get set
A Smart Guide to Adult Life
V-2.0

Useful things to know about preparation, education, and planning on the path to adult independence.

TOGETHER WE CAN FOUNDATION
SMART TRANSITIONS
The truth about becoming an adult is that it has very little to do with how old you are...

You know when you’re a child. You feel like a child, and people treat you like a child. Then, sometime around middle school, things get confusing. You don’t feel like a child anymore, but you may not feel like an adult yet either. Eventually, you’re going to hate being treated like a child and you’re going to start to wonder when you will “officially” be an adult.

Right now, you’re probably focused on when you will turn 16, 18, or 21. The truth is that becoming an adult isn’t just one moment or one definition. It’s a set of definitions. Your chronological age only matters in one of those definitions.

Adulthood is defined in ways that are legal, biological, social, financial, developmental, and behavioral. The better you understand these definitions, the better prepared you will be to make that transition to adult life smoothly.

Some of the ways we define adulthood in our society are beyond your control, but there are things you can do to be better prepared for adult life.

This Smart Guide to Adult Life is a way for you to take your transition to adulthood into your own hands.

...and everything to do with how you act and how well prepared you are.
What makes someone an adult?

Legally: What the law says.

You begin to earn the privileges and responsibilities of adulthood between the ages of 14 and 21. The ability to work and drive a car are often things that youth focus on. At 18, you acquire legal adult status. You can vote, enlist in the military, and sign legally binding contracts. You can also be held legally accountable for your actions.

These are all milestones to which one might aspire, but having these privileges doesn’t make you an adult in any respect except the legal definition. There is nothing magical about the ages 16, 18, or 21. As you might imagine, “the law” has no way of knowing whether you are ready to responsibly handle any of these rights or privileges.
**Socially:** How accepted you are in adult communities.

Another significant definition of adulthood is social acceptance. Once adults (beyond your family) begin including you as an equal in their social and work life, it is often an indicator that you are or are becoming a full-fledged adult.

The upside of this is that adult mentors can teach you a lot about the adult world and give you something positive on which to model your behavior. The downside is that “older people” can’t teach you what being an adult means if they haven’t figured it out yet for themselves, and some people who look like adults may not have your best interest at heart. Being socially accepted by a group of older people may feel good, but it doesn’t always mean you’re an adult yet.

**Biologically:** What your body is capable of.

Another way of defining adulthood is to look at the changes that happen to the body so that men and women can conceive and bear children. The time this actually occurs is different for everyone, but it usually happens between 10 and 15. As you might imagine, just being able to conceive a child doesn’t mean one is old enough or adult enough to responsibly care for and raise that child.

Your biology is an indicator that you are physically maturing into adulthood, not necessarily proof that you’ve made it. This guide is all about making that transition to adult life a “smart” one. That means having a vision of where you want to go and a plan to get there. Being in a loving relationship and having children can be a beautiful part of an adult life plan if you choose it. Having a child without planning for it is going to radically alter the plan you had for your life.
Developmentally: How well developed your brain is.

Two things change in a big way between childhood and adulthood. The first change is the most obvious. Your physical body changes dramatically. Your size, shape, proportions, complexion, hair, and voice all begin to respond to a flood of developmental hormones that are released in your body beginning around 10 years old and begin tapering off somewhere between 17 and 18.

The second change is less obvious and less rapid. The adult brain develops on a slower timetable that isn’t really complete until 24-26. What that means is that while you may look like an adult and feel like an adult, you probably aren’t thinking like an adult yet. That’s not to say that you aren’t smart or talented or even very mature for your age, but adult brains have a more developed frontal cortex or what is called an “executive function.” Put simply, the frontal cortex is that part of the brain that decides whether something is really a smart move or not and is less susceptible to peer pressure and the need for instant gratification. If you expose your teenage brain to a lot of alcohol or other drugs, you’re going to push back the development of your adult brain by another 4 or 6 years. That’s not scary anti-drug propaganda, that’s science!

Financially: How well you can take care of your needs.

When you’re a child, someone is, most likely, taking care of your needs for food, shelter, clothing, healthcare, education, and entertainment. Part of becoming a responsible adult is gradually being able to take care of your own needs. For most of us this, means working, earning money, and learning to manage money in responsible ways.

In order to support yourself, you will probably need to trade your knowledge, talent, time, skill, or physical ability for money. Generally speaking, the more knowledge, talent, skill, or specific physical abilities you have, the more money you will make. That’s why investing in your education and the development of a skill or talent while you are young is so important. There is nothing you can invest in at this point in your life that will pay off more in terms of future earning potential, than your education and the development of skills.

In addition to being able to earn money, supporting yourself usually means managing that money effectively. Becoming an adult means acquiring skills like budgeting, goal-setting, financial planning, saving and investing, and financial self-awareness.
Behaviorally: How you behave and make choices.

