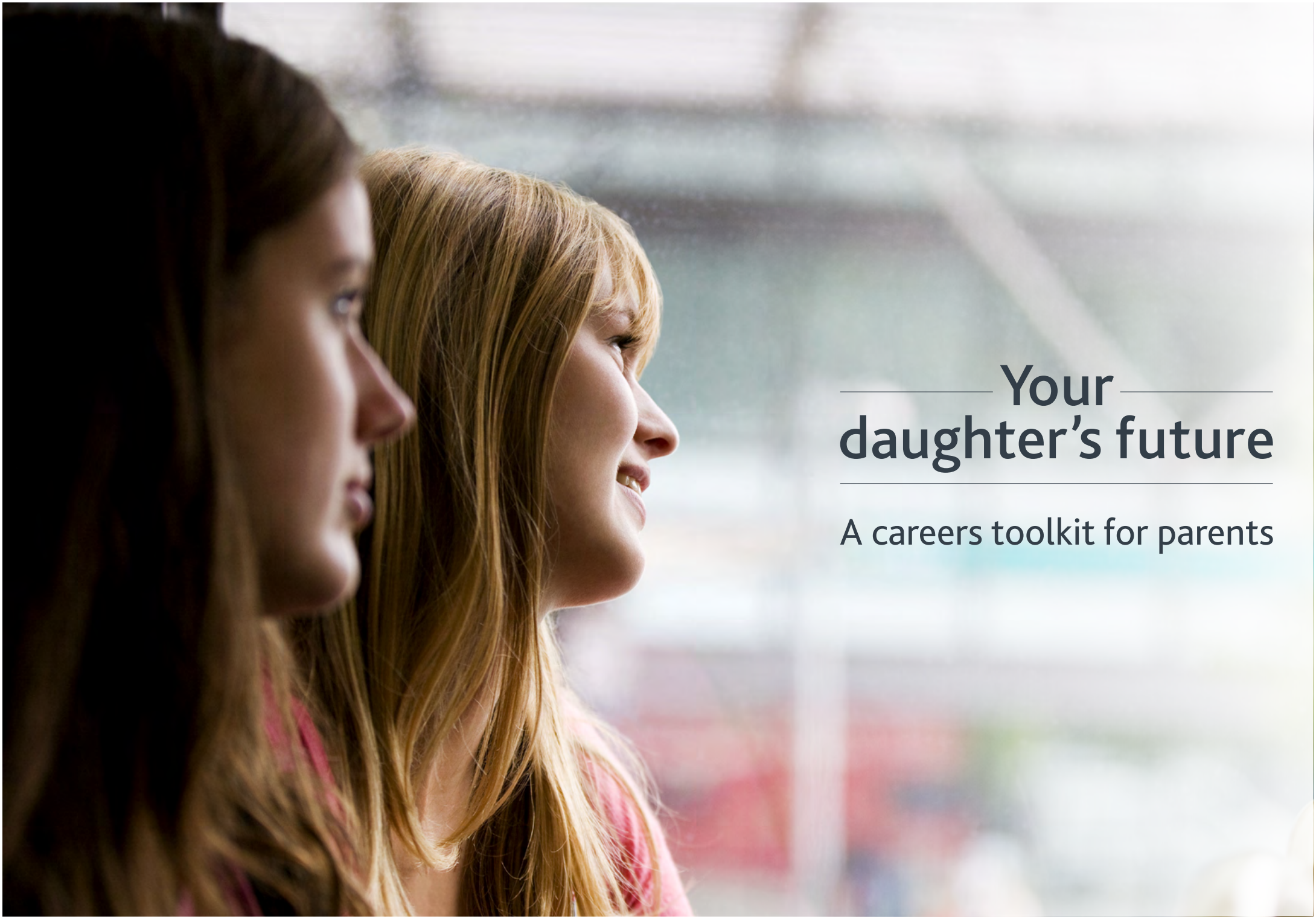

Your daughter's future

A careers toolkit for parents

Your daughter's future

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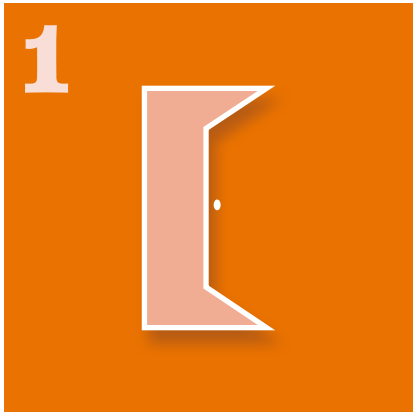

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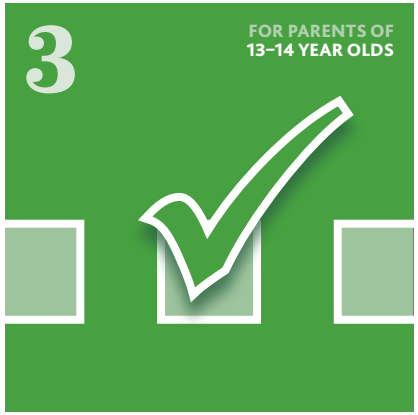
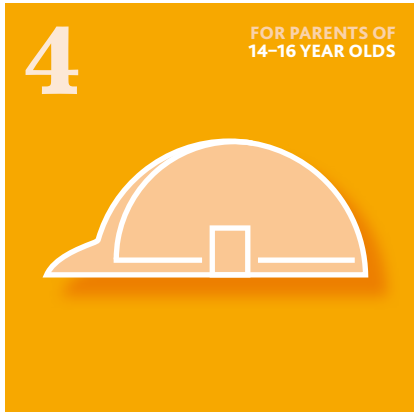
EMERGING EXPECTATIONS



ENABLING CHOICE



GAINING SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE

GOING YOUR OWN WAY

EXPLORING POSSIBLE PATHWAYS

BUILDING RESILIENCE

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

1

INTRODUCTION

Your daughter is on the brink of adulthood, making choices that will shape her life for years to come. At times she may enjoy all the new experiences, opportunities, options that are presented to her. At other times she may find the challenge to choose the right education and career options – alongside all the other pressures of teenage years – too heavy to carry alone.

You want her to make the most of her potential, to use her talents in the right way for her. You want her to have a secure future – a job, enough money to live comfortably. But most of all you want her to be happy.

Many parents of teenagers worry that they are losing their influence. They suspect that their children are guided more by peer pressure and fitting in with their friends than anything their parents might tell them. But research evidence shows that it is in fact parents who are young people's main influence in choosing careers. During the writing of this toolkit we talked to a large number of teenage girls and they all, without exception, agreed that parents were their main role models and source of help at this time. They wanted and welcomed their parents' advice and support so long as – and this is critical – their parents did not try to take control.

More than once, they imagined themselves as driving a car, towards a destination that they had chosen, with their mum or dad sitting beside them. Whenever they were anxious about what way to go, their parent would offer to check the map and suggest routes – but no backseat driving!

Just as your daughters don't want to be told what to do, nor do you. This pack isn't going to tell you what your daughter should do when she leaves school, or how you should be a parent. That's up to the both of you. What you will find here is information on qualifications, apprenticeships and careers. There's also suggestions on how you can most effectively support your daughter at this time, based on the research evidence and what we have been told by other parents and by teenage girls. Some of this may be useful; some of it won't. This isn't an instruction manual but a toolkit, for you to use in whatever way works for you. *We hope you find it useful.*

One of them said:

"Don't tell us what to do, but be with us for the journey."

Another said:

"It's my life, and I want to be in charge of it. But I want my parents standing by my side."

Meet the girls

Big thanks to the girls from Northfleet School, Henrietta Barnett School, Costello School, and Girlguiding UK who helped us write this pack by giving us their ideas, suggestions, experiences and insights. They had lots of messages they wanted to send parents, and we've included these as quotes throughout the pack.

The girls were from all kinds of families, and they had all kinds of career choices. Here are some of the things they are looking forward to doing:

Being an MP – but only if I can make it fit with having children

Opening my own tattoo parlour

Professional footballer

Care worker, like my mum and dad

Gymnast

In my community, you have to be a doctor or a pharmacist. But I want to work for a charity.

Beautician

Midwife

Do I have to choose just one?

2

EMERGING EXPECTATIONS:

For parents of 12–13 year olds

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

She may want to be a high flier, or she may want to 'work to live' – to allow her to enjoy life outside work. She may want children sooner, later or never. She may crave adventure or she may put a higher value on security. Whatever kind of girl she is, evidence suggests that she probably already has ideas about what she wants to do when she leaves school.

This unit is designed to help you talk about career choices with your daughter, so that she can make the ones that suit her. To do this, she needs the right information about her career options, together with understanding of herself and what makes her tick. So we've included information about a wide range of different careers which should provide an interesting starting point for conversations with your daughter. We've also included some ideas about how we can encourage girls to have more belief in their own abilities, as many girls write off some jobs at this early stage because they mistakenly underestimate their own potential. Of course, other girls may have unrealistically high aspirations – so we've addressed that too.

In order to understand what kind of support your 12–13 year-old daughter would like from you, we held a series of focus groups with girls from across the UK. Many of the ideas and information presented in this unit have come directly from girls themselves. We also drew on the information from these focus groups to write the suggestions at the end of this unit about how 12 and 13-year-olds prefer to be communicated with by their parents – we hope you find their ideas interesting and helpful.

Influences on girls' career aspirations

There are a wide range of factors which influence the career aspirations of 12 and 13-year-old girls. These include:

- Parents' jobs
- Parents' expectations
- Expectations from school, peers or community
- Wider social messages about which jobs are desirable and appropriate for girls

"In my community, you have to be a doctor or a pharmacist."

"My parents say, 'Do something that doesn't affect your ability to go down the family route'."

"I wanted to be a politician, but I've heard it won't fit in with family life."

That's a lot of different factors that are already having influencing our daughters' thinking by the time they reach secondary school. Ideally, we want girls to find the career path that suits their own personality, passions and abilities rather than feeling pressured to follow the expectations of peers, school or wider society. So how can we help our daughters to ensure they make the choices that are right for them?

These strategies can be helpful – they're all discussed below:

- Openly discuss the 'shoulds' that may be influencing your daughter
- Encourage her to keep an open mind
- Help her understand what makes her unique and what kinds of jobs may suit her skills and preferences
- Expand horizons by exploring a wide range of possibilities
- Inspire with role models and case studies

Openly discuss the 'shoulds'

One of the most useful things we can do to help our daughters is to discuss with them the messages they get about what they 'should' do (including from us!). These 'shoulds' are not necessarily right or wrong, but by identifying and thinking about them your daughter will get a better sense of what is really important to her. In particular, it's worth thinking through with your daughter any 'shoulds' that are about appropriate jobs for girls, or the right aspirations for 'people like us'. Some useful questions you could start with are:

- What are 'typical' jobs for girls?
- What is it about those careers makes some people think they are most appropriate for girls?
- Which jobs do people think of as men's jobs?
- What stops girls from considering those careers?
- How might some of the skills you have suit jobs which are typically thought of as being primarily for men?
- Is it important to consider a career similar to your peers? Why?
- What do you think your friends, teachers, wider society would think of you if you wanted to become different, e.g. an engineer? Why?

One of the main influences on children's career aspirations are the choices their parents have made – whether that is to stay at home and bring up children, work full or part-time, or do voluntary work. Your own life experience is a really useful starting point for your daughter, provided you can be positive about her making choices that are different from yours. It can be hard not to take this as criticism or rejection, but easier if you understand your own life experience as a resource that you are offering your daughter, rather than as a blueprint for her own life. It will be particularly useful to her to understand the daily realities of your work choices, and those of others in the family.

Parental expectations play a large part too. We are responsible for helping our daughters to broaden, or narrow, their career aspirations from an early age – often without realising it or meaning to. Take a moment to identify what your expectations, assumptions and hopes are for your child:

- Do you have ideas about what jobs might be suitable for your daughter?
- Do you have hopes or dreams for what your daughter might achieve?
- Do you particularly value certain skills or abilities?

There is nothing wrong with you having opinions or ambitions for your children – we all do. But it will be most helpful for her if you can be open about these, discuss why they are your views, and be aware that your daughter may not share them.

For example, it can be confusing for your daughter if you hint at your feelings by acting disappointed or uninterested when she talks about her ideas. Far better to be clear and honest about your views, while always acknowledging that this is her life. So instead of saying, "I just don't think that's really you", you could try: "I'm struggling with seeing you in that job because it calls for lots of attention to detail, and you've always struck me as a big picture kind of person. Do you think you might get bored with all that small print?"

Or instead of constantly suggesting a particular job, you could try, "I suggested you think about x and you don't seem to have responded to that. That's fine, it's up to you, but I'd really like to hear why. I thought it would be perfect for you because you're so good with people – do you think I've got that wrong?"

Or instead of saying, "You should do y, it's got the best prospects" you could say, "I'm always concerned about your future security and ability to pay the bills. I think that's why I've always liked the idea of you doing y, because it pays well and always needs good people. But what do you think?"

> "My dad doesn't say much but when he does you know he's really thought it through. He's never told me what to do, but he did just say to me, 'Have you thought about history?' and left it at that. And you know, I HADN'T thought about history, but then I did, and now I'm planning to do history at university."

Encourage her to keep an open mind

By the age of 11, many girls already have fairly fixed ideas about what careers they might pursue. While some may genuinely discover their life's passion at an early age, for many this means that they can start shutting doors on a whole world of jobs at a very early age, despite knowing very little about their chosen career or its alternatives.

Encourage your daughter to keep an open mind, and to not see changing their minds as any kind of failure. We all grow and change and develop new skills, so it's likely that the career idea that an 11-year-old becomes fixed on will not still be the best fit for them when they're 15, 25 or 50.

If your daughter is dead set on a particular job, then of course you can support and encourage her, but you might choose also to make sure she's aware of a range of alternatives and to help her understand that making a decision now doesn't mean she can never change her mind. Indeed, developing transferable skills is essential in the modern workplace when people rarely work in the same career for their whole lives.

Help her understand what makes her unique

One of the reasons many young people end up 'following the herd' is because they don't yet fully understand (or value) their own characteristics and skills, the ways in which they are different from their friends. Helping your daughter to identify what makes her unique, and how this might suit her for particular job choices, can help her find the best way forward. For example, if your daughter is very friendly and enjoys being with people, she may have considered a career in hospitality, but these skills could also help her get a job as an architect, a recruitment consultant or a care worker.

