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Finding teens' jobs paths

DiscoveryWorks offers workshops to help youths choose their careers

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About three years ago, Carmen Sicilia decided that teenagers could benefit as much from career counseling as adults.

A career and admissions counselor in a vocational college in Montreal, Sicilia had fielded a phone call from a 16-year-old girl who seemed lost. "She said she wanted to become a doctor and asked how she could get into our school."

Sicilia explained that the school's vocational programs could not lead to a medical degree and steered the young woman to a CÉGEP. "I realized that a lot of young people don't know how to navigate their careers," she said. "They don't know what road to take."

So Sicilia, who had always worked in career counseling for adults, founded DiscoveryWorks, a company that offers workshops to teenagers, age 16 through 19. She describes the workshops as the first step toward choosing a career. "Guidance counselors in high schools are overwhelmed helping students with social problems. They don't have time for in-depth career counseling," she said.

Sicilia offers workshops for groups of 10 youths, which enable them to assess their personalities, interests, values and learning styles. "A lot of teenagers think they need to know at 16 what they'll do in their careers for the rest of their lives," she said. "I tell them they'll probably change their careers five to seven times during their lifetimes."

The workshop is not intended to make them choose a career but to help them undergo some self-reflection. "It helps them to become aware of their options," she said. "The first step toward choosing a career is self-assessment."

Sicilia sends out questionnaires to

each youth prior to the workshop to begin the process of self-analysis. After the one-day seminar, she arranges for each youth to visit professionals in various workplaces to garner a sense of what various occupations entail.

Alessandro Priolo, 18, recently enrolled in a vocational program in computer networking after participating in a DiscoveryWorks workshop. He had dropped out of CÉGEP after a year and didn't know what he wanted to do. "All I knew was that I like computers, but I didn't know what I wanted to do with them," he said.

After the workshop, Sicilia took Priolo to observe people in several workplaces. "I met a computer networker and a computer programmer," he said. "I discovered that I don't want to be a computer programmer but the networking really interested me."

So a month ago, Priolo enrolled in a computer-networking program at a vocational college and says he may attend university upon completion of the course. "Before, I had so many things in my head but didn't know what to do. Now, I've narrowed down the field."

Priolo's mother, Maria, said her 21-year-old daughter studied fashion design at a cost of \$14,000 in tuition before discovering that she didn't want to pursue a career in that field. Some self-reflection might have prevented that, she said. "My younger daughter is 15 and I've told her she must take this career management training before going to college."

Sicilia said self-awareness is an essential tool that enables young people to choose the right careers but she emphasizes that teenagers don't have to

make those choices at a young age. She's in good company. Career guru Barbara Moses, author of *The Good News About Careers - How You'll be Working in the Next Decade* (Stoddard Publishing, 1999) says "it's good for a 16-year-old to develop an idea of what he's good at but that shouldn't be translated that into a vocational choice. Self-knowledge is something everyone should strive for but not to make the right career choice. It can, however, help a young person decide what to study at university."

Sicilia says parents can help their teenagers prepare for future careers and the course of study that precedes

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Carmen Sicilia

it. "You need to start asking the children questions long before they reach college age," she said. "You can start asking them if they've thought about what they'd like to do for a career when they're about 9 or 10 but you don't want to make them anxious. Don't tell them they have to make a firm decision. That puts too much pressure on them."

Moses agrees. "A young person can't possibly know what it's like to be a doctor or a computer programmer or anything else," she said.

Sicilia said parents should make their children aware of their options. "You need to go through the process yourself," she said. "Go back and reflect on your own career path and ask yourself how you went about it. It's important to tell your children they need more education than just high school. They should understand that learning is a lifelong process. I often meet people who are fresh out of college and

they say they're glad they're finally finished. I always say 'you'll be back.' Then I ask them if they'd go to a doctor who doesn't read about medicine or attend seminars to upgrade his knowledge. Young people need to know that this is the way now. We need to constantly upgrade our knowledge."

Helping children find the right educational program may also mean doing a lot of research on colleges and universities with them, she said. "Kids need help with this. It's intimidating for them to do this alone."

Sicilia urges that parents find mentors for their children. "Ideally, it should be a relative, friend or colleague," she said. "If you know your child has an interest in mechanical activities, you find a mentor who knows about this area and who can provide the child with information and guidance. It's unlikely a teen will refuse mentoring from someone other than the parent."

And finally, she added, don't choose your child's career. "I deal with a lot of parents who want their children to get into certain fields but the kids just aren't interested," she said. "I know of one bright girl in grade 11 whose parents want her to study pure and applied science. But her passion is in fashion."

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The Macdonald College campus of McGill University will host The Biofair, a career and employment fair devoted to career opportunities in the pharmaceutical and biotech industries, on March 31 and April 1. The fair will take place in the Centennial Centre Ballroom. For information, check the Web site at www.biofair.com or phone toll-free 1-877-6CORTEX.

The fair is open to anyone interested in the field.