THE PARENTS' GUIDE TO

Post 16 Options

2025-2026

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Post 16 Options

2025 - 2026

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1. **What can they do?**
   Understand the different routes your child can take after GCSEs, from academic to vocational options.

2. **A summary of all their options**
   Compare the main choices side by side, so you can help your child weigh up what suits them best.

3. **Making Informed Choices**
   How to guide your child in choosing a path that fits their interests, strengths, and future goals.

4. **GCSE Results Day**
   What to expect, how to offer reassurance, and how to support next steps — whatever the outcome.

5. **Additional Support**
   Financial help and other support available to help your child stay in education, training, or work.

Introduction

What your child chooses to do after Year 11 can have a big impact on their future. The choices they make now may influence how easily they will be able to get a job or enter further education when they are older.

The options at 16 are either for them to continue in full time education or go into the workplace with a role that includes part-time education, such as an apprenticeship or training. Things they need to consider are the type of qualification they are going to study; what type of learning suits them best (classroom or practical); and which subjects they enjoy.

The most usual way forward is for them to stay on at school or go to college and take either A levels or BTECs.
This works well for students that enjoy being in the classroom. However, if your child learns more easily through practical experience, they might achieve better results and be happier by taking T Levels or an apprenticeship.

Don't rule out an option because it's not one you know. In this guide, we'll explain:

1. what options are available
2. the qualifications they lead to
3. what doors open when study's over
4. where's best for your child to study
5. what support is available

Don't forget, whatever they choose to do after GCSE, whilst it will influence Post-18 options, it will not close any doors. If they make a mistake, they will still have the opportunity to change direction later.

Join our Parent Club!

We're here for you

Everything you need to help your teen get the best out of GCSE and sixth-form

- ***Advice** when you need it*
- ***Actions** you can take at home -starting today*
- ***Live calls** with us so you can ask questions*

Discover more

I really struggled with exams during my GCSEs. Choosing to take BTECs over A levels felt the right choice.

What Can They Do?

Interested in a particular topic?
Click on the heading to go straight there.

A levels and the EPQ

A traditional academic route with added research opportunities

BTECs

A practical alternative focused on skills and careers, with options to go to university or straight into work

International Baccalaureate

A broad, international qualification for students who enjoy a mix of subjects and independent thinking

Apprenticeships

For those keen to learn on the job while gaining recognised qualifications and experience

Other qualifications

A look at alternative routes that might better suit individual needs and ambitions

What Can They Do?

All 16 year olds must undertake further education until they are 18. This doesn't mean they have to stay on at school or go to college, they can get a job with a training element to it, but they cannot work full-time without some training.

Their options are to take academic qualifications, such as A levels, BTECs, IB or T Levels or take vocational qualifications, such as an apprenticeship or job with training. If they've struggled to get good results at GCSE, they can do an internship or traineeships to get the experience to progress.

Thinking ahead

If your child thinks they know what they want to do when they leave school at 18, this may influence their choices. For example, someone who hopes to train as a dentist will need to take the sciences at sixth form or someone who has a flair for linguistics may want to study languages.

Keeping their options open

However, in most cases, they won't have a firm idea of what they want to do (and may not even know whether they hope to progress to further education once they're 18). In such instances, it may be a good idea for your child to make choices which give them some experience in lots of areas. This way they can find out more about what they do like rather than limiting their options by taking similar subjects.

Learning styles

Another driver in choosing what to study at sixth form will be the way in which they prefer to learn. Those who like course-work and prefer "doing" will enjoy taking BTecs, T Levels or apprenticeships. Students that prefer listening and exams will enjoy the traditional A level or IB approach.

Remember

There are many different routes they can take towards similar careers. It is better they take qualifications suited to what they enjoy and their learning style, where they are most likely to do well; rather than try to gain qualifications where they are more likely to struggle and may fail.

Qualification/Educational Routes

Level 8	**Doctorate (PhD)**		**NVQ 8**
Level 7	**Masters degree (MA)**		**Degree apprenticeship / NVQ 5, 6, 7**
Level 6	**Bachelors degree** BA or BSc		
Level 5	**Foundation degree** FdA or FdSc	**Higher National Diploma (HND)**	
Level 4		**Higher National Certificate (HNC)**	**Higher apprenticeship / NVQ 4**
Level 3	**A levels** Grades A-E; **International Baccalaureate**; **T Levels**	**BTEC (extended) diploma BTEC certificate**	**Advanced apprenticeship / NVQ 3**
Level 2	**GCSE** Grades 4- 9 (C, B, A or A*)	**BTEC first diploma**	**Intermediate apprenticeship / NVQ 2**
Level 1	**GCSE** Grades 1- 3 (D,E,F or G)	**Foundation diploma / entry level qualifications**	**Traineeship / NVQ 1**
	Academic route	**Vocational route**	**Applied / work route**

Levels of Education

In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there are 8 qualification levels (1 - 8) plus an entry level qualification for those just starting. Generally, the higher the level, the more difficult the qualification is.

With so many different qualifications, it can be hard to know what they mean and where they might lead to next. To help you understand, we've created a summary of what the levels mean highlighting academic, vocational and work-based routes to higher education.

A levels

An A level, or General Certificate of Advanced Level qualification, is an in-depth study of a subject over two years with an examination at the end to test knowledge. Learning mostly takes place in the classroom.

Students take three A levels, although some may take four. For students wishing to go on to university, UCAS points are awarded for up to three A levels. Points range from 16 to 56 points depending on the grade achieved. If a student takes four A levels, only their top three grades will count towards their total UCAS points.

Subject choices

There are many more subject choices at A level than GCSE, so it's possible they might choose a subject they haven't studied before. If they find they don't enjoy the subject as much as they'd hoped, most schools or colleges allow them to make changes towards the end of the first term. Students usually need at least a GCSE grade 6 in their subject choice, if it's something they have studied before, although exceptions can be made.

AS levels

If your child chooses to study a subject for Y12 only, they can take an examination and obtain an AS level which counts as 40% of an A level. AS levels count towards UCAS points, ranging from 20 points (A grade) through 6 points (E grade), although not all schools/colleges offer AS levels.

Key tip:

If your child wants to benefit from different learning styles, some schools offer the option to take a combination of A levels with BTEC.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

General Certificate of Advanced Level qualification

Type of learning:

Mostly theory, , though some include practical elements

Entry requirements

At least 5 GCSEs grades 4 - 9 and at least a grade 5/6 in the subject/s chosen for A level (requirements may vary between schools)

Time:

2 years full time

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

Subject choices

Typically 3 subjects

UCAS points:

56 points – A*
48 points – A
40 points – B
32 points – C
24 points – D
16 points – E

Can lead to:

University, further study, training or work

Discover more

UCAS
The Uni Guide

Extended Project Qualification

Alongside A levels (or equivalent), many schools offer EPQ (Extended Project Qualification) which is a dissertation or project created on the basis of independent research and worth between 8 and 28 UCAS points.

Students can choose the subject matter, so this can be focused around their interests.

A different approach to learning

There's minimum supervision for EPQs, just a little light guidance. This means that research, structure and composition of the project is down to your child, as is meeting deadlines. This approach is much closer to what will be expected at university (or even in the workplace), so it's a good introduction to them finding their own way of learning. However, this style of working doesn't suit everyone, so check whether your child can cope with the added pressures an EPQ may bring.

University offers

An EPQ is the equivalent to half an A-level. Unlike a fourth A level, the EPQ points are added to the UCAS total combined with the total achieved from the first three A level passes, so it can be a useful way for your child to increase their UCAS points.

For universities that use subject grades rather than UCAS points for entry, some may even make two offers: one without the EPQ and one including the EPQ. For example, the standard offer might be BBB but the second offer (with the EPQ) could be BBC plus a pass grade in the EPQ. This might allow your child the flexibility they need to meet the entry requirements of competitive universities.

