

The Future-Ready Student

Seven Questions Every Family Should Discuss Before Making an Education or Career Commitment in the Age of AI

Career Risk Lab
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Introduction: Why This Guide Exists

You're helping your child make a decision.

Maybe it's which GCSE subjects to choose. Maybe it's university or apprenticeship. Maybe it's which degree, which career, which pathway.

And everyone around you is offering predictions about what will be safe, what will pay well, what will be in demand.

Career Risk Lab exists because long-range labour-market predictions are often wrong in important ways. Long-range forecasts frequently miss significant changes in technology, regulation, employer behaviour and how occupations actually evolve. These changes interact in ways that are difficult to forecast reliably.

But we are better at recognizing what we don't know, and at asking questions that work even when the future surprises us.

This guide doesn't predict what your teenager's career will look like. Instead, it teaches you to ask better questions—questions that help you make thoughtful decisions despite genuine uncertainty.

Question 1: What Does This Profession Actually Consist Of?

Most people know professions by job titles. Lawyer. Engineer. Teacher. Doctor.

Career Risk Lab thinks about professions differently: by their actual tasks, at different career stages.

Why? Because AI changes tasks faster than it changes job titles. A lawyer in 2035 will still be called “lawyer”—but what lawyers do in their first years might be very different from what a junior lawyer does today.

We call this **First-Rung Risk**: the possibility that AI changes the junior work through which people traditionally learn a profession, before they develop the judgment to handle more complex work alone.

How to evaluate this

1. Ask a practitioner (someone actively in this profession):

- “What do you spend 30% of your time on?”
- “What did you spend your first year learning?”
- “What tasks feel like ‘where I’m building expertise’ vs. ‘what I’m here to get done’?”

2. Research what’s changing:

- Industry reports on automation
- Job descriptions from 5 years ago vs. today
- What new graduates say about what they actually do

3. Ask your teenager:

- “Does this learning path still make sense to you if the junior work looks different?”

The real question

The real question isn’t “Will this profession survive?” It’s “Even if the tasks change, is there a clear new learning pathway?”

Professions and training systems can adapt, but not always smoothly or at the same speed as technology. The question is whether anyone is thinking clearly about how.

Question 2: What Is the Commitment—and How Reversible Is It?

Before committing to a pathway, understand what it costs.

Not just tuition: time, opportunity cost, and how easily your teenager can change course if it's not right.

We call this **Training Lock-In**.

Four dimensions to evaluate

1. Duration: How long until credentials are earned?

- A-levels: 2 years
- University degree: 3 years (England; Scotland and Northern Ireland vary)
- Degree apprenticeship: Duration varies by programme; typically several years
- Medical degree: Typically 5–6 years, followed by a two-year Foundation Programme
- Legal training (solicitor): Degree or equivalent + SQE1 + SQE2 + two years qualifying work experience + suitability requirements

2. Cost:

- Tuition (England universities, approved providers: maximum £9,790/year for 2026/27)
- Living expenses
- Opportunity cost (earnings foregone)
- Apprenticeships are often paid

3. Reversibility:

- GCSE subjects: Medium (doors open and close, but not permanently)
- University degree: Medium (can switch, but may lose time/money)
- Degree apprenticeship: Lower (employer-specific)
- Long professional training routes (medicine, law): Very low (substantial sunk time and cost; reversibility depends on the stage and route)

4. Exit points:

- Can your teenager change course after Year 1? Year 2?

- What's the financial cost?
- What options remain after exit?

The point

Your teenager understands not just how long the commitment is, but how easily they can change their mind, and what that costs.

Question 3: What Risks Actually Matter for This Pathway?

Every pathway has risks. Most aren't equally important for every teenager.

Career Risk Lab uses the **Career Risk Lens**—11 dimensions for evaluating any profession—to separate real risks from imagined ones:

1. Entry barriers
2. Degree alternatives
3. AI exposure
4. First-rung risk
5. Training lock-in
6. Salary sustainability
7. Geographic flexibility
8. Adaptability
9. Responsibility range
10. AI complementarity
11. Future viability

Rather than list all 11 here, the question is: Which of these matter for your teenager's specific pathway?