The truth about the legal, biological, social, developmental, and, to a lesser extent, the financial definitions of adulthood is that they are largely out of your control. The one definition of adulthood that is within your control, starting today, is the behavioral definition. This is in some ways the most important indicator of adulthood.

You are, at any moment, as adult as you are capable of behaving. It’s true that behavior is influenced by brain development, but the real sign of your coming of age is your capacity to behave in adult ways and that comes down to the choices and decisions you make. That means things like, the ability to see and feel things from someone else’s perspective and the willingness to consider the short and long-term consequences of your actions. It means keeping your word and being responsible for your actions.

We’re hoping you want to become and be seen as an adult across all the definitions.

So where are you?

Self-awareness is a critical adult skill. It means the ability to honestly and accurately assess your current state and skill set.

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- I have a clear vision of where I want to go, a detailed plan for my future, and I am consciously analyzing my choices against that plan. I am actively developing the skills of self-awareness.
- I am working, supporting myself, and making good financial decisions for my future.
- I make plans, weigh consequences, maintain healthy relationships, keep my word, and accept responsibility for my actions.
- My social community and activities are primarily with people who are 21 or older.
- My body is changing in physical ways associated with puberty.
- My age is _____.
What can I do to be better prepared for adult life and independence?

Since you can’t change the laws that define adulthood, and you can’t really speed up your biology or brain development, and how other people choose to see you is beyond your control, the smartest move would be to focus on your behavior and your choices.

Stacking the D.E.C.K. Improving your odds.

Remember how we said that 18 is not a magical number? Well, that’s true, but it is an important number. It’s considered the age of emancipation, which means the age at which you can legally choose to leave your parents’ home and live on your own.

When you play cards, if you could “stack the deck” it would mean that you would set the deck up in such a way that you would get dealt a winning hand. Card games are supposed to be games of chance and “stacking the deck” during a game would be cheating. But, in life, if there was a way to ensure that you were better prepared to deal with adulthood, and you utilized it, that wouldn’t be called cheating, it would be called “smart.”

In the pages ahead we will explore four ways you can stack your own “independence” D.E.C.K. by gathering essential personal Documentation, having key life Experiences, developing Critical Skills, and acquiring Knowledge. You can use the handy check lists to track your progress and evaluate how ready you really are for adult independence.
Documentation

If there is one thing that defines adult life, it might be documentation. It seems like wherever you go and whatever you do, someone will want you to have some kind of documentation, paperwork, or proof of who you are or that what you are saying is true.

Making a smart transition to adult independence means acquiring the appropriate documentation and either having it with you in a wallet or purse or knowing where you can find it when you need it.

Essential items (*) like a driver’s license or photo I.D., social security card, proof of insurance, bank card or credit card, proof of legal status as an immigrant (if necessary) and probably a list of emergency contact information should be with you at all times.

Other items (**) like birth certificates, diplomas or GED Certificates, training certifications and licenses, health records, tax information, or items you won’t need to produce as frequently can be kept in a notebook or a folio with plastic drop in pages.

Got to Have
- State-issued Photo I.D. or Driver’s License *
- Social Security Card *
- Health Insurance Coverage Card *
- Bank Card (debit or check card) *
- Emergency Numbers (numbers you will want to know) *
- Emergency Contact List (in case you are injured) *
- Birth Certificate (original state-issued) **
- Medical Records (immunizations and allergies) **
- High School Diploma or GED **
- Selective Service Number **

Good to Have!
- Resumé (your work and volunteer experience) **
- Personal Presentation Portfolio **
- Life Plan or Career Plan **
- Voter Registration Card **
- Pay Stubs From Your Job **
- Credit Card *
- Your Credit Report **
- List of References **
- Letters of Recommendation **

You May Need!
- Car Registration (if you have a car) *
- Car Insurance Card (if you have a car) *
- Car Title (if you own your car) **
- Green Card for Legal Alien Registration *
- Court History (legal documents) **
- High School Transcripts **
- S.A.T. or A.C.T. Scores **
- Passport **

* keep it with you in a purse or wallet.
** keep it in a safe place but know where it is.
Experiences

There are some things that you just need to experience for yourself because no amount of learning about them will actually prepare you for doing them.

This list could be huge and everyone will have different opinions about what essential experiences might be. Think about the list on the next page as what should be among your highest priorities for experiencing before you turn 18.

Keep in mind that there are many wonderful and valuable things to experience in life, and the greater variety of experiences you have the better. But the experiences we have listed on the opposite page are the kinds of experiences that will best prepare you for adult independence and the world of work.

Between family, school, community, and faith-based programs, most of these experiences are within your reach. How many have you had already? Which experiences could you add to your list before you turn 18?

What you've done.

Essential Experiences

- Working with a Mentor
  Finding an adult other than a parent to whom you can turn for advice and support in life and career preparation.

- Employment
  Working to earn money.

- Volunteer work
  Working to be of service and help others.

