

Evidence review:

Teaching career-related learning through
the primary PSHE education curriculum



Introduction

This evidence review accompanies the Career Explorers lesson pack and teacher guidance for career-related learning at key stages 1 and 2 (Annex A). These materials were produced by the PSHE Association with funding from The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC). The evidence review brings together key research and best practice evidence, showing the importance of career-related learning in the primary phase, and especially the role of personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education, how to effectively teach this age group about careers, and how career-related learning in PSHE education fits into a wider whole-school approach. It is intended for PSHE leads and primary teachers who are beginning to teach career-related learning, or who are reviewing their existing PSHE education curriculum.

Why should career-related learning start early?

As we learn more about how career development works and what makes good career-related learning, it has become clear that we should start earlier. Ideas and perceptions of careers begin at a much younger age than previously thought. Children of primary age, especially key stage 1 pupils, were believed to have transient, fantastical career aspirations. However, research contradicts these assumptions, showing that children's career aspirations, evident from as early as 7 years old, tend to persist into adolescence (Howard & Walsh, 2011). These aspirations, while not always realistic, indicate an early, informal understanding of work roles and societal structures. Education policy has supported this greater focus on early intervention, including a 2023 Education Select Committee report, which states that **'starting careers provision at an early age is essential...'** and the 2017 Careers Strategy, which outlined the importance of raising aspirations, challenging stereotypes, and the need for more employer encounters in the primary phase.

From ages 6 to 8, children start recognising and associating job roles with aspects of identity such as gender, a process influenced by societal norms and family expectations (Porfeli & Lee, 2012). This period is crucial in shaping children's self-efficacy, beliefs, and outcome expectations; central concepts in Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994). As children get older (9-13 years), they begin to categorise occupations based on socio-economic factors and gender, forming career interests guided by their perceived self-efficacy and outcome expectations. These **'greatly influence one's interests, which in turn influence career choices' and make up the 'basic "building blocks" of career development'** (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002).

The perception of job status also plays a significant role in career considerations during this formative stage. Children may shy away from high-status jobs perceived as too challenging, aligning with SCCT's emphasis on the impact of personal goals and self-efficacy on career choices (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2002).

By the end of primary school, children often filter job options based on gender norms. A study by Helwig (2003) showed gender differences in job familiarity and preferences among young children, particularly in STEM fields. For example, boys typically showed greater interest in physical sciences, while girls preferred careers in biological and health sciences (Davenport & Shimwell, 2019).

"...students' learning experiences play a pivotal role as a mediator between personal backgrounds and socio-cognitive mechanisms in SCCT."

Kang and Keinonen, 2017

Moreover, social and economic background can significantly influence children's career aspirations. A study by Auger, Blackhurst, and Wahl (2005) found that children from different socio-economic backgrounds have varying career aspirations, highlighting the need for career-related learning that recognises and addresses these disparities. Additionally, a 2018 study by Chambers et al, analysed pictures drawn by 7 to 11-year-olds of what they wanted to do in the future and revealed that children in less deprived areas were more likely to draw a 'professional' career such as a lawyer, than those in more deprived areas.

Integrating Social Cognitive Career Theory into early career-related learning, as part of a more nuanced understanding of career development from a young age, could help address the formation of career interests that are shaped by self-efficacy, outcome expectations, and social influences.



The role of PSHE education

Whilst research shows the importance of starting career-related learning early, it also underscores the importance of not imposing career decision expectations on primary pupils, but rather providing them with a diverse array of career options to expand their **'careers vocabulary and understanding of the world of work'** (Turner & Conkel, 2010). Studies have demonstrated that early career-related learning enables pupils to develop broader career expectations and aspirations, reducing the likelihood of constraints imposed by societal or familial pressures for premature career compromises (Hughes et al, 2013). A holistic, whole-school approach to career-related learning is most effective, with PSHE education playing a crucial role within that, in deepening pupils' understanding of the world of work, exploring different careers, possible career pathways and options for training routes. This approach is vital for challenging stereotypes and misconceptions associated with certain careers, contributing to pupils' exploration of their **'possible selves'** and broadening their horizons (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

This cannot be achieved without discrete curriculum time. And PSHE education lessons are, according to inspection and monitoring evidence, the most effective model for providing this time for comprehensive career-related learning and allowing pupils to explore a wide range of careers, including those they may not have considered or known about before (Career Development Institute, 2018). This is supported by a recent Ofsted review which states **‘Most schools used personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) education as dedicated time for direct input on careers guidance’.**

“Career-related learning begins at a very early age. Children absorb ideas about careers from many sources including the work that they see in the home, the stories they read and the games that they play. Primary schools have a key role in ensuring that the more formal aspects of this learning provide opportunities for personal growth, enjoyment and challenge.”

