THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO CAREERS

For NCW 2026



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THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO

CAREERS

For NCW 2026

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JOIN
Parent Club

Month by month advice

For parents of teens



Support with:

- Exams and revision
- Stress
- GCSEs and Sixth form
- Next steps - college, uni, work experience

Click here to discover more

Welcome to NCW2026

From The Parents' Guide to:

National Careers Week is a great opportunity to start important conversations about your teen's future. With so many options after GCSEs and sixth form, knowing where to begin can be tricky. This guide sets out the key choices and offers simple, practical advice to help you support your teen in making confident decisions.

The Parents' Guide to is here throughout the year, giving parents straightforward guidance on post-16 and post-18 pathways, alongside support for teenage health and wellbeing. For regular tips and guidance throughout the year, take a look at **Parent Club.**

From National Careers Week:

NCW is a celebration of careers guidance and free resources in education across the UK. The aim is to provide a focus for careers guidance at an important stage in the academic calendar to help support young people leaving education.

NCW, this year from 2nd - 7th March 2026, is the perfect platform to advise and inspire the next generation as they enter the world of work.

During NCW every school, academy and college can offer careers advice and guidance to their students, with support from us with free resources, information on current career opportunities and advice on activities and exercises to run.

And access doesn't stop at the end of **#NCW2026**! Our dedicated websites are available throughout the year!

Educational Routes

Levels of Education

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there are eight qualification levels (1–8), plus an entry level qualification for those just starting out. Generally, the higher the level, the more advanced the qualification. Levels 1–3 are typically taught in schools and colleges, while Levels 4–8 are linked to higher education and professional study.

With so many different qualifications available, it can be hard to know what they mean and where they might lead. To help, we've created a simple summary comparing the main routes and how they connect to further study and careers.

Understanding qualification levels makes it easier to compare options and plan ahead. Academic, vocational and work routes all offer valuable opportunities.

The next pages explain the key choices available at 16 and 18.

Level	Academic route	Vocational route	Applied / work route
8	**Doctorate (PhD)**		**NVQ 8**
7	**Masters degree (MA)**		**Degree apprenticeship / NVQ 5, 6, 7**
6	**Bachelors degree** BA or BSc		
5	**Foundation degree** FdA or FdSc	**Higher National Diploma (HND)**	
4		**Higher National Certificate (HNC)**	**Higher apprenticeship / NVQ 4**
3 *Typically years 12-13*	**A levels** Grades A-E; **International Baccalaureate**; **T Levels**	**BTEC (extended) diploma** **BTEC certificate**	**Advanced apprenticeship / NVQ 3**
2 *Typically years 10-11*	**GCSE** Grades 4- 9 (C, B, A or A*)	**BTEC first diploma**	**Intermediate apprenticeship / NVQ 2**
1	**GCSE** Grades 1- 3 (D, E, F or G)	**Foundation diploma / entry level qualifications**	**Traineeship / NVQ 1**

Options After 16

At age 16 (at the end of Year 11), your teen must stay in education or training until age 18. This means they cannot move straight into full-time work without continuing to learn in some way.

Broadly, their options are to continue in full-time education or to combine work with training, such as through an apprenticeship.

When thinking about next steps, it helps to consider what they will be studying, how they learn best (classroom-based or practical), and what subjects or environments they enjoy.

A levels



A levels are academic qualifications usually studied over two years. They suit students who enjoy classroom-based learning and want to keep a wide range of post-18 options open, including university and higher apprenticeships.

BTEC Nationals



Study takes place over a two year period and is a combination of both practical and theory. Knowledge is tested through course work and a final examination (comprising 40% of the total grade).

Supported Internships



Supported internships are designed for young people with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). They provide structured work placements alongside tailored support to help students move towards paid employment.

Apprenticeships



Apprenticeships combine paid work with structured training. Students gain a recognised qualification while developing practical skills and earning a salary, making this a good option for those who prefer learning on the job.

T Levels



T Levels are a vocational alternative to A levels and involve a mix of classroom learning (about 80%) and practical experience (about 20%) including a 45 day on-the-job placement in a genuine business.

Other qualifications



Cambridge Technicals, City & Guilds, National Vocational Qualifications and the Tech Bacc. These are vocational courses, centred around jobs and practical skills, and suit students who prefer a more applied, hands-on approach.



Find out more!

Everything you need to know about your teen's options after GCSE

Explore options after GCSE

Options After 18

After age 18, there is no requirement to remain in education or training, and young people have a wider range of pathways available to them.

