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Career Counseling for Teens Emerging

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CHICAGO -- Mary Ann Smaby didn't get much formal advice on what to do with her life when she was a teenager and she wasn't inclined to ask for it. Career planning? That waited until well into college.

But the real estate broker wanted to jump-start her children much sooner, so she took her two teenage daughters to a professional career counselor this spring.

It's a move other parents are making, too, amid what some say is an intensifying focus on career planning for kids.

"I want to expand their ideas," said the 46-year-old Smaby, of Atascadero, Calif. "Today's generation of kids, they are going to have to be able to jump around a lot more so they have to have different skills. And there's so much out there."

Skeptics might write off career counseling for children as the latest evidence of overambitious parents trying to ensure perfect life resumes for their kids _ from getting them into competitive preschools to elite universities and then right into ideal jobs.

Carol Christen, co-author of the newly published career guide "What Color Is Your Parachute? For Teens," sees it differently. Christen, who also is the career strategist advising the Smabys' daughters Monique, 17, and Camille, 16, says too many baby boomers and other parents wrongly view college as a substitute for career preparation _ a very expensive substitute, she notes.

"There's a lot of delusional thinking going on out there. ... Parents just hand their children over to the educational conveyor belt and think it is going to happen, and it doesn't," the former educator said.

"There's this huge sieve through which our young people are falling," she said. "Most of them have no plans."

As a cottage industry, fee-based career counseling for teens isn't yet booming like the growing industry linked to the admissions frenzy, where some parents pay thousands of dollars to tutors and counselors to try to get them in the door at top colleges.

But there appears to be increasing evidence it is a growing business.

California-based Eureka, one of numerous Web-based career information systems that market materials to schools, recently began selling subscriptions to individuals, including students. Boys & Girls Clubs of America has added a career search program for its 13- to 18-year-old members called CareerLaunch.

CollegeRecruiter.com, a job site for students, added career counseling services as a paid product about a year ago, contracting with career counseling firms. The average cost is a pricey \$2,000, according to Steven Rothberg, president and founder of the Minneapolis-based Web site.

"The counseling is expensive, so I don't think it's going to take the world by storm," he acknowledged. But career counseling for teens, he said, is "definitely a growth area. It's gone from almost nothing about 10 years ago to being on the radar screen today" _ partly a reflection, he said, of the growing phenomenon of "helicopter parents" who hover over their children's lives.

Overall, though, the price varies for such counseling, which might consist of assessments of a teen's skills, personality traits and interests and advice about careers that match them. Christen's approach is to help students create a career prospectus _ finding three different jobs that need three different levels of education or training _ and set up chats with people doing the jobs they want.

Mindy Bingham, whose Career Choices curriculum used in 3,800 schools nationwide, says kids can't be asked soon enough to begin thinking about their future careers. She targets children as young as 13 with a 10-year plan designed to take them right into the work force.

"The emphasis is on helping kids become career-focused and career-committed," said Bingham, whose firm, Academic Innovations, is based in Washington, Utah. "It's not about choosing a specific career, but ... knowing the process so that if they have a boss who comes in the door and says 'We're closing down the business' or 'Technology just changed your job,' they'll be in position to know how to make this change."

Kids who do single out careers early can come out ahead, though, she said, citing studies that found that students who enter college with a career in mind are much likelier to graduate.

But Annie Fox, an educator, online adviser for teens and author of a book about teenage stress, thinks kids are being pushed too early to focus on careers when they should be taught life skills instead.

"Does anyone in their reasoned mind actually believe that it benefits a seventh-grader to be stressing about medical school or a job or providing for a family?" she asked, citing an instance from her work in the San Francisco Bay area.

"I'm not saying you shouldn't think about what you're going to do until you're 18," she said. "But it's got to be balanced _ that's really the key to managing stress."

Christen, who co-wrote the teen-oriented "What Color is Your Parachute" book with Richard Nelson Bolles, author of the best-selling original version, contends it's the absence of career planning that will ultimately cause problems.

"I don't want any young person to think 'Oh my God, I've got to choose it now,'" she said. "The Department of Labor says the average worker will change jobs 10 times, and have three or four careers."

But everybody needs an interesting job, she said, and that takes some advance preparation.

"Twenty years ago you could tumble out of college and find a profession, a good job that took almost no training," she said. "That is not true today. Jobs for college grads are shrinking. That's the reason we have to start teaching strategic thinking."