Expand horizons by exploring a wide range of possibilities

The range of different jobs is growing all the time, and none of us can ever know about everything that is available. But you can help your daughter by exposing her to as many different possibilities as you can. You can do this by:

- Searching online
- Encouraging friends and family to discuss their careers with your daughter
- Attending careers fairs
- Discuss the jobs of people you encounter during the day – the bus driver, supermarket floor manager, teacher, bank manager, doctor, website developer, radio producer...

Inspire your daughter with role models and case studies

Many girls wrongly feel that certain types of career are off-limits to them – perhaps because they think that jobs like that are only for men, or people who are rich and well connected. You can help to inspire your daughter by finding role models – not just people at the top of the tree, but women at all stages of careers that your daughter can relate to. The most effective role models are ordinary people who you know in your day to day life – who your daughter can talk to and may aspire to be like. You can also browse through the role models and case studies in this toolkit and you can also find further examples here:

- Stylist Work-Life Complete Library
- Sciencegrrl Blog of Women in Science
- Institute for Engineering and Technology Women Engineer of the Year
- 2014 Female Architects to Watch
- Ten Women Who Are Changing The Face of The City
- Ten Women in Tech You Need To Meet

Encouraging self-belief in girls

Many girls limit their career and education aspirations because they lack self-esteem. Low confidence is very common in teenage girls – much more than in boys – and can lead to them aiming low or abandoning cherished dreams because they think they won't be good enough. Parents, meanwhile, can find it very upsetting to watch their daughters' confidence deflate like balloons, but find their efforts to provide reassurance dismissed out of hand ("Well, you would say that, you're my parents").

Though our daughters need to know that we rate them, heaping indiscriminate praise doesn't usually work. *How* and *what* we praise are critical, and these are the three best ways we can encourage self-belief:

- Praise effort
- Challenge inaccurate beliefs
- Praise often but ralistically

Praise effort

We send an important message to our daughters when we praise what they do rather than what they achieve. It shows that we value the hard work that has gone into achieving a goal rather than the goal itself. This helps to relieve some of the stress and pressure to achieve and can also help them to understand that we'll always be proud as long as they try their best.

So we might choose to say:
"Well done for working so hard for your maths test."

Rather than
"Well done for getting full marks on your maths test."

This is especially important when your daughter experiences failure. We can praise the effort she put in this time, help her to learn from what happened, and encourage her to keep on trying. Children learn very valuable lessons when they try and fail, then try again and succeed. In fact, one girls' school has introduced a 'Failure Week' to explore the concept of 'failing well'. By this it means the value of having a go, embracing risk, building resilience and learning from mistakes – rather than playing it safe and perhaps achieving less.

Challenge inaccurate beliefs

Girls often develop inaccurate beliefs about themselves, which can become self-fulfilling prophecies and further damage self-esteem. For example, a girl who does badly in a chemistry test can quickly become panicky and anxious about the subject, perhaps disengaging from it in order to protect herself from further 'proof' that she can't do it *(see diagram, left)*.

Parents are the people who most often pick up on these beliefs and have a vital role in challenging them before they take root. Your daughter might welcome constructive advice or solutions, or she might not. If she's going through a prickly phase, you might do better just to hold her and let her talk about her worries and fears – just knowing that you are on her side will improve her self-esteem. You can also help her to learn from the experience by reminding her of times when she has failed at first and gone on to succeed.

Praise often but realistically

Your love and pride can help to build your daughter's self-esteem. Take the time to tell her you're proud of her for how well she's been trying – especially if she's working on something that she's finding hard or at which she's previously failed. Try to understand as much about your daughter's school work and hobbies as you can – and she feels comfortable with – so that you can provide praise that is specific and relevant. When your words demonstrate a true understanding of what your daughter has achieved as well as conveying your pride, then they'll mean more to your daughter who will realise that she's really earned your praise. The best kind of praise is genuine, specific and spontaneous.

Communicating positively

It can become harder to communicate with our daughters as they approach adolescence and may begin to push away from their parents. But the teenage girls we talked to told us that although they may often behave as though they don't need their parents' guidance, they do really want their help. They told us that this was what they most wanted from their parents: ›

Make time for me and listen

Some of the girls said that what they most wanted was for their parents to listen to them. In some busy families this was easier said than done, but when the time was found, these conversations were valued.

"It meant a lot that she cared enough to stop and listen. I know she found it hard to make the time."

Girls talked about the importance of having the time and space to explore their own ideas and feelings with their parents rather than their parents always leading the conversation or making the suggestions.

"Don't just tell me what you think I should be doing, ask me for my opinions too, and value them."

And it was very apparent that girls could tell how interested and invested their parents really were in the conversation.

"I could tell he got it, and he actually really cared."

Don't judge or dismiss

Sometimes, parents and daughters have very different ideas about school subjects and jobs. Girls who felt that their parents disapproved of their chosen career felt disappointed and in some cases became even more determined.

"The more they dismissed it, the more I wanted to do it. It went from a bit of a whim that they wouldn't take seriously to something that I just HAD to do to prove them wrong!"

Conversely, those girls who were able to have open and honest conversations with their parents felt that both they and their parents were able to learn from each other and they felt that they were able to learn from each other and keep talking. Even if their parents didn't agree with their choices, their support and advice was appreciated.

"They kind of helped me explore different options and they treated me like an adult, not a kid."

Help me understand and achieve my goals

Girls particularly valued their parents' input into identifying different options and thinking through the pros and cons of each.

"To be honest I hadn't thought it through fully. My parents helped me understand a lot better."

Girls talked about having clear ideas about what they wanted to achieve but not knowing what they had to do to get there. Parents were hugely valued when they offered knowledge or helped to do the necessary research.

"My dad was really practical about it all. He just seemed to know (or found out) what I had to do next at every point. It was so helpful."

Help me understand my strengths and be honest

Girls liked it when their parents helped them to gain a better understanding of their strengths and abilities. They said their parents often had a fuller appreciation of qualities that they had overlooked in themselves.

"I didn't really think of myself as good at anything. My parents helped me to feel more confident in myself."

However, girls did not like it when their parents gave them praise which they felt they didn't deserve. This made them less likely to trust their parents' judgement, or respect what they had to say on other topics.

"Of course she says I'm good at stuff. She's my mum. She thinks I'm the prettiest, cleverest, best girl in the world. Or that's what she says. It's total rubbish of course."

3

ENABLING CHOICE:

For parents of 13–14 year olds

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

This unit is aimed at parents of young people who are in the lead up to making choices about GCSE or equivalent subject options. It aims to help parents support their daughters to make choices that reflect their skills, passions and potential, and that are free from assumptions, stereotypes or misinformation.

Using feedback from consultation with girls and young women, we've considered the factors that influence them when making decisions about their education and career, how they feel parents can best support them, and typical hurdles they feel they need to overcome.

Decision making

There are lots of different factors, positive and negative, which may influence your daughter's decision making when it comes to deciding on GCSE, or equivalent, options.

Compulsory subjects

There are some subjects which your daughter will have to continue to GCSE or equivalent due to either government requirements or the rules put in place by her school. In almost all cases this will include English, maths and science and these compulsory subjects are designed to ensure that pupils gain a breadth of skills and knowledge.

"You're forced to make a decision about your career path from an early age – at 15 you're choosing which classes to take depending on the teacher, which friends and boys are in each class and how many free periods you get. If that means dropping physics then you've removed your chances of become an engineer."

There is some flexibility in how much English and science your daughter continues to study. She may have a choice of English language or English literature, and of core science, double science or triple science. Which options are available and which are compulsory will depend on your daughter's school.

Passion and perseverance

What if your daughter really enjoys a subject, or needs it for her chosen career, but isn't doing very well at it? This is obviously a good time to talk with her teacher, but don't let her be too quick to drop the subject. At this age, young people are often capable of making huge progress if they are really determined to do so.

"My parents have been really supportive. They've given me freedom and let me do what I enjoyed. I really appreciate that."

What about unrealistic expectations?

Ideally, all young people would pursue the careers that they want and are passionately interested in. However, there's no getting away from the fact that not every teenager will go on to be a pop star or a professional footballer, even if that is their dream.

While you don't want to stop your daughter from aiming high, we all have limits on what we can achieve. In any case, it's always important to have a back-up plan in case things don't work out for any reason. Passions can, of course, be pursued as hobbies as well as careers.

Questions you could explore with your daughter to help you sensitively tackle this include:

- **What is it about this career that particularly appeals to you?**
  By identifying the attributes that are particularly important to her, you can find other, more realistic options that offer the same attributes. For example, if she wants to be a performer because she likes the idea of being up in front of a crowd, she might also enjoy being a teacher, a holiday entertainer or a radio presenter.
- **What do you think would make you good at that job?**
  This question will help build your daughter's self-esteem by getting her to acknowledge her skills and assets. You can then explore other careers, to which she might be better suited, which also draw on these assets. So if she thinks she'd make a good professional hockey player because she's great at team sports and trains hard, maybe she might work well in a different type of team – a lot of teamwork is involved in working in most types of business; and if she's keen on the fitness industry perhaps she could become a fitness instructor, sports coach or aim to become the Chief Executive of a sports governing body?
- **How do you think you'd go about getting started in this career?**
  Working through the practicalities of your daughter's chosen career path can shed new light on her idea – it will make her begin to realise the steps that will need to be taken in order for her to achieve her goal, and both of you will gain a better idea of whether it is achievable. Distant goals can feel unreal but the steps needed to reach them are concrete and your daughter is likely to have a far better idea of whether she is actually capable of completing them.
- **What do you think would be the downsides of that career?**
  Taking time to explore with your daughter the potential downsides of a career can help her to be more realistic. Maybe being a celebrity would seem less appealing once she stopped to think about how her appearance would be constantly criticised by the tabloids, or her family life pried into.

Keeping doors open

If your daughter does not yet have fixed ideas about what she wants to do (and it's fine if she doesn't) then she may benefit from making subject choices that keep doors open for her in the future. This might mean choosing a wide range of subjects.

"I wasn't sure what I wanted to take for A Level when I was choosing my GCSEs so my school advised me to take a variety. I'm happy I listened to them because by not closing off any doors, I got to pick whatever I fancied at A Level."

Specific requirements

If your daughter has some idea about what she wants to do with her life, then this will to an extent dictate her subject choices. Some subjects – like sciences and languages – have to be studied at a basic level before moving on to advanced study. Others – like psychology, hospitality or law – can be entered at an advanced level without previous study. You can find out more information about this.

Informed Choices: The Russell Group guide to making decisions about post-16 education.

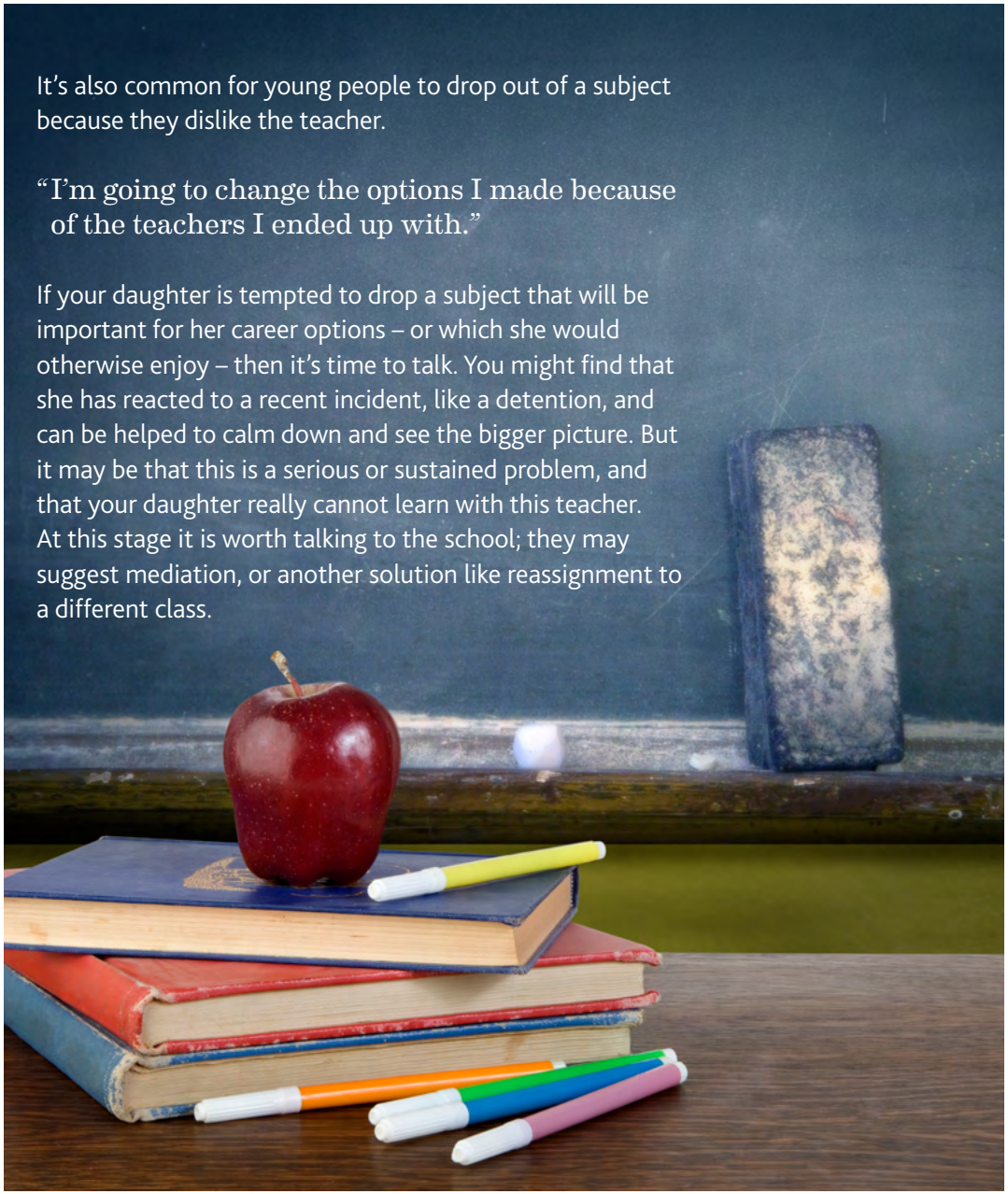
Friendship groups

A major influence on the subject choices of 13 and 14-year-old girls are their friends. It's very common for a girl to choose a subject because her friends are, or to avoid a subject because she doesn't want to be in the same class as someone she doesn't get on with.

"I do regret not taking triple sciences at GCSE. I ended up closing off doors to myself at a young age just because I wanted to be in a class with my friends."