- Having educational and career counseling
  Working with a professional to plan your future.

- Participating in career skills development programs
  Learning specific or general work skills as an intern.

- Travel (local, regional, national, international)
  Experiencing a world beyond your neighborhood.

- Opportunities to practice etiquette and manners
  How you behave in more formal social situations will either move you ahead or hold you back.

- Cultural experiences beyond your comfort zone
  The greater the variety of cultural experiences you have had, the more interesting and attractive you will be.

- Playing a team sport
  Playing a team sport can help develop the teamwork skills that are sought by employers.

- Engaging in regular physical activity
  Physical activity like walking, running, cycling, surfing, skate boarding, or climbing is just good for you.

- Belonging to a club
  Develops strong social skills and reinforces interests.

- Participating in spiritual or faith-based experiences
  Can give you a sense of something larger than yourself.

- Practicing to master a sport, hobby, artform, or craft
  In striving for mastery, we discover ourselves.
Critical Skills

You can always learn new skills and you can always refine and perfect existing skills, but there are some skills that are so essential to success in adult life, that you would be smart to develop them as early as possible.

You may have a story about yourself that you are not good at certain things, but sometimes our stories can hold us back. You may not “like” to do certain things like interviewing, speaking in public, creating a budget, setting goals and making realistic plans to accomplish those goals, and expressing motivation and resilience in the face of adversity; but these skills will make a real difference between your success in adult life and frustration.

If you aren’t comfortable doing these things now, start practicing them. Take a class. Get a mentor or coach to help you work on acquiring them. The skills on the opposite page are more important than even the specific job skills of a particular profession. Best of all, you can start developing these critical skills today!

Critical Skills

- How to find, apply for, and get a job
  Can you present yourself professionally in an interview?

- How to communicate and speak effectively in public
  The confidence to communicate your thoughts and ideas to groups of people is a key success skill in business and life.

- How to set personal goals and create a realistic plan
  Can you identify and set goals and create a detailed plan with action steps and a time-line for accomplishing those steps?

- How to manage your personal finances
  Can you create and live within a practical budget?

- How to manage a home
  Can you find and rent an apartment, set up a household and utilities, pay your bills on time, and keep your home clean?

- How to manage personal hygiene and dress
  Can you dress appropriately for work and formal situations, care for your clothes, and keep yourself clean and healthy?

- How to manage your time
  Can you set a schedule and keep appointments?

- How to behave in a variety of social situations
  Do you know how and when to modify your manners, speech, and dress for different situations?

- How to operate a computer
  Can you navigate your way around a computer operating system, produce documents, and use the internet?

- How to manage stress and anger and resolve conflict
  Can you manage your own stress and anger and resolve conflicts with others in ways that are healthy, and non-violent?

- How to manage interpersonal relationships
  Can you be an effective part of a team or partnership at work or at home? Do you know how to get along well with others?

- How to accept personal responsibility
  Can you anticipate or recognize the consequences of your actions and accept responsibility for them?
Knowledge

Knowledge, like life experiences, can be a huge topic and everyone probably has opinions of what someone should know about. For this guide we have chosen not to focus so much on academic knowledge (things you traditionally learn in school), but rather on things you should know about to increase your likelihood of adult success.

It is probably unreasonable to expect anyone to know everything they might need to know about, but what is more important is to:

1. know when a problem is bigger than your capacity to handle it on your own and;
2. know where you could turn to ask for help with that problem.

Knowledge about the external world is important and some of the items on our list reflect that. But self-knowledge is equally important and is often overlooked in the academic push to pass tests and graduate.

Knowledge

Do you know when a problem is bigger than something you can handle on your own? Do you know where you would turn to for help with:

- Mental Health Care
  For depression, anger management, or other challenges?
- Physical Health Care
  For injury, illness, pregnancy, birth control?
- Substance Use/Abuse
  For a help when substance use has become a problem?
- Shelter
  For a place to stay in an emergency or to find a home?
- Food
  For food when you can’t afford to feed yourself?
- Unemployment
  For when you are out of work and need to find a job?
- Transportation
  For help with how to get around in a city or area?
- Financial advice and credit counseling
  For help with managing money and reducing debt?
- Legal Aid
  For legal advice?
- Crisis Intervention
  For emergency help in violent or abusive situations?
- Sexual Identity
  For help or support with understanding your sexual identity?
- Relationships
  For help with maintaining healthy relationships?
And finally, do you know about you?

Self-knowledge and healthy self-awareness is critical to your getting what you want out of life. If you don’t know the answers to these questions, it’s time to start figuring them out. Get a journal or a writing app for your phone or tablet. Talk to your friends and family. Write down some answers to these questions.

- What do you love to do?
  Sample: I love to work with children.
  Sample: I love to build things.
  Sample: I love playing video games.

- What do you care about?
  Sample: I care about the environment.
  Sample: I care about justice and fairness.
  Sample: I care about ending racism.