Career Development Framework: Handbook for Primary Schools, CDI, 2021

To this end, career-related learning enhances, and is also enhanced by, other topic areas in PSHE education. For example, learning about risk including taking positive risks; teaching pupils the balance between caution and opportunity when exploring career options, and relationship and communication skills; teaching vital components of success in the workplace, and financial education; building skills to enter the labour market and contributing to broader macro-economic benefits (Hooley & Dodd, 2015).

Research also suggests that developing children’s sense of meaning and purpose in life, which it has been found children as young as 9 years old can experience, is related to better mental health and wellbeing (Shoshani & Russo-Netzer, 2016). Career-related learning, combined with other elements of PSHE education, has the potential to support pupils’ sense of meaning and purpose. This link with mental wellbeing was demonstrated by the analysis of a questionnaire which aimed to evaluate the presence and sources of meaning in life in children, combining their scores on three sub-scales: attitude, creativity, and experience. Statements given a high score included: **‘I take actions that will help me achieve the goals in life that are important to me’.** The PSHE education curriculum affords many opportunities, including - but not limited to - specific career-related learning, to develop this sense of meaning and identification of personal goals.

Delivering career-related learning through PSHE education also provides an opportunity for a deeper exploration of self-awareness – a social and emotional skill which research (including

“Meaning in life is a primary personal resource that has consistently been found to be associated with mental health and psychological wellbeing throughout the human life span.”

Steger, Oishi, & Kashdan, 2009



Goodman et al, 2015) has shown is a predictor of a range of adult outcomes, such as life satisfaction and wellbeing, labour market success, and good overall health. It also develops pupils' understanding of their strengths, interests, and values. This learning is key in supporting pupils to make informed career choices when they are older, based on their aspirations and personal attributes. It is also essential to develop pupils' understanding of the workplace, as well as the knowledge, skills and attributes that employers need, and that pupils themselves require, to navigate and compete in today's labour market (Skills for Jobs, Department for Education (DfE), 2021). This could have a strong impact not just for individuals, but for the whole economy. The DfE report - PSHE Education: A Review of Impact and Effective Practice (2015), states that **'PSHE education provides an opportunity to provide or enhance skills such as perseverance, conflict resolution, emotional intelligence, self-management, self-respect, teamwork, locus of control, time and stress management'** which, according to the 2017 Sutton Trust 'Life Lessons' report, are highly valued by employers. A 2011 study by Demos, showed that such skills are more important in determining life chances at age 30 than academic qualifications. Businesses want such skills too. As Neil Carberry, CBI Director for People and Skills, puts it: "the right attitudes and attributes in people such as resilience, respect, enthusiasm and creativity are just as important as academic and technical skills".

A whole school approach to career-related learning

So far, this review has focused on the specific role of the PSHE education curriculum. But this should be at the heart of a whole school approach to career-related learning, which recognises the impact of many aspects of school life that support pupils to learn about themselves and the world around them (Annex B).



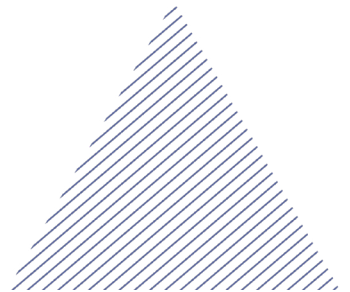
Effective coordination at the whole-school level is crucial for achieving desired outcomes for pupils. Developing a leader dedicated to career-related learning, with the cooperation of the senior leadership team, ensures strategic planning and delivery. This approach includes providing necessary training for teachers. The CEC Primary pilot (see the teacher guidance document for more information) brings together primary schools in local areas and provides teachers with training delivered by Teach First – to support teachers to develop and deliver career-related learning. Where this role is not carried out by the PSHE lead, it is essential that the two work together to ensure a coherent and consistent approach.

