

## Job Interview Strategies for Teens: Expert Tips for During and After the Interview

**Know yourself.** Before you even start the job-hunting process take some time to put yourself under the microscope. The more self-aware you are the more comfortable and confident you will be in job interviews. Ruiz suggests making a list of your strengths and abilities. Make another list of your achievements. Teen girls in particular may need to work on building confidence. “My experience with teenage girls including a daughter is that they tend to be very shy — or painfully modest — about their achievements” says Phil Hey director of career services at Briar Cliff University. “Nobody expects a teenage girl to have started a million-dollar company or won a world championship but even ‘ordinary’ achievements show good performance and other career values” Hey notes. Sarah Bigham director of Career Services at Hood College suggests practicing saying positive things about your skills and abilities.

**Know about the job you’ll be interviewing for.** Maureen Crawford Hentz who formerly hired teens for specific jobs at the New England Aquarium liked to test applicants’ interview preparation. “If an applicant came in to interview for an Aquarium Guide position and told me that she thought she would be feeding the animals and ‘stuff’ I knew that she has not read the job description” Hentz says.

**Think about yourself in relation to the job.** “Read through the job description thoroughly so you know what they are looking for and the skills you possess that match” suggests Gail Fox assistant director of career services University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. “Then think about your personality and ask family and friends what they particularly like about you. Bring this information into the interview as well. It shows that you prepared yourself that you are thoughtful and cared enough about the employer to bring them your best.” Laura Yu of the career-services office at Virginia Tech advises asking yourself “What do I have that would make someone want to hire me for this job?”

**Understand what employers are looking for.** “The primary concerns for most employers talking to teens are these: Will you be here as scheduled? If we are willing to teach you are you willing to learn?” says Gale Montgomery former career-services coordinator at Simpson College. “With this in mind I encourage teens to respond to the questions with frequent reassurances of reliability and capabilities to learn quickly but with a willingness to ask questions for clarity.” Recent grad-school graduate Jeanie Collins notes that the interviewer is not out to get you. “The interviewer is looking for a person with ordinary qualifications who has the attitude to do an extraordinary job” Collins observes.

**Practice.** Ask friends and family members to conduct practice interviews with you. You can find many lists of commonly asked interview questions on the Internet or in interviewing books. Also practice your body language and handshake.

**Plan to dress nicely and appear well groomed.** Dress more conservatively than you normally would and even a bit more conservatively than the typical dress at the workplace at which you’re interviewing. Emily Hamvay who interviewed for many jobs as a teen describes the preferred mode of interview attire as “like Sunday church gear.” Among the “don’ts” mentioned by career counselors are heavy makeup open-toed shoes revealing clothing short skirts visible piercings tattoos clingy tops platform shoes huge earrings wrinkled clothing and hair in your face. Carol Yoannone student performance director at the Community College of Allegheny County PA describes a particularly unfortunate fashion choice she once observed at a job fair: “A young woman walked in with a spaghetti-strap evening dress.” Read our article [When Job-Hunting: Dress for Success](#).

*“Have an ‘old’ person approve your proposed interview outfit before you buy it or wear it to an interview”* advises Hood College’s Sarah Bigham who notes that she sees “way too many short skirts low-cut tops extravagant fingernails etc.” Bigham also cautions against jewelry that clangs and makeup that glitters. “Anybody who is old enough to be your mother should look you over before you leave the house” Bigham suggests. She also advises that teens wear their interview outfits and shoes before the interview — for more than a few minutes. “You want to be comfortable on your big day!”

**Be prepared to be interviewed even when you’re not expecting to.** If you’re cruising the mall filling out job applications don’t be surprised if some employers want to interview you on the spot. The nature of the jobs that teens typically seek makes impromptu interviews more likely than they are for other age groups and they are especially likely if the store has a “help-wanted” sign in the window. Since you could be interviewed at any time you should dress appropriately when you go out to fill out applications. Also be mentally prepared and don’t balk if an employer asks to interview you on the spot.

**Consider enlisting moral support.** Hamvay describes her unusual approach to interviews as a teen. “To help with the butterflies I would ask my mom to go to the interview with me and stay in the car while I was interviewing.” The Mom-in-the-car plan works well Hamvay says because “if you don’t do so well or you don’t get the job you have a easy escape plan. Or if you forget something such as a pen references safety pins moms are famous for being prepared with all of the essentials.” Hamvay says mom is also crucial for providing the all-important “good-luck smooch” and she might just buy you ice cream after the interview.

**Set realistic expectations about salary.** Let’s face it; most teen jobs pay minimum wage. You should certainly be aware of what the current minimum wage is so you’re not surprised and so you don’t ask for less than minimum wage. If the situation seems right you could even consider asking for more as attorney Trinity Hundredmark Fitzpatrick did as a teen. “One thing I learned on my interview at a local retail store was to ask for more than I thought I was going to get” Fitzpatrick recalls. “Everyone had told me that I was going to get minimum wage because of my age no matter what I did. I threw caution to the wind and decided to ask for more telling my interviewer that the store could hire someone at minimum wage or they could take me for a little more money but much better work. The manager chose me even at the higher price. Don’t underestimate your worth.”

**Know what hours you can work and prepare to be flexible.** Consider school homework extracurricular activities sports — anything that takes up your time. Be able to clearly articulate to the employer the hours you are available to work. If the employer needs more availability and you really want the job consider giving up a nonessential activity.

**Punctuality and reliability are a matter of show and tell.** Obviously, you can show your punctuality by arriving 5 to 15 minutes early for the interview. But you can also tell about your punctuality and reliability based on your performance in previous jobs. “If someone’s gotten up at 6 a.m. since she was 10 to deliver newspapers, I know that she’s probably not going to be late in the mornings coming to work,” observes Maureen Hentz, who formerly hired teens for specific jobs at the New England Aquarium. Similarly, if you have a stellar attendance record in school, you can cite that.