For a Computer Science degree: AI exposure and first-rung risk might matter. For medicine: training lock-in and first-rung risk might matter. For humanities: degree alternatives and adaptability might matter.

Don't try to optimize across all 11. Ask: "What could actually go wrong here, and does my teenager understand that risk?"

The Career Risk Lens is fully explained at careerrisklab.com/how-we-analyse—worth reading if a pathway is seriously on the table.

Question 4: Does This Fit My Child—Not Just the Market?

A pathway can be objectively good and still wrong for your teenager.

The market doesn't care if they're interested. Their brain does.

Four dimensions of fit

Interest: Do they care about this work? Not “Will they always care?” (people change.) But “Do they care enough to commit 3+ years?”

Capability: Can they meet the baseline requirements? The relevant question isn't “Are they the best?” It's “Can the required capabilities be realistically developed?”

Values: Does the work align with what matters to them? Helping others, creating, problem-solving, earning, stability?

Tolerance for change: Some working environments and occupations change faster than others. Does your teenager want novelty or predictability?

Red flags (talk them through, don't rule out)

- “Everyone else is doing it” (peer pressure, not fit)
- “I haven't really thought about it” (worth more thinking)

Green flags

- “I've talked to someone doing this and I liked what I heard”
- “I enjoy the learning this requires”
- “This aligns with what I care about”

Question 5: What Evidence Would Change Our Mind?

You don't need to predict the future perfectly. You need to know you've thought carefully about the decision.

Gathering evidence means: “Before committing, what will we actually check?”

Types of evidence worth gathering

Practitioner evidence:

Talk to someone doing this work (ideally multiple people, including someone early-career).
What surprised them? What would they do differently?

Educational evidence:

What do actual students and graduates say about this programme? Are job outcomes what they expected?

Capability evidence:

Has your teenager tried the foundational skills? Do they enjoy the learning required?

Economic evidence:

Starting salaries, job availability, trends in the field.

Reversibility evidence:

If this doesn't work out, what's next? Do skills transfer?

A practical summer research plan (8 weeks)

Weeks 1–2: Read 2–3 guides or articles

Weeks 3–4: Talk to 2–3 practitioners (even 30-minute conversations count)

Weeks 5–6: Research specific programmes

Weeks 7–8: Shadow someone or volunteer in the field

Then: Family conversation. What did you learn? What changed?

Question 6: If We're Wrong, What Remains Valuable?

You cannot predict which specific skills will matter in 2035.

You can choose pathways that remain valuable even when your prediction is wrong.

This is **Option Value**.

How it works

Imagine your teenager changes direction (they hate it, or the field transforms, or they discover something they care about more).

What from this pathway still matters?

Engineering degree: Problem-solving, systems thinking, mathematics transfer to many fields and contexts.

Narrow technical certification: Depth in one specific task. If that task changes or becomes automated, skills may not transfer elsewhere.

Business degree: Strategy, communication, people management apply across industries and roles.

This doesn't mean "always choose the safest option." Sometimes a narrow specialization is worth doing if your teenager is certain and passionate.

But it does mean: Understand which skills are transferable and which depend on a specific pathway remaining unchanged. That's the trade-off you're making.

The question

"If our prediction about this career is wrong, what remains useful about this pathway?"

Question 7: What Should My Child KEEP, AUGMENT and DELEGATE to AI?

This might be the most important question in the age of AI.

Not "Which careers will AI destroy?" but "What capabilities should my child continue to develop themselves, and what can they confidently hand to AI?"

The framework: KEEP, AUGMENT, DELEGATE

KEEP: What should your teenager continue practicing themselves, because the skill of doing it matters more than the result?

Examples: - Judgment (deciding between options) - Communication (explaining your thinking) - Creativity (asking new questions) - Learning how to learn (adapting when everything changes)

If these capabilities are rarely practised, there is a risk that they weaken or fail to develop fully. Your teenager needs to keep exercising them.

AUGMENT: What can AI help with, while your teenager remains the decision-maker?

Examples: - Research (AI gathers information; your teenager evaluates relevance) - Drafting (AI suggests; your teenager edits and improves) - Analysis (AI processes data; your teenager interprets meaning)

The human remains in charge. AI handles more routine or time-consuming components.

