

Their Future, Their Fit

A Future Planning Guide for
Parents, Families, and Mentors



Who Is This Guide For?

This guide is for you if you're an adult with...

- A teen in your home or your heart whose future you care about, whether they learn in a public, private, charter, or home-school environment
- Any level of personal experience navigating the college process—including none
- Questions about how to talk to your teen about their future

What can help your teen most is being someone they can think out loud with. Your presence in their life during this moment matters—and so does knowing what questions to ask. This guide can help with that.

Find more resources at bigfuture.org/parents



Believe it or not, parents have more influence than anyone else over teens' college decisions. But it can be hard to know where to start, what to say, and how to help. When students find a college that is an academic match and aligned to their preferences, they're more likely to graduate on time. But each young person has different things that matter most to them. The challenge is figuring out what those things are.

Whether you've been through the process yourself or are navigating it for the first (or fourth) time, this guide is designed to help you support the teens you care about—your own kids and others who trust you—through self-reflection, conversation, and exploration, before they make any big decisions.

A Good Place to Start

In *Your Future, Your Fit: A Future Planning and Reflection Guide for High School Students*, you'll find tools for your teen to use as they reflect on these questions. Start by sharing it with your teen, then pick the moment to talk through their responses together.

If your teen is tight-lipped on these topics, try low-pressure settings for conversation like:

- In the car
- On a walk
- While shooting hoops or playing a game
- When they're choosing courses for the new school year
- As you're considering college visits

7 Conversations to Have with Your High School Teen



Every teen's approach to future planning will look a little different—and a lot depends on how they're doing right now. They might be feeling great about school or burnt out, juggling outside responsibilities, or something else entirely. Use these questions as a starting point and adapt them to fit your teen.

Before You Start

Here are some common terms you'll hear in the questions below:

FAFSA®: The Free Application for Federal Student Aid is the form you and your teen will need to fill out together in order to access any federal financial aid. Check out articles and videos for families in the BigFuture Community Library for more information.

Net Price Calculator: Every university that offers federal financial aid must provide a "net price calculator" to help you understand how much your family will be expected to contribute to the cost of college. Check in with your teen's school counselor if you need support.

Score Reports: Your teen can access these after they take a PSAT-related assessment or the SAT. In addition to their scores, the reports include useful information about your teen's skills and academic strengths.

1 Help your teen imagine their future.

WHY THIS HELPS

To get the most value out of college, students need to choose a program that sets them up to meet their long-term goals. That means understanding what those goals are and what they care most about. This will guide them toward college and career choices that empower them to reach their goals.

YOU COULD ASK

- "What kind of life do you see yourself having as an adult?"
- "What's your endgame?"
- "What do you hope to achieve one day?"

2 Call out their passions or interests.

WHY THIS HELPS

You know your teen. What do they talk about all the time? Jump-start this conversation and think, together, about what makes your teen happy. What do they love to do after school and on the weekends? What are their favorite academic subjects? Which classes make them feel excited to learn more or tackle challenging tasks?

YOU COULD ASK

- “What types of activities do you enjoy most?”
- “What makes you lose track of time?”
- “Where do you feel most comfortable?”

3 Recognize their strengths.

WHY THIS HELPS

For teens to find a good fit in college, they need to understand what they care about, what they’re looking for, and what they’re good at. Use information available to your teen—such as their [PSAT and SAT score reports](#), report cards, and feedback from teachers and extracurricular sponsors—to talk about their strengths. This includes skills like communication, collaboration, or leadership; academic strengths specific to math, writing, or other areas; and extracurriculars such as music, art, or athletics.

YOU COULD ASK

- “What do you feel like you’re really good at?”
- “What are your top skills?”
- “When do family and friends ask for your help or advice?”
- “What skills have you built through your outside-of-school activities?”

4 Understand their areas for growth.

WHY THIS HELPS

Just as it’s important for teens to understand their strengths before they settle on a college, they also need to understand areas where they can grow. If they learn better through hands-on experience, for example, they might want a college that provides plenty of those opportunities. If they need academic support in a particular area, they’ll want to look for those services. Encourage your teen to be honest with themselves: is it hard to be on time? Communicate clearly in writing? Participate in group work with peers?

YOU COULD ASK

- “If you struggled in a particular class or project, what was most challenging?”
- “What are some skills you are working on improving?”
- “When do you know you need to ask for help?”

