

TALKING FUTURES – EMPOWERING PARENTS TO DISCUSS CAREERS AND EDUCATION OPTIONS WITH THEIR CHILDREN

INSIGHTS FROM PILOT: 2020-21

October 2021



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The importance of parental engagement in careers

The Gatsby Foundation (Gatsby) is committed to ensuring all young people can make well-informed decisions about their future. The Gatsby Benchmarks of Good Career Guidance, which are at the heart of school and college career guidance in England, exemplify how to deliver a world class career guidance programme to students.

However, it is widely accepted and evidenced,¹ that parents² are one of the biggest influences on young people's education and career decision-making. Parents are playing a key role in the career guidance of their children, and it is therefore vital that they engage with school or college careers programmes.

It can be particularly difficult for parents to understand the full breadth of modern qualification routes and careers, feel confident in broaching the topic of the future with their children, and know how schools and colleges can help. The Covid-19 pandemic has also strengthened the case for increasing support to parents, with a third of parents feeling more negative about their child's next step in light of the events of 2020.³

Talking Futures

To help support parents, Gatsby has been researching, developing and piloting activity with parents since 2019. The result of this work has been the creation of *Talking Futures* – a programme designed to facilitate more and better-informed conversations between parents and their children (age 11-18) about career and study routes, and to better connect parents with the career guidance their children receive from school or college.

Our research has included an international literature review by the University of Warwick,¹ substantial market research with parents to explore their attitudes and needs, followup work on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic³ and consultation with Careers Leaders and sector experts.

Talking Futures includes content for parents (with a website, activities to do at home, and a national communications campaign) and support for schools and colleges (including research summaries, CPD, templates, activities and resources).

1 Barnes, S-A., Bimrose, J., Brown, A., Gough, J. & Wright, S. (2020). *The role of parents and carers in providing careers guidance and how they can be better supported: Evidence report*. Coventry: University of Warwick.

2 Throughout this work, when using the term parents, we are also referring to carers and guardians.

3 Opinium (2020). *Parents' engagement in the career guidance of their children*. Autumn 2020. London: Opinium.

Talking Futures pilot

Since January 2021, Gatsby has been piloting *Talking Futures* to ensure it has impact in different contexts and with different groups of parents. The programme has been tested in 16 institutions across seven Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and Combined Authorities, comprising Birmingham, Gloucestershire, Liverpool, London, The Marches, New Anglia and Tees Valley. Institutions included a mix of 11-16 and 11-18 schools, FE colleges, sixth form colleges and a specialist provider, and a mixture of sizes, locations and previous approaches to parental engagement and careers. Institutions were introduced to the activities and given the chance to integrate them into their existing careers provision.

Despite severe disruption caused by Covid-19, an impressive amount of innovative activity still took place. Indications of significant shifts in parent behaviour were observed; the pilot will therefore be continued until spring 2022 to learn more from participating institutions and to further develop *Talking Futures*.

Programme design - lessons learned from the pilot

Pilot institutions used the resources in a number of ways, from integrating a combination of activities across their whole programme, to focussing on specific year groups. The institutions that achieved the most impact were those that **used resources strategically, to address a gap in provision or meet a particular pre-determined need**.

A key takeaway from the most successful institutions was **integrating *Talking Futures* resources into existing events in parents' calendars**; for example evenings focusing on GCSE options, events as part of transition to college or induction to school at Year 7. Starting these activities with parents of younger year groups also reflects when parents start to talk to their children about their futures at home.³

Institutions felt that **using a combination of activities to meet a pre-agreed need** led to students making more considered decisions, with greater engagement from parents. It also made Careers Leaders and wider staff more confident with engaging parents in career guidance, and they all committed to continue embedding parent activities into their programmes.

The pilot has also underlined how **forging strong relationships with parents takes time**. For those institutions who were starting at a lower level it was helpful to start small, delivering a handful of activities for a carefully targeted cohort of parents, and then expanding the programme to other groups.

Pilot institutions acknowledged that the pandemic has led to increased communications to parents, which made it challenging to increase engagement in career guidance while not overwhelming parents. This reflects our finding that **engaging parents in careers is best tackled as a whole-institution issue**, and Careers Leaders with **strong backing from their Leadership Team** were better able to plan their communications strategically with colleagues and ensure they could meet the needs of parents.

