

Making Subject Choices at Age 12-14

At the age of around 12-14, perhaps for the first time in their life, your child will have to make important decisions. Some young people find it easier to decide on what to do than others, but because the choices they make now can impact on their futures, they need to take time to consider their options.

The facts

- Schools must ensure that all young people receive a broad education, so your child will have to continue with certain core disciplines including English, science and maths. Some schools make other subjects compulsory.
- It's not possible for all schools to offer all subjects. Where there are options, choices are usually made from groups of disciplines – the humanities and modern foreign languages, for instance. Timetabling issues can also mean that your child may be restricted in the choices they can make.
- Schools in England may encourage pupils to take English Baccalaureate subjects (English language and literature, maths, history or geography, a language and the sciences/computer science).
- In Wales, it's possible to achieve the Welsh Baccalaureate at Foundation or National level. This involves gaining a Skills Challenge Certificate alongside certain GCSE or equivalent qualifications.
- Some subjects can be picked up at a later stage in your child's education, but for others, e.g. languages or art and design, they will usually need the GCSE/National before progressing.
- It may be possible to take some new subjects, e.g. business or engineering.
- Some schools and colleges offer vocational programmes, such as those leading to OCR Level 1/2 Cambridge Nationals, BTEC Level 1/Level 2 Tech Awards or WJEC Level 1/2 Vocational Awards.
- [Reforms to GCSEs](#) in England and Wales – including the 9-1 grading system in England – have been introduced. Further reforms are planned for [qualifications in Wales](#) and Scotland over the next few years.

The decisions

Once they have found out what subjects and courses are available, encourage your

child to ask themselves some searching questions.

- Which subjects are they good at? Which subjects do they enjoy? The two don't necessarily go hand in hand.
- What assessment methods suit them? Although most GCSEs/Nationals are assessed by exams, practical work forms an important part of certain subjects.
- If they have a particular career in mind, have they investigated which subjects are required?
- If they are unsure about careers, are they choosing a broad enough range of subjects to keep as many options open as possible?
- Are there any subjects they'd like to continue studying post-16?
- What wider interests do they have? Certain subjects, such as music and PE, can be taken at school or continued as hobbies.
- If they have already decided on some subjects, on what are they basing their decisions? Check that they are choosing a subject for the right reasons and not because they like the teacher, think it will be an easy option or because their friends are taking it!
- If they have a choice, how many subjects should they take? It may be more important to achieve good grades than to do extra GCSEs/Nationals.
- Would a different learning environment suit them? Are they aware that it's sometimes possible to continue their education in another setting, such as a local further education college or [university technical college](#)?

The research

It's important that your child gets as much information and advice as possible. Ensure that they attend any options events, check out their school's website or course information booklets, and use the careers resources available to them. Their subject teachers can tell them more about what they will learn at GCSE/National level; they will also say if they feel a subject might or might not suit them. Although it's helpful to give your own opinions, bear in mind that things may have changed quite a bit since you were at school!

Websites such as [Studential](#) and [Start](#) have information on GCSE or equivalent choices. Information may also be found on the national careers service site for where you live in the UK:

- [National Careers Service](#) for those in England
- [Careers Wales](#)
- [Careers Service](#) for Northern Ireland
- [My World of Work](#) for those in Scotland.

Finally

Remember that GCSEs/Nationals and other qualifications aren't just about preparing teenagers for the world of work or for future study, they should also provide a well-rounded education. Although you should do your best to help your child make the right choices, the final decision must be theirs.

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