



**A path for every student.
A plan for every future.™**

Best Practices for Engaging Middle Schoolers in Career Exploration

Quick tips:

- 1 Educate students on all the pathways available, but it's okay to get specific if students ask about certain careers: "A lawyer has to first go through four years of college..."**
- 2 Introduce students to supports before addressing barriers to exploration.**
- 3 Extend exploration into assignments outside the classroom. Taking this work home leads to conversations about the future at home.**
- 4 Offer curriculums in Career & Technical Education, or digital badges in workforce and career readiness.**
- 5 Consider offering job shadowing and mentorship opportunities.**

At American Student Assistance, our goal is to help students know themselves, know their options, and make informed decisions to achieve their education and career goals. We believe that career exploration at an early age can help students develop a clear plan for their future that will put them on a path for post-secondary success and increases their chance of an educational experience well aligned with career interests. Our advisors have years of experience in providing career exploration tools and resources to students online, in classrooms, and through community-based organizations. Gathered here are some of their best practices and practical tips to provide students with meaningful, engaging instruction to uncover skills and interests, and connect learning to the future workplace.

Remember that kids can't be what they can't see

"Find ways to introduce a wide variety of career pathways, not just the ones everyone may think about. For example, if you're doing a lesson on outer space, in addition to talking about the astronauts, why not talk about the mechanical engineers that built the space shuttle, the mathematicians that plotted the trajectory to the moon, the communications specialists who have to talk about space in a way people can understand, the photographers who will take pictures from space, or the government officials who will work at NASA to get funding for future missions. If you're talking to someone who is really interested in sports, the conversation shouldn't just revolve around being a professional athlete, but maybe a sports reporter, statistician, athletic trainer, sports equipment designer, and so on. Every subject matter has a variety of interesting careers associated with it for many differing interests and skillsets. Students just need to understand the possibilities. The Bureau of Labor Statistics' Career Outlook page (bls.gov/careeroutlook) is a great resource for kids to start to explore, and dream, beyond what they may be exposed to in their day-to-day life."

Nadia Chamblin-Foster, *Director of Student Engagement Initiatives*

Instead of asking "what do you want to be," ask "what do you like to do"?

"As a former high school guidance counselor who frequently performed outreach to middle schoolers, I learned to speak about career in terms of the skills required, not specific occupations. Students at that age aren't typically ready to make the decision about a particular career but may be ready to say they want to use certain skills they are good at, enjoy, or both. Also, remember that career exploration is not about what a student is good at now, but what are the possibilities down the road based on interests and aptitudes."

Bill Stiles, *Program & Curriculum Development Specialist*

2019

asa.org/advocacy



Use examples from everyday life to change perceptions

“When helping kids explore careers, it’s really important to just be honest with them and remind them to keep all their options open. One ‘a-ha moment’ was when I received pushback on suggesting plumber as a potential career to a student. I learned quickly that students and parents have their own idea of what jobs are ‘not cool’. Using examples from everyday life can help kids see the value of certain occupations, though. For example, a power outage can illustrate the importance of electricians. Give kids an opportunity to see what they can be, by bringing in real-life blue-collar, white-collar and new-collar professionals from the community to give talks or hands-on demonstrations.”

Clody Goncalves, *Community Programs Coordinator*

Utilize technology to ease workloads

“As a former teacher, I know that it can be hard to concentrate on priorities beyond the immediate day-to-day concerns. That’s why it’s really important to help teachers, counselors and administrators find career exploration resources that don’t add to their workload, like online career interest surveys. Or, online tools that match professionals with schools for career day video chats can bring a field trip into the classroom.”

Ashley Hemmy, *Education & Career Pathways Associate*

Engage parents

“Introducing career exploration at the middle school level requires a culture change not only within the school itself, but within the entire community as well. Parent involvement is essential. In-person teacher-parent conversations and group events are powerful tools. Schedule parent events on weekends to make them accessible and remember to make translators available if needed to accommodate everyone. If parents can’t come to you, you can go to them by partnering with local community-based organizations to give talks at their existing events. Or, if in-person interactions aren’t possible, texting, online newsletters or weekly emails can be effective; just remember to keep it short with highlights and bulleted lists! Ultimately, it’s important to change the culture so that schools aren’t reaching out only when there’s a problem. Make parents feel invested: Make them part of the process, ask for feedback, and use the PTA as a resource. Lastly, remember that career exploration isn’t just for kids; we can use the same tools to help parents thinking of a job switch to uncover their own passions, discover new career paths and pursue the education needed to get there.”

Lily Ornelas, *Program Development Manager*

Make it career exploration, not career preparation

“Career exploration at a young age is about opening minds and hearts, not closing doors. Any middle school career exploration program must be rooted in the knowledge that students do best when their learning and work are aligned with their natural capabilities, but also appreciate that students’ interests may evolve over time. Rather than set students on a specific career path with no room for deviation, career exploration programming must open up a world of opportunity to students and expand their career choices, helping them build flexible education and career plans that grow along with their talents. When implemented properly, career exploration can break down the societal biases and stereotypes that can begin to color young students’ perceptions and lead to a self-imposed narrowing of options. Remember, at a young age students already have preconceived notions about who can do what job, so it’s crucial to tap into the fact that middle school is a time when kids are still open to possibilities.”

Luis Cabral, *Education & Career Supervisor*

Innovate with vision resumes, interactive events and games

“Ideally, dedicated college and career staff would be available in every middle school to drive ongoing career exploration activities. But if that’s not possible, existing faculty and counselors can assign students to create the ‘vision’ resume they would like to have in 10 years. This makes them reflect on the kind of education they need to complete to achieve their dream job. Another strategy is to organize a career fair or panel event with professionals from various fields, who can relate to the audience and are willing to share about their journey. Or, games like ‘Claim Your Future’ can be a fun, casual way to get students thinking about post-high school education, career options and money management.”

Maria Paredes, *GEAR UP Education Advisor*

