

Parent Career Coach's (Quick) Guide to Helpful Questioning

By Terese Corey Blanck and Peter Vogt

If you're like most parents, you've probably felt like a career "dentist" at times - "pulling teeth" in an attempt to get your son/daughter to open up about his/her dreams and visions for the future! At times like those, it's easy to simply tell your young-adult son or daughter what to do about career "issues" (or, more accurately, **try to!**). It's much more difficult - but, ultimately, much more productive and rewarding - to help your child figure out what to do himself/herself by asking thought-provoking questions and creating an environment where your son/daughter can respond to them honestly and in detail. The better the questions you ask of your son/daughter, the more you'll help your child begin to clarify what he/she wants (and doesn't want) in a career and uncover his/her deep-seated fears and anxieties where the future is concerned. Asking questions is a little bit science and a lot art; there's no perfect or right way to do it. But you can use this "Questions Primer" to ensure that the career questions you ask of your son/daughter are relevant, challenging yet not overbearing, and - most important of all - helpful:

Avoid "Yes or No" Questions

The moment you start asking questions that call for only a "yes or no" type of response, you start down the unfortunate path of turning what's supposed to be a helpful dialogue into an annoying interrogation: "Do you want to go to the University of X?" "Do you want to get into accounting?" "Do you want to live in Wisconsin?" And on and on and on ...

In the "Peanuts" cartoon specials on television, the voice of the children's teacher is always something akin to the sound of a broken trombone. Ask only yes/no types of questions and you'll start to sound the same way to your son/daughter.

Don't Ask Leading Questions

In courts of law, attorneys are prohibited from asking questions that "lead the witness." You, too, should avoid asking questions that attempt to lead your child in a certain career direction. Examples:

"Nursing is a hot field right now. You could be a nurse. What sort of nurse would you like to be?"

"You're good with computers. What can you see yourself doing in the IT field?"

Learn to "Listen Between the Lines"

When your son or daughter replies to one of your questions, are you picking up on any underlying feelings accompanying his/her verbal response? For example: You: "What careers have you thought about, if only in passing?"

Your son/daughter: "I wish I could do something in the arts, but ..." [voice trails off]

You: "It sounds like you have some doubts or fears about that. What are they?"

Pose probing questions to help your child uncover what it is that is holding him/her back.

Be Ready for the Unexpected Response

Your child might very well surprise or even shock you with his/her reply to one of your questions. If that happens, do your best to remain neutral at that moment so that you can later process what your child said and come up with a supportive, useful response. For instance:

"I wish I could go to school in Japan and do some teaching there."

Poor response: "What??! How can you even consider going so far away?!!!"

Better response: "Interesting. I didn't know you were even thinking about studying abroad."

Keep Your Questions Simple - and Ask Them One at a Time

Watch any live news conference on CNN or MSNBC and you can see great examples of how **not** to ask questions: "Mr. President, I have a three-part question ..." Ugh. Invariably, the president (or whomever) latches on only to the last part of the question (to the degree he/she can understand or even remember it) and never goes back to the other two. So in your career conversations with your son/daughter, stick with one topic at a time. Better to cover too little in a discussion than to try to cover too much.

Give Your Child a Chance to Think

Some people - particularly introverts - would much rather go off and think about questions before responding to them (instead of replying to them immediately). Does your son/daughter typically prefer to ponder things for a few hours, or even a few days, before making decisions about them? If so, be sure to encourage your child to take the time he/she needs to consider your questions.

Know When to Say When

Neither you nor your child is going to enjoy a six-hour questioning marathon. So unless the two of you feel you're truly in the middle of a productive dialogue and you don't want to stop, keep your conversations to about an hour or so. You can always talk again another day - when your minds and spirits will be more refreshed. Asking insightful questions of your child and demonstrating that you'll listen closely to his/her responses is one of the best career tools you can offer as a parent. You'll learn more about what's on your child's mind where careers are concerned (and how you might be helpful in that regard) - and he/she will see that you're a sincere, non-judgmental ally in the career exploration and decision-making process.

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