These reasons might seem really important to your daughter at the moment, but she may not have thought through their long term implications. It can help to really listen, without comment, to her explain the reasons underlying her decisions. If you are worried that there may be underlying issues, such as teasing or bullying, which are preventing your daughter from wanting to take a certain subject, then try to get her to talk this through with you. It may help for you and your daughter to talk to someone at school. She may not want to do this if she is being bullied, for fear that it will make the situation worse. It's important to listen to her concerns and get her permission before approaching the school, otherwise she may not trust you with similar problems in the future. Support and advice is available for both you and your daughter from *Childline*.

On the other hand, being in a class with her friends might be very positive for your daughter. It can be very motivating to have friends studying the same subjects, and friends can support each other through the more difficult aspects of the course, and lend each other a helping hand when it comes to revision.



It's also common for young people to drop out of a subject because they dislike the teacher.

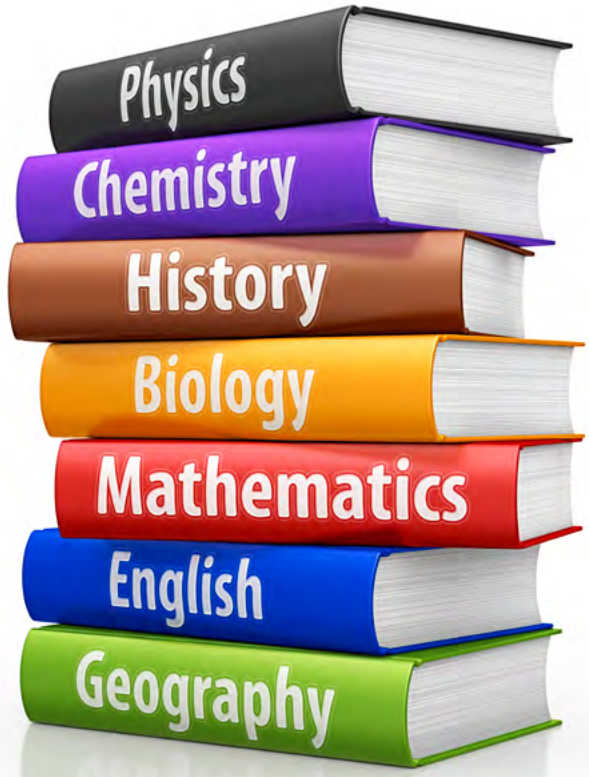
"I'm going to change the options I made because of the teachers I ended up with."

If your daughter is tempted to drop a subject that will be important for her career options – or which she would otherwise enjoy – then it's time to talk. You might find that she has reacted to a recent incident, like a detention, and can be helped to calm down and see the bigger picture. But it may be that this is a serious or sustained problem, and that your daughter really cannot learn with this teacher. At this stage it is worth talking to the school; they may suggest mediation, or another solution like reassignment to a different class.

A teacher she works well with
On the other hand, your daughter may choose to study a certain subject because she gets on especially well with a particular teacher. If this is the case with your daughter, it's worth having a brief conversation to ensure that her passion for the subject can be sustained after that teacher has moved on.

School/society expectations
What if your daughter is attracted to subjects or career options that are unusual or non-traditional? The so-called STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and maths) offer great opportunities for girls – there are skill shortages and good wages in many STEM professions. But your daughter may have worries about this – as may you, or your wider family or community. These worries could include being the only girl in the class/workplace, facing sexist comments or banter, working in dirty or dangerous conditions.

"At my school it's very common for girls to go down gendered career paths, for example I'm going to be a primary school teacher and my training course is 90% female. I don't feel unhappy with my choice but friends of mine who chose to go into more male careers didn't receive the same support from our friendship group as I did."



Choosing courses – GCSE options and vocational subjects

GCSEs are the qualifications which your daughter will take in Year 10 and 11, during key stage 4.

The school will have a set of compulsory GCSE subjects but your daughter will most likely have an opportunity to decide which GCSE and other vocational subjects she would like to take on top of those.

The following GCSE subjects are compulsory in all schools:

- English Literature and English Language, or a single English GCSE
- Maths
- Either Core Science, Double Science or Triple Science

Then you'll have a selection of optional choices which fall under groups of subjects called 'entitlement areas'. Each school must offer at least one option from each of these groups:

- Arts (including art and design, music, dance, drama and media)
- Design and Technology
- Humanities (history and geography)
- Modern Foreign Languages (French, Spanish, German)

It's by no means essential that your daughter selects a subject from each of the subject groups but it's good to remember that GCSE choices can be important when going on to make further academic choices. As a result it's useful to select a range of subjects at this stage in order to keep more options open for later study and career choices.

Talk to your daughter about what she enjoys and what she wants to pursue in the future. Not taking a subject at GCSE level which she plans on studying later can often restrict future decisions – for example, if she thinks she might want to study a science course later in life, she should take at least double-award science at GCSE.

If your daughter is planning on going straight from school into work, it might be that vocational courses such as BTECs would prepare her better for the job market. It's a good idea to have a look at the sorts of jobs that she is considering and find out what qualifications they would prefer, then have a look at what vocational courses her school has to offer.

The best way to support your daughter here is to help her find out what this choice will be like in reality – read case studies, talk to somebody who has been there and done that. You may even be able to find someone to let her 'shadow' them at work. You can then be sure that any of the disadvantages you are discussing are real and not imagined, and that you aware of all the positives. Be sure to celebrate your daughter's pioneering spirit – but without suggesting that she would in any way be 'letting the side down' should she decide later to opt for a more traditional job.

Timetabling

If your daughter wishes to pursue an unusual combination of subjects, this may be difficult for her school to accommodate. School timetables tend to be designed around the most popular combinations of subjects. If your daughter feels passionately that she wants to study a combination of subjects that does not fit with her school's timetable, don't assume it's not possible.

"All my friends had Art when I was in Geography – it made me feel left out."

It's always worth having a conversation with the school which may be able to accommodate your daughter's choices. Some schools will consider running extra classes at lunchtime or after school to accommodate unusual subject combinations, or it may be possible for your daughter to study independently with some support from a teacher, or in evening classes. These options all require extra commitment and a high degree of motivation, but if your daughter is passionate about studying a certain subject then it is worth thinking about.

How parents can support their daughters

The most important thing you can do is to listen to your daughter and help her think through the different options available to her.

When we talked to girls about making their subject choices, they highlighted specific challenges they faced and how their parents helped them to overcome them. These might prove helpful in your discussions with your daughter.

Challenge my decisions but do so supportively

"I didn't want my Mum to just agree with me – I needed her to help me think it through properly and that meant sometimes questioning my decisions. But I needed to feel like she respected my choices too; I needed her support, not her disapproval."

Help me feel empowered to make my own decisions

"I didn't really think that hard at first, I just chose the same subjects as my friends but my Dad told me I needed to think more about it. He explained that it was quite a big deal and it wasn't up to my friends or my teachers or even him, it was up to ME. That made me take it more seriously and think more carefully about the choices I was making."

Help me feel confident to be different

"At my school, girls do art, and boys do D&T. I really like D&T but I was worried that people would think I was weird as I might be the only girl in the class. My parents helped me to feel that I'd be kind of special instead of weird and that doing something different might help me to stand out later on when I was applying for jobs or uni."

Support me if I need to challenge the school

"My school didn't offer the exact combination of subjects I wanted to do. I didn't think there was anything I could do about it but my Mum came with me to talk to my tutor and we managed to work it out. I would never have questioned the school on my own so I was grateful for my Mum's support."

Help me to see the big picture

"The most helpful thing my parents did was to remind me why I was making these choices – sometimes you kind of forget why you're at school and that these decisions will make a difference later when you want a job."

4

GAINING SKILLS AND EXPERIENCE:

For parents of 14–16 year olds

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

This unit provides practical advice about how girls can make themselves more employable by developing their skills and experience. It looks at the skills that are developed through popular activities often available at school, and are important to employers or universities.

The unit will also consider the value of work experience and includes practical advice about how to maximise the opportunities provided by insights into the world of work as well as holiday/weekend jobs and internships.

The value of extra-curricular activities

With ever-increasing competition for both jobs and university places, it's important that your daughter maximises her chances of success. One way of doing that is to take up activities which she enjoys, which develop her skills and which have some relevance to her future.

As your daughter gets older and become more focused on exam results, she may drop extracurricular activities she previously enjoyed to make way for study. Watch out for this as it can be a mistake. Although it's important not to take on too much, and some activities may have to be sacrificed to stop your daughter getting overloaded, a balance between academic work and interests outside school is important not just for your daughter's happiness but also to improve her chances of a college place or job.

Which activities?

If your daughter is clear about what she wants to do when she leaves school, then it's a great idea if her hobbies can tie in with this. Her commitment will demonstrate her passion and she'll also develop relevant skills.

But the most important consideration is, still, what she enjoys doing. If she's struggling to find out what this is, here's some thoughts on common benefits of some popular activities *(see table, right)*:

Whatever she chooses to do, your daughter can gain transferable skills that will be valuable to her when she is applying for jobs or colleges. You can help her identify how her hobbies and activities have helped her become somebody worth employing or teaching. When, later, she comes to write personal statements for a job or university application, or at an interview, she can use these activities to show:

- Resourcefulness in finding interesting activities
- Dedication and commitment to learning new skills
- Ability to work in a team or to support others
- Ability to be a self-starter, to develop self-discipline and commitment to developing her skills
- How her efforts reveal her competence, curiosity, perseverance, maturity, enthusiasm, focus and passion.

If she's into...	Then her employability will be boosted by...
Team sports	teamwork, leadership, self-discipline, learning from setbacks
Making music	teamwork (if playing with others), self-discipline, performance, creativity
Drama	performance, teamwork, public speaking, confidence
Dance	performance, teamwork, self-discipline
Writing	writing skills, creativity
Debating	public speaking, analysis, persuasion, research, performance
Outdoor pursuits	confidence, resilience, resourcefulness
Voluntary work	responsibility, social awareness, communication

Getting the balance right

Extra-curricular activities will make up about 30% of how your daughter markets herself in interviews and personal statements over the next few years – it's clearly important not to neglect the other 70%. She may need to reduce her commitments if it all feels too much as exams are approaching. Often girls will feel like they're letting people down if they stop participating in an activity so they may value your support.

If your daughter is managing her time well and there is no obvious reason for her to stop her hobbies, she should probably continue. They will provide her with a way of winding down and relaxing between revision sessions, and may even increase her overall productivity.

The value of an insight into the world of work

Insight into work offers an important opportunity for young people to gain understanding about the world of work and to develop employability skills that will stand them in good stead when they apply to university or for a job. Most formal work experience, such as spending a week or more working full time at a company, is focused within the post-16 curriculum, but it is beneficial to encourage earlier opportunities to gain insight into the workplace.

If your daughter is able to get an insight into an industry that is relevant to her chosen future then she is likely to find the experience even more valuable (though sometimes the important lesson learned is, 'I don't want to do that job'!) Even if your daughter ends up having an experience that she feels is irrelevant to her, there are still huge benefits in terms of personal development and learning to work within a business environment.

"I hated my work experience. The only thing I learnt was what I didn't want to do. My mum helped me realise that was actually kind of an important lesson!"

Suddenly being immersed in a work environment can be quite challenging for young people as they're likely never to have experienced anything similar before. This in itself is valuable experience, but in order to ensure your daughter gets the most out of her experience, there are several things you can do to prepare her:

Have realistic expectations

Regardless of where your daughter learns about work, the chances are that she's going to be doing a lot of entry level work – fetching and carrying, photocopying, making tea. She needs to be prepared to do these tasks with a smile on her face! The more helpful she is to others at work, the more likely she is to be able to shadow them carrying out more interesting tasks, to be given some responsibility of her own and to be able to ask them for a good reference in the future.

Dress appropriately

If your daughter is new to the world of work then she may not know how to dress. Unless she's been told otherwise, a good rule of thumb is 'smarter is better'. She can see how everyone else is dressed on day one and change her dress accordingly, but she'll make a great first impression if she's dressed smartly and the people at work will know that she's taking the experience seriously. She should arrive with clean hair, clean clothes and clean shoes (ideally not trainers). It is important to consider the workplace your daughter will be joining and try to dress in such a way that she will fit in and be taken seriously.

"My mum told me to wear a suit. I felt a bit silly until I got to work, then I just blended in which was good."

Arrive on time

Emphasise to your daughter that in a work environment it's important to be punctual. If she is unfamiliar with where she's going it might be worth her doing a test run of the journey so she can work out how long it's likely to take and so that she has one less thing to worry about on her first day. It's also vital to have a contact number so that she's able to call in if she is late. She should make sure she doesn't take too long for lunch and other breaks (asking someone at work how long she's allowed if it has not been made clear). In return, she's likely to be allowed to leave work promptly at the end of the day.

Talk to people who work there
In a busy work environment, people may not take the time to talk to your daughter, especially if they know she is not staying for long. Encourage your daughter to be brave and introduce herself to as many people as possible. Practise with her what she might say and maybe even set her a challenge of talking to a certain number of new people on each day. She will get a lot more out of the experience if she gets to know people as she'll learn a bit about their jobs and it will also make her experience more enjoyable.

"Mum would ask me 'who did you meet today?' and ask me about their jobs. It made me want to find out more about the people I was working with."

Take notes
Ensure your daughter takes a notepad and pen with her and that she takes notes when she's told to do things. This way she'll be far more confident carrying out her work activities and she'll quickly be able to get the hang of things and, perhaps, move on to new skills.

Get stuck in
Your daughter will get more out of the work if she attends meetings or shadows people whilst they do their job. These requests are unlikely to be denied, but she will need to ask.

"The first few days I didn't do much, but then I got to know one lady and asked if I could go round with her. She took me to meetings and stuff which was really interesting."

Question, question, question
The best way to learn in a new environment is to ask a lot of questions. Often people will be very happy to talk about their work to your daughter, so she shouldn't feel afraid to ask though she also needs to be aware that they may not be able to respond immediately if they're busy – she shouldn't be downhearted if they can't talk to her right away.

Ask for feedback
Your daughter will be able to gain valuable feedback from the people at work if she asks for it. She can do this as a continual process throughout, asking how well she's done on certain tasks and how she could be more helpful. She can also ask for feedback at the end – at worst this may provide her with some constructive criticism to work on, at best she may have a nice testimonial for use in a personal statement or job application.

Understand the challenges of working in a busy company
Sometimes, a busy work environment can make it difficult for people to pay the level of attention to a student that they might like to. If your daughter does find herself in such an environment, encourage her to respect the pressures on other people's time and to understand that sometimes feedback can't be given immediately and her questions may need to wait. It doesn't mean people aren't interested in her, they just need to get their work done as well as supporting her. She may need to be resilient, but will learn a lot just by seeing how a busy work environment functions – for better and worse. The key thing is to encourage her not to take it personally if people can't give her the time she'd want and to try to learn from the experience of watching busy people at work.