Broadly, their options include continuing in education, combining work with further training, or moving into work while developing skills in other ways.

When thinking about next steps, it's helpful to consider whether they want to continue studying, how they will fund living and course costs, whether they're happy to move away or stay local, and the subjects or environments they enjoy and feel motivated by.

University



University allows students to gain an academic qualification, usually a degree, while developing critical thinking, research and transferable skills. It can lead to careers requiring advanced qualifications and may include placements or opportunities to study abroad.

Apprenticeships



Post-18 apprenticeships combine paid work with structured training through a college, university or training provider. They offer a practical route into skilled employment while gaining recognised qualifications at Level 4 and above.

Higher Tech Qualifications



Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) are Level 4 and 5 courses focused on practical, job-ready technical skills. They can be studied full-time or alongside work and often lead directly to skilled employment or further study.

School Leaver Programme



School leaver programmes are structured entry routes into employment, often offered by large employers. They combine paid work with training and development, helping young people build skills and progress without going to university.

Employment



Employment involves moving directly into paid work, either full-time or part-time. It is often combined with further training, qualifications or skill development to support progression over time.

Gap Year



A gap year is a planned break from education or training, often used to gain experience, work, travel or volunteer. When structured well, it can help young people build independence, skills and clarity about their next steps.



Find out more!

Everything you need to know about your teen's choices at 18 years old

Explore post-18 options

A Dream Career Isn't Luck

Whether your teen is taking their next step through higher education, an apprenticeship, training or their first job, the skills they've developed up to that point will matter – in most cases just as much as the qualifications they achieve.

Skills aren't only learned in the classroom; they're learned through experience. Your teen is developing their skillset every day – through interactions with friends and family, and through the hobbies and interests they choose to pursue. While skills are important in the workplace, they're just as valuable for everyday life too.

Why employers care about skills

Teens applying for their next opportunity will often be a similar age, have studied similar subjects and may even have similar grades. Interviewers need something else to help decide which candidates are the best fit. This is where skills come in.

Employers often see skills as indicators of personality, how someone manages workload, and how well they communicate and collaborate with others.

How skills convert interests into great careers

Skills cover a wide range of personal strengths that help people communicate, collaborate, and flourish. There are many different skills, and no-one is gifted at every single one. Your teen will have their own unique combination of strengths. Looking for jobs that involve using their top skills is more likely to result in a rewarding career. Don't forget - different jobs require excellence in different skills, so there's usually something to fit all personalities.

Soft skills are transferable between different roles and industries, so the skill remains useful even when the job changes.



Parents - help your teen build their skills!

If your teen only sticks to what they know, they are not going to stretch themselves and discover new likes and new skills.

This doesn't mean they have to do new things all the time, but occasionally they should try something different.

Here's how to give them a guiding hand towards maximising their potential:

- Check our "**skills employers love**" list. Ask your teen to pick their favourite 3 (there's no right answer!)
- Help them list the 3 skills they feel strongest in – does this match their favourite 3?
- Talk together about careers where those skills might be useful.
- Encourage them to give real-life examples of when they've used those skills – in school, hobbies, part-time work or with friends.
- Support them to explore a wide range of interests across Years 10–13.
- And check in on whether they're enjoying their hobbies, or doing them mainly to fit in with others.
- **Join Parent Club for more ideas!**

10 skills employers love

- ☑ **Analytical –** Identifying patterns and observing people and behaviours
- ☑ **Communication –** The ability to express complex ideas clearly and simply with other
- ☑ **Flexibility -** being able to adapt behaviour
- ☑ **Curiousity -** Demonstrating an interest in finding out more
- ☑ **Organisation -** not only knowing what needs to be done, but when and in what order to do it
- ☑ **Positivity -** helping others to see things from a positive perspective
- ☑ **Problem solving -** Being able to think of, and develop, inventive solutions to problems
- ☑ **Resilience –** The ability to manage stress and bounce back when faced with difficulties
- ☑ **Teamwork –** Being able to collaborate and co-ordinate with others
- ☑ **Time management** – Using time effectively to maximise outcomes



"Just because you don't succeed in one avenue for your goals, doesn't mean that every other avenue is closed - there is more than just one route from A to B."