Research emphasises the role of leadership in embedding career-related learning in schools and in ensuring that it starts early in the primary phase. It also highlights the need for leaders to ensure ‘buy-in’ from staff and other stakeholders such as governors, by building aspects of career-related learning into the school’s aims and ethos (Hooley, Marriott, & Sampson, 2011; Kashefpakdel et al, 2019).

Engagement with community organisations and employers is vital for enhancing career-related learning. Employer engagement activities could include inviting workplace representatives to lead in-school activities, organising school assemblies with guest speakers, and arranging visits to workplaces. Research demonstrates that young people who frequently interact with employers through school are more likely to achieve higher earnings as young adults (Kashefpakdel et al, 2019; Mann & Percy, 2014), and so it is important to build this into existing encounters with people in the community, and also ensure there is time dedicated to speaking about career pathways and job roles.

[PSHE Association guidance on selecting and working with visitors and speakers](#) supports schools to promote active learning in sessions involving visitors or external speakers, ensuring they add value to the programme and adhere to best practice principles for PSHE education.

Parental involvement in education significantly influences students’ academic success and career choices (Jeynes, 2007; Kashefpakdel et al, 2019) and parental engagement in career-related learning is also a significant factor in a successful approach. To engage parents, schools can integrate career-related learning into school events such as parents’ evenings or themed days and involve parents in planning employer-engagement activities. Sharing with parents the evidence that starting career-related learning from key stage 1 is crucial for broadening horizons and raising aspirations, may encourage them to take up these opportunities to work with the school.



Case study

Pupils from Leen Mills Primary school took part in a Primary Futures aspirations morning that involved an assembly, followed by classroom sessions. To achieve this, the teacher and Primary Futures Coordinator initially held a planning call to understand and create their careers-related learning activity using the Primary Futures platform. The Primary Futures Coordinator regularly corresponded with the teacher on the progress of the activity to ensure volunteers confirmed their attendance and the teacher felt confident about facilitating the activity on the day. Primary Futures also provided the school with resources and guides which outlined how to run the activities and invite volunteers on the Primary Futures platform. On the day, the pupils had the opportunity to ask in-depth questions about the volunteers’ jobs and learn about how they use different subjects in their jobs. After the activity, Primary Futures discussed how the morning went with the teacher, provided a report on feedback collected from the children and offered support in planning future activities.



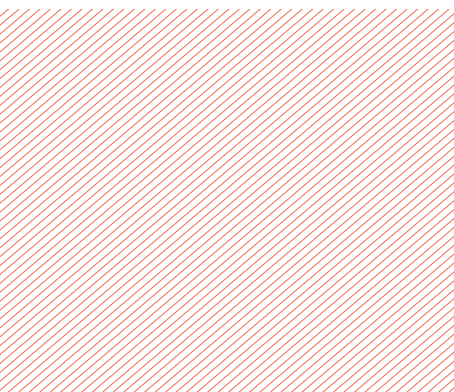
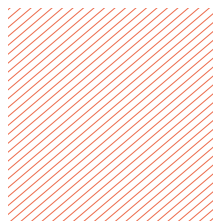
Final thoughts

Whilst there is little research specifically examining the delivery of career-related learning through PSHE education in the primary phase, it is clear from the research and best practice evidence discussed in this review, that the PSHE education curriculum is central to effective career-related learning. But of course, it also highlights the importance of this curriculum being situated at the heart of a whole-school approach.

This integrated model is summed up effectively in the six principles of whole-school practice for career-related learning at primary school, identified in The Careers and Enterprise Company's report '[What works? Career-related learning in primary schools](#)' (2018):

1. Embed into a whole school approach driven by senior leaders
2. Start early
3. Embed into the curriculum
4. Ensure activities are personalised and relevant
5. Make it open to all
6. Involve employers and parents

PSHE education has a part to play in several – if not all - of these actions and a strong, effective PSHE education programme, with fully embedded career-related learning that is linked to and enhanced by the rest of the PSHE curriculum, will be critical to the success of the whole-school approach. But this will not happen by accident and must be led and championed by a PSHE education lead who understands what works and why it is important, and who is able to prioritise an area of the primary PSHE education curriculum that is not yet compulsory. To do this, they must be supported by senior leaders and the lead for career-related learning, and this joint commitment will ensure that their pupils receive the effective and engaging career-related learning they deserve.

