



## What can I do when I grow up?

### WHAT CAN I DO WHEN I GROW UP?

It's impossible to spend time with adults without one of them coming up to you and asking (as if it were the most normal thing in the world), 'What do you want to do when you grow up?' They mean for this to be a relatively simple question; the idea is that you'll quite easily be able to say something like, 'a teacher' or 'a doctor' and then they will move on and bother someone else.

What would you like to  
be when you grow up?

Umm.... a teacher,  
I think?

But the real answers to this question can be much more complicated, and if you've ever felt confused or annoyed by being asked it, you have every right. Properly knowing what you want to do with your working life is one of the biggest, strangest and hardest questions of all. It may take you decades to find a good answer to it — and it is one that most adults are still grappling with, even the ones who are already quite old and who know how to do a lot of complicated work things already (like paying taxes or managing an office). If you could magically look inside the minds of the majority of adults, you


would find many of them trying to decide whether the job they are doing now is truly the one they want to keep doing, and asking themselves big questions like, ‘What do I really enjoy?’ and ‘What’s it all about?’ Another somewhat strange secret is that a lot of adults do not actually feel like adults inside. They’re older, of course, but in their minds, they may secretly be feeling not so different from when they were a lot younger; they might be wondering when real adult life will begin and why a lot of things don’t have the neat answers they once hoped they might have. In other words, it is truly odd that this enquiry — ‘What do you want to do when you grow up?’ — is so often seen as a child’s question when, in fact, it’s a really tricky adult question that even the most serious and wise grown-ups have problems with.



In order to answer this question properly, you need to know a lot about yourself (what you enjoy, what you’re good at, what excites you), you should know a lot about the world (what money is, what jobs are available, what the economy is) and then you need to somehow put the two together, fitting what

you like and can do to the needs and requirements of the world. It is a very complicated puzzle, and it is true madness that adults have come to think that young people should be able to summon up a reply in a few seconds, on the basis of having been to school for a few years. We would not expect a child to know how to drive a car or build a robot without being taught how to first, so nor should we expect a young person to work out the meaning of work on their own. So this is a book that is a bit annoyed by the way that children and young people are asked about the future, and that wants you to take this question more seriously than you are normally allowed to — so that it can hopefully point you in the right direction.

A word of warning, though: we are definitely not promising you that by the time you finish this book, you’ll know exactly what you want to do with the next fifty, sixty or seventy years of your working life. However, we can guarantee that you’ll at least start to appreciate why the question about your future is quite subtle, quite complex and very important. The next time an adult you don’t know well asks you this question, you will also have some good replies, for example, ‘I don’t know yet but I’m thinking about it...’ And if you’re feeling brave, you could add (with a smile), ‘What about you, do you know what you want to do?’ They might stop bothering you quite quickly after that — or it’ll be the start of a fascinating conversation.

A teal background with various light blue geometric shapes, including circles, rectangles, and triangles, scattered across it.

## Why it's hard to know what you want to do

### WHY IT'S HARD TO KNOW WHAT YOU WANT TO DO

There are some particular reasons why knowing what you might want to do is so difficult at this point in time. Let's look at a few of these reasons:

A solid yellow circle.

#### REASON #1

##### It's a new kind of question

For most of human history, people didn't go around asking, 'What should I do when I grow up?' The issue was far simpler and far more automatic: *you just did whatever your parents did*. If your parents had a sheep farm, you'd be a sheep farmer; if they were bakers, you'd be a baker; if they had a ferry across a lake, you'd have a ferry across a lake.

Even being a painter — a job that nowadays we think of as something you do because you especially love drawing — was in the past an occupation you took up primarily because your family was devoted to it. That's how it worked all over Italy at the end of the Middle Ages.

Take the Bellini family, who lived during the 15th and 16th centuries. They went into painting (doing lots of different paintings of Jesus and Mary) generation after generation, simply because that's what you did when your surname was Bellini.