Benjamin, registered nurse degree apprentice

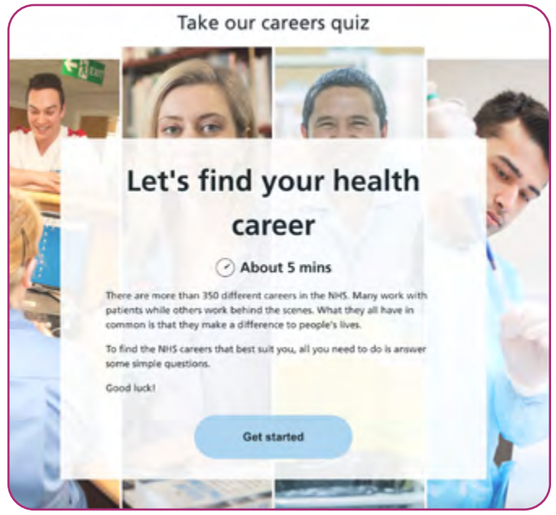
NHS Careers

Helping your teenager figure out what they want to do after school can feel like a big task. The good news is, the NHS has loads of different jobs to choose from. Whether your teen is interested in working directly with patients as a nurse, doctor, or physio, or prefers something behind the scenes in admin, IT, or maintenance, there's really something for everyone.

One of the best things about an NHS career is the clear paths to move up the ladder. The NHS is one of the biggest employers in the UK and offers lots of training and support. Plus, there's financial help available for those wanting to study a healthcare degree. If your teen wants to be a nurse, midwife, or do one of the allied health professions, such as physiotherapy or occupational therapy, they could get at least £5,000 a year from the NHS to support their studies. There are also apprenticeships so your teen can earn while learning.

If you want to help your teenager explore NHS careers, the NHS Health Careers website has loads of info about the different roles and what's needed.

There's also a short quiz. Click this image to help your teen explore which NHS careers could be a good fit for them.



Encouraging your teen to try work experience or volunteering can really help them get a feel for the work. Talking openly about what they enjoy and what they're good at can help them find the right path in the NHS.

You can also contact the NHS Health Careers team if you have any questions on **0345 60 60 655** or by email on **advice@healthcareers.nhs.uk**

Support Your Teen in Exams

Exams are part of every school year, and they can feel just as stressful for parents as they do for students. Many parents wonder the same things:

- **How much should I be doing?**
- **Am I helping, or making things worse?**
- **What actually makes a difference?**

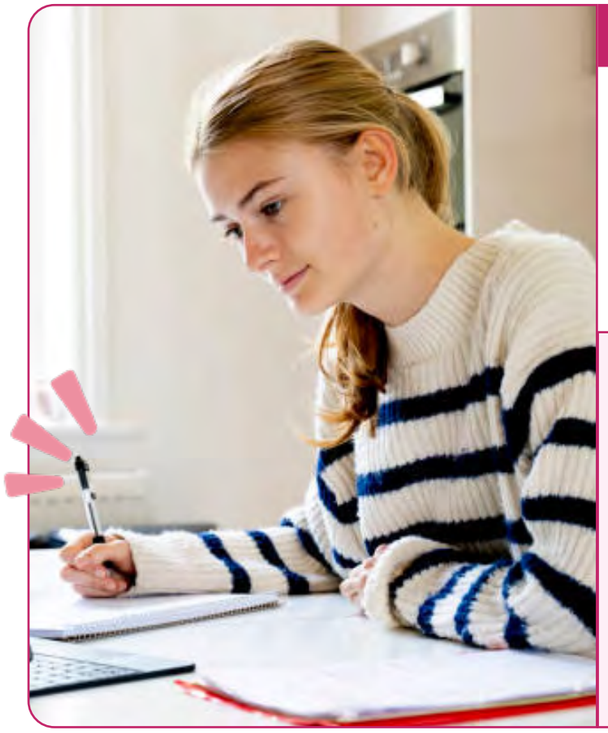
If you've ever thought any of these, you're not alone.

The good news is that you don't need to be an expert in any subject to support your teen.

Your role isn't to teach the content – it's to help create the right environment for learning. That includes routines, organisation, sleep, nutrition, and having a calm space to work – all of which make a real difference. Below are three simple revision strategies to try.

WANT MORE HELP LIKE THIS?

This is exactly the kind of practical support parents get in **Parent Club** – on revision, wellbeing and next steps, all year round.

