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**HEADLINE:** Parents can help children explore career options

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**BODY:**

When I was starting college, I remember adults asking me what I would major in and, essentially, what I wanted to be when I grew up.

It's a cute enough question to ask a child. But when I was face-to-face with such monumental decisions -- decisions that would affect the REST OF MY LIFE -- the questions made my skin feel too tight. I wanted to run from the conversation. I had been a child in high school, but, suddenly, I was expected to have adult answers.

What I didn't realize was how much the questions probably scared my parents, too.

Karen Hite, a personal trainer and entrepreneur from Gibsonia, writes that she is worried about her older son nearing college age, because he doesn't have a clear direction. She doesn't want him taking general-studies classes in college, because he might become bored, but she also doesn't want him focusing on one whim after another, because it wastes time and money.

She believes the school system is failing parents in this sense. "Career Day is not enough," Karen writes. "All of the parenting we have struggled with for so many years leads us to this place where we have to cut them loose and let them make it on their own. But what about the ones that just aren't ready yet?"

I asked the question of the **Familyville** Parenthood Panel, and most of them offered concrete steps that Karen and her son can take to be better prepared. As Pam Bruchwalski of Bethel Park says, "There's no parenting finish line, and this issue is a perfect example."

Two educators on the panel responded -- one in frustration, the other in sympathy. "You know I am going to be riled about another thing being blamed on the schools," writes Jennifer Meliton, a middle-school principal. Most schools have a career curriculum that starts in at least middle school, she says, and parents should be aware of how much information is available to them and their children.

Tracy McDonough, an adjunct college professor, says that college is becoming an extension of high school in many ways. Many professions, including pharmacists, accountants and architects, are requiring five or six years of study. Many people choose a real major with a strong career focus in graduate school.

"I'm sure this doesn't help Karen much," Tracy writes, "but it's the current state of affairs."

She recommends that kids stick their toes in the water, metaphorically. The Community College of Allegheny County, for example, offers free classes for high school juniors and seniors who want to explore a field. The college also offers free tests to assess skills, intellect and interests.

Tracy is on one side of a division on the panel, based on their responses, urging parents to help their kids explore options. On the other side are parents who believe their children have to make some mistakes and discoveries of their own.

Sue MacDonald has a daughter who has graduated from college and a son who's a college sophomore. She believes that "it really doesn't matter what they major in, unless they're truly unhappy with a choice they have made." Her daughter studied political science and writing, but she now works in marketing for Procter & Gamble.

Sue says kids are going to make mistakes, and parents should allow them to change course. Her daughter started out at Tulane University in New Orleans and found it was a bad fit. So, she came home and finished up at the University of Cincinnati. "Lesson learned," Sue writes. "Kids change as they get older."

Another mom, Sharon Samuto of Mars, says she had "one of each" child in terms of finding a direction in life. Her son's primary interest in high school was computers. He majored in that at Gannon University in Erie, and he recently graduated with a job. An internship between junior and senior years helped when he started looking for work.

Sharon's daughter, on the other hand, still is narrowing her choices at Ohio State University. She thinks she might be interested in human resources, so she attended a meeting of the Human Resources Association at the university last fall and came away excited about the possibilities. Another piece of the puzzle is falling into place.

Marilyn Reed has guided her four children through college, and she has one of the best pieces of advice about kids being ready for school. "If kids are not mature enough emotionally to handle college, they should take a year off," Marilyn writes. "They can work or stay home or go to community college for a while."

This was the case with her oldest daughter, who flunked out of Geneva College after two years. She wasn't going to class. So, she worked for two years, attended CCAC, and now is making good grades at California University of Pennsylvania.

The panel was so chock-full of good advice about this topic, that I wanted to share some more:

Make sure college and trade-school students understand the importance of developing a network of friends, advocates and mentors. This will help them find a job when they graduate.

Teach kids early to make choices.

Expose them to as much as possible, and watch what excites them. Do they like working alone or with people? Do they enjoy working with their hands? Are they good at math and science, or do they gravitate toward English and social studies?

Don't dismiss liberal arts as impractical. The courses teach children to think critically, solve problems and be analytical.

Encourage internships during summers so kids can check out the reality of their fantasy career.

Have children speak to someone in a field they find attractive. They can glean information about whether that field is right for them.

Ask your child's high school guidance counselor if you can come in and look at resource materials.

Tell kids to visit high school guidance counselors and college-major advisers. The squeaky wheel cliche applies as much today as ever.