5 Make a list of things to try in high school.

WHY THIS HELPS

High school is the perfect time to take low-stakes risks and try new things. But teens tell us they're stressed about making mistakes in high school. It can be useful to remind them that no single factor is going to make or break their future. There are so many paths to success, and high school is a great time to test-drive different kinds of experiences. The JED Foundation, a non-profit focused on teen well-being, also encourages parents to support their children in identifying opportunities to get experience and exposure in different fields. Encourage students to ask other adults in their wider community—from their pediatrician's office to the electrician or the owner of their favorite local restaurant—for advice and ideas about gaining hands-on experience. Remind your student that high school is an ideal time to try career-connected learning or test out different activities and workplace environments, so they can start to figure out what they like and don't like.

YOU COULD ASK

- "What classes or extracurriculars can you try now to learn more about what you might do in the future?"
- "Are there courses you could try?" (For example, many schools now offer AP Business with Personal Finance, AP Cybersecurity, and AP Seminar.)
- "Who do we know in our community who can help you get work experience in a field you're curious about?"

6 Prepare for the transition.

WHY THIS HELPS

Beyond thinking through all the "what's next" and "how to get there" questions, students need to prepare for the adjustment that comes after high school. As you talk to your teen about what's next, emphasize that there are many paths to success. This process can feel pressure-filled, but it's also an opportunity for teens to build resilience, patience, and compassion for themselves and others. Remind them that their school counselor, teachers, and other trusted adults are there to help.

YOU COULD ASK

- "How are you getting ready for this transition? How can I help?"
- "What are you worried or nervous about? What makes you feel excited?"
- "Where will you seek support when you need it?"

7 Help them begin defining their Fit Factor criteria.

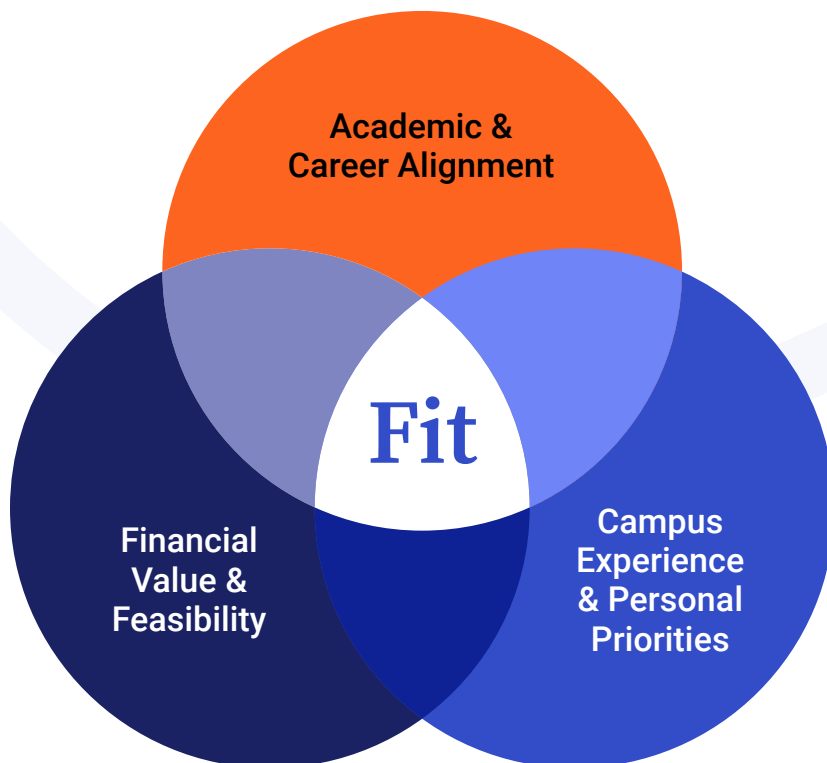
WHY THIS HELPS

“Fit” is the intersection between good academic and career alignment, financial feasibility and value, and personal priorities. A good fit is different for everyone, and for each of these factors, each student must consider their own criteria to find the best schools for them. As your teen starts building their list of potential colleges, encourage them to think through the lens of fit: Rather than “what school do I want to go to?” point them toward “what characteristics matter most to me, and where can I find those?” There are many paths to success, and many options that will be a good fit for every teen.