- What are your values?
  Sample: I believe in the power of love.
  Sample: I believe in helping those in need.
  Sample: I am loyal and true to my friends.

- What are you good at doing?
  Sample: I am good at listening to other people’s problems.
  Sample: I am a great salesperson.
  Sample: I am a gifted athlete.

- What do you want your life to be like?
  Sample: I want to be married and have two children and live in a nice house.
  Sample: I want to travel the world and see new things.
  Sample: I want to have a job I enjoy and be respected by my community.

Using your checklists.

Beyond just looking at the checklists to see how prepared you are for adult life and independence, consider the following:

- Work with a teacher, counselor, coach, or mentor to examine what documentation, experiences, critical skills, and knowledge you have already and what you still need to acquire or develop.
- Share your checklists with parents and family to build your support network for adult life.
- Work with a group of friends to support each other in completing your checklists.
What do I need in order to be successful?

Being successful means getting what you want or going where you want to go in your life, but in order to get somewhere you need 4 things:

A VISION: Where do you want to go? What’s your dream?

A PLAN: How are you going to get there? What steps do you need to take?

A SUPPORT NETWORK: Who can you go to for help? Who are your Mentors & Allies?

MOTIVATION/RESILIENCE: Passion is your fuel. How much do you want this?
Vision  Where are you going?

Your vision is your dream. It’s what you want to achieve or attain. If you don’t know what you want or where you want to go, you’ll end up lost, confused, and going nowhere in particular. For a vision to be authentic and useful, it needs to be yours. Your parents undoubtedly want what is best for you, but you have to live your life and follow your heart. What do you want?

A vision keeps you on track and helps you make smart choices. If you have a clear vision of where you want to go and a decision to make, you can ask yourself, “which decision will get me closer to achieving my vision?”

When you are young, it’s a great time to really think about what you want your life to be like. You should be able to answer the question, “what do you want to do with your life?” with a clear and direct response.

Plan  How are you getting there?

A vision without a plan is just a fantasy. It’s something you talk about that will never come true. A plan turns a vision into a reality with a series of concrete steps and a time line for accomplishing them.

“I want to be a famous rapper” is a fantasy. Lots of people share this fantasy and it isn’t going to happen for 99% of them. On the other hand, if you have a plan and are doing something concrete every day to move your career forward as a rapper and professional in the music industry, you might just be able to make your fantasy into a reality.

A plan is specific. It’s okay if there are holes in your plan (things you don’t know right now), as long as you are working to fill those holes in. The internet is a great resource for getting the information you need to create a real plan for your future. You probably won’t know what you don’t know, so it’s important to ask people about your plan and get good advice.

Motivation  How much do you want it?

Researchers actually study the qualities that successful people have and the one thing that sets successful people apart from other people is motivation and resilience. Motivation is determination and a strong drive to succeed. It is resilience—a quality that lets people keep trying even after they have failed at something.

J.K. Rowling was living on welfare and raising a child on her own. But she had a vision—a book she was working on about an orphan boy growing up in a magical world. She also had a plan. She didn’t just think about the book, she actually wrote it and submitted it to publishers. Most importantly, perhaps, she had motivation. She was rejected by twelve publishers, before one agreed to publish the book that we know as “Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone.” Today she is the 12th richest woman in the United Kingdom.

Any vision that is worth attaining is going to be hard. Your motivation is the fuel that will get you past the challenges.

Support Network  Who can you turn to for help?

A support network is that group of people you can turn to for help and guidance. This can include parents, family members, and friends, but it also includes teachers, employers, and professionals in the field in which you want to work. The secret that every successful person knows is that no one succeeds on their own. Everyone owes their success to the help and guidance and support they received from others.

The good news is that you don’t have to worry about finding a support network because if you have a clear vision of where you want to go, a concrete and realistic plan for getting there, and can communicate your passion, drive, and motivation for achieving your goals, your support network will find you. In general, people want to help other people succeed.

The actress Emma Stone (“The Amazing Spider Man,” “Easy A,” “House Bunny,” “Zombieland,” “The Help”) wanted to act more than anything. At 15 years old she created a Powerpoint presentation in order to convince her parents to allow her to drop out of school, move to Los Angeles, and pursue acting. She had a vision. She knew she wanted to be an actor. She had a plan and she communicated that plan to her parents effectively. She was motivated and was willing to work hard even in the face of rejection. And, finally, she engaged her family and friends as a powerful support network to accomplish her goals.
What Does Your Future Look Like?

YOUR VISION: What do you want to do?
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

YOUR PLAN: What are the next steps you need to take?
1. ________________________________________________________
2. ________________________________________________________
3. ________________________________________________________
4. ________________________________________________________
5. ________________________________________________________

YOUR MOTIVATION: Why do you want to do this?
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________
__________________________________________________________

YOUR SUPPORT NETWORK: Who will help you?
__________________________________________________________

My Future: An Example

MY VISION:
I want to be a video game designer and develop my own video action games.

