

CHANGE @ WORK

Fantasy can be fantastic as kids seek a role in life

Patricia Kitchen
Change@work

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Birthday party clown. Snake master. Ice cream taster. Magician.

Not exactly the kind of jobs we'll find on the Labor Department's "fastest-growing" list. Important, nonetheless, though, because they were mentioned as desirable careers in an informal survey of kids ages 6 to 14. The survey was conducted earlier this year by Melville-based staffing firm Adecco.

Certainly some pretty traditional professions surfaced, too, when 250 sons and daughters of the company's clients and employees were polled. Among the careers cited: doctor, forensic scientist, teacher, police officer, finance manager at a car dealership.

But leave it to the younger gang to come up with some doozies. How about the job of wolf farmer? Or "Fear Factor" contestant? Or ninja? One boy in the 10-12 age group said he wants to be a "comedian, criminal lawyer, magician, snake master, pro basketball player - in that order."

We can rejoice at this sense of possibility and only hope it's not too badly damaged by well-meaning relatives, friends and educators who introduce reality too soon, as in: "That job doesn't pay well." Or "you're not good enough at math." Or "that's not a real job." An adult who hypes the importance of career issues to the point where the child becomes anxious can be equally unhelpful.

This is not to say there's much - OK, any - real demand for wolf farmers. But such fantasizing plays an important role as kids develop self concepts - a sense of who they are, their likes and dislikes, says Michael Nina, a career counselor at Baruch College in Manhattan.

When a child expresses interest in becoming a ninja, two things are at play, he says: content and process. Ninja is the content. And instead of speaking to that, parents are

wise to step deeper into the process, where the child is developing a sense of who he or she is - likes, dislikes, interests, preferences. You're much better off to say you're glad the child is thinking about such options and ask just what it is about being a ninja that sounds so appealing.

Listen to educational consultant Sue Gubing: It's far better, she says, for children to dream up odd possibilities than for them to say they don't like anything or don't know what they want to do - sentiments that can stick with them right through college. Gubing, former school/industry coordinator at Smithtown High School, now leads an online course for teachers: "Choosing a Career Is Child's Play."

Look at a child's career musings as a chance to make "constructive, rich use of their fantasies," says Jim Malone, director of training and counseling at www.readyminds.com, a career counseling site. Try to determine what they're revealing about themselves that could be important components in more realistic careers down the road, as Malone has done with the following:

Ninja - Child may like power, want to be on a fast track;

Wolf farmer - May like the rugged outdoors;

Chippendale dancer in Las Vegas (one of the interests mentioned in the Adecco survey) - may be provocative, possibly an exhibitionist, or maybe just a little bit of a wise guy.

This stage of the career development process - focusing on natural, individual interests; likes and dislikes; work-style preferences - is frequently skipped when people who are older pick careers for real. Instead, they look to professions that will make their parents happy, or that friends are going into, or that offer easy entry or fabulous salaries. And that, experts say, is one factor at the root of so much career dissatisfaction.

So, how does this relate to our potential magicians? If parents get critical or anxious, it sends a message to kids that "some aspect of their personalities and imagination should be suppressed," says Mary Jacobsen, a social worker in Arlington, Mass. She's also author of "Hand-Me-Down Dreams: How Families Influence Our Career Paths and How We Can Reclaim Them" (Three Rivers Press, \$34.45).

She's finding, too, that parents who are over-anxious about a child's getting into the right preschool, classes and extracurricular activities, are "teaching the child to be an anxious competitor just like them." No favors are being done, she says, as they "colonize a child's young adulthood" by being overly involved.

Stay calm and lighthearted when a 6-year-old speaks of becoming a princess or a wizard, she says. And remember just how few baby boomers actually grew up to be cowgirls.

Child's play can be clue to career

We're all a blend of six basic interest categories, but one or two tend to dominate. We can tell a lot about kids' natural inclinations - which may have career implications down the road - from their preferred methods of play. Following are descriptions from Sue Gubing, a Smithtown educational consultant, based on the Holland Interest Code, which matches these categories with careers that may be compatible:

"Realistic/doers" have athletic or mechanical ability and prefer playing with objects, tools, plants or animals, or simply being outdoors. Games may range from playing florist or truck driver to cops and robbers.

"Investigative/thinkers" like to observe, learn, solve problems. They're drawn to board games, puzzles and learning activities, such as chemistry sets.

"Artistic/creators" with innovative or intuitive abilities tend to prefer unstructured play: coloring books, music, making decorations.

"Social/helpers" like to play with others, entertaining, helping, teaching, curing. Find them playing school or doctor.

"Enterprising/persuaders" like to play with others in an influencing, persuading, leading, managing role. Find them running a raffle or a lemonade stand.

"Conventional/organizers" are detail-oriented, often with clerical or numerical ability. They like data, organizing, and collecting things such as baseball cards.