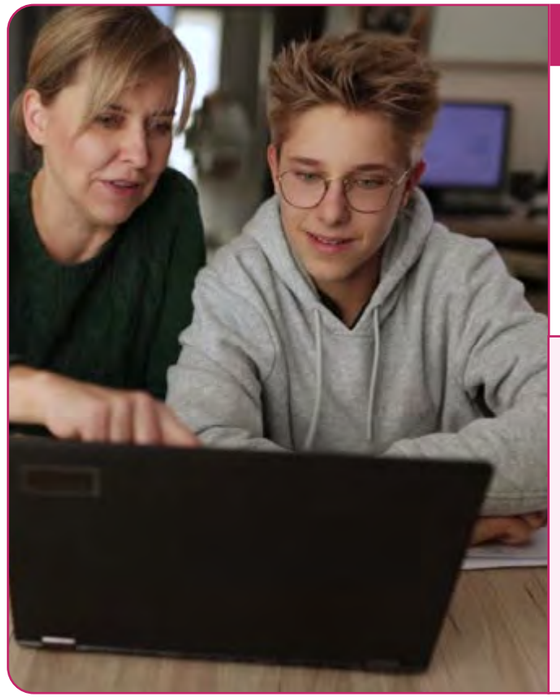


Timed Practice

Timed practice helps teens get used to working under pressure, improves recall, and builds focus for longer exams. The more realistic the practice, the more confident and prepared they'll feel on the day.

How you can help:

- Encourage short, timed questions during the week and a full paper at the weekend.
- Set up real exam conditions - clock on the desk, phones off, and a quiet space.
- Try to match practice times to real exam start times (e.g. 9am or 1:30pm).
- After each session, chat about how it went and look at mark schemes together to spot areas for improvement.

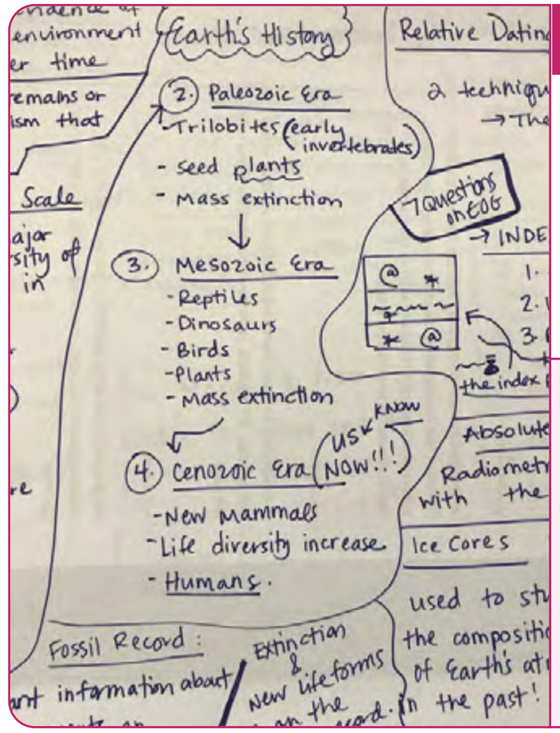


Play The Student

Encourage your teen to teach you a topic they've been revising. Explaining it in their own words helps them notice what's clear and what still needs work. It's a great way to build confidence and turn memorising into real learning.

How you can help:

- Ask your teen to explain a topic as if you've never heard it before - it helps them break ideas down clearly.
- Encourage them to use examples to make their explanation stronger.
- If they really struggle, suggest they check their notes; if their answer feels vague, ask them to expand or give another example.



Brain Dumps

Ask your teen to write down everything they can remember about a topic – no notes allowed. This helps them practise recall, just like they'll need to in an exam. Seeing what's missing shows them exactly where to focus next.

How you can help:

- Encourage them to redo the same topic a few days later to see what's changes
- Encourage them to revisit their brain dump with their notes or textbook, adding anything they missed in a different coloured pen so the gaps stand out.
- Keep sessions short 5 to 10 minutes works well.

A Spotlight on Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are a fantastic option for many students after GCSEs or sixth form. They combine paid employment with structured training, allowing young people to gain qualifications while building real workplace experience. For students who prefer practical, hands-on learning to full-time classroom study, apprenticeships offer a strong and flexible alternative.

Apprentices develop valuable professional skills that are transferable across careers and industries. They earn a salary from day one, and their training costs are covered by the employer and the government. Apprenticeships can last anywhere from one to five years and lead to nationally recognised qualifications.

Work and Study Balance

Apprentices split their time between paid work and structured learning, usually with a college, university, or training provider. Like full-time study, some personal time may be needed for assignments and projects.

