



Getting kids thinking about a range of careers starts earlier than some parents realise.

The push for early career education

By Danielle Galvin

A fascinating snapshot of young Australians and their career aspirations has raised the prospect of a formalised career education beginning as early as primary school.

South Australia's Commissioner for Children and Young People Helen Connolly recently released the results of two surveys of young people and children.

In 'The Job Aspirations of 8-12-year-olds' thousands of postcards were sent out to school kids asking what they care about, their hopes for the future and early career aspirations.

Their responses are fascinating.

Being a professional athlete was the single most popular choice, although teaching and being a 'YouTuber' were also mentioned frequently.

For many children, jobs and careers are generally explored in the senior years of high school.

However children are naturally curious much earlier than that.

"Research has found that a majority of seven year olds can say what they would like to be when they grow up," Commissioner Connolly said.

"Other research has said that the subjects you enjoy and have an interest in at primary school will probably stay with you and it is unlikely you get turned onto science, technology, engineering and maths out of the blue in high school.

"In primary school, the focus should be on creating more contact with jobs and careers to increase exposure to possibilities and interest in learning areas that relate to their interests and passions.

"This contact with the world of work can also help demystify and debunk commonly held misconceptions about the types of jobs available in particular industries, including gender stereotypes.

"While many kids hear that they can do anything they want, if they don't know what they don't know, they can limit their dreams from the beginning."

By way of example, if a child is interested in dinosaurs, it makes sense to introduce them to palaeontology and what that profession entails.

"Or if a 10-year-old wants to be a dolphin trainer get Sea World to run a virtual class," she said.

"We just need to get students excited about their future and dream big.

"We have often said you 'can't be what you can't see' but now after COVID-19 there is no excuse for not seeing everything, albeit online."

Wanda Hayes, the CEO of the Career Development Association of Australia, said children from a very young age form ideas about work roles.

"They start to decide which roles have a connection to them, and which roles don't," she explained.

"By the time they have reached high school, most children have internalised some (mostly unconscious) perceptions that some roles are somehow 'out of reach' or not appropriate for them - and those jobs are automatically 'ruled out' when they are considering their future options.

"Then in upper secondary schooling, the focus of career education is often skewed to be about making decisions (about subjects; about university courses; about future jobs).

"But in fact, career education at school should be about opening young people up to possibilities, not narrowing down their options.

"And the earlier this process starts, the better: get them thinking broadly before they start developing fixed ideas about what is and isn't possible for them!

"That's how career education at primary school level can make a real and positive difference."

There's also a role for parents to play in all of this too.

"The role for parents is to expose children to opportunities through reading, talking and visiting online museums across the world," Commissioner Connolly said.

"Whatever it takes to enthuse passion and not cut off possibilities with negative facts.

"If your child says they want to be an astronaut, or an astrologer, or an abalone diver, don't put up all the reasons why not."

But the simplest thing parents can do is to let their kids play.

"Play fires up the area of brain responsible for planning skills, organisation, critical thinking, reasoning and understanding," Commissioner Connolly said.

"Play facilitates the development of confidence, self-identity and independence.

"If we want critical and creative adult thinkers, it is essential that playfulness be embedded in the lives of young people in childhood.

"Parents should support curiosity and fuel wonder in children as there are too many other systems waiting to drill it out of them.

"If you don't have big dreams and feel invincible as a child, I'm not sure when you will."

Some of the more noteworthy career aspirations from SA students:

- Become a palaeontologist and farm succulents and sell stick insects when I grow up - 11-year-old
- Meet Jeffy on Youtube and Be a pet detective - 8-year-old
- Be a bee keeper with my dad - 10-year-old
- Be a dolphin trainer when I grow up - 10-year-old
- Go to markets and sell my scrunchies from my business - 12-year-old
- Build a spider robot - 9-year-old
- Create a company to help solve environmental issues - 9-year-old
- Work on a Ferry - 12-year-old

Tips for parents to encourage your young child's curiosity on future careers from the CDAA:

- Encourage their natural curiosity and imagination.
- Avoid the drive to make a decision: asking young children "what they want to be when they grow up" can create a level of anxiety about the need to decide. Instead, ask them about their interests. Notice and remark upon their talents. Encourage them to explore and play with the idea of using those interests and talents in different kinds of ways and in different kinds of work roles.
- Most importantly, treat every career idea as if it could be plausible. Our world of work is changing so rapidly there really is no such thing as a "silly idea" when it comes to career options. Helping your children to explore and evaluate how their ideas might work will always be better than dismissing ideas on their behalf.