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## **How Early Is Too Early to Begin Life Career Planning? The Importance of the Elementary School Years**

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The relationship of early and middle childhood experiences to life career planning is discussed. Life career planning is presented as a life skill beginning in infancy. The authors present five premises on which they have based their discussion: Life career development is a life-long, spiraling process; Life career planning includes a series of sub-skills; Career awareness and career exploration form the foundation for effective life career planning; Idiosyncratic factors influence the decision-making of each person; and Child development theory (e.g., Erikson, Piaget and Vygotsky) and career development theory (e.g., Super and Gottfredson) are interrelated. Implications for practice are included.

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**KEY WORDS:** child development and career development; life career planning; elementary school-aged children; self concept; career decision-making.

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Unless work satisfaction is derived, an individual's self-fulfillment is not acquired and, consequently, a person's true happiness is not secured.

Shigekazu Fukuyama

How early do parents first express dreams for their new baby's occupation? How early does a child make his or her first choice? How early in life will that child first see people working? How early in life will that child first say "NO!"? It is our premise that the beginnings of the self-fulfillment Fukiyama assigns to "satisfaction with work" can be traced to infancy as children develop their individuality. After all, play is the work of the young; in their play children begin the acquisition of skills that will last a lifetime. Early pride in mastering the tasks of play, leads to satisfaction in the mastery of increasingly more difficult and complex tasks. How early is too early to begin thinking about what one wants to do with his or her life? We propose that it is never too early to consider ways to help children achieve self-fulfillment.

Children make choices about their preferences early in their lives—first for food and toys followed very soon by preferences for entertainment and clothing. These early choices have a seemingly short-term impact on their lives; however, as children make short term decisions about tangibles, they are unknowingly making long-term decisions about the intangibles, such as, belief in themselves and their abilities. We (and they) can readily see the results of their decisions about clothing, food and video games; it is not so easy to see the results of the decisions they make about themselves. Yet, children's decisions about themselves and what they can or cannot do have the potential for becoming lasting influences in their lives.

If one accepts the concept that children make decisions about themselves and the world at a very young age, it follows that development of the skills required for effective life career planning must begin early. As children mature into young adults, they will be ready to actively pursue age-appropriate occupational decision-making. Life-planning skills will be a part of the "habit" of the person. It is the purpose of this article to present career planning as a life skill which embodies the concepts of career awareness, career exploration and skill development and which begins early in one's life. If we provide opportunities for children to develop the sub-skills required for effective life career planning, we empower them to become all they are capable of becoming throughout their lives and in all aspects of their lives.

## Foundation Premises

Our belief that life career planning begins early in a child's life is founded in five premises that have evolved from our work together in career development and career education over the past quarter century. The premises are: Life career development is a life-long, spiraling process; Life career planning includes a series of sub-skills; Career awareness and Career exploration form the foundation for effective life career planning; Idiosyncratic factors influence the decision-making of each person; and, Child development and career development theories are interrelated.

### *Premise One: Life Career Development is a Life-Long Spiraling Process*

Theoretical support for the concept of career development as a life process is found in the writings of the Ginzberg, Ginsburg, Axelrad, and Herma group; Ann Roe; David Tiedeman; Donald Super; and Linda Gottfredson (Isaacson and Brown, 1997; Zunker, 1994). In the early 1970s, Gysbers and Moore (1975) conceptualized career development as a life-long process that influenced and was influenced by one's life roles, settings, and events. They coined the term "life career development" with the cumulative effects of awareness and exploration leading to a "career conscious individual"—an individual who is prepared to make informed and intentional life career choices. While life career development occurs in somewhat sequential phases, it is at the same time a spiraling development. As one enters a new phase of life, maturation, learning and experiences of the previous phase(s) are incorporated into the next phase. The "career conscious individual" is able to reflect and project thoughtfully as transitions are made from one phase of life to another.