What skills will your child develop

In developing their own way of working, they're likely to become better at:

- Managing their time;
- Conducting research;
- Summarising lots of information clearly;
- Motivating themselves;
- Presenting to an audience;
- Reflecting;
- Working independently;
- Responding to feedback;
- Accepting when things don't go to plan.

These can be excellent qualities to mention in personal statements (if they are applying to university) or for discussion in interviews for jobs.

Key tip:

Students can choose the subject matter for their EPQ, so this can be focused around their interests or future degree / career plans.

IB Diploma (IBDP)

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (DP) - often referred to as the IBDP in UK schools and universities - is an internationally recognised qualification that combines rigorous academic study with personal development.

Students choose up to six subjects (three standard level and three at higher level) as well as undertaking some compulsory core modules. Most learning is theory, although there are some practical elements.

IB is graded by levels, with Level 7 (IBO certificate in higher level) earning 56 UCAS points. There are over 200 schools in the UK offering the IB diploma, although many are fee-paying schools.

Key tip:

The International Baccalaureate Organisation ("IBO") does not inspect schools once they have been approved to run IB, believing that results reflect standards, so it's important to check recent results.

Core components

In addition to their six subjects, each student must undertake three core modules designed to encourage them to become active, compassionate and life-long learners. These are:

- An extended essay - an in-depth study of a question relating to one of their chosen subjects, which requires independent research.
- The theory of knowledge - a course on critical thinking assessed through both an oral presentation and a 1,600 word essay.
- Creativity, action, service (CAS) - a series of activities alongside the student's academic study in creative thinking, healthy living and service to the community. The three strands of CAS are designed to grow a student's personal and interpersonal development through a journey of self discovery.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme (DP)

Type of learning:

Mostly theory, some practical

Entry requirements

Set by the school, up to 5 GCSEs (grades 4-9)

Time:

2 years full time

Subject choices

Up to six subjects (thre standard level and three at higher level)

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

UCAS points:

Each subject earns UCAS points:

- Up to 56 for Higher Level (grade 7)
- Up to 28 for Standard Level (grade 7)

Can lead to:

University, further study, training or work

Discover more

IBO

Good Schools Guide

IB Career Programme (IBCP)

The International Baccalaureate Career-related Programme (CP) - commonly known as the IBCP in the UK - is designed for students who want to combine academic study with practical, career-focused learning. Although currently offered by a relatively small number of UK schools, the IBCP is gaining traction as interest in more flexible, career-oriented pathways continues to grow.

The IBCP is made up of three parts:

1. elements of the IB Diploma Programme
2. a unique CP core, (comprising four related components: personal and professional skills, service learning, reflective project and language development)
3. career related study through an approved provider.

Flexibility and personalisation

Students choose at least two subjects from the six diploma subject groups (IBDP) and must take the CP core and career related study. The diploma subjects can be studied at higher level (HL) or standard level (SL) – or a combination of both.

Schools can create their own distinctive version of IBCP to meet the needs and backgrounds of their students, including selecting the diploma courses they offer to students within the six subject areas.

Grading

IBCP is graded differently for each component. The diploma elements are assessed by exams and graded from 1-7; the reflective project is assessed by the school and moderated by IB with grades ranging from A-E; the remaining elements are assessed by the school.

To obtain an IBCP students must achieve a minimum grade of 3 or higher in two of the diploma elements, D or higher on the reflective project in addition to completing the other components.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

The International Baccalaureate Career-related Programme (CP)

Type of learning:

Balance between practical and theory

Entry requirements

Set by the school

Time:

2 years full time

Subject choices

At least two from the IB diploma range + CP core + career related study

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

UCAS points:

Students earn UCAS points for:

- Diploma subjects (same as IBDP)
- Reflective Project (up to 12 points, grade A)

Can lead to:

University, further study, training or work

Discover more

IBO

BTEC Nationals

BTECs at Level 3 are a similar standard to A levels with a focus on vocational subjects. The subsidiary diploma is equivalent to one A level, the diploma is equivalent to two and the extended diploma is equivalent to three A levels.

Study takes place over a two year period and is a combination of both practical and theory. Knowledge is tested through course work and a final examination (comprising 40% of the total grade).

For those wishing to go to university, subsidiary diplomas offer the same opportunity to earn UCAS points as A levels (15 to 56 points). UCAS points for BTEC diplomas and extended diploma are double and trebled respectively.

Key tip:

BTECs offer the chance of earning the same points for UCAS as A levels and provide a way to learn through practical application and coursework.

If your child prefers learning through practical application, they will more likely do better taking BTECs than A levels. However, some universities have a preference for A levels over BTEC, so if your child has their heart set on a specific university or course, it's worth checking entry requirements to see whether this will influence their sixth form choices.

In July 2024, the Labour government announced a pause and review of the previous plans to remove funding from many Level 3 qualifications, including BTECs. This means that, for now, BTECs are still available and funded. The review is set to conclude by the end of the year, and its outcomes will determine the future of these qualifications.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

Business and Technology Education Council Diplomas

(Level 3 are similar standard to A levels, with subsidary diploma equivalent to one A level, BTEC diploma equivalent to 2 A levels and extended diploma equiiva-lent to 3 A levels

Type of learning:

Combination of practical and theory

Time:

2 years full time

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

Entry requirements

Up to 5 GCSEs

Subject choices

Up to 3 vocational subjects

Can lead to:

University, further study, training or work

UCAS points:

56 points - D* (distinction)
48 points - D (distinction
32 points - M (merit)
16 points - P (pass)

Discover more

UCAS
Pearson Education

T Levels (England only)

T Levels, or Technical Level Qualifications, are a new government backed qualification introduced as of September 2020 and equivalent to 3 A Levels. These 2-year courses have been developed in collaboration with employers and businesses so that the content meets the needs of industry and prepares students for working life.

T Levels offer students a mixture of classroom learning with an 'on-the-job' placement equating to 315 hours (approximately 45 days or 20% of the course time). They provide the knowledge, skills and experience needed for students to get ahead in their chosen industries or go on to further study or a higher apprenticeship. T-Levels offer the chance to earn between 72 and 168 UCAS points.

The industry placement

A fantastic element of T Levels is the industry placement – a real job in a genuine business. It can result in some students being offered jobs after they've completed their T Level. For those going on to higher education, work experience will be impressive.

T Level Transition Programme

For teens that don't have the necessary skills to go straight to T Level, they can take the T Level Transition Programme – a one year course after GCSE to prepare them for the subject they would like to study.

The programme introduces knowledge and skills in the students' chosen subject area and includes work experience to provide a better understanding of the workplace. For students who have not yet passed their Level 2 in English and maths, the course includes guided study to help them achieve this level.

Key tip:

First-hand work experience is hugely beneficial to students, enabling them to get a feel for what it's like in the world of work and whether they like the industry sector they've chosen – it's not too late to make a change post-18 if they don't!

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

Technical Level Qualification

Type of learning:

Classroom learning (80%) with industry placement (20%)

Entry requirements

Set by the school, up to 5 GCSEs

Time:

2 years full time

Subject choices

As of September 2024 there will be over twenty subjects available including accounting, engineering, digital business services, education and childcare, finance, health, law, management, on-site construction and science.

Tuition costs

Free

Can lead to:

University, further study, training or work

UCAS points:

168 points – Distinction*
144 points – Distinction
120 points – Merit
96 points – Pass (C or above)
72 points – Pass (D or E)

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Gov UK
The Parents' Guide to

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are real jobs which include learning elements which might take place at university, college or an education provider. Apprenticeships were developed to help address the skills shortage in UK businesses. They provide a way of combining learning with on the job training to build professional skills transferable from one organisation to another.

