Helping your teen to map out a career course

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" For a young child, it's a question that usually unleashes optimism, fantasy and possibility. But for teens rapidly approaching the end of high school, it can stir up feelings of confusion, stress and anxiety, especially if they're completely unsure about the direction they're heading.

Help your teen navigate their educational and career options by:

Encouraging honest reflection. This is the time to ask your child lots of questions about their skills, abilities, values and desires. Do they enjoy helping people? Are they good at building things? Do they currently have the grades to get into that highly competitive program? If not, what can they do to boost their grades, résumé or portfolio? Avoid asking “yes” or “no” questions. Instead ask “how, why” and “what” questions. Remember that the idea is to get your teen to reflect deeply on the matter.

Listening to your teen's response. There may be a thousand thoughts running through your head about what your teen is contemplating. Put your judgment and criticism on the back burner and focus on truly listening to what your child is telling you about his or her hopes and dreams.

Seeking outside support. If your teen is having trouble with the self-assessment process or needs further clarification, look to the school's guidance counsellor for help. The counsellor will review academic transcripts and may also be able to administer an aptitude test to help your adolescent pinpoint different career options that will match his or her interests and values.

Researching potential career paths. There are thousands of different jobs out there, many of which you and your child might not even be aware exist. Your teen may think he or she needs to choose between two doors, when there may be several other possibilities. A teen that's adept at drawing, for instance, may want to be an artist, but he could also become an animator, industrial designer or landscape architect. Help teens explore all the options available so they can confidently make an informed choice.

Goal setting. Work backwards. Where does your teen see himself or herself in the future? What are the possible paths he or she can take to get there? What kind of grades and training are needed to reach that final goal? Together, map out the signposts they'll need to reach to get where they want to be. This is a crucial time that can help define how your child deals with obstacles down the road. By showing teens how to set smaller "signpost" goals along the way to their ultimate objective, you'll actively demonstrate the importance of perseverance.

Keeping an open mind. While you may have always dreamed of your child becoming a doctor, remember that was *your* dream. As long as teens are making responsible, informed decisions, try to understand the path they are leaning toward taking. If you're concerned your teen is being unrealistic or rash, shine a light on the issue rather than lecturing or nagging. Encourage your child to talk to those with firsthand experience—whether it's someone who took a year off after high school or someone who went through the same competitive program your teen is contemplating. Remember that part of life is about learning from mistakes and doing better because of them.

Investigate co-op opportunities. Many high schools offer students a chance to get a taste of the job they're thinking about through work placements. If this is the case at your teen's school, encourage them to sign up. It's not only a great way to decide whether your teen actually enjoys the field, but also provides your adolescent with valuable experience for the often competitive application and selection process.

Etch out a budget. If your teen is considering post-secondary education, then hopefully this isn't the first time you've thought about the financial aspects of his or her future. Consider how your child will finance any post-high school education. Will they need to take on a part-time job to help contribute? Are there bursaries or government support available? Do they have the opportunity for a scholarship? This is the time to work out a concrete financial plan of action so you and your teen aren't left scrambling for resources upon high school graduation.

Your teen's career path may transform several times along the way to his or her final goal (which may also eventually change). By supporting adolescent children during this significant time, you'll not only ease anxiety and strengthen family bonds, but you'll also give your child the skills to become independent. Remember that this can be a stressful and difficult time for your teen, and your continued support will help them to make decisions that will ultimately shape their future.