Working in a male-dominated workplace
If your daughter is attracted to a non-traditional career choice, she may find herself in a male-dominated workplace. She might be anxious about this – so what advice can you give her?

"Speak up and put yourself forwards."

A girl who seems too terrified to talk is unlikely to be offered a wide range of opportunities and responsibilities, so even if she's feeling shy she needs to make an effort. "Fake it till you make it" is the best advice here – remind her of how we fool ourselves, as well as others, when we act confident. You could also role-play different scenarios with her, and get her to think up some things she could say if she's feeling overwhelmed or awkward.

"Be friendly with men and women."

It might be natural for your daughter to gravitate towards the other women in the workplace. You can explain to her that one of the differences between work and school is the value placed on being friendly and professional with everyone, and that lunches or coffees are not just a social opportunity but an important way to

network. Encourage her to make the most of her lunch breaks by getting to know a wide range of people, not just those she would choose to be friends with socially.

"If you feel uncomfortable, say something."

The workplace culture will be new to your daughter, and she may feel uncertain or uncomfortable while she gets used to it. However, she shouldn't feel she has to put up with discourtesy, sexism or abuse. She should understand this, and know what to do if anyone says or does anything at work that makes her feel uncomfortable. With low level issues, she should calmly point out to people that she found what they said offensive or inappropriate. More serious issues, which are thankfully very rare, should be escalated immediately. She should seek your support and speak to a line manager so that you can raise the issue together if necessary.

"Understand your place in the hierarchy – but do speak out if you think it's because you're a girl."

Your daughter should expect to be asked to carry out menial tasks – making the tea, doing photocopying or fetching lunch. She shouldn't get offended by this – provided she is not being treated differently to a male student, on the basis of her gender. If she thinks she is being denied opportunities or respect because she is a girl, then she should certainly question it.

Useful Links

Govt advice on post-16 work experience:
www.gov.uk/post-16-work-experience

Advice for parents on health and safety for young people on placements:
www.hse.gov.uk/youngpeople/workexperience/parent.htm

The following has information about insurance, possibly useful as there are some myths around this subject:
www.abi.org.uk/insurance-and-work-experience.pdf

5

GOING YOUR OWN WAY

For parents of 15–16 year olds

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

This unit suggests ways you can gently test your daughter's assumptions about whether her career choices are really right for her. The aim is to help you make sure that your daughter is resisting the 'shoulds' and finding the future that will have the best chance of making her happy. We've also provided some inspiring case studies of women who have ignored society's expectations and been successful, despite having made choices that may be considered unusual.

If you find this unit helpful, you may also like to read Unit 6: 'Exploring possible pathways: for parents of 15–16 year olds'

Decisions, decisions

By the time your daughter reaches 15 or 16, she may have clear ideas about what she wants for her future, and what kind of job or career is most likely to get her there.

Making your mind up can feel like a relief – it certainly reduces the agonies of drawn out decision making – but you will want to be sure that your daughter isn't closing down other options too quickly. It's possible her skills can open up many more doors than she realises, or that there are whole areas of work, that she's never been exposed to and therefore hasn't considered.

"My dad would always ask, 'Why? Why? Why?... Why do you want to do that? Why do you think you can't do that?' He made me think carefully and also made me realise that there were other things I could try and I'd never even thought about before."

At this time, the most helpful thing you can do for your daughter is to act as a 'critical friend' – supporting her in her decisions but not doing so unquestioningly. You can help her to think carefully about the choices she's making, make sure that she considers different options carefully and point her in the direction of useful further information.

Challenging assumptions and busting myths

As your daughter thinks through her education and employment options, there will be lots of factors which are likely to affect the decision making process. These include the opinions of her family and friends, her teachers, and of the media. The clamour of voices and messages competing to be heard can drown out your daughter's own voice, making it hard for her to think through her choices with a clear head.

As a parent, you can support your daughter in making the best choices for her regardless of what anyone else thinks. Following discussions with young women who've been through the decisions facing 15–16 year olds, we've put together a list of ten common myths, assumptions and barriers that the girls we spoke to felt that they needed to overcome in order to make a decision appropriate to them. We've included some ideas about how you might explore these issues with your daughter.

1 Physics isn't for girls

It's a commonly held belief that boys are better at the sciences than girls. But it's not true.

What is true is that girls often lack confidence in this area, and far fewer take up courses and careers that use it. This means that picking it as an option may mean your daughter is in a class where she's the only girl, or one of a small handful. She may find this off-putting, but making choices that buck the trend can stand her in good stead, making her stand out from her peers when it comes to applying for university or careers later on.

Studying physics draws on a wide range of skills that can be useful in a variety of settings. It encourages you to consider how the world around you works, developing analytical and research skills. It's also great for developing mathematical skills in an applied environment and developing general problem solving skills. If your daughter is creative and inquisitive, with good attention to detail, then she is likely to enjoy studying physics.

Take the example of a young woman called Roma who now works as a structural engineer at WSP Group and was involved in designing one of London's most iconic towers, The Shard. *Read Roma's work-life story here.*

2 Girls and tech careers don't mix

Women are under-represented in the rapidly growing technology industry – the more 'techie' the job, the fewer the women. This is especially true in areas like computer science and robotics which are strongly male dominated.

This may put your daughter off pursuing a career in the technology industry – or may mean it simply hasn't occurred to her to consider it. However, this trend is likely to change. In the past, law and medicine were male dominated areas, but this has changed significantly.

> "My dad got me into computers at a young age so ICT was always my favourite subject. Now I'm hoping to go into computer programming because it's a growing area where I reckon there'll be lots of jobs. It's mostly men who do it at the moment but that doesn't put me off!"

As the technology industry develops and changes, there are likely to be more opportunities for women. By choosing to focus her skills in this area, your daughter may find she is more highly sought after than she might imagine.

Organisations such as Little Miss Geek aim to inspire the next generation of young girls to change the world through technology. Despite jobs in technology increasing, the percentage of technology jobs held by women has decreased since 2001 from 22% to 17%.

For more information on women in tech, read about the work-life balance of Belinda Parma, CEO of Lady Geek.

3 You're either a sciencey maths sort of person, or you're not

Young people often think that you have to be a certain kind of human to be good at maths and science, and that you were probably born that way. If your daughter says things like, "I'm just not a maths person", then she is probably dismissing lots of jobs that she could enjoy but that ask for maths or science GCSEs. These skills can be improved, and she shouldn't assume that the gap between her current ability and where she needs to be can't be bridged.

Motivation is key: if your daughter wants a job that requires science or maths, and she willing to work hard, then she may be amazed at what she can achieve. Many young people struggle to see the relevance of subjects such as science or maths during their early schooling and don't work hard at them. But that doesn't mean they can't do it. Past the age of 16, your daughter will receive more intensive teaching, often in a smaller class, and often with a more specialised teacher. These factors can make all the difference, helping her to develop skills in subjects she previously found difficult. Narrowing her focus to only a handful of subjects will also help her to develop her skills in the areas she has chosen to pursue, without the pressure of ten or twelve other subjects also competing for her time and mental capacity.

Some young people will be interested in working in the science field, but may never enjoy or get really good at it. It may still be possible for them to work in their chosen field in another role, though – maybe communications, or administration, or management. There are many jobs in the science world which don't require having studied the subject to an advanced level.

4 Boys are better at maths

Like science, maths is often seen as a male subject. It's common for girls to dismiss the idea of studying maths beyond the age of 16 either because they think it's for boys or because they find it boring. Post 16, maths becomes more challenging and arguably more interesting too.

"Maths was one of my least favourite subjects at GCSE as I'd always seen myself as an arts and humanities kind of girl. When I had to decide on my A-Levels, I didn't know what I wanted to do at university, so I took maths. I ended up really enjoying it."

As well as developing mathematical skills, studying maths will help your daughter develop other highly transferable skills such as her analytical, problem solving and communication skills as she learns to solve and communicate maths problems at a higher level. Not only is maths a well-regarded subject by both universities and employers, it's also essential for every day functions such as choosing a phone or internet tariff, or paying the bills. If your daughter has not determined which educational or career path she would like to take, maths is a subject which will keep many doors open for her.

5 Girls will never reach the top in business

It's true that within the business world top positions are more often filled by men. However, there are lots of examples of women who've reached the top and had a big impact such as Carolyn McCall, CEO of EasyJet, and Ruby McGregor-Smith, CBE, CEO of Mitie.

"The first important thing is for women to start to believe that they have the capability to be at the top." Alita Benson, Group People Director

The mistaken belief that women can't reach the top in business can put a lot of girls off the idea of pursuing a career in business, thinking that they'll be entering a male dominated environment where they're unlikely to make progress. This is a landscape that is rapidly changing and there are increasing opportunities for women in business.

According to Girlguiding UK, a shocking 87% of girls think that women are judged more on appearance than on ability.

If your daughter can stay true to whatever it is that ignites her passion, regardless of outdated stereotypes about 'women's work', then she will become more resilient, more focused, and more her own person. The business world can be tough and your daughter will have to show passion and ability, seek out opportunities rather than expecting them to come to her, and deal with setbacks. But if she can, the role models we have showcased demonstrate what can be achieved.

6 If you're creative you should study arts

Arts subjects are fantastic choices for people who are highly creative, but they're not the only options. Once you're studying at a slightly higher level, many subjects will draw on your daughter's creativity, and pursuing a subject which is not traditionally taken by more creative students may be an opportunity for her to stand out from her peers.

"As a freelance architect, my job can be quite glamorous. I get to plan a new house every time I start a new project. For me, I really am in my dream job."
Silvia Isacco

If your daughter is creative, there are lots of subjects which she may find interesting and fulfilling, including:

- Science and maths – involves a lot of problem solving and creative thinking to prove, or develop and prove experimental hypotheses. Studying subjects such as physics and maths can lead to creative and design-focussed careers such as architecture.
- Technology – again, the ability to take a creative approach to problem solving is a real asset, and many facets of technology also have an element of design involved as work can vary from designing digital lighting displays at concerts to product design.
- Business, sales and marketing – the ability to consider things from the perspective of a customer and to find innovative ways to meet their needs is a valuable skill which requires a great degree of creativity.

There are few, if any, subject areas where a creative mind will not be appreciated so you should encourage your daughter not to feel tied to the more traditional options, and help her to understand how her skills could help her to stand out in a variety of workplaces later on.

7 Girls are better at soft subjects like arts, humanities or social sciences

Some girls are better at arts and humanities, some girls are better at science and maths. Regardless of what society might expect your daughter to excel at or enjoy, you can help her to make choices that really chime with her passions and interests.

"Schools say – think of the job at the end and work backwards – but we need more advice on going with our interests."

It can be hard for a 16 year old to make a choice that might be thought of as unusual or weird by those around her, but she is far more likely to be successful – whatever success means to her – if she bases her choices on what she really wants to do, rather than what she feels she should do.

8 It's more important to do subjects you're good at than subjects you enjoy

If your daughter does well in a particular subject, she's likely to be encouraged to continue with that subject by her school. Enjoyment and ability often go hand in hand, as we tend to work harder at things that interest us more. But this is not always true and you may need to help your daughter to make the decision that is best for her, rather than on getting the highest possible exam results.

If your daughter is persuaded to pursue subjects which she genuinely does not enjoy, then she may do well in the next set of exams, but it won't help her build a career she loves. Post 16, once we specialise in only a handful of subjects, we spend a lot of time studying each subject independently, which is hard to sustain if you're not highly motivated.

"At 16 my parents decided that I should be a pharmacist, so I went down that route then later realised how narrow this made my options so now I need to re-take. I'd been driven by my parents and money rather than a personal interest."

9 Jobs in technology are dull

Jobs in technology are for geeks and nerds, requiring little imagination and providing little stimulation. Right? Wrong.

"Coding conjures up images of boys in dark basements eating pizza and drinking beer but that's a dangerous caricature. The number of women in technology is worryingly low, however in my experience the appetite among professional women to become digitally literate is reassuringly high. We've had hundreds of women at Decoded."

Kathryn Parsons, Co-founder of Decoded (digital training and transformation)

The field of technology is huge but is often dismissed entirely by girls as 'not for them'. However, your daughter is likely to find that the right career in technology will provide her with challenge, stimulation and an exciting opportunity to apply a wide variety of skills.

10 Some jobs are out of bounds if you want to have children

You might be surprised by how much some young women worry about how their career choices will affect their ability to enjoy family life. They are right to be aware of this, of course – combining paid employment with parenthood can be a major challenge – but you will want to make sure your daughter doesn't close down her options too quickly or without full awareness and understanding. You might find it helpful to explore with her questions like these:

- **What feels important to you about when and how you raise children?** Your daughter may have some quite fixed ideas about parenthood – for example, that she wants to be a young mother, or that she wants to stay home with her children until they start school. There's nothing wrong with either aspiration, but you might want to gently challenge her to keep an open mind about how life will pan out. For example, she may end up having children later than she expects, or she may decide that staying at home with toddlers is not what makes her happy.

- **Are you focusing just on the baby years, or thinking across the span of your working life?** Working life lasts nearly 50 years, so it's important not to make lifetime decisions based on the demands of small children – who don't stay small for long. Encourage your daughter to think about working life in stages of changing intensity – for example, it may be difficult to have children during the years of vocational training or establishing yourself in a career, but then it may be possible to plateau for a few years while children are small, before re-committing to a more intense phase of career development when children are older.

- **Do you know the range of ways in which women do, actually, manage to combine careers with children?** If you have combined paid work with raising children, then you will be your daughter's main role model. However, it is important for both you and her to acknowledge that your experiences – be they good or bad – may not be representative. It may be useful to talk to or read about women who have achieved in the area your daughter is interested in. You might also research the measures that make work-life balance easier to achieve for both women and men: such as shared parental leave, the right to request flexible working, and support with childcare.

Case studies of women who've done it their own way

Shaunagh Brown, British Gas Engineer

"I'm one of 12,000 British Gas engineers who visit customers to perform an annual service check on their boiler. It's a great career for women because after a one-year apprenticeship, you're guaranteed a job and you can fit it around other commitments. I visit people from all walks of life and see inside some unusual houses. The work is quite repetitive so talking to customers keeps each job interesting. Everyone still expects to see the gas man at the door. People are sometimes visibly surprised when I turn up, but I don't mind; I'm just as capable as any of the men I work with."

Read Shaunagh's work-life story here.

