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ABSTRACT

Described is a pilot test of a project whose prime objective is to improve parent/child interaction concerning career choice. The subjects (N=30) were ninth and tenth grade students and their parents. Parents were grouped and introduced to the Career Conversation Manual, and challenged to hold at least one planned conversation before the next meeting. Three subsequent sessions were held. The parents involved felt that the experience was positive for themselves and their child, and that there existed a need for regular interaction with professionals in order to succeed in their parent-child career conversations. A portion of the program is excerpted. (LFB)

THE CAREER CONVERSATION

Training Parents to Help Their Children Make Career Decisions

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THE CAREER CONVERSATION: Training Parents to Help Their Children Make Career Decisions

In the fall of 1976 a project was initiated in the Greece Central School District (Rochester, New York) with the prime objective of improving parent/child interactions concerning career choice. The original project proposal called for three major steps: 1) assessing the need, 2) developing a program to meet the need, and 3) testing the program in the Greece high schools. In Appendix A of this report, the needs assessment is described. Appendix B contains the Career Conversation manual that was developed to help meet the needs identified in the assessment. The purpose of this report is to describe the initial pilot test of the program in the district's high schools. The report will be divided into three sections. The first section will define the purposes of the pilot test. These purposes will contain the questions that were posed at the beginning of the project. The second section will briefly describe the mechanics of the project--what happened, when, and to whom. In the third section the results and conclusions will be reported.

Purposes of the project

One of the primary purposes of the Career Conversation project was to identify effective methods of introducing the manual to parents. Would parents feel comfortable using the manual without any assistance from professionals? Would parents be willing to participate in parent

training groups, if offered? What would be the most effective contents of parent training groups? How could the program be described in ways that would intrigue parents rather than threaten them?

A second goal of the project was to gather information that would lead to program revisions. Is the manual too long? Which conversation topics are not easily understood by parents? Which topics are best liked by students?

A final area of focus for the project was evaluation techniques. Since a thorough search of paper pencil instruments in the area of career development had yielded disappointing results, a new evaluative technique was combined with the program in order to test its effectiveness. The technique consisted of a structured interview between a guidance counselor (trained in the procedure) and the student. How useful would counselors view the procedure? How difficult would students find the interview? Would the procedure take too much time to warrant its further use?

The Project

Ten students in each of the three high schools were selected to participate in the project. They were selected on the basis of their parents' involvement in school conferences. All students were either in the ninth or tenth grades. As parents agreed to participate in the project, a time was arranged for an introductory meeting at the school with all ten couples as a group.

During the introductory session, parents were introduced to the Career Conversation manual. The concept of career development was discussed and parents were guided through the various topics in the manual. Parents were given an opportunity to discuss their concerns about the topics suggested in the manual and their ability to plan an effective conversation with their ninth and tenth grader. Each parent group was challenged to hold at least one planned conversation before the next meeting.

A second meeting was held with each parent group approximately two weeks after the first session. During this session parents were encouraged to share their experiences with their first career conversation encounters. Group leaders, as well as other parents offered advice to parents who had experienced frustration in their first attempt. At the conclusion of the second meeting, parents were questioned about their perception of the need for additional meetings. In each of the three groups parents voiced a desire to hold an additional meeting before the summary session at the close of the school year.

The third session was similar to the second in that parents discussed their experiences, both positive and negative regarding their conversations. Most parents had progressed through the first three conversation topics, at this point in the project and therefore were discussing new concerns unique to the topic areas they had been discussing with their children.

The final session focused on parents' perceptions of their total experience in the project. They were asked to evaluate the worth of the experience for their child, the utility of the manual and the need for parent training groups.

It should be noted that in one high school the parents were much less consistent than in the other two high schools. While the reasons for that inconsistency are crucial to the improvement of the program, most of the data given came from two high schools rather than three. It should also be noted that both parents came to most sessions. It was rare that a parent came without a spouse. This provided important perceptions by both mothers and fathers concerning the program.

Following the final parent session, 18 students were asked to complete an evaluative questionnaire concerning their experience during the previous eight week period. A sample of five students were also interviewed by counselors using the new career development assessment process created specifically for this project.

The Findings

1. Introducing the program to parents.

*Parents reported a definite need for group meetings. They did not feel that the manual would be very useful in isolation.

*Most parents had a poor understanding of the basic concepts in career development. Many had never considered the role that personal values and life goals play in career choice. Many

often thought of career development as being limited to the first job a person takes rather than a life-long pursuit.