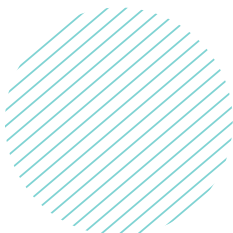
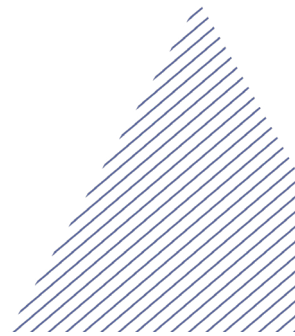


Annex A: The Career Explorers lesson pack

In line with this evidence review, the [Career Explorers PSHE education lessons](#) have been created to support and contribute to career-related learning provision by:

- encouraging pupils to reflect on their strengths and interests, and how these might suit different career pathways
- providing examples of a wide range of careers, including counter-stereotypical depictions of these careers
- broadening pupils' understanding of future career pathways, including what could influence them
- allowing pupils opportunities to consider and challenge career-related stereotypes
- focussing on the types of skills needed for work, including transferable skills, and providing an opportunity to reflect on skills they may want to develop now and in the future
- introducing the work and study options available, including academic and vocational routes into various careers
- creating a foundation for, and supporting the transition to, effective career education at secondary school

The lessons are not designed to be taught in isolation and should form part of a school's overall programme for PSHE education. They could be effectively embedded within the 'Living in the wider world' core theme of the [PSHE Association's Programme of study](#). The lessons may also be sequenced to follow teaching about economic wellbeing and money. The teacher guidance document contains curriculum links to the PSHE Association Programme of Study.



Annex B: Practical tips for promoting career-related learning through the PSHE education curriculum and across the school community:

Effective and engaging career-related learning in PSHE education can be supported by:

- Exploiting the link between career-related learning and other PSHE education topics, supporting pupils to recognise and develop transferable skills. For example:

Health and wellbeing:

- Learning about personal strengths and qualities encourages self-awareness, self-reflection and the development of personal values. Pupils also learn about goal setting and aspirations, aligning with the exploration of career paths.
- Learning about the importance of looking after mental health and wellbeing, including strategies to maintain a work-life balance and manage stress. Pupils also learn about how having a job or career, including voluntary work, can provide a sense of meaning and purpose and have a positive impact on mental wellbeing.

Relationships:

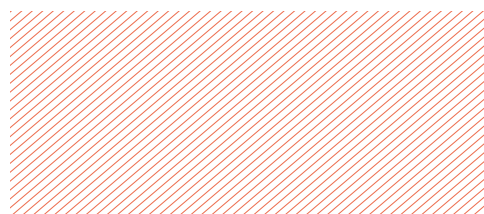
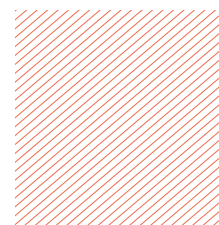
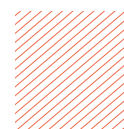
- Learning about friendship and bullying teaches pupils about building and maintaining connections, navigating social situations, resolving conflicts positively and reconciling differences – all useful within the context of career-related learning and future careers.
- Pupils use critical thinking and analysis skills when learning about challenging stereotypes, and they are therefore well placed to apply this within a careers-related learning framework. This also acts as a foundation for when pupils explore inclusion and challenging discrimination, as well as how stereotypes can impact career choices and opportunities.

Living in the wider world:

- Learning in financial education supports pupils to make informed decisions, assess risk in different contexts, and helps them develop a sense of financial wellbeing, contributing to positive feelings about the future, including career-related goals.
- Learning about their place in the community, including the rights that people are entitled to, and the responsibilities that come with them, can also support pupils' understanding of careers and how different job roles benefit society.