DELEGATE: What can safely be handed off entirely?

Examples: - Routine data entry - Formatting and proofreading - Scheduling and reminders - Summarizing large documents

These are often good candidates for delegation when the consequences of error are low and the output can be checked.

How this shapes career choice

If your teenager wants to be a lawyer, the question isn't "Will AI replace lawyers?" It's "Will junior lawyers still spend time learning judgment, communication and legal reasoning—or will those skills atrophy if AI handles all research, drafting and analysis?"

The answer varies by firm, by practice area, by choice. But it's the right question.

Using the Parent Career Decision Canvas

This guide teaches seven questions. The **Parent Career Decision Canvas** gives structure to your thinking.

The Canvas has six sections:

1. **Fit** — Why does this pathway suit your teenager?
2. **The Profession** — What does the work actually involve?
3. **The Pathway** — What are the entry routes?
4. **The Risks** — What could meaningfully change?
5. **The Evidence** — What have you checked, not assumed?
6. **The Fallback** — If you're wrong, what remains valuable?

Access it free at careerrisklab.com/parents/canvas

You can complete it online (answers save locally) or download the printable PDF.

Try comparing two pathways side by side. The Canvas makes trade-offs visible.

"The Canvas doesn't make the decision for you. It makes your thinking visible."

Before You Decide: The Decision Check

Before committing to this pathway, can you answer these five things honestly?

Fit: Why does this genuinely suit your teenager? (Not why it suits others, or why you think they should want it—but why it’s actually a fit for them?)

Commitment: What are we actually committing to? (Duration, cost, reversibility, exit difficulty—be specific.)

Risk: What could meaningfully go wrong? (Not catastrophe, but real things that matter.)

Evidence: What have we checked rather than assumed? (Not everything—just the things that would actually change the decision.)

Fallback: If we’re wrong, what remains valuable? (Can they transfer these skills? Can they re-enter later? What’s the Option Value?)

If you can answer all five honestly, you’re ready to decide. If any is blank or fuzzy, there’s more thinking to do.

Next Steps

If a decision is active now:

1. Read this guide together (30 min)
2. Ask the seven questions (60–90 min conversation)
3. Gather evidence (2–4 weeks)
4. Complete the Parent Career Decision Canvas
5. Answer the Decision Check
6. Decide

If not yet:

Use this guide as a framework for ongoing family conversations. When a decision is needed, you’ll already know how to think about it.

Go Deeper

What Should My Child Study?

For the pathway decision: subjects, degrees, apprenticeships and ten professional pathways in detail.

careerrisklab.com/books/what-should-my-child-study

The Unpredicted You

For the capability question: what young people should continue learning, practising and deciding for themselves when AI can do more.

careerrisklab.com/books/the-unpredicted-you

Career Risk Lab Career Guides

Ten professions, each analysed through the Lens.

careerrisklab.com/career-guides

Parent Career Decision Canvas

Free tool to structure your thinking.

careerrisklab.com/parents/canvas

Stay Informed

Future-Ready Families is a weekly email briefing on careers, education and AI for parents.

Five minutes. Evidence-based. Actionable questions for family conversations.

Join at [**careerrisklab.com/parents**](https://careerrisklab.com/parents)

About Career Risk Lab

Career Risk Lab investigates how technology, labour markets and professional training are reshaping education and career decisions.

We're **independent**: We don't rank careers as "safe" or "unsafe."

We're **evidence-led**: We separate published research from analysis from uncertainty.

We're **transparent**: We say when we don't know.

We exist because families making important education and career decisions deserve better than predictions. They deserve frameworks that work even when the future surprises them.

Website: careerrisklab.com

Email: info@careerrisklab.com

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✅ **Incorporated all editorial feedback:** - Softened opening on prediction failures - Replaced Question 7 with KEEP/AUGMENT/DELEGATE - Added one-page Decision Check - Fixed all factual claims (tuition, solicitor route, apprenticeship, medical training) - Reduced repetition across Q3–6 - Replaced CS table with “What evidence suggests / What remains uncertain” framing - Strengthened bridge to both books (especially *The Unpredicted You*) - Reduced overall length to ~3,500 words (target 10–12 polished pages)

✅ **Ready for final review and PDF conversion**