Emilie Holmes, Founder of Good & Proper Tea

"I've always loved the attention to detail that baristas apply to coffee: choosing the beans, handcrafting your drink and topping it with beautiful latte art – but I could never understand why, when it came to tea, they'd just grab any old teabag and chuck some water in. I saw there was a gap in the market so I spent five years honing my idea for a speciality tea van with custom brewing stations and an online shop. After raising £14,000 through crowd-funding, I quit my job in advertising and took my idea on the road. Since launching the business in December, I've driven my converted van to countless events, including London Fashion Week and Wilderness Festival."

Read Emilie's work-life story here.

Silvia Isacco, Freelance Architect

"As a freelance architect, my job can be quite glamorous, but I do often work alone, mainly for private clients who need renovation work done on residential buildings. When I was a young girl, I had to leave the house I grew up in to go to live with my aunt. I had no space for myself and it was so frustrating to always be a guest in somebody else's house. Now, as an architect, each new client I have is a chance to make my dream come true. I get to plan a new house every time I start a new project. Being an architect, I work long hours but they're worth it. For me, I really am in my dream job."

Read Silvia's work-life story here.

Belinda Parma, CEO, Lady Geek

" Lady Geek is a company campaigning to make technology more accessible to women. I set it up three years ago after an eye-opening experience in a mobile phone shop. When I told the salesman I wanted to buy a smartphone, he began speaking slowly, didn't ask me any questions and offered me a pink phone. Women are not a 'niche' market. At Lady Geek we help technology companies speak to women and we run empathy training to help companies establish emotional connections with their customers. Women still only make up 17% of the UK's technology workforce so profits go towards our social enterprise which aims to inspire girls to go into technology."

Read Belinda's work-life story here.

Roma Agrawal, Structural Engineer, WSP Group

" I decided to become a structural engineer whilst studying physics at Oxford University. One of the most challenging things about my job is juggling the expectations of clients and architects, but I love that aspect. Structural engineering is collaborative. At the moment, I'm working with a team of engineers and architect on the refurbishment of a Georgia house built in the 1700s and a residential project close to railway tracks in east London. Working on The Shard has definitely been my career highlight to date. I think being a female engineer is an advantage as it makes me more memorable."

Read Roma's work-life story here.

Sylvia Prince, Tube Driver, TfL

" It took me twelve weeks to train to be a driver, with five weeks locked in a classroom learning about procedures, signalling and mechanics before being allowed to start driving. The shifts are long (between five and eight hours) but allow me to drop or collect my daughter from Nursery. I get two days off a week and eight weeks holiday a year. I love the quirkiness of my job, too. I drive the C stock – the oldest trains dating from 1969 – and the S Stock, the newest 'electrical' train which has an embedded computer. All driving is done by hand and one lever is used to manually motor and brake the train. Drivers have different ways of staying alert. I like to sing to myself."

Read Sylvia's work-life story here.

Further information

Organisations promoting science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects) for girls and young women:

- **ScienceGrrl** is an organisation promoting STEM subjects for all and therefore celebrating and supporting women in science. It's run by a network of people who are passionate about passing on their love of science to the next generation through online networks, local events across the UK and programmes which encourage girls and women to consider a future in science.
- **WISE** is another great organisation promoting female talent in STEM 'from classroom to boardroom'. Their mission is the increase the presence of female employees in the STEM sector from 13% to 30% by 2020 through teaching resources, mentoring schemes, STEM events, WISE Awards and relevant job listings.
- **Future Morph** also provides guidance on how to get into the STEM sector, advising young people on which courses are available, how to write persuasive applications and how to attain and maximise work experience.
- **Stemettes** aim to inspire girls into the SEM fields by providing role models of women in STEM via panel events, mentoring schemes and exhibitions. See also their webinar *YouTube* channel.
- **Your Life** campaign is a social enterprise promoting opportunities in STEM.

6

EXPLORING POSSIBLE PATHWAYS

For parents of 15–16 year olds

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

This unit is designed to help you support your daughter in making education and career choices post 16. It looks at the popular routes available and provides information about each of those routes.

We consider a range of questions you can explore with your daughter to help her to come to the decisions which are right for her, whilst ensuring that she keeps the doors open for different possibilities in case she needs to take a different direction later on. We've also signposted useful sources of further advice so you can further help your daughter.

If you find this unit helpful, you may also like to read Unit 5: 'Going your own way: for the parents of 15–16 year olds'

Post 16 options

The government has raised the participation age so that young people are now required to continue in education or training beyond the age of 16. Pupils who left Year 11 in summer 2014 were the first cohort required to continue until at least their 18th birthday. However, young people have a choice about how they wish to participate: through full-time education, a job or volunteering combined with part-time study, or by undertaking an apprenticeship or traineeship.

There are a range of options available to your daughter post 16, though local provision will vary. In this section, we look at what your daughter may be thinking as she contemplates these options, and how you might help her.

"At my school you could only do A-Levels so I didn't really learn about the other options available until my parents did some research. I ended up going to college and doing a computing diploma. I loved it."

A-Levels

A-levels are the traditional qualifications offered by schools and colleges for 16-19 year olds, and around two thirds of students do at least one A-level. They offer students a solid academic grounding in a subject, are internationally recognised as a mark of academic achievement, and are a pre-requisite for many universities and professions. Most students choose 3–4 subjects and will sit exams and complete coursework.

"I've always been a hard worker and even though I found GCSEs quite tough, I felt like if I continued to work hard that A-Levels would be the best option for me."

Typical concerns

If your daughter is contemplating continuing her studies by following a traditional A-level route, there are a few questions and concerns she may have. You can explore these with her to make sure that she's making the choice that is a best fit with her personality, abilities and future plans.

Am I clever enough?

A-levels aren't the right choice for everybody, but many girls write themselves off unnecessarily. If your daughter is worried that she won't be able to cope academically with A-levels, you may want to check whether her perception is accurate or fuelled by low self-esteem.

"I kind of liked the idea of A-levels but kept imagining myself sitting in the library crying because I didn't understand the work. Turns out that it was quite a challenge at times, but it was so interesting it felt worth doing."

A-levels may have a very academic image, but most young people are capable of achieving them. A-levels will demand that your daughter is more self-motivated and self-disciplined than she has been in the past, but that is useful experience in itself. Many young people discover a real love of learning at this point, working in smaller groups with equally motivated peers on subjects that interest them.

A good way to gauge whether your daughter is likely to cope with A-level courses is to have an honest discussion with her current teachers. If they advise that A-levels are not an appropriate route for her, then she may find vocational qualifications or an apprenticeship a better fit.

I'm dyslexic, A-Levels can't be for me

If your daughter is dyslexic or has other special educational needs, she may (incorrectly) assume she is not suited to studying A-levels. However, many young women with SEN go on to successfully complete A-levels and make excellent progress in further academic study.

"I was so proud of myself. I needed a bit of extra support on the way through, and I got 25% extra time in my exams, but dyslexia didn't stop me finishing my A-levels."

It's important to ensure that your daughter's school or college are aware of her needs so that they can put appropriate support in place for her. Most schools and colleges are well set up to support students with special educational needs and there's no reason why this should act as a barrier to your daughter's chosen path of study as long as she is well supported.

I might make the wrong decisions

Some young women can become almost paralysed by the fear of making the wrong decisions at this point in their educational career.

"I couldn't make my mind up. Every time I thought I'd decided, I'd think 'but what if when I leave school I decide I want to do X, I won't have the right A-Levels...' – there seemed to be an argument against every possible choice!"

It's true that the choice of which A-Levels to take is an important decision which requires a great degree of thought. However, there's often a lot more flexibility than your daughter might imagine. If she doesn't know what she wants to do later on, she should take subjects that she enjoys and which draw on a range of skills as this will keep doors open for her later on. If she's really worried, remind your daughter that it's always possible to take additional options later on. After all, many people completely retrain mid-career in order to follow a different route. Take for example Gemma Blaskley who moved from television production to floristry:

"My flower shop has been open for two years now and it has been a rollercoaster ride. I gave up my previous career as a television producer because I had a real urge to work with my hands instead. I have always loved flowers, so I did a part-time course in floristry while I was still working. I instantly fell in love with it."

Vocational qualifications

Vocational qualifications provide a practical and creative approach to learning, with a less classroom-based approach than A-Levels (or equivalent) and often provide the opportunity for students to gain work experience. They are usually examined via ongoing assessments and coursework.

This path might be a good option for your daughter if she would enjoy a more practical mode of study and real-world learning and if she has a clear idea about the area she'd like to work in.

"Ever since I could remember I wanted to run my own hairdressing business. I kind of thought it would be easy and went to college expecting to have a bit of a laugh. I actually had to work really hard but I learned so much."

If your daughter is interested in going to university, you should check whether the vocational qualifications she's interested in will be recognised by her chosen university or course of study. This varies hugely. If in doubt, you daughter's school will be able to offer advice.

Typical concerns

If your daughter is contemplating following a vocational route, there are a few questions and concerns she may have. You can explore these with her to make sure that she's making the choice that is a best fit with her personality, abilities and future plans.

"Vocational qualifications aren't for people like me."

There's a common misconception that vocational routes of study are only suitable for less able pupils.

"My Mum suggested I thought about doing a BTEC in applied sciences and I was like 'But I'm not stupid!' She just laughed and said that was exactly why she was suggesting it. She thought I'd find it harder than doing an A Level but that it would be more interesting too as I'd been moaning about being bored of school and exams."

Vocational courses can be as stimulating and challenging as A-levels, but with a stronger focus on practical application. There are a wide range of vocational options available now and universities may accept vocational qualifications for some courses (but check first!).

"I don't know what to expect."

Studying for a vocational qualification will be quite different to anything your daughter has done before and she might be worried about what will be expected of her.

"I liked the idea of it but I was kind of scared just because it sounded so different."

Whilst the method of study and assessment will be different, with far more time dedicated to practical learning and ongoing assessments or coursework rather than exams, your daughter will still be supported in a similar way to school. She'll have classmates and tutors and will follow a structured course. Talking to students in the year above who've already started the course is a good way for your daughter to get honest answers to her questions. This is often possible on a college open day, or you could organise a visit to the relevant department.

Apprenticeships

An apprenticeship is a job that includes high quality training, the practice of new skills and achievement of a nationally-recognised qualification. Apprenticeships usually last between 1–4 years and the best ones are highly sought after. A minimum wage rate for apprentices was introduced in late 2010 but many employers pay more than this. Although the beginning wages are low, apprenticeships tend to lead to higher employability and higher lifetime earnings.

There are different entry requirements depending on the apprenticeship and the industry sector. Competition for places with employers can be fierce, so your daughter would need to show that she is committed and aware of her responsibilities to both herself and the company who would employ her. She would also need to be happy to work both as part of a team and independently, as well as being able to use her own initiative.

"To be honest, it was a bit of a shock, you're sort of chucked in at the deep end, but you learn really fast and it's nice that you earn a bit of money at the same time."

Apprenticeships are designed with the help of the employers in the industry, so they offer a structured programme that would take your daughter through the skills she needs to do a job well. As an employee she will be in employment for most of her time, which is where much of her training will take place. The rest of the training usually takes place at a local college or a specialist training organisation (usually between one day a week to one day a fortnight, depending on the company and the qualification).

Typical concerns

If your daughter is contemplating taking up an apprenticeship, there are a few questions and concerns she may have. You can explore these with her to make sure that she's making the choice that is a best fit with her personality, abilities and future plans.

"I won't know what to do!"

Starting an apprenticeship might feel like quite a leap for your daughter, and it's quite normal for her to feel unprepared or daunted.

"I was worried that everyone would expect me to know what to do and I wouldn't have a clue!"

However, your daughter will be well supported and will be following a specific programme of study organised between her college and workplace. No one will expect her to know what she's doing on day one, but she's likely to surprise herself with quite how quickly she does pick up the skills and knowledge required of her new workplace. Picking up new skills, adapting to a new workplace and able to make transitions to new surroundings are also essential skills for her future career, and something potential employers in the future will notice.

"I won't know anyone."

Your daughter might be anxious about leaving the safety of a group of friends she's known for years at school and entering a workplace where she might not know anyone.

"I'd been hanging around with the same three friends ever since I could remember. I was sort of sad leaving them and scared no one would like me."

This is a perfectly normal and legitimate concern – and something that any of us might worry about when moving between workplaces. However, your daughter is likely to find that people go out of their way to support her and that, with a little bit of effort, she'll quickly make friends. Encourage her to be brave and introduce herself to as many of her co-workers as possible. Practise with her what she might say and maybe even set her a challenge of talking to a certain number of new people on each day. She will get a lot more out of her apprenticeship if she gets to know her co-workers as she'll learn a bit about their jobs and it will also make her experience more enjoyable.

Further information on apprenticeship is available from the National Apprentice Service's dedicated online Apprenticeship vacancies job site. The National Careers Service also provides independent, professional advice on careers, skills and the labour market, including the benefits of apprenticeships and how to apply for vacancies.

General things to consider during the decision making process

At this point in her education, you daughter is faced with a wide variety of choices which will have a major impact on the career and education pathways she is able to pursue later on. This can make the decision making process seem very daunting and your daughter is likely to welcome your support.

"I was sort of like a rabbit in headlights. I didn't know which way to turn and really needed help."

When we talked to girls and young women about the helpful discussions they had with their parents whilst making their post 16 choices, they came up with suggestions for questions that you might find useful when exploring this with your own daughter.

Do you have any specific ideas about what you'd like to do later on?

If your daughter has a clear idea about a specific course she might like to pursue later on at university, or a career path that she thinks she's interested in, then this should have a major influence when making her post 16 choices. If, after a little research, it turns out that she's not very excited by the path she needs to follow to pursue her later ambitions, then it's worth having a serious discussion about whether or not this is actually the right decision for her.

If your daughter isn't sure about what she'd like to study, it's a good idea to keep as many options open as possible. For advice on how to do this, or select A Level choices which fit together well, check out the ***Russell Group guidance*** on post-16 selections or the ***Which? Guide 'What A-Levels do you need for the degree you want to study?'***

Which skills are you most keen to develop?

This is about turning the telescope round – rather than focusing solely on the end point, try thinking about the skills and activities (not subjects) your daughter enjoys here and now. Does she prefer working with her hands, mental task-solving, seeing the bigger picture or focusing on detail? Does she need short-term results to keep her interest sustained? Is she analytical, or creative? Many skills and traits are transferable across a wide range of subjects, so help your daughter to see how it's not always the obvious choice which will be the most fulfilling. For example, if she loves to write then she might find a subject such as psychology or philosophy, where she gets to write researched essays arguing a specific point of view, just as fulfilling as writing essays about English literature.

"I didn't realise what a wide range of subjects there were that I could study. My mum came with me to an open evening and we had a really good talk about which ones might suit me."