Length and Flexibility

Apprenticeships can last from one year to several years. Shorter options provide recognised qualifications without long-term commitment, and many apprentices can progress to higher levels later if they choose.

Qualifications and levels

Apprenticeships range from Level 2 (GCSE equivalent) through to Levels 6 and 7 (degree and master's level), giving students clear routes to progress step by step.

LEVEL 2
Intermediate apprenticeships



Typical length
12-18 months

Entry requirements:
None or few

Qualifications obtained:
GCSE, BTEC or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with limited or no academic qualifications.

LEVEL 3
Advanced apprenticeships



Typical length
12-24 months

Entry requirements:
Usually 5 GCSEs

Qualifications obtained:
A levels or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with reasonable academic achievements but who don't want to study in sixth form.

LEVEL 4/5
Higher apprenticeships



Typical length
3-5 years

Entry requirements:
A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:
Higher national diploma / foundation degree

Who's it for?
Mostly for those who want to qualify for professional career paths without attending university or college.

LEVEL 6/7
Degree apprenticeships



Typical length
3-7 years

Entry requirements:
At least 2 A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:
A BA or BSc degree or higher

Who's it for?
Mostly for those with excellent sixth form results that want to study for a degree or similar whilst working.

Finding the Right Apprenticeship

Careers advisor

If your child is still at school or college, then getting them to speak with their careers adviser is a good move. Careers advisers are often the first to hear from companies advertising new apprenticeship opportunities.

Industry sector

It's smart to check apprenticeships directly on company, university or college websites. If your child doesn't know which of these sites to select, then they should first do some research on which industry sector may be of interest, and then find companies within this sector.

Companies direct

Another option is to identify companies your teen is interested in and check their websites for apprenticeship opportunities. Well-known international companies (such as Amazon, Coca-Cola, Google or Virgin) are highly competitive, but can be a useful starting point for understanding what an apprenticeship in that area involves.

Government website

Most apprenticeships are posted on the Government's website. By creating an account, your child can set up alerts and filters to see opportunities that are of most interest to them and to be emailed when new opportunities arise. However, not all apprenticeships will appear on there at any one time.

Job boards

National job agencies will also advertise apprenticeships and options can be narrowed to review within local distances from home or specific job types. This might be a particularly good way to seek out apprenticeships in level 3-5 range.

Reviews

To find out what other students think about apprenticeships and how they rate their experiences, you can read student reviews on Rate My Apprenticeship to get a better sense of what different roles are like in practice.



Want more detailed support on apprenticeships?

The Parents' Guide to Apprenticeships gives you just that – a clear, practical guide to how apprenticeships really work, from levels and pay to applications, employers and progression routes, so you can feel more confident supporting conversations at home.

Inside the guide, you'll find:

- Apprenticeship levels explained
- Pay, funding and contracts
- Finding high-quality opportunities
- The application process
- Apprenticeships vs. university
- Sectors, roles and pathways

Get the guide

Exploring all the options

Apprenticeships are one important route, but they're not the only option after GCSE or sixth form. Many young people will also be considering staying on in education, going to university, or combining study with work and training.

Our wider set of guides are designed to help you understand the full range of pathways available – and to support informed, realistic conversations about what might suit your teen best.



See the full collection

Work Experience

Work experience covers a range of opportunities, from attending the workplace in person, shadowing or observing a particular person or job role, volunteering or carrying out work remotely/virtually. What's important is that your teen gets some first-hand experience of what it's like to work.

Work experience is important for getting into any career. It provides your teen with first-hand experience of what it's like to work; dealing with colleagues and the public; working to deadlines and how it feels to do things "for real".

If they're lucky, they might find work experience within an industry that is related to their course or ultimate job goal. If this is the case, it can help your child discover more about the industry and may help them realise whether it is or isn't for them. A lesson much better learned sooner than later!

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Finding Work Experience

There are lots of ways for teens to get work experience, and most will use a mix of these rather than just one.

Face-to-face opportunities

This includes spending time in a real workplace, either through a short placement, a few days in the holidays, or informal arrangements.

Good ways to find these include:

- Speaking to the school careers team, who often have strong links with local and national employers
- Using your own contacts - friends, family, neighbours and work
- Contacting employers directly
- Applying for Saturday, evening or holiday jobs, even if they aren't related to long-term career plans
- Using LinkedIn or Indeed to find and approach organisations

Virtual work experience

Virtual placements let teens gain insight into real workplaces from home through online projects, talks, meetings and activities.