- Embedding career-related learning into other PSHE topics, for example: by exploring roles that are focused on promoting, maintaining, or restoring health such as doctors, nurses or therapists as part of health and wellbeing topics; when learning about discrimination and stereotypes, using career-related examples which defy the stereotype, such as women in STEM.
- Using key stage 2 to key stage 3 transition activities to support career-related learning. These can be fun and engaging ways to ensure progression and consistency in learning, but also help pupils to link secondary school with preparing for their future:
 - Encourage parents to attend secondary school open days or evenings. This can provide an opportunity to demonstrate the continuing value and importance of career-related learning.
 - Liaise with secondary school staff to carry out visits from a career's perspective: they could bring a team of students to speak with parents and pupils about career-related learning at their school or deliver a lesson promoting the secondary curriculum offer.
 - Plan a transition day with a focus on career-related learning – pupils could take part in skill building workshops or find out about different job roles.
 - Work with secondary school staff to plan or improve the careers programme and to ensure consistency between career-related learning in feeder primary schools and secondary school.
- Making use of assessment to contribute to the effectiveness of career-related learning. Using baseline assessments at the beginning of lessons can help teachers gauge pupils' existing knowledge, skills (including transferable skills such as teamwork), attitudes and attributes. Depending on the context, it may also help teachers find out pupils' interests and strengths, or aspirations for the future. Feedback from pupil assessment can be useful in helping teachers to adapt the lesson or programme and steer the learning to support the development of necessary skills. Involving pupils in evaluating the learning through self or peer assessment can enable them to reflect on their skill development, personal growth and next steps.
- Through pupil voice: involving pupils in the design and development of career-related learning and incorporating topics and activities that resonate with their interests, can also be an effective tool to ensure the learning experience is relevant and engaging.
- Using PSHE education lessons as opportunities for employer encounters. Employers could visit school multiple times to deliver short, interactive sessions to pupils with a different focus each time. For example, skills for employment or goal setting.
- Planning a curriculum-based project, delivered over a longer timeframe (e.g. a half term). An area of the PSHE education curriculum could be taught through the lens of the workplace, such as challenging stereotypes or diversifying careers, with employers supporting delivery in the classroom.



Additional ideas across the school community:

- Run an event such as a careers fair with local businesses. This could include a panel Q&A to explore different jobs within one sector or 'speed networking' to meet lots of employers to find out more about different sectors in the local area.
- Organise an event such as careers and enterprise week, where pupils could take part in simulations or role play. Each day could include an assembly focussing on a different career or career area e.g., STEM and the skills needed.
- Form a working party with different curriculum leaders to build career-related learning into a range of subjects e.g., looking at aspirations and career choices through books in literacy or writing job adverts.
- Ask pupils to interview staff members about their job roles in school.
- Invite alumni young people into school to speak about their experiences of different career pathways e.g., apprenticeships, or academic qualifications such as A levels or degrees.
- Plan a school trip to a local college or university to find out more about education and training pathways.
- Use technology to do virtual tours of workplaces or tools to showcase different careers.

These approaches, underpinned by a consistent, whole-school strategy, are critical in expanding pupils' career aspirations and challenging societal expectations that may limit their future choices (Kashefpakdel et al, 2019).



Additional materials to support career-related learning

Guidance and resources

- [The Careers & Enterprise Company](#) - 'Primary Careers Resources Platform' - provides teachers and school leaders with high-quality resources that can be used to embed and deliver career-related learning.
- [PSHE Association Programme of study](#): learning opportunities for all PSHE education and each key stage, across three core themes: 'Health and Wellbeing', 'Relationships', and 'Living in the Wider World'.
- [Handling complex issues safely in the PSHE education classroom](#): detailed advice about establishing a safe classroom environment for discussing complex issues.
- [Best practice principles – interactive posters](#): 'safe classroom' and 'effective teaching' posters.
- [Selecting and working with visitors and speakers](#): a guidance document, planning checklist and podcast containing important advice on ensuring external visitors and speakers make a safe and effective contribution to the PSHE classroom.
- [Career Development Framework: Handbook for Primary Schools | Primary Schools Toolkit \(careersandenterprise.co.uk\)](#): a framework identifying six areas of learning that facilitate positive careers and lifelong career development.
- [Career's strategy: making the most of everyone's skills and talents](#): sets out a series of measures intended to improve careers guidance in England, including the introduction of new benchmarks for careers education, an investment fund for disadvantaged pupils, and a named Careers Leader in every secondary school and college.



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