Sixteen year olds can start an apprenticeship at Level 2 (few qualifications required) or Level 3 (5 GCSEs required). There is no level one as enrolling on an apprenticeship requires demonstrating a certain ability. Students with no qualifications can take on a traineeship or internship to help them achieve the necessary skills to start an apprenticeship - see page 31.

Most apprenticeships work towards one or more qualifications. These qualifications correspond to the level of apprenticeship. Advanced apprenticeships (level 3) provide qualifications equivalent to 2 A levels. Level 3 qualifications may include National Certificates, National Diplomas or NVQs which will open up choices once your child is 18.

Flexibility

Apprenticeships are often flexible in that it may be possible to extend the apprenticeship period and obtain a higher qualification. For example, some apprenticeships will allow students to continue on to a higher apprenticeship (level 4 / 5) once the advanced apprenticeship is complete. Always check with their employer whether such progression is possible.

Key tip:

Unlike BTECs, which are studied at school or college, apprenticeships also include an element of study at work, so there is a real-life component to the course.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

Advanced Level 3
(equivalent to 2 A levels)

Type of learning:

Work based including off-site learning

Entry requirements

Advanced Level 3 - depends on employer, some require at least 3 GCSEs. Students need to show they can complete the programme

Time:

1-2 years

Tuition costs

Free

Subject choices

Range of vocational subjects, driven by the job offered

Can lead to:

Further study, training, professional development programmes or work

UCAS points:

168 points – Distinction*
144 points – Distinction
120 points – Merit
96 points – Pass (C or above)
72 points – Pass (D or E)

Discover more

Apprenticeships - GOV

The Parents' Guide to

Apprenticeship Levels:

LEVEL 2
Intermediate apprenticeships

Typical length
12-18 months

Entry requirements:
None or few

Qualifications obtained:
GCSE, BTEC or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with limited or no academic qualifications.

LEVEL 3
Advanced apprenticeships

Typical length
12-24 months

Entry requirements:
Usually 5 GCSEs

Qualifications obtained:
A levels or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with reasonable academic achievements but who don't want to study in sixth form.

LEVEL 4/5
Higher apprenticeships

Typical length
3-5 years

Entry requirements:
A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:
Higher national diploma / foundation degree

Who's it for?
Mostly for those who want to qualify for professional career paths without attending university or college.

LEVEL 6/7
Degree apprenticeships

Typical length
3-7 years

Entry requirements:
At least 2 A levels or equivalent

Qualifications obtained:
A BA or BSc degree or higher

Who's it for?
Mostly for those with excellent sixth form results that want to study for a degree or similar whilst working.

Traineeships & Internships

Traineeships

Traineeships are short-term work placings lasting up to a maximum of six months to help young people become "job ready". The work experience element includes at least 100 hours on the job training to help provide the necessary experience to undertake apprenticeships or other employment.

Internships

Whilst internships can be useful, they should not be confused with apprenticeships. Internships are informal arrangements with an employer, there is rarely a signed contract, they are usually short-term (less than one year) and they do not result in a formal qualification. They do offer an insight into business, networking opportunities, the possibility of job offers afterwards and the ability to learn practical, transferable skills. They may be useful in giving a student enough experience to start an apprenticeship.

Supported internships

Supported internships are for students with learning difficulties or impairments who want to get a job and need extra support to do this. They're a good way to get the training and experience your child needs to get into work.

Key tip:

These routes can be very helpful for non-academic students who may be better at picking up practical skills.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

Traineeship / volunteer with training / internship – all to help your child get enough skills to take on an apprenticeship or other form of qualification if they do not already have the minimum qualification requirements.

Type of learning:

Work based

Time:

6 weeks – 6 months

Entry requirements

None

Tuition costs

None

Subject choices

Range of vocational subjects, driven by the job offered

Can lead to:

Further study, apprenticeships, job offers

UCAS points:

None

Discover more

GOV - Traineeships

GOV - Internships

Other Qualifications

Other qualifications available include Cambridge Technicals, City and Guilds, National Vocational Qualifications and Tech Bac (similar to the International Baccalaureate). They are vocational driven courses – i.e. centred around jobs and are well suited to students who know what type of job they want to do when they leave education or who prefer a more practical working style but still want to include classroom learning in their education.

Cambridge Technicals

With examination marks split 50%-50% between coursework and examinations, the Cambridge Technicals offer a very practical route to learning, but students must be well-organised, able to handle lots of projects at once and be able to meet deadlines in order to succeed.

National Vocational Qualification

National Vocational Qualification is a work-based way of learning. There are no examinations, assessment is made on a student's competence to complete the task. Whilst NVQs are vocationally focused, they can be studied at school and college as well as at work.

Key tip:

In most cases no UCAS points are awarded but these qualifications provide an excellent route into industry.

AT A GLANCE:

Qualification type

City and Guilds; National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or Tech Bac (similar to International Baccalaureate)

Type of learning:

Dependent on the qualification, most contain practical on the job training

Entry requirements

Usually 5 GCSEs grade 4 - 9, but check individually

Time:

2 years (level 3)

Tuition costs

Free (unless parents choose to pay privately)

Subject choices

Range of vocational subjects

Can lead to:

Further study, training, professional development programmes or work

UCAS points:

In most cases no UCAS points are awarded but there are some exceptions.

Discover more

- Cambridge Technicals
- City and Guilds

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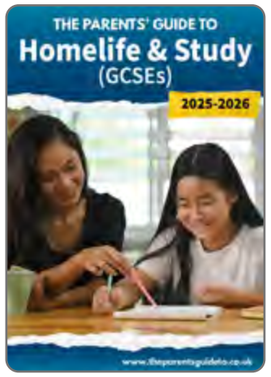


Each guide is designed with YOU in mind, offering clear, practical steps you can take at home.

Next steps:

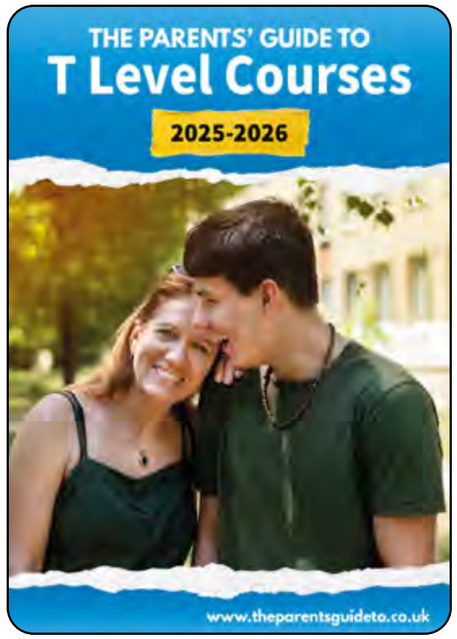
A Summary of All Their Options - Part 1

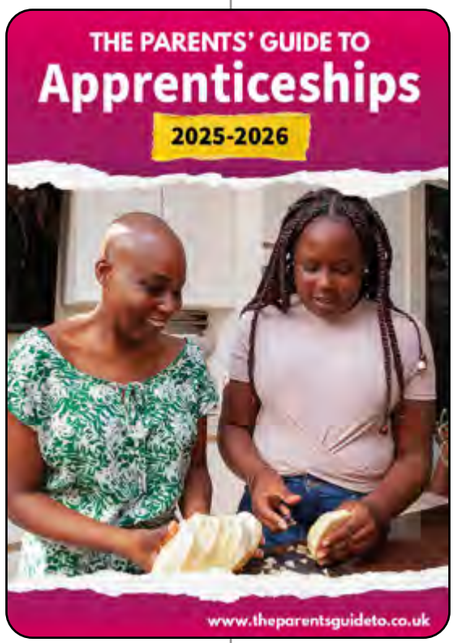
	Qualification Type	Type of learning	Entry requirements	Subject choices	UCAS points	Can lead to
A levels	General Certificate of Advanced level qualification	Mostly theory	At least x5 GCSE grade 4 – 9. At least grade 5/6 in the subject/s chosen for A level	Typically three subjects	56 points – A* 48 points – A 40 points – B 32 points – C 24 points – D 16 points - E	University, further study, training or work apprenticeship
International Baccalaureate	Diploma Programme (IBDP)	Mostly theory, some practical	Set by the school, up to 5 GCSEs	Up to six subjects plus some compulsory modules including an extended essay	Up to 56 for Higher Level and 28 for Standard Level (grade 7). In the IBCP, students also earn up to 12 points for the Reflective Project.	University, further study, training or work
	Careers Related Programme (IBCP)	Balance between practical/theory		At least two from the IB diploma range + CP core + career related study		
BTEC Nationals	*(Level 3 are similar standard to A Levels, with subsidiary diploma equivalent to one A level, BTEC diploma equivalent to 2 A levels and extended diploma equivalent to 3 A levels).*	Combination of practical and theory	Up to 5 GCSEs	Three vocational subjects	For subsidiary diploma: 56 points – D* *(distinction)* 48 points – D *(distinction)* 32 points – M *(Merit)* 16 points – P *(Pass)* *Points are doubled for diploma and tripled for extended diploma*	University, further study, training, professional development programmes or work
T Levels (England only)	Technical Level Qualification	Classroom learning (80%) with industry placement (20%)	Up to 5 GCSEs	One industry field, such as construction or Education	168 points - D* 144 points - D 120 points - M 96 points - P (C or above) 72 points - P (D or E)	University, apprenticeships

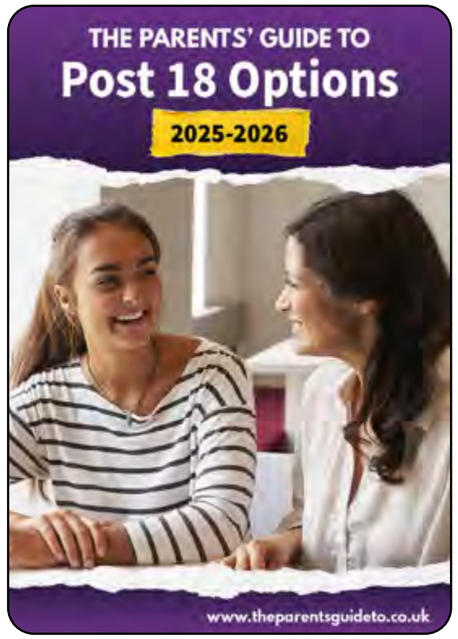
A Summary of All Their Options - Part 2

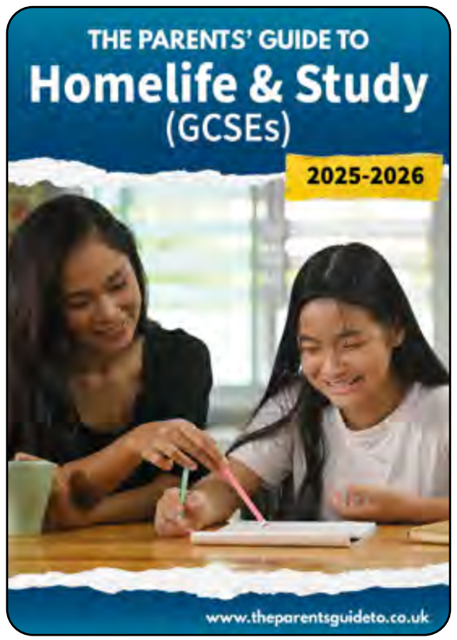
	Qualification Type	Type of learning	Entry requirements	Subject choices	UCAS points	Can lead to
Cambridge Technicals	A Cambridge Technical Extended Certificate (equivalent to an A level) or Cambridge Technical Diploma (equivalent to x2 A levels)	Practical course with lots of coursework based on real life case studies	At least x5 GCSE passes	Range of vocational subjects	Cambs Tech level 3: 56 points – D* (distinction) 48 points – D 32 points – M (merit) 16 points – P (pass)	University, further study, training or work
Other Qualifications	City and Guilds; National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) or Tech Bac (similar to Baccalaureate)	Dependent on the qualification, most contain practical on the job training	Set by the school, up to 5 GCSEs	Range of vocational subjects	In most cases no UCAS points are awarded but there are some exceptions.	Further study, training, professional development programmes or work
BTEC Apprenticeships	Advanced Level 3 (equivalent to x2 A levels)	Work based including off-site learning	Advanced Level 3 - depends on employer, some require at least 3 GCSEs	Range of vocational subjects, driven by the job offered	N/A	University, further study, training or work
Other Options	Traineeship / Volunteer with training / internship – a starting point to other qualifications or work	Work based	None	Uange of vocational subjects, driven by the job offered	N/A	Further study, apprenticeships or work

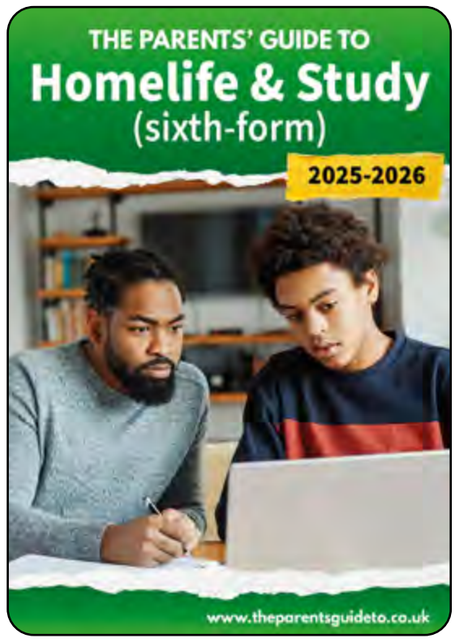
The Parents' Guide to:

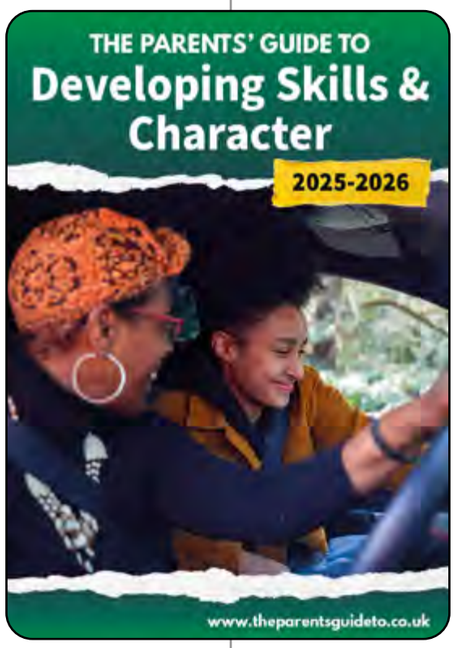












Parent Guides:

Our range of interactive guides provide you with easy to follow advice, hyperlinks to reliable sources and the most up-to-date information.

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At 16 I was ready to leave school. I went to my local college where I was able to have a fresh start in a more adult environment.

Making Informed Choices

Interested in a particular topic?
Click on the heading to go straight there.

Choosing The Right Subjects

How to help your child pick subjects they enjoy, are good at, and that keep future options open.

Choosing The Right Environment

Should they stay at school, move to a college, or enter the workplace? What environment will help them thrive?

Other Considerations

Think about things like travel, support needs, workload, and how your child copes with change.

GCSE Results Day

What to do on the day, how to respond to unexpected results, and how to support your child.