MY PLAN:
1. I will finish high school with good grades while learning everything I can about computers and video game design on my own. I will identify the best schools for computer game design.
2. I will go to a four-year college that has a good program for studying computers and video game design.
3. While I am in college, I will also study computer graphic design and business and marketing.
4. I will seek out internships with computer game design companies and work on my own designs for computer games.
5. I will build a portfolio of my projects and work in my field and identify the companies I’d really like to work for.

MY MOTIVATION:
I love video games and my head is full of ideas about making them better. I can’t imagine a better career than making a living doing something I love.

MY SUPPORT NETWORK:
To get me through high school: my family, my technology teacher, my art teacher, and my guidance counselor.
Like it or not, almost all careers begin by completing high school or getting a GED. You may be able to find a minimum wage job without a diploma or GED, but it is getting harder and harder and it is unlikely that you will rise much beyond minimum wage jobs or have a fulfilling career without one.

### Career Tracks

Once you have a diploma or a GED, there are five general career tracks to consider:

- Skilled Trade
- Technical
- Professional
- Military
- Non-Traditional (Athletic, Artistic, Entrepreneurial)

Understanding these career tracks is critical to your having a realistic plan for your future. A realistic plan would identify and reflect:

- Your vision of the kind of work you want to do and the kind of life you want.
- What your post high school graduation career track should be, based on the kind of work you want to do. Basically this means what kind and amount of training do you need to begin working in this career field (see the next several pages).
- How you will pay for your education. How you will support yourself and where you will live while you are getting that education or training. Do you understand the difference between scholarships, grants, and loans? Do some research online to find out the cost of schools and programs. Ask people for help with figuring out a financial plan for your career path.
- A set of very specific next steps with deadlines for accomplishing them.

Learn more about preparing for the career you want at www.getsetguide.org
Skilled Trade | Plumber, Welder, Carpenter, Mechanic

Do you like working with your hands? Do you like building, installing, repairing, or fabricating? Do you like plumbing, welding, carpentry, landscaping, electrical installation, or maintenance? Do you like working on engines or with cars, boats, or ships?

If this is the kind of work you would like to do, then your career track (how you learn about or become qualified or certified to do these things) is either:

• a trade or vocational school;
• an apprenticeship program, or;
• on-the-job training with a skilled practitioner.

These jobs are traditionally called trades, crafts, or skilled labor and they generally command reasonably high salaries compared to minimum wage service jobs and even some technical and professional jobs. There is usually work for these skilled trades, but sometimes entry into apprenticeship programs can be highly competitive.

Many high schools have programs to begin learning these skilled trades while you are still in school. Some even result in various certifications that can make you even more attractive to an employer. If you can get into a program like this, take it seriously. Your teacher is more than just another teacher, he or she can actually refer you for jobs or recommend you to people looking to hire. This is a relationship you want to build and a person whose respect you want to earn.

After high school, you might want to consider a trade or vocational school, but before you spend too much money, do some research about the job placement rates for the school you plan to attend.

The bottom line is that skilled trades can be a good fit for some people and provide a good income and a solid career.

Military | Army, Navy, Air Force, Marine Corps, Coast Guard

This is a topic that deserves a booklet of its own, but a couple of things you need to understand are:

• Military officers (lieutenants, captains, commanders, majors, colonels, admirals, and generals, etc.) have at least 4 years of college, usually in an engineering field or a field the military identifies that it needs. Officers may perform tasks like flying jets and helicopters, but an officer’s primary role is leadership and managing people in combat and in preparation for combat. If you love fixing tanks, becoming an officer won’t give you the opportunity to do what you love.

• Junior enlisted personnel (seaman, airman, private) have no command authority and usually perform tasks or have specialized jobs.

• Senior enlisted personnel (corporal, sergeant, petty officer, chief petty officer, master sergeant, etc.) may also have specialized jobs, but also manage junior enlisted personal.

• If you are primarily interested in combat, join the Army or the Marine Corps.

• Special Forces jobs may seem very exciting and even glamorous if you’ve grown up on action films and video games, but it is very tough to qualify for these highly competitive programs. Each of the services has its own variation of special forces, and more applicants fail out of the selection process than succeed at it.

• If you are serious about a military career, see a recruiter now! The military is getting more selective and is no longer just taking anyone. If all you have is a GED, they may require some additional college. If the military is part of your plan, find out everything you can about getting in now.
While skilled trade jobs tend to be more physical and involve working outdoors, technical careers tend to involve the use of more mental power than physical power. They tend to require more knowledge and more technology-related skills.