Most last from half a day to one week, though some run longer depending on the organisation and the age of your child.

Observing and shadowing

Observing is one of the easiest ways to get experience, especially in competitive or professional careers.

This means your teen spends time watching professionals at work, even if they aren't actively doing the job themselves. Examples include:

- Sitting in on a court case or legal hearing
- Observing a doctor, nurse or clinic
- Watching a business meeting or planning session
- Spending time with an engineer, architect, accountant or designer
- Attending a council meeting, public inquiry or professional talk

Part-time work

Weekend, evening and holiday jobs all count as work experience – even local roles in shops, cafés or bars. These help teens learn how workplaces run, how to deal with customers, and how teams and managers work together.

Volunteering

Volunteering is another great way to gain experience, try new things and give something back, whether for a few days or on a regular basis.

Live Parent Talks

Our live parent talks give parents a chance to get clear, practical support with the things that matter most during the teen years – from school and exams to wellbeing, friendships, online life and what comes after GCSEs and A levels – with time for questions too.

New talks are added regularly, shaped by what you tell us you'd like more support with, so you can stay in the loop via Eventbrite, social media or Parent Club.

All of our live talks are free for Parent Club members.

What's coming up:



Understanding apprenticeships

A clear, practical look at how apprenticeships work, the different levels available, and how they compare to university.

March
4.45 - 5.15pm

Book my place

Free for Parent Club members



Preparing for exams

How to help your teen revise well, manage pressure, and feel more confident going into exams.

Multiple dates
4.45 - 5.15pm

Book my place

Free for Parent Club members



Applying to university

What the process really involves, from open days and choosing courses to personal statements and meeting deadlines.

May
4.45 - 5.15pm

Book my place

Free for Parent Club members



Finding work experience

How teens can find meaningful work experience and why it matters so much for future applications.

June
4.45 - 5.15pm

Book my place

Free for Parent Club members



Preparing for results day

What happens on GCSE and sixth form results day, what the possible outcomes mean, and how to support your teen through it.

August
4.45 - 5.15pm

Book my place

Free for Parent Club members

Talking To Your Teen

It's not always easy to get teens talking – especially when it comes to their future.

They may feel unsure, overwhelmed, or simply not ready to have those conversations. But helping them reflect on what they enjoy, what they're good at, and where they might want to go can make a real difference.

As a parent or carer, you don't need to have all the answers. Creating a safe, open space to talk – and listening without pressure – is often the most valuable thing you can do.

Here are some of our favourite tips to help make these conversations easier and more productive.

1

Accept their idea of success may be different to yours

Their dreams and ambitions might not align with your ambitions for them. This can be disappointing, but let them walk their own path.

2

It's OK if they're not sure on a career route yet

They don't need to make that decision right now. They do need to develop skills that will help them progress, and that should be their focus.

3

Help them if they are struggling to look far ahead

Setting short-term, achievable goals will help them strive towards a long-term ambition.

4

It's OK if they change their mind!

Reassure them that if they tell you they have their heart set on one direction, then later change their minds, you won't berate them for it.

5

Encourage them to turn passions into money-makers

They're more likely to be successful (and happier) pursuing a career in something they enjoy.

6

Help them navigate their limitations

Not being academic should not be a barrier to success and there is usually more than one way to reach a destination.

7

Try not to make the decisions for them.

They have more options that you when you were their age. Your guidance is valuable, but the decision is theirs to make.

8

Let them explore careers that are interesting to them

This is especially relevant if you have a family tradition of all going into the same field of work or if you own a family business.

9

Encourage them to explore all their options

Help them plan out a route that focuses on their strengths. Different educational routes can often provide entry points into the same industry.

10

Empower them: they have control over their future

The decisions they take and what they do matters.

For more, join [Parent Club]



Morrisby

Is your child struggling to make decisions about their future?

Many parents are unsure about how best to support their child as they approach key choices at 15+. If this is you, you're not alone, and Morrisby, a leading provider of careers guidance, can help with their service for individuals.

These questions can help you reflect on your child's needs and your own confidence in guiding them.

About your child

- Is your child unsure about what they want to do next?
- Do they seem overwhelmed by the number of options available?
- Are they worried about making the "wrong" decision?
- Do they underestimate their own strengths or abilities?