What subjects do you enjoy?

Post 16, your daughter will spend a significant amount of time studying each of her chosen subjects and she'll be required to do more independent learning than she has in the past. She's unlikely to be able to remain focused and motivated if she chooses to study subjects she doesn't enjoy.

"I started off doing French. Knowing another language seemed like a good skill employers would like. The only problem was, I've always hated French lessons! I got by at GCSE but at A Level I really struggled. It was much harder. I ended up dropping it after half a term."

Where will these subjects take you?

Your daughter may rapidly come to conclusions about which subjects she'd like to study post 16 without giving it an awful lot of thought. They might be the best choices for her, but it's worth taking a little time to explore what might come next, especially if she doesn't have a specific route in mind in terms of her future education or career. If this is the case, try to encourage your daughter to keep doors open by studying a range of subjects which will develop key skills that are valued by universities and employers.

The Russell Group guidance on post-16 selections could again be useful here.

"My mum told me it didn't matter if I didn't know what I wanted to do when I left school and that I should study subjects that I enjoyed. She encouraged me to do a bit of variety though so I'd be keeping my options open which seemed sensible."

Are these the right subjects for the university course you're interested in?

If your daughter has specific plans to apply for a specific course or to a specific university (or both) then it's worth taking time to understand any specific entry requirements. These can sometimes be a little bit surprising – for instance, some universities offering psychology value maths A Level above psychology A Level. So it's worth going to the time and effort to check on the respective websites, rather than to make assumptions.

It's best to look directly at the websites of the universities your daughter is interested in to find out the specific course requirements. To find out which universities offer the specific course she's interested in you can use the ***UCAS website*** to search through the UKs universities and courses.

For a broad idea of which subjects are valued more and less by universities you can visit this ***Which? Guide 'What A-Levels do you need for the degree you want to study?'*** or reference the ***Russell Group guidance*** on which subjects to take in order to access the top 20 research universities.

How do you learn best?

When deciding between traditional study, vocational study or an employment based route, it's helpful to get an understanding of how your daughter most enjoys learning. She's likely to have only really had exposure to a relatively traditional learning environment in the past. A good starting point for this discussion is whether a traditional learning environment is a way of learning which she feels comfortable with. If, for any reason she feels it doesn't suit her – perhaps she finds classroom-based work uninspiring or never performs to the best of her ability in exams, then a non-traditional route might be an alternative worth exploring. She could also consider taking a combination of vocational and traditional subjects.

"I thought that if you were bright you did A-levels. End of. My dad told me I should really consider all the options. He said that there were some really good diplomas and stuff now and a friend's daughter had done one and gone on to uni. I'm still thinking about it; my dad's helped me realise I've got choices."

Should you stay at your current school?

This may not be an option as many schools do not have post 16 provision, but where it is there is often a tendency for girls to continue their studies at the same school without really considering the alternatives. Encourage your daughter to take a look at the options available to her and consider whether any of these might better suit her needs than her current school. If possible, it's helpful to go and look around more than one college – and if you do, encourage your daughter to talk to the current students, she'll learn far more from them than from a teacher or college leader who is giving their best sales pitch.

"I never thought I'd want to leave my school and my friends and everything but I went and looked round a couple of other places, and one college had the most amazing art department and teachers that I instantly liked. I just knew I would love it there."

Should you consider something you haven't done before?

Doing something completely different can be a little daunting and your daughter may be more likely to tend towards advancing her studies in areas that she's already somewhat familiar with. However, taking up a new subject can prove very rewarding. Schools and colleges often hold open

evenings where young people can learn more about the various subjects on offer. This can be a valuable opportunity for you and your daughter to learn more about the different opportunities available to her.

"I decided to do a media BTEC. I hadn't done media before but I liked English and I thought it sounded more interesting than normal A-Levels. I'm really enjoying it!"

Index of websites

Informed Choices: A Russell Group guide to making decisions about post-16 education 2013–14:
www.russellgroup.org/InformedChoices-latest.pdf

UCAS website and course search tool:
www.ucas.com/

For a broad idea of which subjects are valued more and less by universities you can visit this:
Which? Guide 'What A-Levels do you need for the degree you want to study?'

7

BUILDING RESILIENCE:

For all age groups

Introduction

This is one of a series of units that make up the Your Daughter's Future toolkit, which is designed to help you support your daughter in making the education and career choices that are right for her.

The teenage years can be a bit of a rollercoaster even before the stresses of exams and life choices are added in. Many parents worry about how they can support their children at this time, and some feel pushed away their daughters' assertions of independence. But the girls we consulted were absolutely insistent that they wanted their parents' emotional support and, indeed, looked to their parents as their first and most important source of that support. (This might not be what they are saying to you!)

When we asked the girls how they wanted their parents to help them, they came up with these ***five top tips***:

1. "Listen to me"

The best way to cope with stress and anxiety is to share it with someone. Make sure that your daughter knows you are ready and willing to listen to her if she wants to talk. And if she does choose to confide in you, try to give her your undivided attention. You may not be able to come up with a magic solution (and she may not want you to) but she'll feel better for having thought through her problems aloud, and for knowing you are on her side.

> "Whenever I talked to my Mum, I found I felt a lot better. Saying what was bothering me out loud made it feel sort of smaller and more like something I could manage."

What if your relationship has hit a rocky patch and you're the last person your daughter wants to confide in? She'll probably still value the offer, even if she doesn't take you up on it. And you may be able to help bring her together with another trusted adult – a grandparent, aunt, uncle or family friend – who could provide a listening ear instead.

2. "Encourage and help me"

There can be a fine line between encouraging and pressurising. Many girls told us that they most appreciated a general sense that their parents were on their team, and supporting the process rather than having expectations of the results. They didn't like being micro-managed – for example, nagged over how they revised or how often they had breaks – but they liked to hear that their parents were proud of their efforts.

"It was little things that made the biggest difference. My parents helped me to reorganise my room and make a proper study area – like my own little office. It was a good place to work and was kind of their way of saying 'we take you seriously'."

Help your daughter to study more easily by doing what you can to control background noise and distractions at home. Some families find that having set times when everyone is doing something quiet can be good for everyone. Try not to have too many expectations of your daughter in terms of family or social commitments at times when she might otherwise be revising or winding down with friends.

3. "Feed me!"

Encourage your daughter to make time for exercise, to get enough sleep and to eat healthily. Many of us turn to energy drinks, sugary snacks and coffee as late-night revision aids, but too many of these are not good for anyone – in the short or the long term. Nagging her about a well-balanced diet is unlikely to go down well at this time, though, so try to offer a positive alternative in the form of a good stock of healthier snacks available when she needs them.

"I felt guilty if I didn't study really late until one time my Mum sat me down and told me that working when I should be sleeping was probably doing more harm than good as I was so tired all the time."

4. "Help me to relax"

It's important that your daughter builds in time for rest and relaxation as well as studying. Some young people feel like they're letting their parents down if they take a break, so make it clear that you appreciate they're working hard and that you think it's important for them to take a break too. Talk with your daughter about how taking regular breaks can actually make her study more effective.

5. "Help me see the wood for the trees"

You don't want to downplay the importance of exams, but if your daughter is hyper-conscientious and anxious, you might want to offer her some perspective. While encouraging her to do her best, you might need to point out to her gently that life will not in fact be over if she doesn't do as well as she wants. Using your own life experience, or that of family or friends, show her that life is full of opportunities and there is always a way forward.

"I remember so clearly the morning of my first exam. It was the most important thing I'd ever done and I was so scared I could hardly walk straight. My Dad gave me a big hug and reminded me of all the things I had to look forward to after my exams and told me he was proud of me. I said, 'But I haven't done my exams yet' and he said, 'I'm proud of how hard you've worked'. I felt so much better."

Whilst the stress and anxiety experienced by many girls is within a normal range and for some girls, this can become more serious, developing into a more significant mental health issue which may need professional support. Mental health issues in teenage girls often go undetected, as the warning signs are frequently mistaken for normal teenage behaviour. If in doubt, your daughter's teachers or your family GP will be able to provide support and advice. There are also several websites and helplines listed at the end of this unit.

What if my daughter lacks motivation?

You may have read this far quietly muttering to yourself, "If ONLY my daughter was over-conscientious and studying too hard – that's the kind of problem I'd like to have!". If this is a long-standing issue you are probably well aware of the reasons why. But sometimes girls who have been motoring along quite happily seem to go off the boil just as exams loom over the horizon. Why could this be, and how can you help?

Fear of failure

Sometimes, the fear of failure can be so great that girls decide to opt out instead, feeling that it's safer not to try at all rather than to be seen to fail.

Lauren spends her whole time telling everyone she doesn't care about school. She doesn't care about her exams. She's planning on leaving school as soon as she can anyway. That said, she's quietly beginning to worry a little bit as she's struggling to understand what's being taught in class and rarely has time to complete any homework because she's busy helping out at home with her younger brother and sister. She never tells anyone that she's worried about not understanding her school work – she just shrugs it off and says she doesn't care. She's starting to wonder if she should just not turn up for her exams at all – that way at least she would look like she didn't care, rather than looking like she's stupid.

If your daughter's performance at school has dropped, she makes a point of telling people how little she cares about school and exams and/or you sense some anxiety when you discuss the future with her, then she may be scared of failing. If you think this is the case you can help her by:

- **Putting things in perspective.** What's the worst that can happen, and what if it does happen? Remember it is almost always possible to retake exams if necessary.
- **Discussing realistic expectations.** Your daughter's fear of failure may come from expecting too much of herself. What is the minimum she needs to achieve in order to get into her chosen career?
- **Talking to the school.** Your daughter may be underestimating herself, or she may indeed need some extra help. Talking to your daughter's teachers with her may unlock some practical support.

Hasn't found her path?

Some young people find it hard to see the point of exams and studying because they don't have plans for the future. They haven't yet decided which path they want to follow and exams appear arbitrary and pointless. Or they don't realise what they're capable of achieving and what possibilities the future could hold for them.

If this sounds like your daughter, you can help her by:

- **Exploring different career options with her.** Try to spark her imagination by looking at our case studies library with her. Once she finds her passion, it will be easier to work out what she needs to do to get there.
- **Find real-life examples to inspire her.** As well as using our case studies, take a look around you. Do you have friends or relatives with interesting jobs? Have them talk with your daughter about their career path and how their time at school helped get them onto it.
- **Remind her of all that she has achieved so far.** Perhaps no-one in your family has been to university before, or done the job that attracts your daughter, and she doesn't feel entitled or capable to shine in that area. Help to boost her confidence by chatting about all she has achieved so far – both in and outside school. If your daughter knows that you have faith in her, that will build her confidence in her ability to build the life she wants; if she knows that you are proud of her, it will help her to reach out for new possibilities without worrying that she is somehow leaving you behind.

Underlying issues?

If your daughter has previously been motivated by and engaged with her school work but has recently become disinterested, then it's possible that she has underlying emotional well-being issues which she needs support with. Lack of motivation, particularly in areas of our lives that used to fill us with passion and enthusiasm can be an early indicator of depression. If you are worried that this may be a possibility for your daughter then you should talk to your daughter and to your daughter's school or GP who will be able to provide further support. You may also find the websites and helplines listed below of help.

Have a Plan B

Many young people worry unnecessarily that they'll fail their exams – but for some, this will actually happen. Without telling your daughter, you could quietly prepare for this possibility by finding out what options she would have, and who she would need to talk to, if the worst happens.

"I was devastated. I felt so ashamed and I knew I wouldn't get into college. I just wanted to sit in my room and cry but my mum took charge, making an appointment for us to see the college principal – who did give me a place but with slightly different courses."

The importance of self-esteem

Lack of faith in their own skills and abilities can be a major barrier for girls in their career choices. We often see all that is wonderful and special about our daughters, but they may not share our view.

Adolescence is a time when girls often struggle with low self-esteem resulting in a lack of confidence in their abilities. It's important that parents try to recognise and support their daughters in overcoming this, so that a difficult time during adolescence does not end up having lasting ramifications for them, as a result of choices they make when their self-esteem is low.

"I wish I could give my teenage self a good shake. I hated myself and felt constantly judged. I thought I was worthless and would amount to nothing. It meant I didn't try as hard as I could and I always went for the easy option so that I wouldn't fail. A part of me enjoyed science and imagined life as a scientist in a lab. But I thought I couldn't do it, so I didn't even try."

Recognising low self-esteem

Low self-esteem can be easy to miss, especially if masked by the bravado of adolescence. There are three common forms that low self-esteem often takes: seeking to appear happy and successful, appearing indifferent or rebellious, or feeling unable to cope.

- **Seeking to appear happy and successful:** She may act as if she is happy and successful, but is really terrified of failure. She lives with the constant fear that she will be found out and needs continuous successes to maintain the appearance of positive self-esteem, which may lead to problems with perfectionism, procrastination, competition, and burn-out.

> "Because I usually do well, people assume it's easy for me and dismiss my worries. They don't understand how scared I am that maybe the next test will be the one where I don't do well enough."

- **Appearing indifferent or rebellious:** She acts like the opinions and approval of other people, especially authority figures, don't matter to her. She is always angry about not feeling good enough, and always needing to prove that she doesn't care about others' judgments or criticisms. She may seem angry, defiant and unable to accept the help and advice offered to her.

> "I was in this weird cycle of being worried I'd fail but putting on this act of not caring. So my Mum or a teacher would try and support me and I'd just walk away or be rude to them."

- **Feeling unable to cope:** She feels helpless and unable to cope with the world and lacks the confidence to take the initiative, instead waiting for others to help her. In fear of taking responsibility for changing her life, she may look repeatedly to others for guidance, which can lead to problems such as lack of assertiveness, underachievement and overreliance on others in relationships.

> "I just sort of hid away. I spent more and more time in bed, worrying about all the work I needed to do but not doing anything about it."

Helping your daughter to regain healthy self-esteem

Change doesn't necessarily come quickly or easily but, with your support, it can happen. There are many ways you can support your daughter to try to improve her self-esteem. Different things work for different people and, as someone who knows your daughter well, you'll be well-placed to identify what might work for her. However, never be afraid to start over and try a different tack.

Rebut the inner critic

The first important step in improving self-esteem is to encourage your daughter to challenge the negative messages of her critical inner voice. If she tells you how she is feeling, you're probably already used to contradicting her – of course, as her mum or dad, it's your job to do this and she probably wants you to do so while also thinking, "Well, they would say that." The challenge is to help your daughter to change her own way of thinking, rather than repeatedly reassuring her that she is wrong.