*“Remember you are making an impression from the first moment you walk in the door,”* cautions Amy Brenengen, youth program/GirlVenture manager for WomenVenture in St. Paul, MN. “Chances are the receptionist or the first person you see will tell the hiring manager if your behavior before the interview isn’t as respectful and optimistic as when you meet the manager for the interview.”

**Don't chew gum.** Gum chewing is a major turnoff for employers, as it was for photographer Jeanie Collins when she interviewed a young woman for a campus job while in grad school. "When she opened her mouth to respond to my first question," Collins recalls, "a bright pink piece of bubble gum flew out of her mouth and hit my notepad."

**Don't downplay your previous experience, no matter how lowly it seems.** "I'm amazed by the number of teens who say 'well, I've never really worked before, other than babysitting or being a camp counselor or mowing lawns,'" notes Maureen Hentz. "These are jobs where promptness and responsibility are key. If she's been babysitting for the same family every Saturday night for three years, this tells me that she does a good job, has built rapport with the kids, and is trusted by the family. If she's gotten a babysitting certificate from the Red Cross, I know that she is interested in learning more about her job. All of these are transferable experiences. Transferable skills from any of these jobs could include being flexible, creative, a good communicator, promptness, handling money, responding to customer feedback, setting and keeping a schedule, as well as balancing schoolwork with other activities." Echoes Amy Brenengen: Volunteer work, babysitting, and working at Mom's, Dad's, auntie's, or a neighbor's office all count as work history when you are applying for a job.

***"Fill out every part of the application and use your best handwriting,"*** advises Brenengen. "Use complete sentences when you are asked an open-ended question on the application." (See our article, *A Job-Seeker's Guide to Successfully Completing Job Applications*). Brenengen adds that a resume is always impressive, especially for a teen. "However, it doesn't replace the application; it is just a 'special bonus,'" she notes. "Resumes can be very simple, and you can use templates in Word to help create yours."

**Avoid peppering interviews with "um" and "like."** The best way to get past overusing these "pause words" is practice. As you conduct practice interviews with friends and family, have them flag you if you start inserting too many "um's" and "like's" into your interview responses.

**Make eye contact.** It's extremely important for connecting with your interviewer. When asked a question, don't look up at walls and ceiling as if searching for answers. Don't cast your eyes downward. One expert, recognizing that eye contact is hard to maintain in a one-on-one situation, says to look at interviewer's nose.

***Be yourself.*** Emily Hamvay remembers how her trademark wackiness and humor paid off for her when she interviewed for a job as a hostess at a restaurant. "The interviewer asked me why I wanted to work at the restaurant," Hamvay recalls. "Without even a blink of eye I retorted with, 'Sir, I have a terrible addiction'... pause ... a look of bewilderment came across his face ... 'I just can't get enough of the chicken Marsala at this place. I figure, I better start working here or take out a loan.' After a few more chuckles, he hired me on the spot."

**Be memorable.** Hamvay's humor certainly made her memorable, but Jeanie Collins offers another trick for sticking in the interviewer's consciousness. "Always have a visual trademark. I always used to wear a conservative suit with a lapel pin in the shape of a dragonfly. You could find a pin that represents a hobby you have, such as a sailboat or a tennis racket. Then, when the interviewer asks what kinds of pastimes you enjoy, you can link the pin into the conversation. Later, when the interviewer is narrowing down the herd, you are sure to stand out."

**Show your enthusiasm.** Employers list lack of enthusiasm as their No. 1 turnoff in interviewees. The best way to show enthusiasm? A big smile throughout the interview. But, as Hamvay puts it, “not one of those psycho smiles, but one that looks like you are singing Christmas carols at a home for the elderly.”

**Project confidence.** The scary world of job interviewing is new to teens, but overcoming the fear and appearing confident is a great way to stand out. Teen girls are especially vulnerable to appearing timid in interviews because they sometimes lapse into “little girl” voices. One of the best ways to show confidence is with a strong, forceful voice. No matter how shaky you may feel inside, try your best to show a confident attitude. “A strong, confident, charming young woman can often win over everyone, both men and women alike,” notes law student Trinity Hundredmark Fitzpatrick.

**Ask questions.** Interviewers almost always invite you at the end of the interview to ask questions. Asking questions shows your enthusiasm for the job, so have a couple prepared, but don’t ask about things like salary or vacation time. Recent college graduate Colleen Holuk suggests asking questions like: How long have you been working here? What’s the best part of your job?

**Close the sale.** If you want the job, say so. Conclude the interview by thanking the interviewer and making a statement that conveys your enthusiasm for the position. You could also ask if the interviewer has any questions or concerns about your ability to do the job. If the interviewer expresses any reservations, you can address them and try to ease the employer’s qualms. Gail Fox, assistant director of career services, University of Wisconsin-Whitewater, further suggests that you always find out when the employer will be making a hiring decision and how the hiring manager will communicate that to you — or if you need to follow up.

### **Expert Tips for Teens... After the Job Interview**

**Write a thank-you note.** It’s just common courtesy to thank people for their time, and since very few teens exercise this little gesture, you’ll stand out if you do it. If the interviewer has a business card, ask for one to ensure you spell his or her name correctly. One teen job-seeker we know interviewed for a job at Kmart. As soon as she got home, she wrote a thank-you note and turned right around and went back to Kmart to hand-deliver it. She got the job.

If you haven’t heard a hiring decision by the time you expected to, call the interviewer to check on your status. Don’t make a pest of yourself, but do follow up.