

A Note for Parents and Counselors

Helping without adding pressure

By the time a student sits across from you with the “what’s next” question hanging in the air, they have already heard it a hundred times. From relatives at dinner. From the friend who seems to have it all mapped out. From the college banners in the hallway and the trade-school ads online. Most of the adults asking mean well. Together, without meaning to, they turn one big decision into a verdict on the kid’s whole worth.

You can be the person who lowers the temperature instead of raising it. That is the job this note is here to help with.

I spent thirty years hiring, mentoring, and promoting people. I watched who found good work and who spun their wheels, and the difference had almost nothing to do with picking the “right” path at seventeen. It came down to learning how to choose, adjust, and choose again. That is a skill you can help a young person build. A single perfect answer is not something you can hand them, and chasing one usually backfires.

Trade the verdict question for a process question

“What do you want to be?” asks a teenager to sum up their entire future in one sentence. Few adults could answer it well. A quieter opening works better: “What are you curious about lately?” or “Which part of this feels hard to decide?” You are not fishing for a career. You are opening a door and showing that the conversation is safe.

When a student says “I don’t know,” treat it as an honest starting point, not a problem to solve on the spot. Not knowing yet is normal. Most working adults changed direction more than once, and the ones who came out fine were the ones who kept moving and paid attention.

Keep your own worry on your side of the table

A parent’s fear is real, and it leaks. *Will they be okay? Did we do enough?* A student can hear it in a sigh, a raised eyebrow, a “well, have you at least thought about...” The pressure you feel becomes pressure they carry.

Before a big conversation, name your own stake to yourself privately, so it doesn’t ride along uninvited. Their decision is theirs. Your part is to keep the door open, not to walk them through it.

Point to evidence, not opinions

Everyone has a hot take on what a kid should do. Opinions are cheap, they contradict each other, and they pile on. What helps a student is real information they can look up themselves. When a claim comes up (“nursing is a safe bet,” “that major is useless”), you can gently move it from opinion to something checkable. Four free, public tools do most of that work, and none of them care which answer the student reaches.

The four free tools, in one place

O*NET oneline.org

What real jobs involve day to day, the skills they call for, and the outlook.

Occupational Outlook Handbook bls.gov/ooh

Pay, growth, and entry requirements, straight from the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

College Scorecard collegescorecard.ed.gov

What specific schools and programs cost, and what their graduates go on to earn.

Apprenticeship.gov apprenticeship.gov

Paid, on-the-job paths into skilled careers that don't require a four-year degree.

Encourage testing over declaring

The most useful thing a student can do is try a direction on before committing to it. Declaring a major or a plan feels like progress, but it is cheap talk until they have seen the work up close. Testing costs little and teaches a lot: a few hours shadowing someone, a summer job in the field, one honest conversation with a person who does the thing for a living. Help arrange a small experiment rather than pushing for a big decision. A student who spends a Saturday with a physical therapist learns more than one who reads ten articles, and can change course cheaply if it isn't for them.

Retire the “major equals career” myth

A lot of pressure grows from the belief that a college major is a life sentence. It rarely is. Most people end up working in fields loosely tied, or not tied at all, to what they studied. A major teaches a way of thinking and gives a starting point. It does not weld the door shut behind them. Saying that out loud takes weight off the choice. A seventeen-year-old picking between two majors is not deciding the next forty years; they are deciding what to learn next, and *next* is a word that keeps coming back around.

When they change their mind

They will, so count on it and treat it as information rather than failure. “I thought I wanted this, but now I want that” is how good decisions get made: by trying, noticing, and adjusting. An adult who meets a change of heart with “I knew it” or “after all that money?” teaches the

student to hide the next one. An adult who asks “what did you learn?” keeps them honest and keeps the door open.

The short version

You do not need to have the answer. It was never yours to hold. Your job is smaller and more important than that: keep the pressure low, keep the conversation open, and point toward real information instead of louder opinions. Do that, and the student in front of you gets to make a decision that fits them, which is the only kind that lasts.

If this was useful, the book goes further. It walks students through the rest, how to read their own interests and strengths, how to size up the real job market, and how to make a first move without pretending to be certain.