Technical careers such as nursing and health care specialists, computer repair or information technology specialists, chefs and bakers, drafting and design assistants, cosmetologists, paralegal assistants and other more technical fields require education programs that can run from 18 months to 2 years at community colleges, for-profit colleges, and technical schools. The best value is usually the community college route. For-profit colleges can be expensive, and too often end up not delivering on promises of job placement. Do a careful comparison before signing up for anything.

These careers can provide a good income doing work that you enjoy or that feels important. While they do require education beyond high school, it is usually a more focused kind of education and training which is well-suited to the kind of person who just wants to get on with their career as quickly as possible. If you feel drawn to a technical career, start doing your research now. Start planning now. Remember, without a plan, a vision is just a fantasy, it most like will never come true.

Some sample technical career paths.

- **I want to be a nurse**: 2 years of nursing school (some nursing programs are 4 years and provide a Bachelors Degree).
- **I want to be a dental hygienist**: 2 years at a community college (Associates Degree or a certificate program).
- **I want to be a chef**: 2 years at a culinary school studying food preparation and restaurant management.
- **I want to be a hair stylist**: 10 to 18 months at a cosmetology school.

Generally speaking, higher paying professional careers require more education and training.

Doctors, lawyers, professors, scientists, engineers, designers, teachers, therapists, business management and marketing professionals, and accountants (to name only a few of the many career possibilities) all require between 4 and 10 more years of higher education (college, medical or law school, or graduate school).

If you have a real passion for a field of study and want to learn more, you are probably already thinking about college. You can start out in a 4-year college or university or begin in a 2-year community college and transfer to a 4-year school to complete your degree. Community college can save you a lot of money and, regardless of how well you did in high school, you can get in to a community college and once you get in, you have a clean slate academically.

College is not easy and it is not cheap, but if you think you can use college to your advantage, it is one of the best investments you will ever make in your own future and in your own earning potential.

Some sample professional career paths.

- **I want to be a pediatrician**: 4 years of college (Bachelors Degree in biology), followed by 4 years of medical school, followed by a 4-year internship (practical medical training).
- **I want to be a social worker**: 4 years of college (Bachelors Degree in psychology/sociology), followed by two years of graduate work (Masters Degree), plus certification training.
- **I want to be a lawyer**: 4 years of college, followed by 2 years of law school.
- **I want to be a scientist/professor**: 4 years of college, followed by 2 years for a Masters Degree, followed by 3 to 5 years for a Doctoral Degree.
Non-Traditional: Athletic, Artistic, Entrepreneurial

This a hybrid category because the career paths here are not as straight forward as the others and tend to have more flexibility.

A word of warning about this category of career paths: If you are not extremely motivated in addition to being athletically, artistically, or creatively gifted, this is not the career path for you. It’s a very hard path with a lot of setbacks and obstacles and few succeed at it. If there is anything else you think you’d like to do, then consider doing that instead. If you can’t imagine doing anything other than mastering this art form or sport or changing the world through a business, then read on.

Non-traditional career paths tend to work best for people who are highly motivated and very self-disciplined. They seek out the specific training they need in order to live their vision. If you think you don’t need any more training and have nothing left to learn about your art or sport or business, you are not honest enough with yourself to make this career path work, so quit now.

Athletics and Professional Sports
This career path is highly attractive to many young men but the odds on playing a pro sport are not good.

• Only 3 out of every 10,000 high school seniors who play basketball will end up getting drafted by the NBA.
• Only 9 out of every 10,000 high school seniors who play football will end up getting drafted by the NFL.
• Only 1 out of every 200 high school senior baseball players will get drafted by a minor league team, but only 1 out of every 6,600 seniors will make it to a major league team.

If you still want to give it a try or use an athletic scholarship to get a college education, then the post-high school career
path is pretty clear. You have to do well enough in school to get into a college and play well enough to earn a spot on the team at that school. Then you have to play well enough to get drafted. Cover your bases and get a good education while you are in college. Also, consider other careers that would keep you engaged with the sport you love.

The Arts
Career paths in the arts tend to break down into:

- **Performers**—those who act, sing, rap, play musical instruments, dance, M.C., or do comedy. As a performer, your focus is on the performance of the material (song, dance, play, scene, routine), whether you were the one who created that material or it was created by someone else.

- **Creators**—those who make visual art, crafts, photography, films and video, or who write plays, scripts, books, poetry, music, songs, or choreograph dances. This also includes designers in fashion, interior design, architecture, graphics, video games, and mobile applications.

- **Producers**—those who produce or facilitate the creation of works of art like music producers, promoters, recording engineers, and the legions of people behind the scenes who make movies happen.

Some artists (especially in music and stand-up comedy) are hybrid performers and creators. They both create and perform their own work. Other artists interpret the works of others with a combination of technical skill and emotional depth. Most performers, creators, and producers study for 2-4 years at an arts school or in an arts program at a university. There is a surprising amount of craft and skill that goes into mastering an art form. Some artists learn more by touring and performing, but this requires a lot of energy in self-promotion while, at the same time, developing a style or sound that is unique enough to distinguish them from other performers.