*Parents who participated in the groups felt confident as they planned and carried out their conversations.

*There was almost no attrition in two high schools. In the third school about half of the original participants completed the eight week experience.

*One of the most common concerns of parents in the group training session was their difficulty in "getting started" with the conversations. Most felt that once the initial conversation was successfully completed, later conversations were easier to "find time for."

*Most parents felt that their conversations were worthwhile and were highly positive about the prospect of other parents participating in a similar program.

2. Information leading to program revisions.

*Students rated the "values" conversation as the most worthwhile and most enjoyable. Parents generally had some difficulty understanding the reasoning behind including that as a topic in a career planning program.

*Students were least positive about the Life Goals topic. It should be noted, however, that many of the student raters had not reached that topic in their conversations with parents.

*Some parents felt that the introduction in the manual was too cumbersome to read.

*Most parents had difficulty with the "Career Planning Sheet" introduced in the manual.

3. Evaluating career decisions growth.

*Counselors who used the newly developed evaluation technique (structured career development interview), were positive about its potential in assessing career development growth.

*In reading the transcripts produced from the audio tapes, it was found that counselors have a tendency to "lead" the student, when less directive questions would produce less bias.

*Counselors found the 15 minute interview to be a realistic time period for the information gained through the interview.

*Transcribing the audio tapes was difficult and time consuming. The audio quality was often poor--making parts of each tape unintelligible.

Additional findings

*Most students (72%) felt that they were closer to a career plan following the series of conversations.

*Most students (61%) felt that other high school students should participate in the program.

*Most students (83%) viewed their parents as "very competent" or "good" at assisting them in making career decisions.

*Students reported an average of six hours of conversation during the eight week period. This compares with an average of three hours per year reported by students in the needs assessment.

Conclusions

It would be inappropriate to draw broad conclusions from this initial pilot effort. There are, however, several specific findings that should be amplified. First, parents felt that their participation in the project had provided a positive experience for both them and their child. This finding does not suggest that all parents and all secondary students could benefit from the Career Conversation Program. It does suggest that certain parents and certain students can be positively involved. Further evaluation will yield data which will determine whether the perceived career decisions growth is real or imagined.

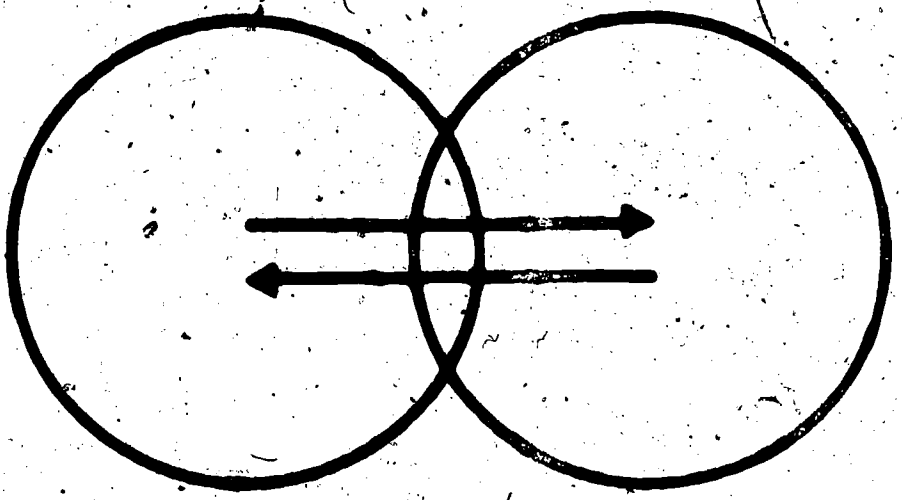
A second important finding of the project was parental opinions of the group meetings. From parent comments and behaviors, it would appear that most parents require regular interaction with professionals in order to succeed in their career conversations with their child. It is likely that this professional contact serves two functions: 1) training and 2) motivation. Some parents felt that they could have made use of the manual with little or no help, but that they may not have engaged in any conversations had they not known that they would be required to

"report" on their experiences in a subsequent meeting. Other parents felt that the manual would have been difficult to use in isolation and that the professional contact in the group meetings was essential for training purposes.