[Your Future, Your Fit: A Future Planning and Reflection Guide for High School Students](#) includes activities to help your teen think through their Fit Factor criteria.

YOU COULD ASK

- “Which academic programs will prepare you for careers that interest you?”
- “What career-connected supports and experiences will help you prepare?”
- “Based on your career aspirations, how much income do you anticipate after college?”
- “What financial resources do we have available and what types of aid do we need?”
- “What other factors—activities, support networks, vibes—are important to you when you imagine yourself in college? Why do those things matter more than others?”



Keep In Mind

As you're trying to engage your teen in future planning conversations, simple language adjustments can help focus on personal fit and keep the pressure low.



INSTEAD OF...

"Your future hinges on this decision."

Students already feel the pressure of this decision—and it is an important one. But focusing on the stakes won't help students identify their best personal fit.

TRY...

"Mistakes happen."

In a College Board survey of college freshmen, 70% said they were worried a single mistake could keep them from going to a good college. High school students need ample reminders that no single choice or experience defines them and their future. Risk-taking is part of life, and they'll learn about themselves along the way.

INSTEAD OF...

"What college do you want to go to?"

Focusing on specific institutions is less helpful than helping your teen articulate the characteristics of the type of program and institution they want.

TRY...

"There are many great colleges that offer similar features."

Some students get the unintentional message that only a select handful of colleges offer value, or that there's just one school where they can be successful. Encourage your teen to remember that there are many institutions out there that can help them meet their goals, while aligning with their personal priorities and financial feasibility. Tools like [BigFuture.org College Search](https://BigFuture.org) allow your teen to search by characteristics like location, major, or financial aid availability. You can also ask an AI tool to help locate colleges that share a particular feature; for example: "Make a list of colleges with under 6,000 undergraduates and strong biology programs within a 3-hour drive of Columbus, Ohio." (Always be sure to verify the info you get from AI with another source, of course.)

INSTEAD OF...

"This is your decision."

Ultimately, sure. But along the way, they're going to need guidance from adults they trust, who bring different experiences and background knowledge.

TRY...

"We're here to help."

Remind your teen that while you don't have all the answers, you're there to help them steer and brake when they need you to. Help them generate a list of other trusted adults in their life that they can also turn to for advice or support. They should think outside the box: adults like their pediatrician, an athletic coach, or a friend's parent or older sibling might be able to share how they made their own college decisions.

INSTEAD OF...

"Don't worry about the money."

Yes, it's great for your teen to think about the other aspects of fit beyond finances, but they also need help to be realistic about options that won't overburden them.

TRY...

"Let's think about finances."

This is a conversation to have early in the future planning process, regardless of your family's financial situation. Talk about the value of college in the context of your teen's long-term finances. For example, push them to consider their career goals and potential future earnings relative to the cost of college. Every college offers a net price calculator, which allows you to see how much your family will be asked to contribute to the cost of college. Explore these with your teen, along with BigFuture's [financial aid resources](#) to understand what types of financial aid are available. Finally, have an honest conversation about how much they (and you) are comfortable borrowing.

INSTEAD OF...

"This school is perfect for you."

This might sound encouraging, but it can be both overwhelming and unrealistic. Instead, use conversations about future planning to help your teen weigh the trade-offs that will come with their choices.

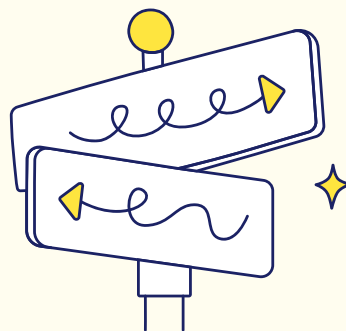
TRY...

"What are the trade-offs?"

There's no perfect college. But there are better and worse fits out there for every student. Encourage your teen to consider the trade-offs as they look at their options. For example, a big-city location with a top program in their interest area might be a larger school than they were hoping for; a great financial aid package might come from an institution that's a little bit further from home than they envisioned. How will they cope with the less-than-ideal elements of whatever institution they choose?

What's Next?

When your teen has completed the steps in *Your Future, Your Fit: A Future Planning and Reflection Guide*, encourage them to use [BigFuture.org's](https://bigfuture.org) [College Search](https://bigfuture.org/college-search) and filter by the factors that matter most to them.



For expert guidance especially for families, visit bigfuture.org/parents.