About you, as a parent

- Do you feel unsure how best to support your child's decisions?
- Are today's education and career routes different from when you were at school?
- Do you worry about giving the wrong advice?
- Do you want to support your child without putting pressure on them?

Confidence and reassurance for you both

- Would you value independent, expert guidance to support your conversations?
- Do you want reassurance that your child's choices suit their strengths?
- Would clearer insight make family conversations about the future easier?
- What if your child could make informed decisions with confidence?

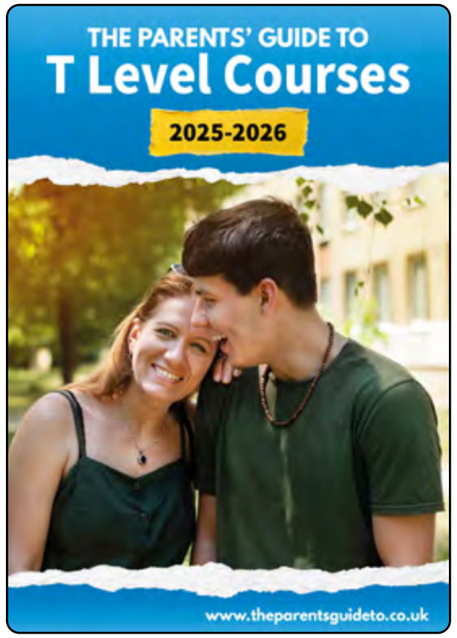
If you answered "yes" to any of these questions, Morrisby can help. Your child can gain access to Morrisby's careers guidance assessments, plus a 30-minute interview with a qualified career development professional.

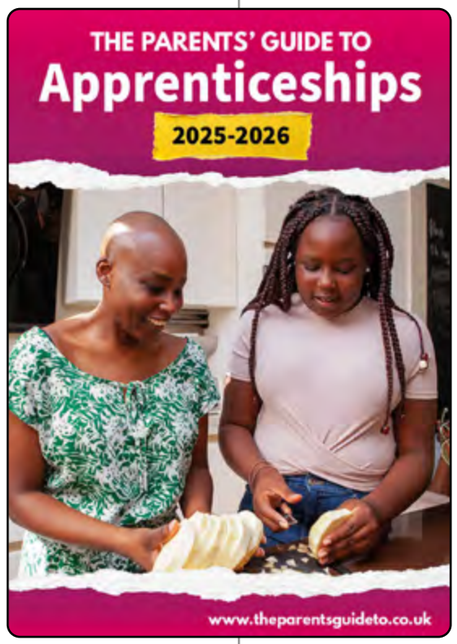
Morrisby Career Guidance

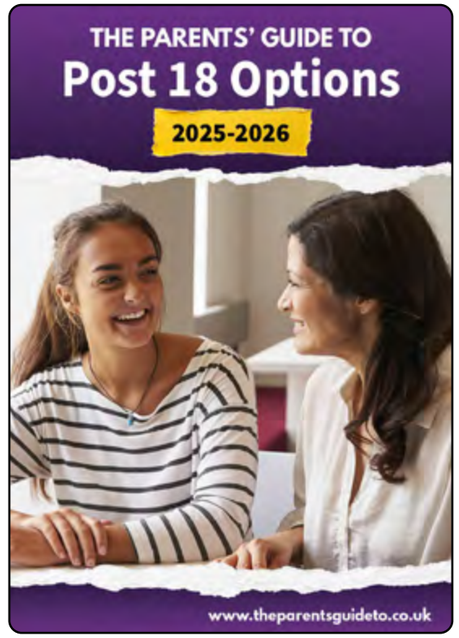
Find out more

The Parents' Guide to:

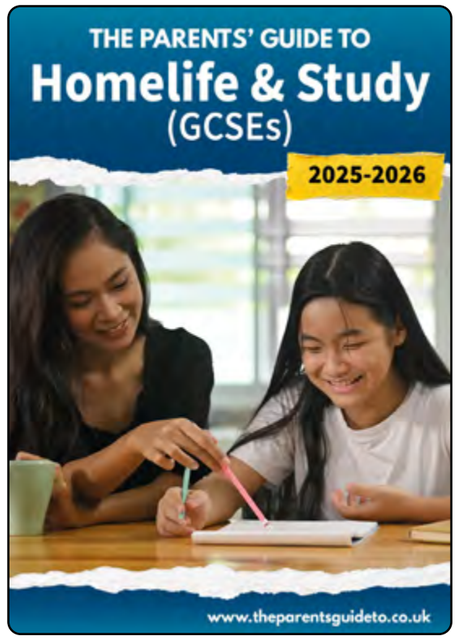


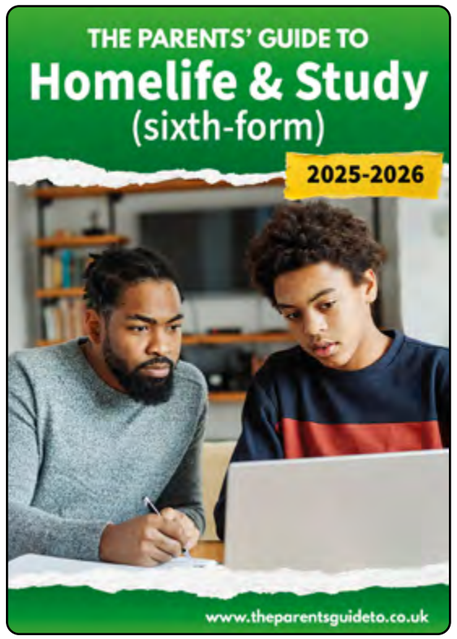


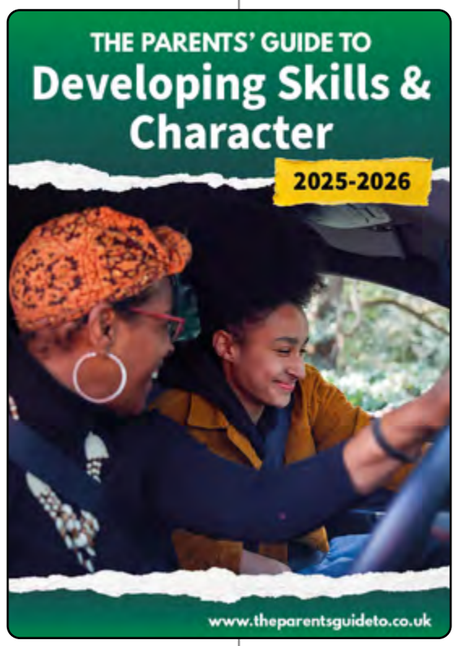


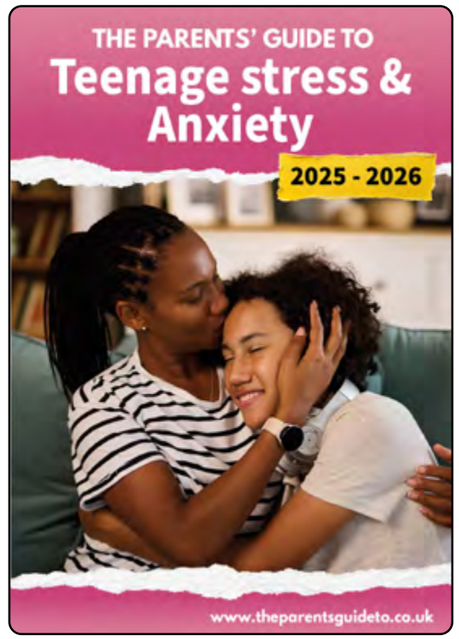












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Talking Futures

As a parent or carer, your role in your child's future is more important than you might think. Even when it feels like they're not listening, the small conversations you have with them about their interests, subjects and next steps really do matter.

Education and careers have changed since most of us were at school- newer options like T-levels, Higher Technical Qualifications (HTQs) and apprenticeships can feel like unfamiliar ground – even though they're opening doors to exciting, in-demand careers for young people. As a parent, you don't need to be an expert. You just need to be open to exploring what's out there – together with your child.

Talking Futures helps make those parent-child chats easier. It's a free resource created specifically for families to help you explore education and career options with your teen – without pressure, without jargon and without needing to know it all.

Rather than steering your child toward any particular route, Talking Futures helps you explore the full range of possibilities together.

Talking Futures provides:

- Explanations of post-16 and post-18 options in plain English
- Practical activities for families to explore careers together
- Prompts that take the awkwardness out of those important chats
- Ways to help your teen connect what they're learning now to real opportunities
- Support to keep discussions positive and pressure-free

Make everyday conversations count. Explore a range of free resources at **TalkingFutures.org.uk** to help your child find the path that's right for them.

Are you an educator looking to support parents and carers?

The Careers & Enterprise Company has free CPD and a suite of resources to effectively support parental engagement.

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THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO CAREERS

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