

# About Kids Health

## What do you want me to be when I grow up?

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### Parental and social pressures on adolescent career choices

*"My son used to have his own hopes and aspirations. Now he has mine. Thanks, Obay!"*

- From the makers of *WhyBecauseISaySo*

In a two-part series of advertising features contracted by Colleges Ontario, this fictional drug was marketed with text reading "My son had ideas of his own. Obay put a stop to that," and "Our teenagers don't have their own goals anymore. Obay works like a charm."

Bewildered onlookers were left scratching their heads as they stared at the poster's beaming parents and shiny trophy children until the second part of the series revealed a large yellow sticker plastered over the original ad, reading "Luckily, Obay isn't real. Unfortunately, though, the problem of pushing your kids to do what you want is – especially when it comes to their future. Believe it or not, university isn't the only prescription for success. Help your children explore their options."

Colleges Ontario advocates for the province's 24 colleges of applied arts and technology, and while the group has an interest in this promotion, they do bring up a very important issue: do we really give our kids a choice when it comes to their career?

### Starting young: career choices of children and adolescents

We cut their meat, tie their laces, and make sure that they have wiped after using the potty. And yet, at the same time, we ask them one of the most important questions they will ever have to answer: what do you want to be when you grow up?

The answer is not as simple as the colourful drawings of teachers, veterinarians, and firefighters found on classroom walls may suggest.

Cradled between finger-painting and applying for university, adolescence is a critical period during which individuals discover, one hopes, who they are and how they might like to earn a living. Studies have shown that job interests and aspirations formed in adolescence influence career choices made in adulthood. However, adolescents are vulnerable to environmental influences including peers, media, culture, and especially parents and family.

### Parental influence: You can be anything you want ... as long as I say it's okay

Although there are many factors that contribute to career choice, parents and family are one of the most influential. Mark Franklin, career counsellor and president of CareerCycles, a career counselling and coaching organization, says with careless, subtle comments "[parents] say what is a good career and what is a bad career." For example, "Painting is a hobby, not a career," or a sarcastic "Isn't it nice that Billy's mom can afford to stay home and not have a real job" would strongly impress on a child that becoming an artist or stay-at-home parent should be crossed off the wish list.

"By the time parents figure out what the world is about, they think about job security, financial security, and prestige – particularly prestige," says Franklin. These values ultimately resurface when children begin considering career options.

Adolescent girls may be particularly vulnerable; compared to their male peers, it has been argued that they are more likely to change their career goals to suit their parents' wishes.

In addition to the regular pressures of adolescence, individuals of lower income levels may be further disadvantaged due to reduced access to resources, lower family or school support, and lower job



expectations based on the types of jobs held by family and friends. "Career inheritance" is how Jelena Zikic, Assistant Professor of Human Resources Management at York University, describes these pressures. "Very often, what we see is a family tradition. Whether it is a trade, profession, or family-owned business, children are likely to follow that," she says.

Intrinsically linked to parents, family, and career inheritance are ethnicity and culture. Zikic, who also does career counselling, says, "Students often explain that it's really their cultural influences that causes their parents to impose specific careers on them." Franklin agrees, noting a recent session with an Asian client in medical school whose cultural background focused on achievement. He explained that his parents pushed him toward medical school and he was confused about whether this was the career he truly wanted.

A career crisis may develop when there is a mismatch in terms of the ego strength of the child and the environmental pressures that challenge their identity. By definition, adolescents straddle the line between childhood obedience and adult independence. In a sense, they are learning how to make up their own minds, perhaps ignoring what they are told. However, judging by the multiple shelves of career self-help guides found in any major bookstore, it is not only youth who struggle with this problem.

### **What should I do with my life? And when?**

Featured on *Oprah* several years ago, Po Bronson's book *What Should I Do with My Life?* documents the career epiphanies of people of all ages from all over the United States. The book chronicles the often drastic career transitions of a very diverse group of individuals who, later in life, all asked themselves this same question: what do I want to do when I grow up?

Many books on the career paths people choose are predicated on the concepts of career maturity: the physical, social, intellectual, and emotional components that determine an individual's degree of readiness to deal with the career demands appropriate for his or her age group. Essentially, it is the idea that specific career milestones should be reached by certain ages in one's life.