Taken together the data suggest that school systems should devote greater attention to the involvement of parents in career education. As parent projects are designed and implemented, care should be given to the types of data collected. There is a need to explore further both the training needs of parents and the personal growth of students. Knowing more about successful methods for involving parents will allow school systems to more effectively meet the mandate of preparing students for meaningful careers.

THE CAREER CONVERSATION

A Guide for Parents to Assist Their Children in Making Career Decisions



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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a traveler who has no specific destination in mind. Imagine another traveler who has a vague idea of the destination but no plan for getting there. Now imagine both of these travelers facing an intersection, not a normal four-way intersection, but one with a thousand crossroads. The picture you now have in your mind represents most American youths confronted with career decisions. Many of these youths are overwhelmed by the multitude of career possibilities that our technological society places before them. Many are confused because they are unable to define their own values and life goals. This confusion prompts many young people to make unwise career decisions - decisions that later have a profound influence on their overall satisfaction with life.

An increasing number of research studies is reporting that Americans are generally dissatisfied with their work (H.E.W. Task Force). In summarizing this research, it has been said,

> Dull, repetitive, seemingly meaningless tasks, offering little challenge or autonomy, are causing discontent among workers at all occupational levels. This is not so much because work itself has greatly changed; indeed, one of the main problems is that work has not changed fast enough to keep up with the rapid and widescale changes in worker attitudes, aspirations and values. ...many American workers (believe) an interesting job is now as important as having a job that pays well. (Work in America, MIT Press, pp. xv, vxi)

The fact that many adults in the work force are dissatisfied with their jobs is not so important as the effect that the dissatisfaction seems to have on people's lives. There is some evidence to suggest that job dissatisfaction breeds a host of more serious problems including physical disease and mental duress (Miles, et al., 1976). In other words it would appear that when a person becomes dissatisfied with a job, the person becomes dissatisfied with life in general.

If the selection of an occupation is so important, how and when should a person begin to plan for a career - and who should assist in the decision-making process? Recent developments in our society and in public education would suggest that career decisions should be nurtured as early as possible. Many schools emphasize career education at each grade level - beginning in kindergarten. These early activities are usually centered around career awareness - helping children to

understand that their career choices are not limited to being a fireman or a nurse. As children advance through a career education program, they are encouraged to identify their interests, clarify their life values, and more objectively assess their own aptitudes for certain types of work. As the child enters high school, the decision-making process intensifies. Each high school student must decide whether to seek some kind of post high school training or to move directly into the work force. The student who decides to seek further vocational or college training must make some tentative decisions about which types of training and which institutions to attend. The student who decides to take a full-time job immediately following high school must decide which types of work to prepare for during these high school years.

The basic career decisions that high school students make have far-reaching effects on their lives. It has become clear over the past decade that a prime source of discontent among middle-aged workers is the increasing difficulty of career change (Quinn, 1972). In other words, if a person becomes bored and frustrated with a job after spending 10-15 years in that type of work, family responsibilities and retirement considerations may discourage the person from seeking the additional training needed for the desired job. Vocational research seems to show that many American workers would like a second chance at making those early (high school) career decisions - decisions that would allow them more flexibility, more autonomy and more challenging day-to-day activities.

Since early career decisions can have such an impact on a person's life, it would seem only logical that those decisions should be made with special care. But as we look at those who are now in the throes of selecting a career, the decision-making process they use often seems somewhat less than systematic. In fact, if you ask high school students why they are selecting a certain occupational goal, they are usually hard-pressed to provide an explanation. The question immediately arises, "How can we help young people make wiser career decisions?" Public education is beginning to attack that question with greater commitment. Programs for teachers have been developed and training for counselors has been intensified in the area of career guidance. But with all of the efforts that are now being focused on career education, one important group seems largely to have been ignored - parents.

The question might be posed, "Why should parents be involved in the career decisions of their children?

Shouldn't the schools assume that responsibility?" If we briefly examine the parent/child relationship and the effects of that relationship on the child's personal development, the answer to the question of parental involvement becomes clear. One obvious advantage parents have over school personnel is the enduring quality of the parent/child relationship. While counselors and teachers may have important effects on students' career decisions, they are only acquainted with each students for a relatively short period of time and are not able to maintain close contact following high school graduation. The parent, on the other hand, knows the child long before those post high school decisions are made, and remains interested in the child throughout the child's career growth.

