uncertain about aspects of college admissions, financial aid, or career planning. Seek guidance from school counselors, college access professionals, other parents, or trusted community members who have experience navigating these processes. Asking for support is a sign of strength, and it models lifelong learning for your teenager.

Summary

The high school years are often filled with excitement, uncertainty, growth, and important decisions. Although conversations about college and career planning may become more frequent and more detailed during this stage, remember that your relationship with your teenager remains one of the most valuable sources of support you can provide.

Continue encouraging exploration, celebrating growth, communicating openly, and reminding your teenager that they do not have to navigate the future alone. The confidence, resilience, and healthy relationships they develop during these years will serve them well throughout adulthood, regardless of the specific educational or career path they choose.

Conclusion: Learning and Growing Together

As we conclude this eBook, we hope one message stands out above all the others: Conversations about college and career planning are ultimately about much more than preparing children and teenagers for their future educational and career pathways. They are opportunities to build stronger relationships, encourage curiosity, nurture confidence, and support young people as they discover who they are and who they hope to become.

Throughout this eBook, we've explored how these conversations naturally evolve across different stages of child and adolescent development. During the early childhood and elementary school years, parents and caregivers can begin planting seeds by nurturing curiosity, introducing children to different types of work and learning, and helping them see the many ways people contribute to their families and communities. During the middle school years, conversations often become more focused on helping young people explore their strengths, interests, and developing identities while encouraging hope and keeping future possibilities open. By the high school years, many conversations naturally become more detailed as students begin making decisions about educational and career pathways, while still benefiting from the guidance, encouragement, and steady support of the important adults in their lives.

No matter your child's age or stage of development, remember that there is no perfect roadmap for these conversations. Every child is unique, every family has its own values and experiences, and every educational and career journey will look a little different. Rather than striving to have all the answers, consider your role as helping your child ask thoughtful questions, explore possibilities, learn from challenges, and continue growing over time.

It is also important to remember that parents and caregivers continue learning, too. You may find yourself learning about educational opportunities that didn't exist when you were growing up, discovering new career pathways alongside your child, or seeking guidance from school counselors, mentors, and other trusted resources. Modeling curiosity, humility, and a willingness to keep learning can be one of the greatest gifts you offer your child as they prepare for adulthood.

As your child grows, try to keep the door open for ongoing conversations. Celebrate milestones together, support one another through disappointments and setbacks, and continue making space to dream about the future while also enjoying the present. Although plans and goals may change over time, the foundation of a strong, supportive relationship can remain a steady source of encouragement throughout your child's life.

Thank you for joining us for this Healthy Relationships Initiative eBook. We hope these ideas have helped you feel more confident and encouraged as you begin or continue conversations about college and career planning with your child. We invite you to explore additional HRI resources on parenting, healthy relationships, and family well-being by visiting our website at <https://healthyrelationshipsinitiative.org/>.

Remember, the journey toward adulthood is not one that children travel alone. Through open communication, encouragement, curiosity, and healthy relationships, parents and caregivers have the opportunity to walk beside their children as they learn, grow, and prepare for whatever the future may hold.