

Stop Asking Kids What They Want to Be When They Grow Up

The question forces children to define themselves in terms of work.



By Adam Grant

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“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

When I was a kid, I dreaded the question. I never had a good answer. Adults always seemed terribly disappointed that I wasn’t dreaming of becoming something grand or heroic, like a filmmaker or an astronaut.

In college, I finally realized that I didn’t want to be one thing. I wanted to do many things. So I found a workaround: I became an organizational psychologist. My job is to fix other people’s jobs. I get to experience them vicariously — I’ve gotten to explore how filmmakers blaze new trails and how astronauts build trust. And I’ve become convinced that asking youngsters what they want to be does them a disservice.

My first beef with the question is that it forces kids to define themselves in terms of work. When you’re asked what you want to be when you grow up, it’s not socially acceptable to say, “A father,” or, “A mother,” let alone, “A person of integrity.” This might be one of the reasons many parents say their most important value for their children is to care about others, yet their kids believe that top value is success. When we define ourselves by our jobs, our worth depends on what we achieve.

The second problem is the implication that there is one calling out there for everyone. Although having a calling can be a source of joy, research shows that searching for one leaves students feeling lost and confused. And even if you’re lucky enough to stumble onto a calling, it might not be a viable career. My colleagues and I have found that callings often go unanswered: Many career passions don’t pay the bills, and many of us just don’t have the talent. After the comedian Chris Rock heard an administrator tell entering high schoolers they could be anything they want to be, he asked, “Lady, why are you lying to these children?” Maybe four of them could be anything they want to be. But the other 2,000 had better learn how to weld. He added: “Tell the kids the truth. You can be anything you’re good at — as long as they’re hiring.”

If you manage to overcome those obstacles, there is a third hurdle: Careers rarely live up to your childhood dreams. In one study, looking for the ideal job left college seniors feeling more anxious, stressed, overwhelmed and depressed throughout the process — and less satisfied with the outcome. As Tim Urban writes, happiness is reality minus expectations. If you’re looking for bliss, you’re bound to be disappointed. This explains research showing that people who graduate from college during a recession are more satisfied with their work three decades later: They don’t take it for granted that they have a job.

The upside of low expectations is that they erase the gap between what we wanted and what we got. Extensive evidence shows that instead of painting a rosy picture of a job, you’re better off going in with a realistic preview of what it’s really like, warts and all. Sure, you might be a little less excited to take it, but on average you end up more productive and less likely to quit. Oprah said it best: “Your job is not always going to fulfill you.”

I’m all for encouraging youngsters to aim high and dream big. But take it from someone who studies work for a living: those aspirations should be bigger than work. Asking kids what they want to be leads them to claim a career identity they might never want to earn. Instead, invite them to think about what kind of person they want to be — and about all the different things they might want to do.

Adam Grant, an organizational psychologist at Wharton, is the author of “Originals.” For more on building your career and connections, listen to WorkLife With Adam Grant, a TED original podcast on the science of making work less awful. You can find WorkLife on Apple Podcasts, or on your favorite podcast platform.