### *Premise Two: Life Career Planning Includes a Series of Sub-Skills*

Throughout one's life there are predictable and natural events (e.g., graduation from high school, reaching age 70 ½) and unexpected events (e.g., winning the lottery, a disabling accident) that force occupational decisions. Being a skillful planner by habit will facilitate and maximize expected and unexpected decision-making at every point in one's life-long career development. Outwardly, planning requires one to: generate options, evaluate options, make decisions, plan action and

evaluate the process and outcomes of the plan. Application of the sub-skills to life career planning is influenced by one's internal processing of life's experiences. The acquisition and application of the sub-skills are developmental and must begin in childhood.

*Premise Three: Career Awareness and Career Exploration Form the Foundation for Effective Life Career Planning*

Through career awareness and exploration children become knowledgeable about themselves, other people, and the world of work and workers. Career awareness experiences enable students to accommodate and assimilate accurate information about themselves and other people into their thinking. Elementary school-aged children become increasingly interested in what adults do and how people get the goods and services they use. In the early elementary school years, developing an awareness and appreciation of the many kinds of work and workers is the primary emphasis; career exploration at this level is designed to create the awareness that work-tasks are applications of academic skills.

Career exploration experiences provide opportunities for children to confirm the knowledge and information obtained through career awareness experiences. Exploratory experiences help young people process knowledge about themselves, their skills and their aptitudes in relation to work related tasks. As children mature, career exploration becomes a greater emphasis than career awareness. During the later elementary and middle school years, career exploration takes on an increasingly more complex meaning as students become involved in strategies such as job shadowing and mentoring programs. Self awareness and knowledge about occupations gained through career exploration strategies will strengthen the foundation for knowledge-based and age-appropriate narrowing of choices.

*Premise Four: Idiosyncratic Factors Influence the Decision Making of Each Person*

After all is said and done, it is the individual who makes a choice. Ultimately, a choice in any area of life is based on one's individually unique perceptions of self and of the world. Our challenge as mentors of children is to help them become aware of and test their self- and world-perceptions as they are developing. The career development theories of Super and Gottfredson (as cited in Isaacson and Brown,

1997) stress the importance of individuals developing an accurate understanding of their own strengths, skills, aptitudes, interests, and preferences. Zunker (1994) identifies the concept of “success criteria” as a major influence in an individual’s occupational choice-making. According to Zunker, each individual has an internal set of “success criteria” against which options are measured from a very young age.

The writings of Super, Gottfredson (as cited in Isaacson and Brown, 1997), and Zunker (1994) indicate that children may unknowingly make career choices early in their lives. This implies the need for adults to help young people maintain an attitude of reflection, to preclude the premature closing of the doors of their minds. The process will require helping young people develop the skills of self-reflection and opportunities for discussion of already-established beliefs concerning themselves, their personal “success criteria,” the world of work and workers and their perceptions of the match of self and a variety of occupational roles.

#### *Premise Five: Child Development Theory and Career Development Theory Are Interrelated*

As we discuss elementary school-aged children and appropriate life career planning experiences, the total development of the child must be considered. The interrelationship of early childhood development and life career development is evidenced by the fact that several authors have used life-span development as an organizer for their presentation of career development concepts (Drummond and Ryan, 1995; Herring, 1998). The theories of Erikson (1963), Piaget (Phillips, 1969), and Vygotsky (Cole, John-Steiner, Scribner, and Souberman, 1978) describe the ways in which children develop their understanding of the world. The life career development theories of Super and Gottfredson (as cited in Isaacson and Brown, 1997) and the concept of “success criteria” presented by Zunker (1994) provide a framework for understanding the ways in which children develop their understanding of the world of work.

Weaving the writings of child development theorists with career development theorists provides direction when planning age-appropriate career awareness, career exploration and career planning skill-building strategies. The interrelationship and integration of all factors strengthen the effectiveness of any of the strategies. Following is a brief overview of the major tenets of the child development and career development theories from which we have drawn.

