

Help Your Child to Live Happily Ever After by Making the Right Career Choice

by **Thomas J. Thomas, dean, University College, Wilkes University**

In his senior year in high school, it was time for Christopher to choose a major for his college education. He had other interests and careers in mind, but his father knew he had strong math skills and could make a good living as an accountant. Because of his father's influence, Christopher applied to study accounting, though it did not appear to fit some aspects of his outgoing personality. So in this instance, as in many others, parents and guardians can be very persuasive.

Guiding our children to make critical career decisions is not easy, but we are often tempted to try our best. After all, we love our children and know more than they about the World, and especially about the world of work. But how can we be sure we are giving the best advice? How could we be sure we are at least giving good advice? Or how can we be sure we are at least not giving bad advice that they will regret in the years to come?

This is, after all, a complicated decision when you consider all the factors. To some degree we are making an educated guess to predict our interests in five, ten or more years. In addition, career counselors will remind us that this decision also involves the interplay between our goals, values, skills and personality.

Then there is the world of work itself. Most groups of high school juniors can name between 50 to 75 different careers. The O*NET database includes over 900 career titles. Before they worked to merge the career listings, the *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* listed over 13,000 career titles! It is no wonder that in a recent survey of college graduates, 61% said they would change their major if they could go back.

Despite the critical nature of the decision, and the complexity of the process, there are some basics that could get you off to a good start if you are not going to have access to professional guidance. The first step is the most difficult of all. Here, we need to realize that our child has to live with the consequences of this decision well into the future, perhaps a lifetime. That means it is essential that we recognize it is our son's or daughter's decision. This will not be easy for some of us. After all, we know our child has little if any practice making important decisions with long-term consequences.

Although true, we can guide our children through the decision-making process instead of leading them to specific decisions. This is where we can be most helpful without using our experience to influence them to make the choice we wish. Instead, we can monitor their decision-making process to be sure they are giving this decision the appropriate amount of time, gathering the necessary information and giving the appropriate weight to specific information.

To accomplish all this, we need to ask questions and listen carefully for the answers. Through our questions, we not only show interest, we also guide the process and offer advice about the next steps. We are listening to be sure the information gathered is from reliable sources and that our child is following a natural progression of steps. If we are skeptical about any of the information, we can even identify other sources as long as we are working as a "partner" in the process.

Here is the point where we can be the most helpful. Throughout the process, we can watch for **three common mistakes** people make when making career decisions.

1) **Giving too much emphasis to one piece of information.** Imagine how many career options have been prematurely abandoned because of something heard along the way. Aunt Martha says, *“Don’t go into nursing, I was a nurse for three years and hated every moment.”* Young people are very impressionable, so it doesn’t take much to dissuade them or their families.

Sometimes, it is not something someone said, but rather a bit of information that can change a young person’s career goal. For example, *“There will be 40% fewer openings for elementary teachers over the next decade.”* *“A recent survey found that 30% of accountants would choose a different major if they could go back.”*

While any of these statements sound important, it remains one piece of a larger picture. For example, for every Aunt Martha who had a terrible experience, we can find others who will tell us the opposite. For every negative prediction for the future of a profession within a geographic location, we find successful people employed in those positions who are doing quite well. The point is, you only need one job, so you can’t let future predictions about a career change your mind if you have the right skills and determination and you are willing to take the risks. And since 61% of college graduates stated they would change their major if they could, 30% of accountants expressing this desire is not bad at all!

2) **Searching for a career made up of activities you enjoy.** Many young people are told that making a career decision is simple, just look at the activities they enjoy. This is an example of the advice we get that may be largely responsible for the high percent of college graduates who wish they had chosen a different major.

The reason this is not good advice is because the activities we enjoy doing at seventeen or eighteen years of age will likely change significantly by the time we are twenty-five or twenty-six. Actually, we hope this is true as we mature and develop. This is also most likely the reason why more than half of college graduates work in a field different from the major they studied.

Perhaps the most important reason this is poor advice is because so many of our careers are made up of activities no one would describe as “fun.” As we have come to know from experience: this is why we call it “work.”

So what can we tell our child to avoid making this common mistake? Try replacing the word, “*fun*” with the word, “*rewarding*.” Many people have found that they are motivated by the opportunity to make a contribution to their family, their neighbors and community. As we develop expertise, we are motivated to face the challenges that are a part of many careers.

For example, think about activities that are part of police-work, teaching, or nursing. No one will describe some of these daily activities as being something they “enjoy.” Instead, they feel the reward that comes with confronting difficult, challenging situations that many others would

want to avoid. As these professionals develop expertise, they contribute to the well-being of the community and become examples for new professionals.

3) Narrowing your options before you identify all your options. This is perhaps the most common mistake people of all ages make when confronted with a critical decision. In fact, this is where you can be most helpful as your child is making her career decisions. Encourage your child to make the effort to create a growing list of realistic options. Too many young people begin college with two majors in mind and believe the goal is to select one. In reality, these options are just the beginning of a list of realistic, potential careers. Remember how many career titles appear in the U.S. Department of Labor database?

While this is one of the most essential aspects of effective decision-making, it is also among the most difficult. It takes time and effort to create a list of five to ten strong options, which is why most will not. Yet, it is too limiting to select from only those options that we see in front of us every day. For example, in all my years of assisting young people, I have never had anyone come to me interested in hotel/restaurant management or college professor. Yet, these are very rewarding careers for those who eventually make their way there.

In addition to encouraging your child to develop a list of potential career options, you can also provide essential guidance. This is where computer-based career inventories are powerful tools. However, despite popular opinion, career inventories are not effective at helping your child make decisions, but they are the best instruments for expanding the number of career options. If you have difficulty finding the best sites, contact your high school guidance office or the advising office at your university. The professionals in both these offices utilize these tools for the same purpose.

Once your child has put the necessary effort into creating a realistic list of career options, your guidance is going to prove especially helpful. Here is where you guide your child to return to the list and select the few that will make the most of her potential and take her beyond the others. Some will find this step easier if they begin by eliminating from the list. Once you have identified the top options, it is then appropriate to work to narrow the list.

So while your child has identified opportunities that most others missed, there are no guarantees in the human decision-making process. She may need to return to the list at some point in the future if she learns something about her skills or something about the nature of the career that causes her to reconsider. The important thing is that she has already learned the steps in the career decision-making process and developed a list of options.

So what about Christopher, the young man I introduced at the start? After his first semester in college, he changed his major to elementary education. He successfully completed the major with honors, and quickly found a position when he moved to another state to teach fourth grade. He is motivated to go to work every day and his students could not be in better hands. His decision, his goals, his future...it became more than a career, it is his life.