“If I was looking for stuff to do with parents, I wouldn’t be going anywhere else. I would be going there, because I know, now, that’s where I can get almost everything that I need for parents. They haven’t got everything careers related, that’s no problem, but how to present it and get it across and how to engage them, that’s what is there.”

Careers Leader, speaking about Talking Futures

One of the many ways institutions adapted to the pandemic was by **incorporating digital events where it was not possible to invite parents into school or college**. Many *Talking Futures* activities have been designed to be delivered both digitally and face-to-face, and parental engagement efforts are likely to take a blended approach in future, with some Careers Leaders observing that virtual delivery made attendance easier for schools and colleges with large catchment areas. Care needs to be taken however to avoid an overreliance on digital, which could further entrench digital exclusion among disadvantaged families.

Across the board, the pilot showed it is **vital to provide more in-depth support to some groups of parents**. Careers Leaders felt it was important to **be visible, friendly and supportive to parents from the start**. ‘Broadcast’-style communications and large-scale events are unlikely to work with parents who lack confidence or feel more distant from their child’s education – a more personalised, longer-term structured approach is needed. Tools available as part of *Talking Futures*, such as a family action planner, support this approach. Communications that tap into popular events and key points during the academic year can be particularly successful in engaging parents.

Overall, Careers Leaders have responded very well to taking on *Talking Futures* at a challenging time, and view *Talking Futures* as a key source of support for any careers programme. Positively, all of the pilot institutions who delivered activities with parents planned to do more in 2021-22.

The impact on parent-child conversations

The pandemic severely impacted not just delivery of *Talking Futures* in schools and colleges, but also the gathering of evaluation data. In spite of this, survey data,⁴ backed up by interviews with participating Careers Leaders, has revealed the following limited but significant findings:

- Three in five parents reported that they ‘learned a lot’ from attending a *Talking Futures* event, and a majority said that it made them more likely to talk to their child about these topics in future.
- Following the increased number of careers activities aimed at parents, there are indications that young people in pilot institutions were consulting a wider range of people to help them inform their choices, including a significant increase in those speaking to their teachers. In one participating school, young people reported a 16 percentage point increase in those consulting their parents.

4 A total of 981 student survey responses (663 from the start and 318 from the end of the pilot) and 391 parent survey responses (284 from the start and 107 from the end of the pilot), taken from five institutions. Data from institutions that did not trial at least one activity, or administer the survey at the start and end of the pilot, has been excluded.

“I just think it’s a really good resource to have, and it just makes life a lot easier because I don’t have to reinvent things. It’s all there for me to choose. The only thing that I have to do is to organise it within my setting.”

Careers Leader, speaking about Talking Futures

- Participation in activities was also beginning to change the content of conversations. Significantly more parents were basing their conversations on information they had received from school or college, rather than their own experiences. The pilot was also impactful in getting parents to consider the full range of qualifications: more indicated that they would consider technical options as suitable for their child (up from 17% to 28% for T-levels).
- Data indicates that young people welcomed the conversations they had with their parents, with three-quarters finding them helpful, and this led them to take action, with significantly more young people saying they resulted in them doing further research of their own. More students were found to have based their conversations with their parents around what their study choices could lead to.
- There was also an increase in students reporting that their parents had told them something different from their school or college – this risk of confusion is understandable but highlights the importance of connecting parents as much as possible with school or college, to ensure young people are given consistent information wherever possible.
- In one school, staff reported that careers were raised more often than usual, and that families seemed better prepared for meetings with careers staff. Senior leaders at the school also felt that students had made better options choices that year as a result.

National partnership

Following the encouraging results of the first phase of the *Talking Futures* pilot, Gatsby will be partnering with The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) to help all Careers Leaders integrate parental engagement into their careers programmes. The CEC will launch *Talking Futures* support across their national networks in Autumn 2021.

Gatsby will continue to test the materials in schools and colleges into 2022, using the results to refine the materials hosted by the CEC, and build the case further for parental engagement. A national communications campaign aimed directly at parents will be launching in early 2022, to help every parent have the confidence and tools they need to have effective conversations with their children about their future.

For an overview of Gatsby’s work on parental engagement visit: <https://www.gatsby.org.uk/education/programmes/supporting-parental-engagement-in-career-guidance>

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Registered Charity number 251988

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October 2021