## Theories of Child Development

The theories of Erikson (1963), Piaget (Phillips, 1969), and Vygotsky (Cole et al., 1978) have particular relevance to our discussion. They each contribute to our understanding of how children process their experiences and the information presented to them. Erikson addressed psychosocial development throughout one's life. His premise was that each individual's growth and development includes passage through eight critical stages of social and emotional development (as cited in Berger, 2000 and Santrock, 2000). At each of the stages, specific life tasks or crises must be resolved. The successful resolution of the crisis of each stage prepares the individual for the next stage of social and emotional development. Piaget's focus was cognitive development—how children develop the ability think. His premise was that children must move through four stages of cognitive development in order to become abstract thinkers and problem-solvers (Phillips, 1969). Vygotsky's (1978) approach to understanding children and their understanding of the world was socio-cultural. It was his premise that social interaction, including the guidance of more knowledgeable individuals (mentors), was the key to the construction of knowledge with language as the foundation for the process. Each of the three theorists recognized the need for the early and active involvement of role models in the acquisition of knowledge, skill and understanding.

### *Erikson's Theory*

Children at the pre-kindergarten through early grade one level (approximate ages 3–6 years old) have moved through the first two of Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development (trust vs. mistrust and autonomy vs. shame and doubt) and have entered the third stage: initiative vs. guilt (as cited in Berger, 2000). Around 6 years of age, children enter Erikson's fourth psychosocial crisis (industry vs. inferiority) which will continue until about the time of puberty. Their level of initiative and sense of capableness will impact on their willingness to try new experiences (as cited in Berger, 2000).

As a result of their experiences, before they enter school children unknowingly will have made decisions in two critical aspects of living: the level of trust they can put in adults and their degree of self-sufficiency. Typically-developing children will enter school believing that adults will provide care for them and that they (children) have the ability to master life tasks. They are excited about exploring detail

and learning new things. As children experience challenge and success (or failure) in their explorations, they make decisions about their abilities. Atypically-developing children may enter the school years exhibiting signs of mistrust and a doubting of their own abilities. If children are discouraged in their explorations or their efforts are deemed “not good enough,” they are at risk for developing an internalized sense of inferiority. Discouraged children will be more likely to limit the range of occupations in which they imagine themselves. These basic decisions children make about who they are in relation to the world around them will influence their continuing development, including their ideas about work, workers and themselves.

### *Piaget's Theory*

Piaget's cognitive theory (as cited in Berger, 2000 and Santrock, 2000) promotes the importance of understanding how children think. The pre-kindergarten-grade one child has passed through the first stage, sensorimotor and is in the pre-operational stage. Gradually new information is assimilated with previous information or, if information does not fit into prior ways of thinking, the mind of the child “makes a place” to accommodate new information. Typically-developing children in the Preoperational Stage have active imaginations, engage in magical thinking and view the world from their own perspectives. They are able to think symbolically and to understand the emotions of others; however, they center thinking on appearances (bigger means older).

At about age 6½ or 7, as children enter the concrete operations stage of cognitive development, they make a dramatic shift in their ability to process information. According to Piaget's theory (Phillips, 1969), children at this stage are able to perform mental actions such as logical reasoning about concrete situations and categorization of objects. The cognitive work of this stage is dependent upon the experiences the child has had at the earlier levels. If curiosity has been nurtured, children will be more willing to explore. If curiosity has been stifled, children may be hesitant to explore and may not know how to assimilate or accommodate new experiences.

### *Vygotsky's Theory*

Vygotsky's work (Cole et al., 1978) placed children's learning in a social context—children seek the help of others as they strive to make sense of the world. Their asking of “Why?” is an example of children's

expectation that others know the answers and can help them understand. Vygotsky viewed children as apprentices in learning to think. Those more knowledgeable serve as mentors in a process of guided participation; thus, cognition is not a private discovery but “a social activity, advanced through the guidance of (adults) . . . who motivate, channel, and construct children’s learning” (Berger, 2000, p. 275). Cognitive development (learning) is influenced by the *zone of proximal development* and *scaffolds*. The *zone of proximal development* is somewhat like the concept of “readiness”—new learning is within the reach of the child but he or she needs a bridge to the learning. *Scaffolds* structure and support the bridge to the new learning. Mentors (a child who has attained the new learning or an adult) provide help as individuals grasp the new learning. Language is a key in the advancement of learning. Verbal interactions—with others as well as internal dialogue with self—provide opportunities to validate understanding. Lack of mentors (in Vygotskian terms) will limit a child’s acquisition of language and thus cognitive growth. If children do not “hear” about occupations, they will not “know” about occupations.