If you are convinced that you have a lot of talent and a lot of drive to succeed, consider going to a good arts school to nurture and develop that talent and learn the inside business of success in the arts and design fields. If a lot of other people are convinced that you have real talent and drive, you might consider getting out there and taking your show on the road.

**Entrepreneurial Careers**
All entrepreneurs are at some point small business owners, but not all small business owners are entrepreneurs. If you want to open a hot dog stand, you are small business owner. If you want to see your signature hot dog stands in every city of the world, you’re an entrepreneur. If you want to open a used video game store, you’re a small business owner. If you want to invent a radical new way for people from around the world to recycle and share old video games, you’re probably an entrepreneur.

It isn’t too much exaggeration to say that entrepreneurs want to change the world with their business, service, or product. They think big. Some famous entrepreneurs like Bill Gates (Microsoft), Steve Jobs (Apple), Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and Pharrell Williams (music industry entrepreneur) either never attended college or dropped out of college to start their businesses. It isn’t that entrepreneurs don’t like education, it’s that they are so focused that they don’t want to waste any time on education or training that is not specific to what they want to do.

Bill Gates, who started Microsoft Computer has been paraphrased as saying that the best way to become an entrepreneur is to study how great start-up businesses succeed and then put that into practice by starting a business. If you have a great idea or product that you are passionate about, the entrepreneurial path would be to seek out the specific training, advice, and education you need to turn your idea into a business and then dive in.

There are organizations in this area that nurture and support entrepreneurial start-up businesses.
How do I get a job?

Learn more about getting a job by reading our companion guide: GET WORK.

The long answer to this question would take more space than we have and involves research and preparation and familiarity with the specific hiring practices of the career track in which you are interested, but the short answer, and probably the key element of getting hired, is cultivate your own personal brand and make a great first impression.

Your Personal Brand

How do you want to be thought of and talked about by your friends, your peers, your community? What qualities do you want people to associate with you? If you had only three words to describe yourself what would they be? Talented? Creative? Energetic? Motivated? Friendly? Smart? Attractive? Loyal? Enthusiastic? Honest? Passionate? Organized? Committed? Are you a natural leader, a great salesman, a powerful communicator, an empathic listener, a quick learner? Do you have a great sense of style, good people skills, an eye for detail?

These are aspects of your brand and just like Nike® or Mercedes Benz® or Coca Cola® or Apple® or Polo®, your brand is one of your strongest assets. There are three steps to a strong brand:

• **Defining:** To define your brand you have to know yourself. You have to know what your strengths and talents truly are. While you can certainly build your brand by adopting new productive and attractive traits, faking a brand never works for long.

• **Cultivating:** To cultivate your brand you need to start practicing presenting your “brand” traits and qualities to the world now. If you wait until you think someone is watching, it will be too late. You need to eat, breathe, and live your brand 24/7.

• **Protecting:** You protect your brand by asking a simple question when you are about to make a decision—Will this action build my brand or hurt it? If it will hurt your brand and you do it anyway, that’s okay. It just means you aren’t thinking and acting like an adult yet.
Your Employment Brand

You may have a personal brand, but where your brand really counts is in the world of work. If you want to position yourself to be an attractive hire for an employer and to be retained and promoted once you are hired, your challenge is to establish and refine an employment brand with some combination of the values and qualities to the left.

You may be stronger in some than in others, but you should show some level of competence in each of them. Of course, it’s easy to claim to be all of these things, so most employers look for “evidence” of these qualities. They look for that evidence in a variety of ways:

- questions on a job application
- experiences listed on a resume
- questions at a job interview
- what your references say about you
- what is in your letters of recommendation
- documentation you’ve provided in a personal presentation portfolio
- checking your personal presentation Website
- checking your Facebook page or social media sites on which you’re active

Building a personal brand means both having the experience that will prepare you to be an attractive hire and making sure you document those experiences (gather evidence) effectively.

Successful people are, ultimately, effective at building and promoting their personal brand and blending it with their employment brand. They do this by focusing on:

- expanding their external knowledge (learning about the world of work)
- expanding their internal knowledge (learning about themselves)
- taking on challenges that give them experience building their employment brand

Social Media and Your Brand

Social media includes things like email, texting, Facebook®, LinkedIn®, Twitter®, Instagram®, Pinterest®, and other applications and platforms for networking and communicating. Done right, these tools can jump-start your career, make connections, and build your brand. Done wrong, they can become a roadblock to employment, advancement, and the life you want.

1. Get a professional email address and use it. Taniquawilliams96@gmail.com is professional. Partygirl166@gmail.com is not. Most likely, Partygirl’s resume and application aren’t ever going to get looked at.