Franklin, who spent 15 years as an engineer before pursuing a career in counselling, disagrees.

"There's an underlying assumption that when you're young, you can make a decision about what you'll do for the rest of your life – most people don't do that," says Franklin. Zikic, whose research focuses in part on career transitions and career development, adds, "Children will reach what we call career maturity at very different ages. There won't be one time in their life when they will be ready to make a decision – very often, there's change. The world of work, in general, is changing a lot; nothing is really that fixed any more."

Given these family pressures and shifting social changes, Franklin believes it is crucial that adolescents learn to identify their interests, wants, and needs apart from those of their parents. "When you really know and appreciate who you are, you will know what you want to do," he advises on his website.

### **How can parents help?**

Children will need to discover who they are on their own. And although parents are warned against imposing their own goals onto their children, they can most certainly act as a guide. Briana Keller and Susan Whiston recently published a study on the role of parental influences on the career development of middle school children. Along with Mark Franklin and Jelena Zikic, Keller and Whiston have the following suggestions for parents wanting to help:

#### **1. Respect your child's differences.**

Family environments that show respect for differences and independence are enormously helpful to a child's career development.

#### **2. Show interest in and support for your child's career plans.**

Keller and Whiston found that showing interest in and support for their child's interests and career plans proved to be more helpful than providing information about the careers or jobs themselves.

#### **3. Focus on your child's strengths and give names to them.**

Parents are ideally positioned to notice their child's strengths. By giving names to these strengths, parents can empower their child with a **vocabulary** for the skills that they have. For example: "You're a really good people-person," or "You draw really well," or "You're very creative." But be careful not to make the next judgemental leap, which could be harmful: "You should be an accountant because you like numbers."

By focusing on strengths, children will gain confidence knowing that their parents believe in them, and as a result, will feel more confident in their own skills for future career options.

#### **4. Encourage your child to explore career options.**

Your child may tell you that he wants to be a surgeon one day and then a cattle rancher the next. It is important for children to get a sense of what these jobs are like in real-life before they start pursuing them.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Job shadowing: Children can gain useful insight from activities such as Take Your Child to Work Day, or job-shadowing a family member or close friend with a profession of interest.
- Volunteering and part-time jobs: Teenagers and young adults will often have several part-time jobs before entering into the workforce out of school. Part-time jobs and volunteer opportunities can provide valuable experience sampling different careers. For example, working as a receptionist in a law office or volunteering as an animal attendant at a veterinary clinic would give students a taste of the inner workings of each profession. They will also learn about themselves and may be able to narrow down their options. For example, those who dislike babysitting may be able to rule out early childhood education.
- Get help: A recent Ipsos-Reid survey noted, given the chance to start over, “65% of Canadians would get more career planning or job information”. Encourage your child to speak to a professional for career help. For example, if your child is in university, encourage them to visit the career centre.

#### **5. Be mindful of careless comments.**

As mentioned earlier, children are very susceptible to careless comments parents make about “good” and “bad” professions. There are over 30,000 different jobs categorized by Canada’s National Occupational Classification. However, when considering career options, adolescents often consider only a fraction of one percent of them, often because of parental and social influences.

#### **6. Remember, there is no plan.**

Because we are all so different, there is no 7-step program that can guarantee instant career satisfaction. Your child will almost certainly make mistakes along the way, but learning from those missteps will get them closer to finding a career that will complement their unique set of skills and passions.

As Po Bronson writes in *What Should I Do with My Life?:* “Step one: Stop pretending we’re all on the same staircase.”

#### **Further career resources**

Free Canadian site for career information: Alberta Learning Information Service (ALIS):

<http://alis.alberta.ca/>

Occupational profiles: [www.alis.gov.ab.ca/occinfo/](http://www.alis.gov.ab.ca/occinfo/)

Career quizzes: Service Canada: [http://www.jobsetc.ca/toolbox/quizzes/quizzes\\_home.do?lang=e](http://www.jobsetc.ca/toolbox/quizzes/quizzes_home.do?lang=e)

#### **Looking for a career professional?**

Association of Career Professionals International (approximately 120 career professionals in the Toronto chapter): <http://www.acpinternational.org/>

*Ansely Wong*

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