### Theories of Life Career Development

The following paragraphs describe two theories of career development that are “developmental” in nature, i.e., they address the systematic progression of one’s thinking about the world of work and workers throughout the life cycle.

#### *Super’s Theory*

Donald Super’s theory included fourteen postulates (Isaacson and Brown, 1997). Six of these have direct relevance for the early childhood years. Briefly stated they are:

- Vocational preferences, competencies and self-concepts change with time and experience; self-concepts are increasingly stable from late adolescence onward.
- The process of change may be summed up in a series of five life stages; the first two, growth and exploration, include early childhood and adolescence.
- The occupational level attained and the sequence, frequency and duration of trial and stable jobs is influenced by parental socioeco-

conomic level, idiosyncratic characteristics, career maturity, and opportunities.

- Development can be guided as one moves toward a satisfying occupational choice.
- The process of career development is essentially the developing and implementing of occupational self-concepts.
- The process of synthesis between individual and social factors, between self-concept and reality, is one of role playing and of learning from feedback. (Isaacson and Brown, 1997)

### *Gottfredson's Theory*

Linda Gottfredson's theory (as cited in Isaacson and Brown, 1997) addresses career aspirations and is based on four assumptions: career development begins in childhood; career aspirations are an attempt to implement one's self concept; career satisfaction is influenced by congruence between career and self-perceptions; and people develop occupational stereotypes that guide them in the selection process. Her research indicates that children's beliefs about specific occupations are based on self-perception as opposed to factual information. Central to children's organizational schema about work are their idiosyncratic perceptions of the masculinity/femininity of specific occupations, the prestige of the occupation and the nature of the work. Children then decide their compatibility/non compatibility with occupations based on their perceptions of themselves compared with cognitive maps they have developed about the occupation. The degree to which an occupation is seen as compatible, influences children's elimination or acceptance of an occupational field. Gottfredson views children's discounting of occupational fields as irreversible without mediation.

### *Zunker's Theory*

Fukuyama's belief that self-fulfillment is related to satisfaction with work may be seen in Zunker's (1994) dimensions of "career life planning." Zunker discusses the process of career life planning in relation to the skills needed, the role of our personal search for fulfillment in life and the wisdom of making plans that can change as we and our situations change. His premise is that each individual's set of "success criteria" becomes the variable which determines "... how we judge success (and) ... is a crucial decision consciously or subconsciously faced by everyone" (p. 84). Children's internal "success sensors" are

not fully developed. Limited experience with abstract concepts may make it difficult for youth to verbalize their criteria for success; thus it will be important to help young people identify and understand their personal "success criteria."

### Implications for Practice

Children are naturally curious and seek to understand the world (Piaget), look to others (mentors) for guidance in their quest (Vygotsky), are judging themselves by the responses of others to their self-initiated explorations (Erikson), are observing people at work and drawing conclusions about the nature/desirability of the work (Gottfredson), and are forming ideas about themselves and their aspirations (Super). What happens at one level of development will influence subsequent levels. Our responsibility as adults in the lives of children and young adults is to provide many and varied developmentally appropriate opportunities for career awareness, career exploration and the development of life career planning skills. To be personally meaningful to children as individuals, the experiences must be accompanied by opportunities to express individual thoughts and beliefs as they develop. The following suggestions are intended to be "thought-starters" as you develop strategies relevant to the children with whom you work.

#### *Strategies for Children*

Common to all of the strategies are the processes of: encouragement of effort, self-evaluation, and planning for children's growth via providing increasingly more complex tasks. The tasks will be varied, require a range of skills, and allow for successful problem solving.

1. To encourage a "curious spirit" within children:
  - Provide areas in which children are free to explore and wonder. Include such things as: old, small household appliances that may be taken apart and put back together; magnifying glasses, construction tools, building blocks, and hats which may be used in a variety of ways. As children experiment with the objects, introduce them to workers who use the tools.