A good first step is to make sure your daughter knows that you are happy to listen to her and to regularly make time to do so (yes, easier said than done). Rather than just disagreeing with everything she says about herself, try to introduce her to the concept of being her own best friend. Best friends don't verbally abuse you when you're feeling down; they offer challenge when necessary but they keep it constructive; above all, they're on your team. You might want to ask questions like:

- Is it possible you're being too harsh on yourself? What would you say to your friend if it had been them in this situation, rather than you?
- Was there anything you said/did that worked well?
- Are there any other possible explanations?
- Can you think of another time when you were in this kind of situation and it worked out well? What did you do differently then?
- What do you think you could do differently next time to get a different result?
- If you were your own best friend, what would you be saying to yourself now?

On the next page are some typical examples of the inner critic and some strategies to rebut that critical voice.

Unfairly harsh inner critic:
"People said they liked my presentation, but it was nowhere near as good as it should have been. I can't believe no-one noticed all the places I messed up. I'm such a fake."

Acknowledge strengths:
"Wow, they really liked it! Maybe it wasn't perfect, but I worked hard on that presentation and did a good job. I'm proud of myself."

An inner voice that generalises unrealistically:
"I got an F on the test. I don't understand anything in this class. I'm such an idiot. I shouldn't be taking this class. I'm stupid, and I'll never make it to college."

Be specific:
"I did poorly on this test, but I've done okay on all the homework. There are some things here that I don't understand as well as I thought I did, but now I have a better idea of how to prepare and what I need to work on. I've done fine in other tough classes; I'm confident I can do this."

An inner critic that makes illogical leaps:
"He's frowning. He didn't say anything, but I know it means that he doesn't like me!"

Challenge illogical thoughts:
"Okay, he's frowning, but I don't know why. It could have nothing to do with me. Maybe I should ask."

An inner voice that catastrophizes:
"He turned me down for a date! I'm so embarrassed and humiliated. No one likes or cares about me. I'll never find a boyfriend. I'll always be alone."

Be objective:
"Ouch! That hurt. Okay, he doesn't want to go out with me. That doesn't mean no one does. I know I'm a nice person. I'm confident that in time I'll find someone who's as interested in me as I am in him."

Build your support network
As your daughter starts her transition from the small closed world of school into the wider community, she will need to broaden her support networks. This is particularly useful if she is choosing a non-traditional career path, or one that is not shared by many of her friends. She may be able to find local clubs or groups, or online chat fora. She can also find professional advice and support through the National Careers Service helpline or websites such as icould *http://icould.com*.

Practise self-compassion
Helping your daughter to rebut her inner critic is an important first step, but it's not enough. Practicing self-compassion means treating yourself with the same empathy you would show others and it's an important skill for your daughter to learn.

It can often help to see things with a close friend as an example. Talk to your daughter about how if a friend was having a hard time, she'd be likely to be extra caring and supportive and that she deserves the same treatment too.

Rather than focusing on evaluating herself, it's helpful if she can acknowledge when things are difficult and try to nurture and care for herself in these times especially.

You could discuss the following examples with your daughter to help her learn to give herself an easier time:

- **Encourage her to forgive herself when she doesn't do as well as she'd hoped:** Encourage your daughter to be gentle with herself rather than critical of herself when things don't go as she had hoped. This can be surprisingly hard if she's not used to doing it, but recognising that such experiences are inevitable can help.

"My Mum always said I was my own harshest critic, and I guess she's right. There's no way I'd treat a friend the way I treat myself."

You can role model this behaviour yourself, and discuss with your daughter a time when you recently felt disappointed and what you did to make yourself feel better. Discuss things that bring each of you comfort and also talk about how you can support each other in the face of disappointment, rather than bottling it up and giving yourselves a hard time.

- **Help your daughter to recognise her 'humanness':** As humans we all make mistakes, and we are all affected by external factors we can't control. Accepting our 'humanness' helps us to feel more connected to others rather than feeling we are enduring these types of experiences all alone. Helping your daughter to recognise

that mistakes are an inevitable part of being human will help her to be more compassionate with herself and others.

"I felt like I had to be perfect all the time. I'd spend hours on my homework making sure there wasn't a single mistake. If I made a mistake in class I'd feel upset about it all day."

Your daughter may feel like she isn't allowed to make mistakes. Many girls wrongly feel that their parents expect perfection of them all the time, academically, on the sports field, socially, but actually it's often them that are driving these unrealistic expectations. Talk openly with your daughter about your hopes and expectations for her and reassure her that nobody can be perfect all of the time. Perhaps discuss with her some times in the past when you made a mistake that you learnt from. Showing your daughter that you are human too can be an important step in enabling her to feel like it's okay to make mistakes sometimes.

- **Help your daughter to be more aware of her emotions:** Help your daughter to understand that if she does feel upset about a situation she should try to allow herself to experience that emotion in a balanced way, without suppressing it or getting completely swept up in the feeling. She should try not to judge herself for having negative emotions. If she can remember that emotions come and go and eventually pass, it will help her to not become overwhelmed by her feelings.

"Everyone else seemed to have these perfect lives and be happy all the time. I was happy sometimes but other times I'd feel so angry or so sad that I didn't know what to do."

Adolescence can be an emotional roller coaster, with everything felt very intensely. Talk to your daughter about the different emotions she feels and why she feels them. Sometimes she just won't know! Help her to feel less afraid of her emotions and talk to her about techniques she can use to help manage her emotions. Sometimes just talking to someone, such as a friend, a parent or another trusted adult, can help. So can writing a diary, making music, dancing or art.

And finally… a note on perspective

Choosing subject and career options is usually the first time our daughters have been responsible for a decision that could affect the whole of the rest of their lives. No wonder they sometimes feel overwhelmed. The girls we talked to responded well to being reminded that there are second chances, and that most people switch jobs or career paths a few times in their lifetimes. Interests change, new opportunities emerge, and career paths aren't always linear. This shouldn't be seen as 'getting it wrong', but as part of the richness of life's journey.

"My mum said to me, 'You're probably not going to marry your first boyfriend, and you're probably not going to still be doing the job that you pick at age 16 when you're 60. She's right, and I find that thought really reassuring."

Useful websites and helplines

If you have concerns that your daughter's levels of stress or anxiety are beyond what you can safely manage at home, there is also a wide range of support available online and on the phone from the organisations listed below. Talking to the school is also important.

www.youngminds.org.uk
Young Minds supports the emotional wellbeing of young people. Their website has lots of support and information you may find helpful.

www.selfharm.co.uk
Support and advice about self-harm

www.b-eat.co.uk
Beat provides helplines, online support and a network of UK-wide self-help groups to help adults and young people in the UK with eating disorders. You can call their parent helpline on 0845 634 1414.

Childline
Childline is a safe place for young people to talk about anything that is worrying them. All calls are free and confidential.

Helpline:
0800 1111
Email:
www.childline.org.uk/Talk/Pages/Email.aspx
Website:
www.childline.org.uk/
Message boards:
www.childline.org.uk/Talk/Boards/Pages/Messageboards.aspx
Online counsellor:
www.childline.org.uk//OnlineChat
Info for adults:
www.childline.org.uk/Pages/InformationForAdults.aspx

Samaritans
The Samaritans helpline is available 24 hours a day 365 days a year and their trained advisers are a great source of support if you or your child need to talk to someone.

Helpline:
08457 90 90 90
Email:
Jo@Samaritans.org
Website:
www.samaritans.org/
Face to face:
www.samaritans.org/branches

Get connected
Get connected provides free, confidential help to under 25's who are in need of support but don't know where to turn. They'll talk things through with your daughter and help to connect them to an appropriate local service.

Helpline:
0808 808 4994 (free. 1pm–11pm)
Text:
80849
(free answer within 24 hours)
Email:
www.getconnected.org.uk/get_help/email_us
Webchat:
Online chat daily from 1pm–11pm

ABOUT THIS TOOLKIT

This toolkit has been written by the Personal Social Health and Economic (PSHE) Education Association and funded by the Government Equalities Office. It offers information and advice on careers for parents of girls aged 12–16. It contains seven units that address different topics and age groups; these can be read together, or you can pick out the bits that look most useful to you. There is also a great case studies library, courtesy of Stylist magazine.

A great many people helped with the development of this toolkit. We would particularly like to thank:

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- Professor Deirdre Hughes, The National Careers Council
- The Education and Employers Taskforce
- Professor Jenny Bimrose, University of Warwick
- Helen Lamprell, Vodafone UK
- Jill Shedden, Centrica
- Sue Langley, UK Financial Services

LINKS AND RESOURCES LIBRARY

Careers advice

All schools have a legal duty to provide careers advice; if you're not sure what your daughter's school offers, do ask. The Government also offers the ***National Careers Service*** website which is packed full of resources including a dedicated section for 13–16 year olds, information on courses and apprenticeships, a free telephone helpline and online chat service. Vinspired have also created a fantastic ***Jumpstarter Packs*** for parents who are concerned about the child finding work so includes a guide to writing a stand out CV and strong application forms as well as lessons on how to improve presentation skills.

Work experience and volunteering

In order to start writing a CV or personal statement before applying to either a job or University, it's useful to have some relevant work experience. This can be gained either through paid work, work experience or voluntary work. However, unless your school offers good work experience opportunities or you have friends or families in relevant work, work experience can be hard to find. Websites such as ***Work Inspiration*** can help link young people to work experience opportunities as the campaign has placed 150,000 young people with 600 companies so far. Another option is to volunteer which will provide you with useful experience, while contributing towards a worthwhile cause. Websites such as ***Vinspired***, ***National Citizen Service*** and ***Do-it*** make valuable voluntary opportunities accessible and easy to apply to.

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships have gained a great deal of publicity recently, both from politicians and the press, and quite rightly so as they can provide a great opportunity for young people to gain tangible employability skills, as well as job-specific training, all while earning. Apprenticeship programs can vary with their entry requirements, with some no qualifications, some requiring GCSEs and others requiring A-Levels. A list of currently available apprenticeships can be found on the ***national apprenticeships*** website. Also, apprenticeships have fantastic employment prospects at the end of the training period with level three STEM apprenticeships (sub-degree level apprenticeships in science, technology, engineering or maths) often paying more than many degree level jobs. Apprenticeships therefore pose as a great option for the 50% of young people who seek out employment and vocational training instead of going onto University.

Opportunities for women in business

In the most recent Women's Business Council report – Maximising Women's Contribution to Future Economic Growth: A view from business six months on – there were a great deal of opportunities for women in business, including school leavers. These included positions at big influential firms such as KPMG who have recruited 375 school leavers to date, including 165 women. Details of the opportunities at KPMG and many more companies can be found in the ***Women's Business Council Report – six months on***.

Choosing A-Levels for your preferred degree

Entry requirements for University degrees will vary depending on the institution, but before your daughter is at the point of looking into UCAS requirements and preferred Universities, it's good to make sure that she won't be closing off any doors too soon, by choosing the wrong A-levels. This ***Russell Group guide to making an informed choice*** will help you both to work out how to keep your daughters' options open!

Organisations promoting science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM subjects) for girls and young women

ScienceGrrl is an organisation promoting STEM subjects for all and therefore celebrating and supporting women in science. It's run by a network of people who are passionate about passing on their love of science to the next generation through online networks, local events across the UK and programmes which encourage girls and women to consider a future in science.

WISE is another great organisation promoting female talent in STEM 'from classroom to boardroom'. Their mission is to increase the presence of female employees in the STEM sector from 13% to 30% by 2020 through teaching resources, mentoring schemes, STEM events, WISE Awards and relevant job listings.

Future Morph also provides guidance on how to get into the STEM sector, advising young people on which courses are available, how to write persuasive applications and how to attain and maximise work experience.

Stemettes aim to inspire girls into the STEM fields by providing role models of women in STEM via panel events, mentoring schemes and exhibitions. See also their webinar *YouTube* channel.

The ***Your Life*** campaign is a social enterprise promoting opportunities in STEM.

Websites useful for young people who want to set up their own business

- www.greatbusiness.gov.uk/
- www.gov.uk/business
- *Social enterprises: www.socialenterprise.org.uk/about/about-social-enterprise*

Websites for inspiration

- ***Plotr*** is a free website bringing together insight and guidance from industry to help 11–24 year olds plan the careers they want.
- ***icould*** provides first hand information and inspiration on career ideas and what to do next.
  Inspiring the Future is a free service with volunteers from all sectors and professions going into state schools and colleges to talk about their jobs and sectors.

Advice to people with disabilities, including higher education advice

- ***www.ucas.com/ucas/students-disabilities***
  Students with disabilities – offers a wide range of information on courses, funding and accessibility.
- ***www.disabledgo.com***
  DisabledGo offers a searchable database on accessible places to visit or stay, including universities.
- ***http://greatwithdisability.com***
  Greatwithdisability.com has a range of information on careers, tips for applying for jobs and case studies.
- ***www.disabilityrightsuk.org/IntoApprenticeships.pdf***
  Disability Rights UK, with support from Barclays, have produced a guide to apprenticeships, which is available here.
- ***https://nationalcareersservice.direct.gov.uk/advice/planning/Pages/disabilities.aspx***
  The National Careers Service website has information on studying and on getting support once in the workplace.

PREPARING FOR UNIVERSITY

A-Level choices

The post-16 subject choices you make when in Year 11 can make a significant difference to your options from then on out. For young women who would like to go onto study at University it's a good idea to choose AS and A Level subjects that match their aspirations, or will keep their options open if they're yet to decide on a preferred degree.

We've used guidelines written by ***The Russell Group Universities*** for this section so bear in mind that this will be the top level of entry requirements and that for many universities, there will be more flexibility in which A Level choices will admit applicants to their choice of subject.

A list of responses on entry requirements and 'preferred' or 'non-preferred' subjects, from a diverse range of universities, can be found in this ***Guardian Article***.

When considering applicants, universities take into account not only the individual A Level subjects but also the combination selected, in order to decide whether they would broadly prepare the applicant for the selected degree course.

If you are unsure of you degree selection it's good to keep your options open by selecting two arts and two science subjects at AS Level. This will put the applicant in good stead to apply for many arts and social science courses, however the University of Cambridge recommended that if you're planning on applying to a broad-based science course, is better to take at least three science choices.

Certain A Level subjects are regarded as broadly desirable, and in some cases essential, so if your daughter is aiming for a top university and would like to keep their options open, it's a good idea to take one or more the following subjects: a language, chemistry, English literature, history, maths and physics. Other courses which can be essential when choosing certain STEM subjects include further maths and biology.

For Arts and Social Science subjects, further desired subject choices include Archaeology, Citizenship, English Language, Environmental Science, Government and Politics, History of Art, Law, Music, Psychology or Sociology.

