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Your kid's drifting? Help is a phone call away

Parents are increasingly seeking out counsellors to help their children focus on fields of employment best suiting them

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WORKPLACE REPORTER

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It's the latest thing: private career coaching for kids.

And Laura Faulkner believes it's well worth the \$695 investment.

Ms. Faulkner has spent the past 25 years in the freight boarding business, importing and exporting cargo. Her husband, siblings and in-laws all work in the same field.

She wants something different for her daughter. But since the family shop talk is all about freight boarding, Ms. Faulkner felt ill-equipped to advise 18-year-old Heather on her options.

So Heather spent two days earlier this summer at an intensive workshop developed by Toronto-based career counselling firm vpi Inc.

"We got the requests from mums and dads everywhere, from existing clients to ad hoc telephone calls from parents who said, 'I understand you do career planning. Do you have anything for kids?' " says vpi chief executive officer Gail Rieschi.

Alan Kearns, founder and "head coach" of Ottawa-based CareerJoy, says parents pay \$699 a shot for his firm's career-planning services for students - either because their kids are drifting, or because they're totally undecided about what they want to do when they grow up.

Mr. Kearns says demand for his student counselling services generally peaks around Christmas every year. "We'll see a lot of young adults then, because they have started first-year [university] and they can't stand what they have chosen."

Ms. Rieschi says the idea of her workshop is to open students' eyes to the range of possibilities. The boy who loves car racing and mechanics, for instance, might also be able to indulge his passion by designing vehicles or marketing in that field.

Heather Faulkner underwent a Myers-Briggs personality assessment and a vocational interest survey to determine which fields she's best suited for.

From there, a team of counsellors helped her zero in on some potential careers, and showed her how to research the educational requirements.

Heather said in an interview this week that she plans to take a few more high-school courses - although she graduated this year - before starting her postsecondary education, with a view to a career in social work, specializing in children.

Her mother is pleased that Heather opted for a bit more time to take some extra high-school courses and plan her next move.

"You don't want to send them off to college or university and spend all that money if they're going to change their careers or their majors. You want them to be sure of what they're going to do before you start spending all that money," Ms. Faulkner said.

Before Heather took the career-planning course, she expected she would become a teacher because she enjoys working with children. "But I wasn't super excited about it. It was more like I was settling for it."

This past week in Toronto, 14 young students went through the vpi course, where they learned more about their personalities, preferences and working styles - and how they interact with others.

Millan Jankovic, who is entering his final year of high school, says the assessments confirmed that he is on the right track in planning for a career in finance, eventually in a management role. He found the psychological insights into what makes others tick particularly fascinating.

"It showed how everyone is different, how everyone is going to work differently. You have to adapt."

To illustrate the point that some people learn and work better in short bursts, with breaks in between, while others prefer to press on through, the career counsellors had the students get out of their chairs and line up in front of a handwritten placard best describing their attitude.

Only Millan and Dina Peel, about to enter Grade 7, agreed with the statement that work should be done before play.

The other 12 gravitated to the other side of the room, to the sign that said, "I can play any time."

They are, after all, still kids.

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