- Encourage make-believe play and the using of objects in creative ways, e.g., an eraser becomes a microphone for a budding rock star.
2. To build bridges to more complex learning, begin with what children “know” to help them move to what is “not yet known”:
    - If a child repeatedly chooses the tools/hat of a firefighter, expand her possibilities by asking what she thinks about being a carpenter or physician. Make tools of other occupations available, without discouraging her choices of a firefighter’s tools.
    - Encourage a youngster interested in plants to work with and talk with you as you care for the plants, gradually guiding him to learn when to water and how to identify leaves that need plucking.
    - Provide free-time choices, academic project ideas, reading materials, and games on different levels of difficulty. As children grow in competence and confidence, they may choose from activities on their own or with your encouragement.
  3. To develop social understanding (including the awareness of self and others) provide opportunities for individuals to engage in frequent interactions with a variety of people:
    - Each day, a myriad of workers passes through the doors of your school. Invite workers to “stop by” your class for a few minutes. This will personalize their work and will create world-awareness in several ways: children will expand their knowledge about jobs; they will gain an understanding of the interrelatedness of people; they will hear first-hand that satisfaction can be gained through working; you will be modeling respect for all workers.
    - Help children develop an understanding of their internal “success criteria” through self-evaluation and self-reflection. Provide sentence starters such as “Jobs I would not like and why . . .” Children’s shared thoughts provide cues for understanding their interpretations of their experiences.
    - Plan for the expression and exploration of children’s thoughts about specific work and workers through drawing, writing, talking in groups or in dyads. Encourage conversation and journal writing about work tasks.
    - Plan opportunities for children to have many successful tryouts of occupations. Role-playing allows children to try on many roles and (through feedback from self as well as peers and adults) enables them to gain information about themselves and work.

*Thoughts to Guide the Planning of Strategies*

Career awareness and self-awareness go hand-in-hand. As mentors in the lives of children, we can provide for active and intentional involvement of children with their social and cultural environments as they engage in the process of learning. We must keep in mind the influence of the “world of self” in their thinking about the world of work and workers. Incorporating the following ideas into your planning and implementation of strategies will help children arrive at decision points in their lives with effective life career planning skills and tools.

1. Become a constant observer of children:
  - Watch for the individual’s approach to tasks; idiosyncratic ways of approaching tasks provide insight about the learning style of a child.
  - Watch for children’s choices of activities, e.g., the level of activity required, group or individual participation, being a leader or follower. Use these preferences to encourage the child’s efforts and emerging abilities.
  - Observe the child’s initiative-taking. Initiative is a characteristic that contributes to ongoing success and it is in childhood that children are deciding about the value of their initiative.
  - Watch, listen without judgment, take notes over time about individuals’ choices and monologues/dialogues and reflect on your observations. Patterns of choice and themes in self-talk will emerge and provide cues about the ideas children are forming about work, workers, and self.
2. Consider the processing of an activity as important as the activity itself. Processing includes feedback from others or self.
  - Focus feedback on the specifics of children’s efforts. Keep in mind that adult response to the efforts of a child may mean the difference between the child developing a sense of industry or a sense of inferiority.
  - Accompany career awareness and career exploration experiences with opportunities for students to express their beliefs about themselves in relation to the various occupations.
  - Encourage reflection about classroom projects through discussions and/or writing, e.g., what they did, what pleased them about their efforts, what they would do differently if they were to do the same or a similar project another time and what is needed as they continue their exploration.

## Conclusion

How early is too early? The response indicated by the child development and career development theories is "It's never too early." The early years are crucial in the formation of ideas and perceptions about self and the world. Children are especially vulnerable to dependence upon others for their learning opportunities, making childhood a critical time for supportive adults to provide interaction-rich experiences. With our encouragement, children will develop skills and attitudes that will strengthen their knowledge and understanding of the world. They will develop the ability to consider alternatives, set goals, plan a course of action to meet goals and to engage in self-assessment and initiate change as appropriate. We will help them to become active participants in their own lives rather than passive reactors to life's events and passages. Intentionally incorporating the concepts of career awareness, exploration and planning into children's early experiences as they are making decisions about themselves and the world will encourage the process of life career planning as a "habit-of-the-mind." They will be helped to develop a skill that will last a lifetime. It is never too early to help a child develop the self-fulfillment that comes from personal satisfaction with a task well done.

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