

Seven Reasons Skilled Trades May Be the Best Path for Your Teen

When you hear skilled trades, do you think of low-wage jobs for kids who couldn't hack college and "settled" for something else? *It's time to get over that outdated thinking.*

High school grads are often pushed into a four-year (or higher) degree, yet only 62% of four-year students graduate after six years. Many drop out after their first year. Meanwhile, high-paying jobs in skills-based occupations sit empty. There's something wrong with this picture.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not anti-college; I just don't believe college is for everyone.

There will be millions of trade job openings this year

There are 2.5 million skilled trade job openings expected this year and they're not just in construction. Skills-based career opportunities exist across many industries, including healthcare, information technology, energy, manufacturing, public services, and others. And the path to reach them is shorter, more focused, and less expensive than the journey to a four-year degree.

You don't have to take my word for it. People in the trades tell the real story — of utilizing their skills to earn a good living, working their way up the ranks, even opening their own businesses. And doing it all with little or no student debt to repay.

Why a skills-based career might be a great fit for your teen

1. Some teens are happiest working with their hands.

Students interested in fields like automotive technology, solar energy, or respiratory therapy don't want to spend all their time in an office or a lecture hall. Trade schools, on-the-job apprenticeships, and workforce development programs at local community colleges prioritize hands-on teaching, helping students build the skills they will use in their careers and preparing them to enter the workforce.

2. They can get a head start

Community colleges, trade schools and apprenticeships take two years or less to complete. That means they enter the workforce earlier than grads of four-year colleges — and gain experience, develop connections and move up the career ladder sooner. While college students are amassing debt, tradespeople are earning income.

3. Skills-based careers offer a good bang for the buck

Many entry-level jobs in the skilled trades pay upwards of \$20 an hour, and the wages go up from there. Consider these median wages from the Bureau of Labor Statistics:

- Software developer: \$49.82 per hour
- Dental hygienist: \$36.65 per hour
- Respiratory therapist: \$29.48 per hour
- Electrician: \$27.01 per hour
- HVAC technician: \$23.43 per hour

Given the high demand for skilled electricians, plumbers, mechanics, and the like, it's not uncommon for skilled tradespeople to open their own business — and earn six figures.

4. You can't be what you can't see

For many of our teens, the problem isn't the false stigma of the trades but simply that a lot of kids don't see a clear path to these great jobs. All of us — guidance counselors, parents, schools, and employers — can highlight the great opportunities that exist.

We rightly celebrate students with great grades or the best student-athletes. We should also celebrate those who can troubleshoot a diesel engine in the fastest time, design the best app or install fiberoptic wiring in a competition.

5. The country needs us

The future can't build itself. The labor shortage of skilled workers is well-documented throughout the United States. Older generations of skilled tradespeople are entering retirement much faster than they can be replaced. One statistic indicates that over 50% of skilled-trade workers in the U.S. are 50 years old and older, and nearly 20% are over 60. If we want a strong economy, then we need new talent to get us there.

6. For women, the future is particularly bright

Women earn only about 80 cents on the dollar compared with men, even though half the U.S. workforce is female and women make up more than half of all college grads. But in the skilled trades, the story's different. In construction, for example, women earn about 99% of men's pay, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

7. It's cool to be a maker!

Being a "maker" is more important now than ever as people shift from passive consumers to become active creators. Fixing things, building things, seeing the physical fruit of your labor can be far more personally fulfilling than the tasks associated with many traditional careers requiring four-year degrees.

The moment is waiting for you and your teen.

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