Making The Right Choice

How to weigh up the options together - and why flexibility is important if plans change later on.

Focusing on what your child has a natural passion for will likely make good sixth form options

Choosing The Right Subjects

For some children the decision on what to study after their GCSEs will be fairly straightforward. For others, narrowing their subject choices may prove trickier. If your child needs some extra guidance, it's important to consider the following:

What your child is good at and enjoys

Almost all of us tend to be better at things we enjoy than things we don't. If your child has a natural passion for certain subjects, they will likely make good sixth form choices. Additionally, your child will need to spend a lot of time on each sixth form option they select, so it's a good idea that they have an interest in the subjects they study.

GCSE results can be a useful indicator of whether they'll do well in a subject. If they have not already studied the subjects at GCSE, speak to their teacher to get advice on whether they're likely to do well. For example, if they want to study a language that wasn't offered at GCSE, how well did they do in their compulsory language subjects? Also, consider whether your child excels in practical studies or theoretical studies. This can also be a big influencer in subject choices.

What your child wants to do next

If your child knows what profession they want to work towards, or which subject they want to read at university, their sixth form subject choices may be more obvious. For example, to study pharmacy they must take chemistry and at least one from biology, physics or maths; or if they want to take a degree in engineering, they will likely require Maths.

Where conflict can appear is if they have their heart set on a career choice but little aptitude for the subjects needed to progress towards it. That's where vocational courses can be helpful. Someone that wants to go into business could avoid a maths-heavy Economics A level and choose to take a BTEC in Business Studies instead. Alternatively, they may choose to start an apprenticeship in an industry area they are interested in (such as hotels and leisure).

University preferences

Different universities have different entry requirements, so it is important to check the university's website for details if your child has a particular university or degree course in mind. Subject combinations, types of qualification and subject grades needed for entry not only vary from university to university, but may also differ within the same university for different degrees. If in doubt, call the university and speak to admissions.

Not all sixth form qualifications are considered equal by top universities. Some do not accept T Levels or BTEC and others consider certain A levels more weighty than others. To maximise the universities open to your child, it's a good idea for them to take a mix of commonly approved subjects ("facilitating subjects") such as biology, chemistry, English, geography, history, maths, modern/classical languages or physics. These are recommended by Russell Group universities (17 British research universities). Be careful not to take subjects which are too similar, as certain universities will not accept certain subject combinations (such as business studies and economics). If your child is not sure what they want to study after sixth form, don't worry too much about subject combinations. It's far better for them to achieve good grades and widen their university options, than sit "winning" subject combinations but fail their examinations and not meet universities' minimum entry standards.

Where to find out more:

- Speak to your child's current teachers;
- Speak to sixth form teachers;
- Speak to other students;
- Read subject guides;
- Review university websites – or speak to admissions;
- Check text books and reference books;
- The Parents' Guide to website

Choosing The Right Environment

The 16-18 age range is a very important time for a teenager because it marks the transition from child to adult. If they are going to continue with full time education (rather than joining the workplace through an apprenticeship, traineeship, internship or voluntary role), where they study is an important consideration.

It may seem an easy decision to continue studies at their current school; however, this is not always the best option and is sometimes not possible. Some schools may not offer the subject or qualification choices your child wants to study, some schools don't have a sixth form, some schools have a joint sixth form (which your child may not like) and some students are just keen to leave the school environment.

It is important that your thoughts and feelings are taken into consideration when making the decision about "what next", but remember, the choice should ultimately be your child's.

Continuing at the same school

There are lots of benefits to this for your child: they know the staff, they will have friends there and they are familiar with journey times and routes. It's also nice for them to be role models to younger pupils and this, combined with the familiar environment, can help build self-confidence. In most cases, sixth forms are smaller than colleges and provide more support. For students with special educational needs, they know what support is provided and whether their needs are met (support can vary widely from one institution to another).

However, because schools are smaller, they are unlikely to have as many subject choices or vocational courses as colleges. Students need to watch out about becoming complacent by being the "big fish in a small pond". Staying at the same school may well be the right choice, but don't automatically assume this, even if it is the most convenient option.

Applying to sixth form in another school

Providing the school is offering the right subject and course options for your child, this can be a good compromise between staying at the same school or going to college. The challenge of meeting new teachers, new friends and working in a different atmosphere with a different daily journey still exists, but the smaller numbers, greater guidance and nurturing environment also applies. It can prove a good way for your child to start to take control of their own lives, increase confidence and improve communications without everything changing at once.

Depending on GCSE results, changing schools can provide the opportunity of going to a more academic school or one that has greater focus on co-curricular interests that may provide job opportunities in the future (such as rowing, music, drama etc). A fresh environment can inspire fresh ideas.

Going to college

The great thing about colleges is that they have a huge range of academic and vocational courses to study, so there will be plenty of choice. Also, all their focus is on the 16-19 age-range so all facilities and additional offerings are aimed at the same age group, unlike schools who are caring for children of many different ages, sometimes as young as early years. Teachers and lecturers will all be experts in their specialist subjects for this age range.

Colleges tend to be larger and less personal than school sixth forms; the experience is much closer to life at university. This is ideal for students who are disciplined at managing their own studies and can meet deadlines on their own, but students that need nudging, coaxing and reminding are less likely to do well. Of course, learning these skills is important regardless of whether they want to go onto university or start work after sixth form, but some sixteen year olds need a little more guidance than others.

The question is whether your child will do well with new teachers to get to know, a new environment and, in most cases, a whole new set of friends to make. If they like the challenge of stretching beyond their comfort-zone, it can be a great stepping stone from school to university but if they are reserved, it could be over-whelming.

Independent learning providers

It doesn't have to be a choice of school or college. There are independent organisations that offer entry level courses and employability training for young people who want to get a qualification or learn the skills to help find a job.

Vocational learning

If they are taking vocational learning, such as an apprenticeship, the learning location will be chosen by their employer, who will have an arrangement with a local school, college or other education provider. They will not be able to influence this.

Creative Courses

If your child is looking to study art, design, photography, media or illustration they will need to put together a portfolio of work showcasing their abilities.

Other Considerations

Academic or vocational?

If your child's keen to focus on vocational qualifications they are likely to find more choice at colleges than at schools. If they do want to stay at school, BTEC courses might be more appealing than A Levels.

Single sex or co-ed?

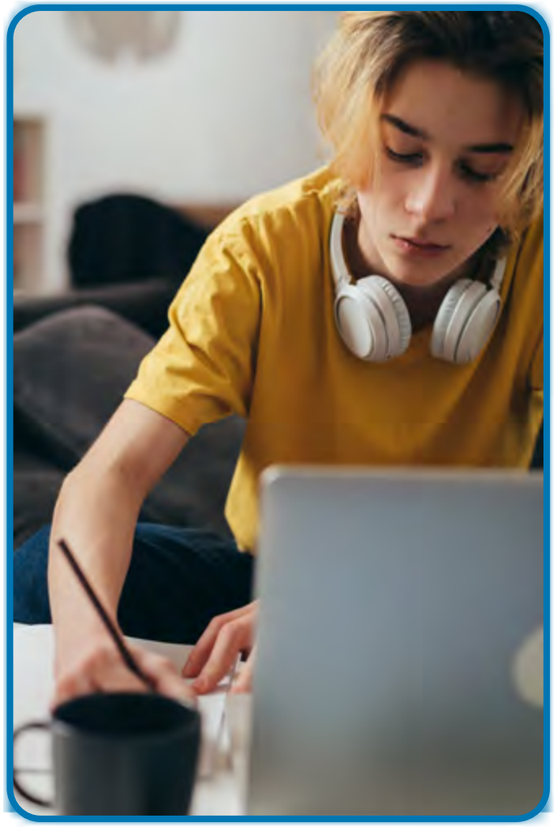
Sixth form can be a great opportunity to move from single sexed schools to mixed schools (or vice versa). This can be a good time to go co-ed and start acclimatising to the atmosphere with both sexes, which is what they will experience at work and in post-18 education. However, there can be a lot of social pressure so is this the right time for your child to adapt?

