

Finding your true

A new programme, CONNECTIONS, which was piloted in Antwerp, affords young expats aged 15-18 the time to think clearly about the best career option for them, writes Dr Chintha Dissanayake.

The task of guiding our children proficiently through the school years is challenging at best, but helping them navigate the maze of options that will eventually lead them confidently towards successful careers can be particularly daunting. Yet, that is exactly what is required of us when our offspring make curriculum choices followed by university selections that govern their future educational and career paths.

Are young adolescents developmentally ready to make important career decisions?

For years, many have raised the question: are young adolescents developmentally ready to make such important career decisions? Most will not have matured sufficiently, and career choices made at this stage will reflect more a student's academic achievement (i.e. subjects he/she is currently performing well in) rather than choices borne out of true identity.

We often hear young children say things like, "I want to be a vet or a doctor or a fireman" – and may all of the above within the same month! But it is not until adolescence that career aspirations begin to redefine themselves in terms of their personality and interests. A 13-year-old who enjoys science may indeed show an interest in being a science teacher or



CAREER IDENTITY

a doctor, but these choices can be quite tentative and he/she will go on to explore a number of other career options before too long. It is only by late adolescence that many teenagers will start to make choices that integrate their true *identity* and shrink the vast array of career options open to them. And it is *after* the choice of job or career is made that it becomes an integral part of how they see themselves.

While it is common for early teens to take on parental ideas and beliefs without much question, for healthy development of their own identity, our children have to pass through a phase of questioning these borrowed ideas and beliefs and actively explore alternatives. But, due to its very nature, this period can be a strain on relationships for both children and parents and can add a further dimension to the challenge of offering advice (however well-meaning) to our children.

INCREASING SELF-AWARENESS

Although it's acceptable for children to be undecided about career aspirations during early adolescence, there is compelling evidence to suggest that they should begin the career development process through self-exploration in relation to career options. It is this growth in self-awareness that is key to the development of personal identity, which in turn is vital to being confident career-wise.

A large-scale study published in 2010 by the University of

Pennsylvania followed more than 12,000 young people in the US. The findings revealed that adolescents who were undecided about their career ambitions at age 16 remained uncertain about their careers at age 26. Furthermore, they had lower educational attainment and earned significantly less than their counterparts with clearer aspirations. The conclusion reached by the researchers was that, 'career uncertainty', while normal, could indeed diminish success.

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In 2011, a unique two-year programme, CONNECTIONS, designed specifically to help adolescent expatriate students in the Antwerp region, was piloted. Through a mix of workshops and individual coaching sessions, youngsters took meaningful steps towards greater self-awareness and career-identity. Several of the participants had already undergone their school's standard online

career-profiling process. But says Steve, a participant of CONNECTIONS: "If you already know what you want to do, the computer career profiler will confirm this for you. But if you are unsure, then it can only confuse you further."

One of most the important aspects of any career development programme is to provide participants the space and time to think. The CONNECTIONS programme makes best use of the time available, without pressing the youngsters to decide too early. It teaches the participants strategies for smart exploration – an invaluable tool for the rest of their lives. As a direct result of this simple model, all the young participants have made the remarkable transition from undecided to greater career confidence in less than six months. Emma, an 18-year-old student from Antwerp described the programme as "a work in progress. Through it, I learnt things about myself that I didn't know and feel comforted in knowing what I can achieve."

Helping young people to develop confidence in making decisions concerning their future careers is important. By developing clearer aspirations they become more sure of their own abilities. The consequences are far reaching.



Dr Chintha Dissanayake is a UK and Belgium registered, chartered occupational psychologist, with over 20 years' experience. She specialises in talent assessment and development. For more information on the CONNECTIONS programme, visit www.oxford-psyometrics.com