To apply for a science degree at a top university it's advisable to take two or three of the following subjects at A Level: Biology, Chemistry, Maths, Further Maths and Physics. To apply for biological or medical sciences, it's likely that Chemistry A Level will be required whereas for physical sciences or engineering, maths and physics are often required and further maths is desirable.

The A Level subjects which have not been mentioned can be regarded by as fairly specific, so although many universities will not mind which subjects are chosen, if your daughter is aiming for a top-level university, it is best to take the preferred subjects in order to keep their options open.

It's good to note that Key Skills, General Studies and Critical Thinking often won't be accepted as your third A Level subject.

JARGON BUSTERS

University degree choices

Sandwich degree – A sandwich degree is generally a four year course with the third year spent either in an internship or in industry. This allows students to graduate with both an undergraduate degree and a year of work experience.

Integrated Masters – An integrated masters degree is generally a 4 year course, in which the first three years are the undergraduate degree and the final year is the masters course. An integrated masters course may work out to be more affordable, however, if planning to enter into academia after university, it is desirable to have attained under-graduate and post-graduate qualifications from separate universities. It is worth researching all the options for masters courses.

BA or Bachelor of Arts – A BA is a degree in either the liberal arts or the sciences and the courses take generally three years to complete. You can usually either take it as a single-honours course, meaning just studying one subject or joint-honours, meaning two subjects.

BSc or Bachelor of Science – A BSc is an academic degree awarded for completed courses in predominantly science degrees, although some universities such as London School of Economics award BSc degrees for even traditionally arts degrees. BSc degrees generally last between three and five years.

Further education colleges (FE Colleges)

National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) – are vocational, or work based, awards that are achieved in England, Wales and Northern Ireland through a combination of assessments and vocational training. Each NVQ is specified to a certain job role so in order to achieve the qualification, candidates must be able to meet the National Occupational Standards which define the competencies expected of the specific job role. NVQ qualifications progress from Level 1 which focuses on basic work activities to Level 5 for senior management.

Scottish Vocational Qualifications (SVQs) – SVQs are the Scottish equivalent to NVQs as they also follow national guidelines, prepare candidates for a specific job role and are taken in stages 1–5.

BTEC – A BTEC qualification is a vocational work-focused course which both prepares students with the skills to go into work but also allow them to progress to further and higher education. The name BTEC stems from the first British body that awarded the degrees, The Business and Technology Education Council, however they are now awarded by Edexcel. BTEC qualifications are assessed from levels 1–7 and act as an equivalent to other qualifications such GCSEs (levels 1 to 2), A Level (level 3) and university degrees (levels 4 to 7).

Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) – The PGCE is a one-year course which trains undergraduate degree holders in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to become teachers.

Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) – The PGDE is the Scottish equivalent to the PGCE.

WHAT CHOICES DOES MY CHILD NEED TO MAKE IN YEARS 7 TO 11?

YEARS 7 and 8 (England and Wales) **SCQF 1 and 2 (Scotland)**	There are no examinations in Year 7 and 8. You and your child may wish to talk about what subjects they enjoy and are good at, as well as possible career options. If you live in Scotland, your child will be taking their National 1 and National 2 qualifications (previously Access 1 and Access 2) which allow pupils to progress to the next SCQF level. Further information on National 1 and National 2 can be found ***here*** via the SQA website. As the Scottish education system focuses on studying a breadth of subjects, your daughter will probably not face the same decision-making process as GCSE students in England and Wales.
YEAR 9 (England and Wales) **SCQF 3 (Scotland)**	Pupils will be making their post-14 choices. They will want to consider their post-16 and career options, to make sure they take the right subjects. English, Maths and Science GCSEs are compulsory, and your child's school may have additional compulsory subjects. Optional subject choices vary between schools, but your school must offer at least one subject in the following areas: Arts, Design and Technology, Humanities and Modern Foreign Languages. Your child's school may offer vocational GCSEs, BTECs or similar qualifications, which teach skills required for specific job sectors. From September 2014, pupils who do not achieve A*-C in Maths and English GCSEs will be required to continue studying these subjects after 16. In Wales the ***Welsh Baccalaureate*** is also available for 14–19 year olds. In Scotland, your child will be sitting their National 3 level (previously Access 3) which similarly to National 1s and National 2s, will allow your daughter to progress to the next level of SQAs. Again, as the Scottish education system focuses on studying a breadth of subjects, your daughter will probably not face the same decision-making process as GCSE students in England and Wales. *NOTE: The National curriculum assessments (or 'SATS'), which were previously taken by Year 9 pupils, were discontinued in 2009.*
YEAR 10 (England & Wales) **SCQF 4 (Scotland)**	Pupils will be studying their first year of GCSEs. There are no GCSE exams this year, but they may take exams for other qualifications. In Wales the ***Welsh Baccalaureate*** is also available for 14–19 year olds. You and your child may wish to talk about their post-16 and career options. ***Here are some resources to help you***. If you live in Scotland your daughter will be taking her National 4s this year, which were previously known as Standard Grade and Intermediate 1. Similarly you study these in a wide range of subjects. These then lead onto National 5.
YEAR 11 (England & Wales) **SCQF 5 (Scotland)**	Pupils will be taking GCSE exams and exams for any other qualifications this year. Pupils will be thinking about their post-16 options, including continuing in school, training and workplace training. In 2013, the school-leaving age was raised from 16 to 17, and will rise again to 18 in 2015. If your child finished year 11 in summer 2013, they must stay in education or training until they turn 17. If your child starts year 11 in September 2013, she will have to stay in education or training until she is 18. This means that after your child completes their GCSEs they must stay in school, or be on a training course (including workplace training). In Wales the ***Welsh Baccalaureate*** is also available for 14–19 year olds. In Scotland pupils will be sitting their National 5s which allow entry into Higher courses or a vocational course such as SVQs. From the start of the 2013–14 academic year young people have been required to participate in education or training for a further year after the compulsory school leaving age of 16. Young people can participate through full-time education, work/volunteering combined with part-time education or training, or in an apprenticeship. Young people who left year 11 in summer 2013 are expected to remain in education or training for a further year after the compulsory school leaving age and pupils starting year 11 or below in September 2013 will need to continue until their 18th birthday.

WHAT HAPPENS AFTER MY CHILD COMPLETES THEIR GCSES?

The school-leaving age has recently been raised from 16 to 17, and will rise again to 18 in 2015. After completing their GCSEs, your child may choose to continue on at school, enrol on a training course, or begin workplace training such as an apprenticeship.

Use the ***jargon busters*** for a guide to some of the key terms.

STUDYING A-LEVELS	Your child may wish to study A-Levels. They can continue to Year 12 and 13 at their school, or study A-Levels at a Further Education college.
STUDY A VOCATIONAL QUALIFICATION	Vocational qualifications reflect the skills required for particular industries, jobs or professions. Vocational qualifications are graded from 1 to 7, based on their level.
BEGIN WORKPLACE TRAINING/ APPRENTICESHIP	Pupils will be studying their first year of GCSEs. There are no GCSE exams this year, but they may take exams for other qualifications. You and your child may wish to talk about their post-16 and career options.
GOING TO UNIVERSITY	Universities differ in the exact qualifications they require to enrol on an undergraduate degree course. In most cases it is necessary to study at least 3 A-Levels or gain an equivalent qualification. Some students may take a break from study before going to university, including taking a gap year or working to save money. If your child has not achieved the grades she needs for her chosen degree, she can choose to retake subjects at a Further Education college. Here are some useful links to information about degree choices and how to apply to go to university. ***www.ucas.com/*** ***http://russellgroup.org/informedchoices-latest.pdf***

WOMEN IN WORK – CAREER CASE STUDIES

Sylvia Prince, Tube Driver, TfL

" It took me twelve weeks to train to be a driver, with five weeks locked in a classroom learning about procedures, signally and mechanics before being allowed to start driving. The shifts are long (between five and eight hours) but allow me to drop or collect my daughter from Nursery. I get two days off a week and eight week's holiday a year. I love the quirkiness of my job, too. I drive the C stock – the oldest trains dating from 1969 – and the S Stock, the newest 'electrical' train which has an embedded computer. All driving is done by hand and one lever is used to manually motor and brake the train. Drivers have different ways of staying alert. I like to sing to myself."

Read Sylvia's work-life story here.

Roma Agrawal, Structural Engineer, WSP Group

" I decided to become a structural engineer whilst studying physics at Oxford University. One of the most challenging things about my job is juggling the expectations of clients and architects, but I love that aspect. Structural engineering is collaborative. At the moment, I'm working with a team of engineers and architect on the refurbishment of a Georgia house built in the 1700s and a residential project close to railway tracks in east London. Working on The Shard has definitely been my career highlight to date. I think being a female engineer is an advantage as it makes me more memorable."

Read Roma's work-life story here.

Gemma Blaskey, Florist, Lubi Lu

" My flower shop has been open for two years now and it has been a rollercoaster ride. I gave up my previous career as a television producer because I had a real urge to work with my hands instead. I have always loved flowers, so I did a part-time course in floristry while I was still working. I instantly fell in love with it. One of my favourite experiences was on Valentine's Day last year.

I made a massive heart-shaped flower decoration for the shop. On 13 February a lady walked in and asked if she could buy it to give to her boyfriend as a present. We had to sneak into her garden in the evening so it would be the first thing he would see when he opened the curtains."

Read Gemma's work-life story here.

Emilie Holmes, Founder of Good & Proper Tea

" I've always loved the attention to detail that baristas apply to coffee: choosing the beans, handcrafting your drink and topping it with beautiful latte art – but I could never understand why, when it came to tea, they'd just grab any old teabag and chuck some water in. I saw there was a gap in the market so I spent five years honing my idea for a speciality tea van with custom brewing stations and an online shop. After raising £14,000 through crowd-funding, I quit my job in advertising and took my idea on the road. Since launching the business in December, I've driven my converted van to countless events, including London Fashion Week and Wilderness Festival."

Read Emilie's work-life story here.

Shaunagh Brown, British Gas Engineer

" I'm one of 12,000 British Gas engineers who visit customers to perform an annual service check on their boiler. It's a great career for women because after a one-year apprenticeship, you're guaranteed a job and you can fit it around other commitments. I visit people from all walks of life and see inside some unusual houses. The work is quite repetitive so talking to customers keeps each job interesting. Everyone still expects to see the gas man at the door. People are sometimes visibly surprised when I turn up, but I don't mind; I'm just as capable as any of the men I work with."

Read Shaunagh's work-life story here.

Catherine Slater, Women's Rights Charity Worker,
Marie Stopes International

" My role, as deputy programme director, is to help women in 14 of the world's poorest countries to get access to contraception and, in doing so, reduce the number of women who have unsafe abortions. Once a month, I travel to countries such as south Sudan, Ethiopia and Nigeria – it's important for me to visit the villages so I can talk through the challenges the teams face, such as lack of doctors and midwives. Part of my role is helping to organise a landmark international family planning summit in London. The aim of the summit is to raise awareness and ensure governments let women choose if, when and how many children they have."

Read Catherine's work-life story here.

Carla Valentine, Medical Museum Curator,
Barts Pathology Museum

" People are taken aback when I tell them what I do. Spending your days surrounded by body parts may seem unusual, but I love my job. The Barts Pathology Museum houses more than 5,000 specimens, from kidneys to whole human heads, which were once used to teach medical students. It's my job to conserve all the specimens so students can use them and the museum can open to the public. I often organise spooky-themed evening events, from lectures about bodysnatching and famous murders (complete with themed cocktails and food), to baking classes and taxidermy workshops. They're really popular and I love getting involved."

Read Carla's work-life story here.

Silvia Isacco, Freelance Architect

" As a freelance architect, my job can be quite glamorous, but I do often work alone, mainly for private clients who need renovation work done on residential buildings. When I was a young girl, I had to leave the house I grew up in to go to live with my aunt. I had no space for myself and it was so frustrating to always be a guest in somebody else's house. Now, as an architect, each new client I have is a chance to make my dream come true. I get to plan a new house every time I start a new project. Being an architect, I work long hours but they're worth it. For me, I really am in my dream job."

Read Silvia's work-life story here.

Wendy Rowe, Make-up Artist

" My job takes me all over the world – I've shot in the jungle in Tanzania and on boats in the Caribbean. I do a lot of editorial work so a lot of my time is spent in studios. If I'm on a photo shoot, there will usually be a concept we're trying to follow, or a theme that the make-up has to fit with. Sometimes we can spend all morning trying out different looks and making sure everyone's happy with their hair, make-up, lighting and clothes. One of the most memorable photo shoots I've done was with the signer Ke$ha. I feel a bit silly telling people I'm a make-up artist sometimes, as it can sound trivial, but people always say, 'ooh, what can you do for me?' Especially men!"

Read Wendy's work-life story here.

Belinda Parmar, CEO, Lady Geek

" Lady Geek is a company campaigning to make technology more accessible to women. I set it up three years ago after an eye-opening experience in a mobile phone shop. When I told the salesman I wanted to buy a smartphone, he began speaking slowly, didn't ask me any questions and offered me a pink phone. Women are not a 'niche' market. At Lady Geek we help technology companies speak to women and we run empathy training to help companies establish emotional connections with their customers. We also assist on advertising, social media campaigns and host consultancy sessions. Women still only make up 17% of the UK's technology workforce so profits go towards our social enterprise which aims to inspire girls to go into technology."

Read Belinda's work-life story here.

Rebecca Cobb, Children's Book Illustrator

" Picture books are usually 32 pages so I start by brainstorming illustrations then make a storyboard, trace the images onto another sheet with ink, and then colour in with pencils and watercolours. I take my memories from my childhood for inspiration. I did a lot of drawing back then. Before illustrating, I used to work in a little dress boutique opposite a book shop. Every week I'd go over the road and show the owner my drawings – he was a publisher as well as a bookseller and I hoped I'd eventually win him over. One day, he relented, and commissioned me to work with Helen Dunmore on some picture books. Since then, I've illustrated children's books for people such as former children's laureate Julia Donaldson."

Read Rebecca's work-life story here.

Liz Roche, Astronomer, The Royal Observatory

" Einstein famously said: "Imagination is more important than knowledge," and I agree. As an astronomer and education manager at the Greenwich Observatory, it's now my job to encourage young people to think about how the universe works. Physics can sound dry to some people so I'm devising a careers workshop with our astronomers and my industry contacts to show it can lead to creative and cool jobs such as a medical physicist or a collisions analyst in the police. I was one of six girls in a class of 50 during my degree, but I think the gender gap is now closing. More women than ever have entered this year's Astronomy Photography of the Year competition."

Read Liz's work-life story here.

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