State to private?

Private education is expensive, but sixth form does offer the opportunity of benefiting from smaller classes, greater pastoral care and more guidance whilst knowing the financial commitment is just two years.

Private to state?

If your child's at private school and finances are beginning to pinch, this can be a good time to move. Your child won't get the same level of personal attention but a stronger atmosphere encouraging self-management and accountability can put them on a good path for the future.

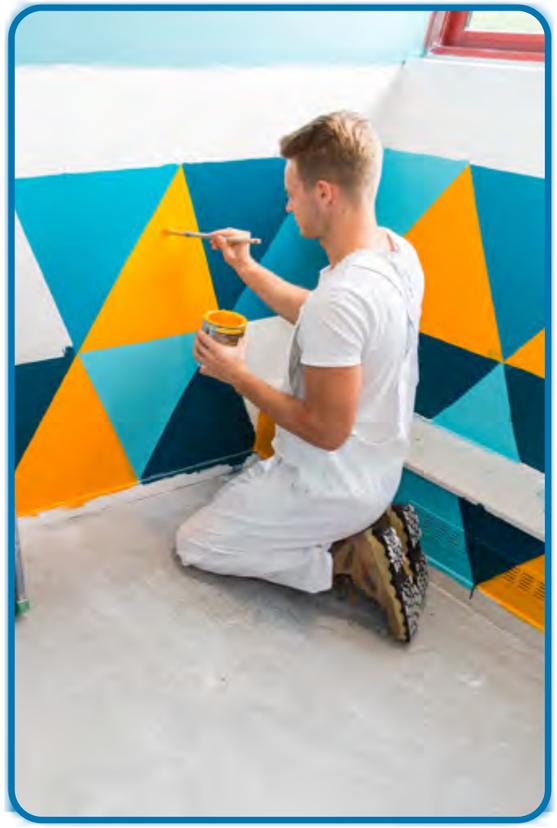


Day school to boarding?

If your child is sure they want to go to university, experienc-ing boarding can get them used to living away from home whilst still under the protective guidance of a school so they don't go off the rails.

Small or large?

Will your child work better with close supervision in a smaller school or will they thrive with more independence in a larger college?



Leaving education

Jobs with training or short-term apprenticeships offer the chance to get into work without continuing intensive, academic study. There are training elements that will include theory, but it is much more practical and competence is often assessed on the job rather than via examinations.

Behaviour

It's not uncommon for teens to think that poor behaviour won't have a lasting impact. Help them be aware! Not only is it more likely that students that behave poorly won't do as well in their GCSEs, but behaviour counts too. Some schools, whether the school they're already at or a different one, won't accept students into sixth form if they have regular records of poor behaviour.

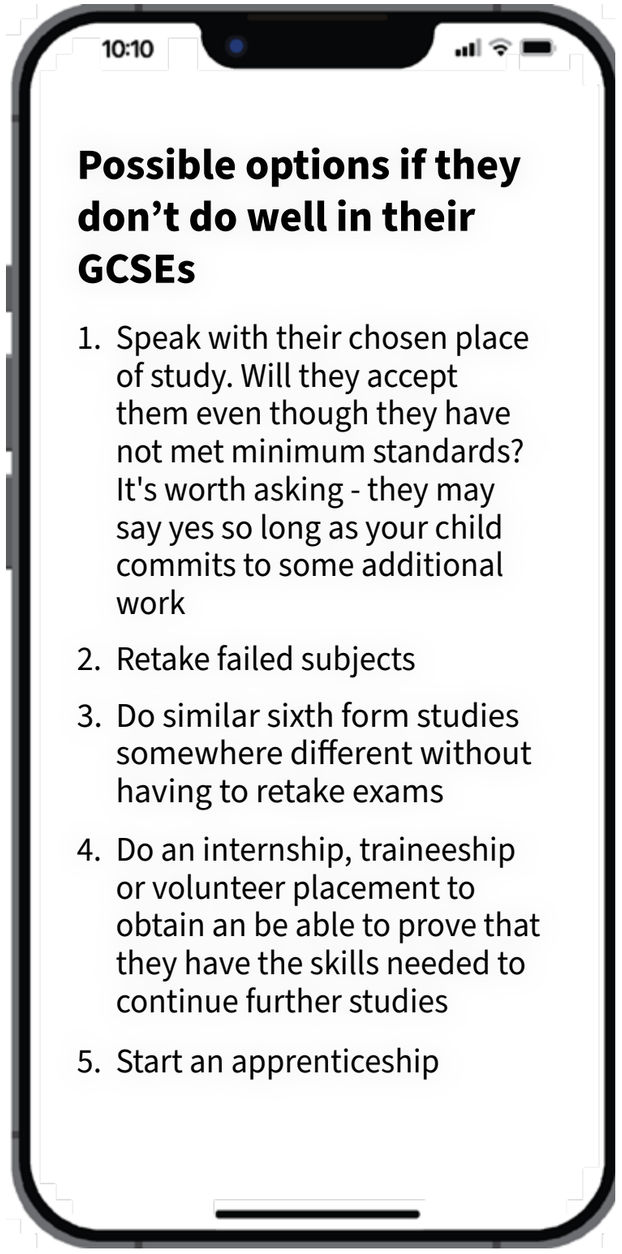
There are plenty of alternative options if your child has not done as well as planned in their GCSEs

GCSEs Results Day

When GCSE results come out in August 2026, your child may not have done quite as well in the subjects they have selected to study at sixth form as they had hoped.

Please be reassuring and supportive at this time, and try not to get angry, disappointed and frustrated – especially if it is a case of "I told you so"! There are usually alternatives and a positive approach offers a faster route to finding happy solutions.

Low grades do not mean they cannot study their chosen subject at sixth form. There may be an option to retake the GCSE, or commence the sixth form subject without a retake. However, in some cases, GCSE results are a strong indicator of future performance and it may not be wise to pursue a subject for which they do not have a natural aptitude; choosing an alternative subject might be a better option. Speak to their school teachers and get advice about next steps.



Making The Right Choice

You know that the better grades your teen achieves at sixth form, the more options they'll have about what to do next. Remember, they're likely to improve their outcomes when they're studying both something they enjoy learning that is presented in a way that appeals to them. In broad terms, those who like coursework and prefer "doing" will enjoy taking BTECs, T Levels or apprenticeships. Students that prefer listening and taking exams will enjoy the traditional A level or IB approach.

Same destination different path

If your teen has their heart set on a career choice but little aptitude for the subjects needed to progress towards it, vocational courses can be helpful. Someone that wants to go into business could avoid a maths-heavy Economics A level and choose to take a BTEC in Business Studies or a T Level in Business Services instead.

Alternatively, they can start an apprenticeship in an industry area they are interested in (such as hotels and leisure) and work towards their goal from a different angle.