The enduring quality of the parent/child relationship means that parents normally have more impact on their child's life than do teachers or counselors. Part of this influence involves career choice. Research would suggest that the reason parents have so much influence on their child's behavior is because of behavior modeling. (Bandura, 19). What this research says is that a person's behavior is heavily influenced by the behavior of those people who are in frequent contact with the person. During the first several years of a child's life, those people are parents, brother(s) and sister(s). Whether we realize it or not, our own behavior as parents is probably the most potent force in our child's life. Our interests, our goals, and the things we prize all have an effect on shaping our child's life pursuits.

If parents are so important in the career development process of their children, to what degree are parents involved in the career decisions of their children during those crucial high school years? In a recent study, 72% of both the ninth and twelfth-grade students sampled said that they had spent less than six hours during the previous year talking with their parents about careers (Osguthorpe, White and Veenis, 1976). While parents of those children often reported spending more time in career conversation than did their children, the finding is important - especially in view of the fact that the child was usually the one to initiate the conversation. It is also interesting to note that parents reported that they almost never plan a career conversation with their child ahead of time.

Why are so many parents reluctant to discuss career decisions with their own children? Several reasons seemed to surface in the study. Some parents don't feel they have the time. As high school aged children become involved in more and more activities, time for talks with mom and dad grows scarce. For some families time is not a barrier, but the parents may feel that their relationship

with a child is so tenuous at best, career conversations could only make it worse. Part of this feeling stems from the old adage that parents should never try to teach their own children anything because they will lose patience and the session will end with both parent and child upset and discouraged. While there is no question that parent/child sessions can be volatile; there is some evidence to suggest that the relationship can even be enhanced, if parents are provided with effective techniques (Osguthorpe and Harrison, 1977).

Some parents who have adequate time to interact with their children and feel that their relationship would not be damaged report that they do not feel competent to advise their child concerning career choice (Osguthorpe, White and Veenis, 1976). Nearly one third of the parents of ninth graders and one fifth of the parents of twelfth graders in the study said that they did not feel very well informed when talking with their children about career decisions. Many of the remaining parents felt only "somewhat well informed." It is interesting to note, however, that in spite of the fact that many parents did not feel adequately prepared to assist their child in making career decisions, children reported that their parents have much more influence on their decisions than do school personnel.

Since parents have such a profound effect on their child's career decisions, it would seem only natural that we should make a conscious effort to maximize the benefit of that effect. It would appear that some parents are influencing their high school-aged children without really knowing it. It is even possible that those parents are unknowingly influencing their children in directions that are completely contrary to those that the parents would prefer - were they to spend some time in a planned career conversation with their child.

The purpose of this guide is to provide parents with a more effective method of interacting with their teen-aged son or daughter concerning career decisions. More specifically, the guide is designed to help parents overcome the problems associated with parent/child interaction. For the parent who feels pressed for time, this manual should facilitate the process of planning a career conversation within the time that is available. For the parent who feels that career conversations would damage the already fragile parent/child relationship, the guide will outline techniques that have proven effective in a variety of situations. For the parent who does not feel competent as a career advisor, the guide will become a valuable tool as well as a reference to other resources such as: professionals in career guidance, published materials and career education programs sponsored by the community.

Chapter 1 outlines the techniques and principles for planning and holding a successful career conversation. Many of the techniques are drawn from research on counseling and tutoring - techniques that have been shown to be effective. Certain techniques will be provided for the planned career conversation and other techniques will be suggested for conversations that are spontaneous. A record form will be provided for keeping track of both planned and spontaneous sessions.

In Chapter 2 a series of career conversation topics will be described. Each topic is of primary importance in the career decision-making process and will thus become the core of the content discussed in each session. Topics such as "interests," "aptitudes," "values," and "life goals" are covered. They are integrated and presented in such a way that parents who are new to career guidance should find the approach relatively easy to use.

Chapter 3 focuses on the Career Planning Sheet. This is a short, easy-to-keep record of the progress the child makes in career decisions. It is a record that could correlate the total career education effort of parents, counselors and teachers.

In the final chapter (Chapter 4) parents are encouraged to interact not only with the child but also with school personnel (counselors and teachers). Ideas are suggested for making counselor and teacher contacts more useful for both the parent and the child. Following Chapter 4 a set of references is included which outlines career education programs provided by the school district and the community.

This guide, then, is designed as an aid to parents interested in the career decisions of their children. As you progress through the manual select those topics that seem the most appropriate for the needs of your child at a particular point in time. As a parent you know your child better than anyone else and are in the best position to be of real help.

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