

Why Passion Matters

Life provides plenty of reality checks. This mother argues in favor of letting kids dream.

By Jacquelyn Mitchard
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"I've changed my mind," said my 13-year-old daughter, Francie. "I don't want to be a lawyer anymore. I want to be in the FBI." I tried to imagine my daughter's bespectacled face staring back at me from the climbing wall at Quantico, but the image didn't come easily.

Still, I replied, "How cool is that?"

"Yeah," Francie said, arms folded in satisfaction. "It's going to be good."

I hope it is. I hope that her life turns out absolutely according to her dreams. If she doesn't quite hit the bull's-eye, then she'll still have aimed in the right direction.

Not long ago, someone asked the dad of a young pop star what his son would have done if he hadn't become a singer-songwriter. The father said he had never considered anything else. This was his Plan A. There had been no Plan B. I mentioned this to my son Marty, a musical theater major, when he was pondering a second major in business or teaching.

"Don't do it on my account," I said.

"But what if I don't make it?" he asked.

"Someone has to," I answered.

My Friends think I'm crazy. They've advised their own growing children to choose a fallback plan, to pursue something they think they can get good at even if they don't love it – just in case. Times are hard, my friends remind me. Was I setting my kids up for years of rejection and sacrifice? I understand the concern; each of my three college-age kids has chosen a risky path.

Rob, 25, is designing computer games that he hopes will be played simultaneously by masses of people around the world. Dan, 22, is training to become a pastry chef-the trickiest of all the culinary arts. Marty, 19, may have the most flagrantly impractical career, goal, next to writing haiku. Of the 300 who tried out for his college's musical theater program, he was one of just 15 who were chosen. (As a professor put it, there might be a shortage of nurses or forklift operators, but never of actors.) Yet even among those chosen, Marty was the only one to hold on to his heart's desire: While every sophomore kid in the college chorus announced his or her major - hotel management, nursing, pharmacy, or another seemingly safe choice – Marty retained his theater concentration.

Of course I want to protect my children. But why should they give up their "best years" to study things that barely hold their interest? Is that really a wise use of their time? Why teach them to ignore their instincts?

It's the bold, not the meek, who vault higher during hard times. Fear leads nowhere; enthusiasm can lead everywhere.

People who bind themselves to what they love tend to succeed in some way, shape, or form. The great Agnes de Mille loved dance so much, she became the most innovative choreographer of her time, even after she gave up dancing herself. David Zayas worked as a New York City cop for 15 years to support his young family while also studying acting; he ended up as one of the most famous cops on TV, detective Angel Batista on the Showtime hit *Dexter*.

The wisest parents I know are honest. They watch their children grow and steer them toward their strengths with encouragement rather than force. And sometimes these parents feel pride *and* fear. When my son Marty stepped into the extraordinarily competitive arena of performance, I have to admit, I wondered whose dream it was, his or mine.

Yet I'd watched whim grow. And I kept in mind what a great athletic coach once told me: kids will self-identify. No one has to force a driven kid to achieve. It's one thing to shine on the soccer field at age 7 but another at 17. As the years pass and the pool widens, parents can see which hopes have real promise and help their children make decisions accordingly, but only if they've maintained a supportive relationship with them rather than one that's doctrinaire.

Once, on a train, I met a man who told me a story about his sons, who had inherited his wife's concert-quality musical ability. The man had recently instructed both of them to choose business technology as their college degrees. That was where the money was, he told them – music was just a hobby.

"How old are your boys?" I asked.

"Eleven and twelve," he replied.

Already, at his sons' tender ages, the man had squelched the aptitudes and passions to which his boys had devoted their childhoods. That's not my place as a parent. The world will dole out its own reality checks to my kids.

I don't know if my children will suffer more for dreaming big. Odds are that Rob won't create the most successful electronic video game since Halo. Dan may never own the restaurant he dreams of naming That One Place (because people always say, "Let's go to that one place we went to last summer"). And Marty may never cross a Broadway stage except to congratulate someone else. But I believe that learning one's limits organically is better than making choices out of an excess of caution. I'd rather my children plunge in than hang back.

The other night, my ten-year-old daughter, Mia, told me about her dream to be a professional cheerleader. She also wants to open an ear-piercing boutique for dogs. I kept my thoughts to myself and simply said, "Really?" Later, I wondered why we hadn't already heard about the trend of dogs sporting chandelier earrings. My daughter might be a visionary!

I'm forever grateful that my own mother encouraged my Plan A from the get-go. She praised and encouraged my scribbles as a young writer and read me the classics. I was a teenager when she died; Dad wanted me to get a job. So I waitressed, but when I wasn't doing that, I wrote stories for 15 cents a word for a weekly newspaper, honing my craft. Years later, I was working two part-time jobs (one in public relations, the other as a technical writer) when my first husband died young. With three little boys to raise, I wrote out my grief long into the night until I had a 386-page novel, *The Deep End of the Ocean*, which launched me into the career I had always dreamed of. I don't know for sure about heaven, but if there is one, Mama led the choir in a cheer.

As my children weigh their options, I give them my best advice: Risk everything. Plans B, C, D, and E will always be there. Grab Plan A.