Options after GCSE:

Full time study

A levels
(level 3)

T Levels
(level 3)

BTECs
(levels 1,2,3)

Other technical qualifications
(levels 1,2,3)

Exam retakes

Work and study

Apprenticeships
(levels 2,3)

Supported internships

Traineeships

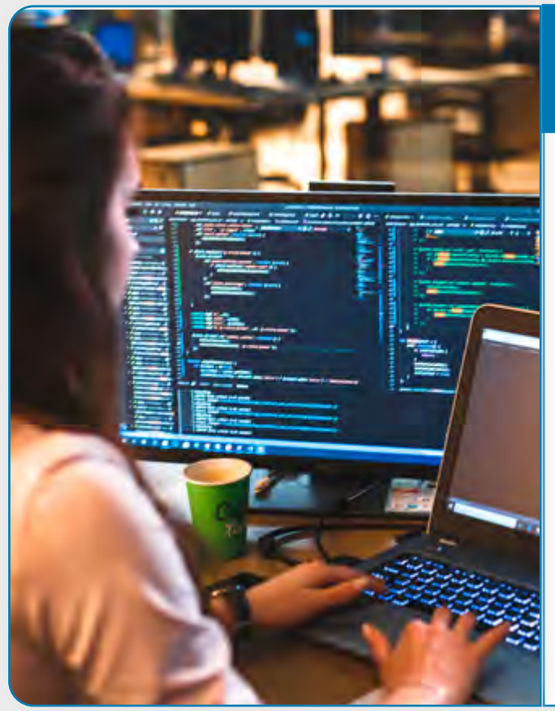
LEVEL 2
Intermediate apprenticeships

Typical length
12-18 months

Entry requirements:
None or few

Qualifications obtained:
GCSE, BTEC or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with limited or no academic qualifications.



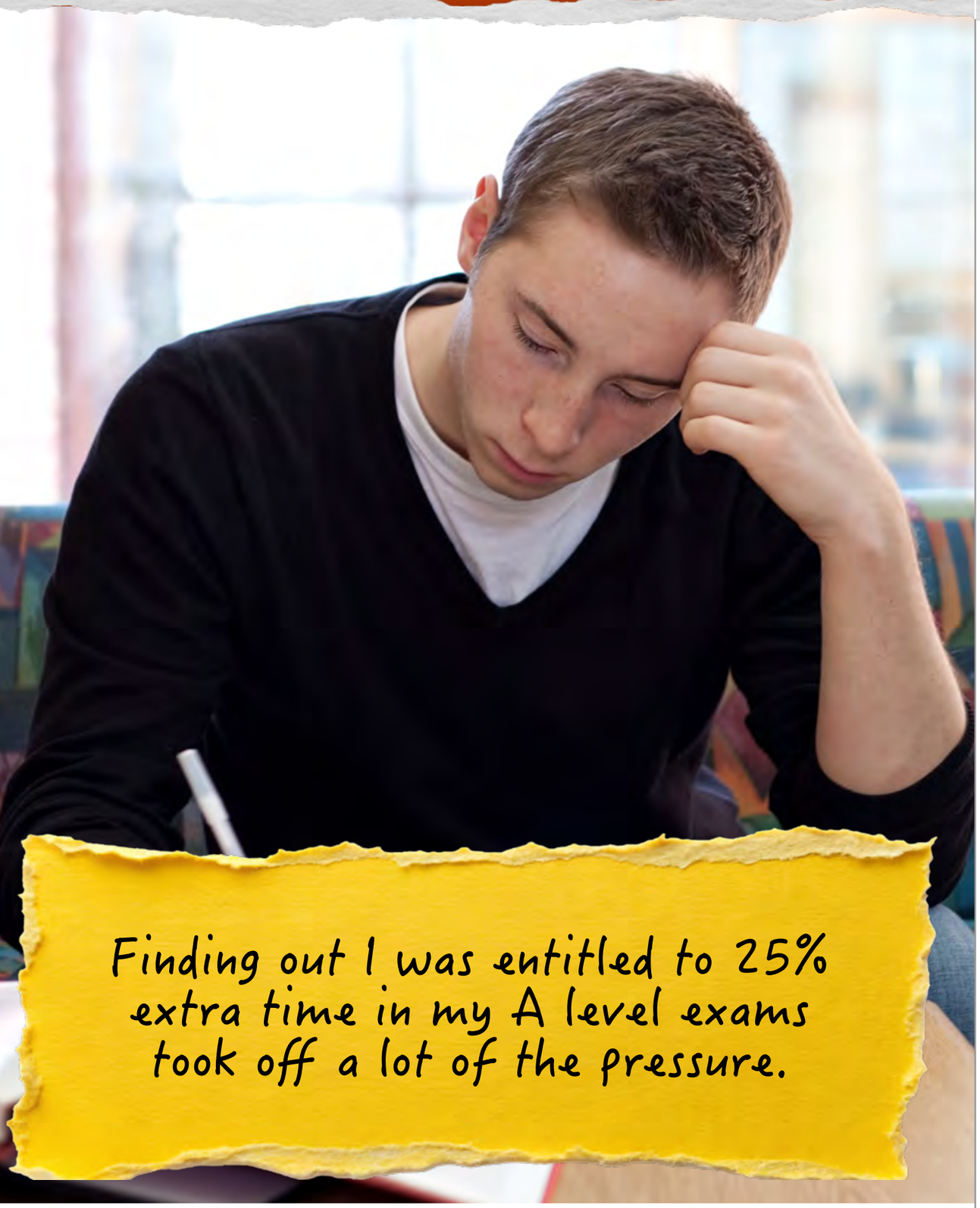
LEVEL 3
Advanced apprenticeships

Typical length
12-24 months

Entry requirements:
Usually 5 GCSEs

Qualifications obtained:
A levels or equivalent

Who's it for?
Mostly for 16-year-olds with reasonable academic achievements but who don't want to study in sixth form.



Finding out I was entitled to 25% extra time in my A level exams took off a lot of the pressure.

Additional Support

Interested in a particular topic?
Click on the heading to go straight there.

SEND

Guidance and resources to help your child access the right support if they have special educational needs or disabilities.

Financial Support

What help is available to cover education, travel, meals, and other costs after GCSEs.

Final Words

Whatever path your child takes, there's more than one way to succeed — and you don't have to figure it all out at once.

SEND (special educational needs and disability)

If your child has SEND and is moving to a new educational establishment (whether a different school, college or other education provider), make sure you advise them in advance so that they can be involved in ensuring they are able to meet your child's needs or get support from outside if necessary.

Regular Assessment

The school or college should regularly assess your child's needs and keep written records of reviews. They will communicate directly with your child, so you'll need to come to an agreement about how you'll be kept up to date so that you can be involved and provide the right level of support.

Discover more

- GOV UK
- SEND Parent Hub

Finding local support services

All local authorities are required, by law, to provide information and advice for children and young people with SEN. This is available online, by phone or face to face. If you check your local government's website, you will find the Local Offer section which provides information on education, health and social care services in your area. You can also approach your child's existing school, your doctor or charities and other organisations that offer support and services.

EHCs

If you child has an education and healthcare plan ("EHC") this will continue to apply through their post-16 studies (but not if they progress to higher education after they are 18). If they have an EHC and they have additional needs outside of those met by the school or college in order to deliver on the provision set by the plan, you can request a Personal Budget to help (such as therapy or transport costs). Applications are considered by the local authority on a case by case basis.

If your child does not have an EHC but you think they need one, you (or they) can request an assessment.

Benefits

If your child has SEND they might get some help during exams, such as more time, permission to use technology (such as being able to type a paper rather than handwrite it), a reader, a scribe, rest breaks and even a separate room. However, they will have to demonstrate a history of need.

Key tip:

All Further Education providers should have a named individual in charge of SEND provision.

Financial support

Education and training is provided free of charge (unless at a private school). If you claim Child Benefit, Child Tax Credit or Universal Credit for your child, these automatically stop when your child reaches 16 but can be extended until 19 if your child is in full time education. Make sure you notify the relevant authority. Some other financial support is available depending on specific needs.

Discretionary bursary

It may be possible to get a discretionary bursary if students need financial help but do not qualify for a bursary for students in vulnerable groups. The education or training provider decides how much is awarded and what it's used for.

Free meals

Students of families on low incomes can apply for free meals, so long as they are studying at an institute funded via the Education and Skills Funding Agency.

