

Coach your children to be individuals, not mini-me's

By VIRGINIA JUSTICE

Some parents want their child to be a star athlete, discover the cure for cancer or be miniature versions of themselves and continually push their kids in that direction. But what if your child wants to be a plumber, firefighter or astronaut? Parents have considerable influence over the decisions of their children. When does that influence cross the line and cause stress and anxiety for children?

In her blog, career coach Monique Betty observes that the most difficult situation for a child "is when they have a negatively involved parent. These parents push their children down career paths of their own choosing and may belittle the child's choices and impede their

progress if the child and the parent have opposing ideas. This leads to anxiety and resentment on the part of the children and often insecurity that they can achieve the career they really want."

In short, are we as parents allowing our children to develop their own individuality or creating stressed, anxious young people who seek to please their parents rather than following their own desires?

As parents of two daughters, all my husband and I wanted was for our children to be happy and become productive adults. We felt it was important to instill in them curiosity and a love of learning. If they were interested in trying something, we did our best to

ensure they had an opportunity to have a hands-on experience. Take your children to the library, a zoo, OMSI, the children's museum and sit on the floor to play with them to help them discover the vast world around them. Children don't need expensive toys to have fun; they will play with a cardboard box, water-soluble markers and stickers for hours. Encourage children to experience many things in an endeavor to find their true calling.

Our youngest loved Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter, and told us from an early age she wanted to be a marine biologist and work with marine animals. How do you encourage that? Send her on a shark dive, of course. Yes we did! Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium in Tacoma has a program where people eight years and older can participate in a cage dive in the shark tank. The aquarium provides the wet suit and facemask; participants are provided air through an umbilical type tether. As a mom, I worried that something would happen during her dive, a shark might attack, but this did not happen, even when they opened the large door of the cage and she stood in the doorway. This experience only galvanized her desire to study marine science. Today, she has her sights set on earning a Ph.D. in marine science.



Strategies

Our other daughter tried a couple paths and decided that her

passion lies in nursing. She is planning to pursue a career in nursing with the goal of becoming a physician's assistant specializing in dermatology.

What can parents do to encourage individuality and creativity in their children? Encourage exploration though reading,

experience and creative play, and talk to them about their interests. The library provides a wealth of information and spending time with books will foster the imagination. Encourage your children to be individuals, even if their interests are different from yours. Do not expect children to like what you do just because they are your offspring. Avoid comparing siblings by developmental markers or interests; children learn and do at their own pace. Encourage your children to be who they want to be, not who you think they should be.

Pendleton resident Virginia Justice is a former substitute teacher. She and her husband have two college-aged daughters.



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