

growing dreams, aspirations, and possible selves

Young people's dreams are like bubbles – colourful, ever-changing, and easily blown away or destroyed. If we are not to burst a bubble, we must hold it very lightly. It is exactly the same with the hopes, dreams and aspirations of young people. These fragile bubbles are the tentative beginnings of their ideas about their adult selves, and the people who are in the best position to hear, respond to, and help grow such dreams are their parents. The particular dreams on which this book focuses are those concerning career.

One of the biggest challenges faced by young people as they grow through their teenage years is to decide which career dreams to follow. In other words, the question they must ask of themselves is:

‘What is it that I can do to become a competent,
learning adult in the world, independent and
able to support myself?’

This is a huge question for young people to answer, particularly as they may have little if any idea of what they like, what they might be good at in the future, and how to go about finding that out. As vocational choices continue to multiply in the 21st century, so too does confusion grow over what to choose. Young people are overwhelmed by the options and possibilities thrust in their faces, bewildered by the multitude of college, university or training prospectuses all wrapped up in glossy marketing material and complete with stories of future success and satisfaction.

Given this information overload, it is hardly surprising that I hear the following kinds of remarks from parents on a daily basis:

‘He doesn’t have a clue – I would just like him to have some direction . . .’

‘She has no idea what she wants to do yet. It bothers her – she says all her friends seem to know . . .’

‘He changes his mind all the time – he’s really lost.’

‘She wants to do a gap year – but I’m afraid that if she takes a break from learning, she won’t go back . . .’

‘I’m worried about his motivation – he says he’s sick of school. He doesn’t seem to know what he wants to do, and now he has to choose subjects for next year . . .’

The parents who make such comments are worried that their child seems to be lost in the career quest. These parents are seeking help in finding a direction for their son or daughter – a focus for their child’s energy and their aspirations – and this level of parental concern is justified.

It is important for young people to develop clear aspirations for a number of reasons. Most significantly, it assists them to feel less lost and more in charge of their lives as they sight a goal for themselves in the midst of the many and varied tasks

they are required to work at during their teenage years. Achieving clarity of goals provides focus and a sense of certainty. It gives them an answer – even if it is a tentative one – to the prevailing question that 17- and 18-year-olds are continually besieged with:

‘And what have you decided to do?’

My own experience in counselling young people is that it is a huge relief to have an answer to that question that they can feel satisfied with. It enables them to face the world, their friends and peers with a sense of competence and confidence.

Although there is a tendency, under pressure, for the young person to leap to an answer – any answer – it is important to understand that at this stage they do not need to come up with an immediate final answer to the career question, or even a very specific one. Having career goals and directions does not mean that they have to make final choices about occupations. In fact, making specific choices too early can close the mind to more suitable options that may emerge later. For the moment,

just a broad sense of direction, being able to identify skills they want to develop and areas of interest, can help enormously in the younger teenage years. When a direction feels ‘right’ it provides a focus for a more useful selection of subjects for study in senior years, and for the motivation to achieve in this learning.

So how do we help young people to discover this sense of direction? The answer is simple – by working with the emerging self. This means gently helping to draw out of the developing adult the aspects of self that they want to grow in the future, their dreams about life, work and career, and gradually assisting them to develop a picture of their possible self.¹ The possible self is the future accomplished adult, complete with skills that they have yet to learn, and achieving, working and living in the way that they desire.

Aspirations reflect individuals’ ideas about their possible selves, and are closely related to hope and motivation. It is crucial that young people feel hopeful about themselves and

their futures if they are to maintain the motivation to achieve their goals. And while counsellors and teachers can be hugely influential in this process, the best people to help develop and affirm this possible self are parents.

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It is important for parents to be aware that the emerging concept of the possible self is heavily influenced by the background ideas and beliefs the young person has grown up with and hears daily. This backdrop includes the work that you do yourselves, the working roles they have been in contact with, the jobs that they have heard you and their peers applaud or scorn – and the comments you have made to or about your child.

Encouraging the growth of the possible self

As a parent, you encourage growth of the possible self by demonstrating trust in your child and their potential, and faith in their ability to grow. You can lay the foundations for the future by affirming their strengths and talents in what they are currently doing, as well as by listening positively to their ideas about further avenues of exploration. An important task is to look for clues to their competence, and help them find ways to demonstrate their ability.

Show belief in your child's competence now by helping them name their skills

A belief in your child's competence NOW leads to the young person's self-belief in their future competence. Young people possess a strong desire to be competent and to be able to demonstrate competence. It does...