Residential loans

Students needing specialist provision which means they have to live away from home to study can apply for residential loans via the ***Residential Bursary Fund.***

Vulnerable Groups

Students classed as vulnerable groups (such as in care, receiving income support or disability allowance) can claim a bursary up to £1,200 each year.

Discover more

- Bursary Fund
- NCS

Grants

It may be possible to get a grant from the ***Family Action Trust***, who provide small grants for additional costs associated with a course of study such as clothing and/or equipment required for the course, travel, examination costs, computers/ laptops.

Care to Learn

Students under 20 years old with their own children can apply for "care to learn" grants to provide childcare while they are studying up to a maximum of £160 per week (£175 in London) via the ***Student Bursary support service.***

Where to find out more:

There's heaps of information about post 16 options on the Government's website. You can find details of what's available in your local area by checking your Local Authority's website – find your local council here.

Your child's current school should also be able to help and you can approach any further education institute directly.

There's free advice from the National Careers Service.

Final Words

Sixteen marks a milestone for you and your child. It's a great opportunity to reflect on what's worked so far and what might need adjusting for the future.

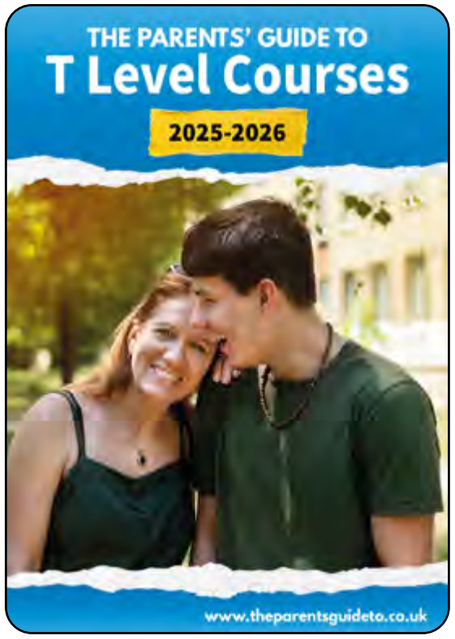
If your child has had a difficult time so far, it's a chance to reflect on why - and perhaps change their style or place of study for a fresh start. If they love their school and can take the right qualifications, there's no need to leave; if they've enjoyed it but feel they've outgrown it, now's the perfect time to move on. And if they're ready to get into the workplace, there are plenty of options, whether they want to combine academic learning or focus on practical experience.

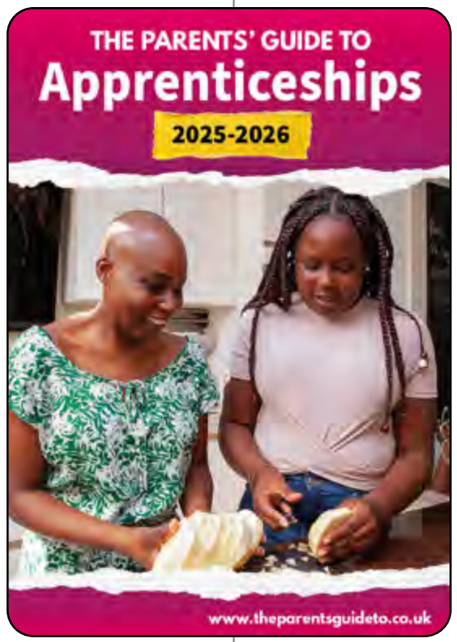
Sixteen is possibly the first time your child is making decisions for themselves that will have a significant impact on their future. It's important for them to realise that they will need to make choices that are right for them and not follow what their friends are doing; it's the first step toward their independent future.

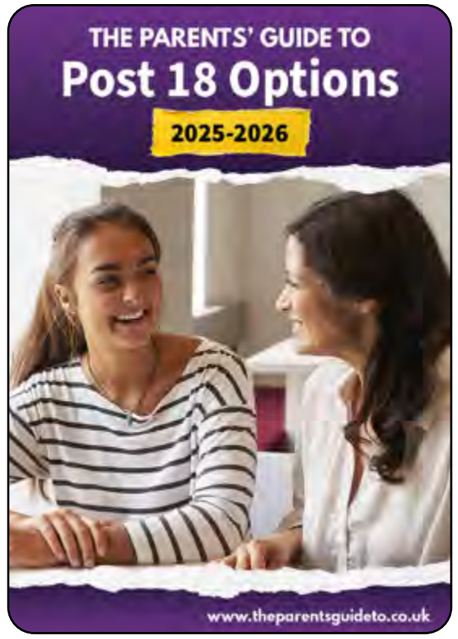
Whilst they should be making decisions for themselves, it's still important that they get help, guidance and reliable advice from you.

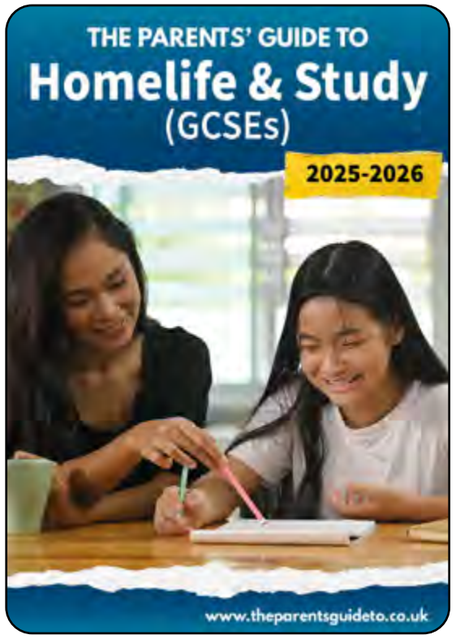
Follow us on

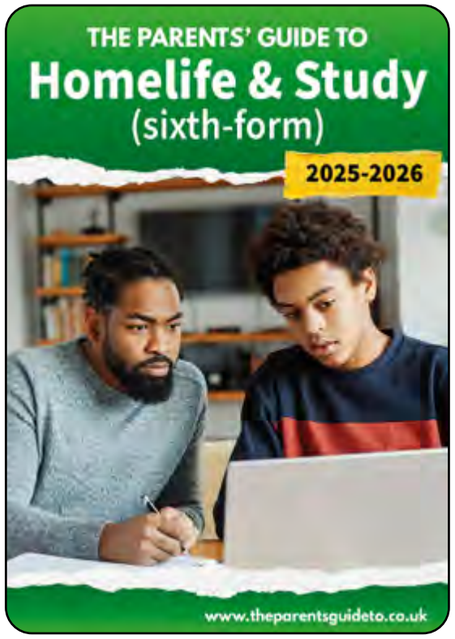
The Parents' Guide to:

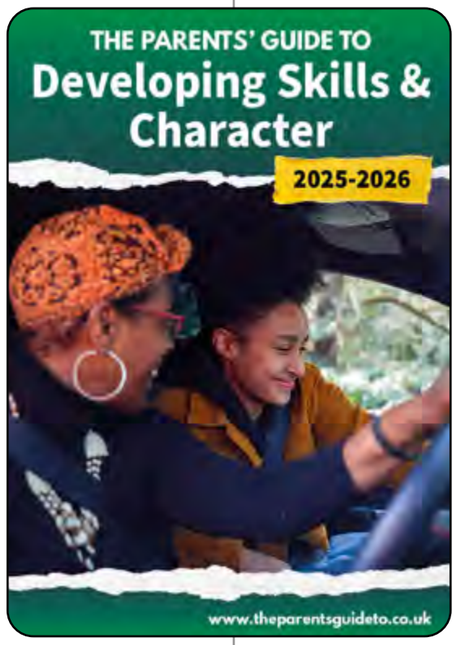












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Post 16 Options

2025-2026

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