2. Clean up your Facebook® page. Scroll all the way through your Facebook® page as if you were a private investigator. What would you learn about you? Are there pictures, posts, links, or group memberships of yours or other people that reflect badly on the brand you are trying to promote? Are there photos of you that are sexually provocative, embarrassing, or in poor taste. Not only do people not get hired for these kinds of posts, but people get fired every day for things that they post or allow to be posted to their pages.

3. Think your Facebook® posts, texts, and emails are secure and available only to your closest friends? Think again. Once you hit post or send, you don’t know where your politically incorrect jokes, alcohol inspired photos, or verbal tirades will end up.

4. Never put in an email or text anything that you would not want the world to hear about, especially when using corporate or business email.

5. Professional adults don’t manage relationships with texts and emails. The moment a relationship is challenged, stop texting and have a real conversation by phone or even better, face-to-face.
3 Secrets of a Successful Interview

Sooner or later, all job searches come down to how well you do on an interview. That means how good you are at presenting your personal brand and how well your brand aligns with the needs of an employer.

A successful interview is always about solving a potential employer’s problem. Your problem, as a job seeker, is that you need or want a job. That’s not the employer’s problem. The employer has another problem, to which you might or might not be the solution. A successful interview means presenting yourself as the most attractive solution to the employer’s problem. That means you, as an interviewee, need to present yourself as being qualified, attractive, and memorable.

Are you qualified?

1. Find out what the formal qualifications for a job are. If there are specific qualifications, and you don’t have them, why are you wasting everyone’s time by applying? If you do have them, make sure you establish that up front.

2. Put yourself in the employer’s place and ask yourself what you would want in an employee for this position. Do you have any of those qualities? Pick three of them (your strongest) and practice presenting them in a relaxed but convincing manner. Make sure you have solid examples that you can share of when you have demonstrated those qualities.

Are you attractive?

1. Make sure you are well groomed (hair, beard, fingernails, teeth, breath). You should not smell like cigarettes.

2. Find out what people wear who have the job you are applying for, then dress slightly better than that. Dressing too much better suggests that you don’t know the position you are applying for. If the position requires a uniform, then fall back on simple but conservative clothes that are clean and well pressed. Aside from your ears, take your obvious body piercings and gauges out and do your best to downplay or cover up your tattoos. With few exceptions, tattoos and piercing are not a professional asset.

3. Speak in the best business English you can manage. Answer questions with complete sentences and speak clearly.

4. Stand or sit up straight. Sit on the front edge of a chair (see the young woman on the opposite page) and don’t lean back. Hold your head up, your shoulders back and then relax your shoulders. Practice leaning in while conversing. This suggests enthusiasm and interest to an employer.

5. Bring your “A” game in terms of energy. Smile. Maintain good eye contact. Remember “relaxed but enthusiastic,” “passionate but easy-going.” Don’t take yourself too seriously, but take what you do very seriously.

Are you memorable?

1. Bring something with you that will make you memorable. This could be a professional presentation portfolio of your work and life experience. It could be samples of your work. It could be plans or notes for solving problems that you imagine an employer might have (which takes some research). Improvise in the moment to establish unique connections. Can you find anything that you have in common with an employer or interviewer. Do you know any of the same people? Do you like any of the same things (sports teams, music, arts, literature)? Have you had any shared life experiences (military service, family, church, etc.)? Don’t force it, but look for openings that will make you memorable to an interviewer.
About The Together We Can Foundation

We believe all young people deserve the chance to successfully transition to independent adult life and the workforce. We choose to focus our efforts on Smart Transitions for young adults.

Together We Can Foundation is dedicated to improving outcomes for at-risk youth in transition to independent adult life and the workforce in Hampton Roads by ensuring that they are better prepared, more connected, and have a greater sense of optimism about their future.

We partner with regional referring organizations and agencies who deal with youth to provide success skills classes for youth in areas like personal presentation, career planning, money management, and relationship management. Youth who have graduated from our programs have a significantly higher rate of high school graduation, the pursuit of post-secondary education or training, and finding employment.

For information about attending or hosting one of our programs or obtaining additional copies of this guide, or for more information about the Together We Can Foundation, you can visit us at: www.twcfoundation.org or contact us at: 757-351-3737 or info@twcfoundation.org

5101 Cleveland Street, Suite 305, Virginia Beach, VA 23462
Want to learn More?

Take charge of your future and play an active role in becoming the adult you want to be.

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- Boys & Girls Clubs of the Virginia Peninsula
- Great Expectations
- Girl Scouts of the Colonial Coast
- Access College Foundation
- Project Life
- The Up Center
- Judeo-Christian Outreach Center
- Youth Career Center of Hampton Roads
- For Kids
- Friends of the Virginia Beach Juvenile and Domestic Relations District Court
- Tidewater Youth Services Commission
- The LGBT Center of Hampton Roads
- The Barry Robinson Center
- Equine Youth Challenge
- Stand Up For Kids
- Seton Youth Shelters
- Timberline Ranch
- Time With a Purpose
- Trimtab
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