

Grandparents – The Ideal Career Mentors

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At opening day of the Oakland A's with his young granddaughter, Dr. Robert Chope asked her what she'd like to be when she grows up. Looking around at the busy food vendors, she thought for a moment and said, "I think when I grow up, I'd really like to sell pizzas."

Many parents would shrug off such a childish ambition, or perhaps gently suggest a loftier goal. But Chope, a career counselor and author of "Family Matters: The Influence of the Family in Career Decision Making," took a more grandfatherly approach: he listened to her.

"I think what grandparents do is to listen more and judge less," he says. "Where parents are often worried about the economics of their children's career decisions, grandparents encourage kids to follow their dreams, which helps promote truly positive career beliefs."

According to Chope, grandparents are uniquely suited to help young people get their professional lives off to a good start. "Because of the number of divorces in the country, grandparents have much greater degrees of influence over children than before," he says. "And parents are often so busy balancing their work and home lives that they don't have time to both listen to and give advice to kids. But when you're with your grandkids, you can devote a huge amount of energy to just listening to what is on their minds. And since grandparents have a lifetime of information about the work world, they can give them a perspective that will be different from what their parents offer."

Carla Snyder agrees. A recent college graduate, Snyder's is about to become an elementary school teacher, just like her grandmother. "My parents are wonderful people and wonderful parents," she says. "But because grandparents don't have to be disciplinarian, and you don't see them all the time, you see a lot more positives through them. I never saw any negative aspect of teaching through my grandmother. She would take me to class with her, I'd help her set up and play with all her classroom stuff, and it was really fun. So I decided before kindergarten that I wanted to teach elementary school. I can't imagine working anywhere else."

But though her grandmother is delighted with her career choice, Snyder felt no pressure to follow in her footsteps. In Chope's view, that's another reason grandparents make such good career mentors. "In my practice I see a lot of people who are miserable because they are doctors or lawyers," he says. "And the only reason they're in those careers is because their parents were doctors or lawyers and pressured them to engage in the same activity. But there's very little confronting that grandparents will do with their grandchildren."

In Melinda Brock's case, her grandparents' easygoing encouragement brought her back to a career dream she'd almost abandoned. Brock's grandparents are long-time rodeo professionals in North Texas, and they inspired both her and her mother to seek careers in the sport. But Brock

says her mother's intensity almost turned her away from that goal. "Parents want you to win, and they're hard on you because of it," she says. "And that kind of pushed me away from rodeoing when I was younger. But my grandparents were like, 'It's there if you want it.' And when I decided that was what I wanted to do, they backed me the whole way, which made me want to keep doing it."

According to Chope, grandparents' unconditional support of their grandchildren's career decisions can bring benefits even beyond the workplace. "I think to some extent, grandparents can serve the same purpose as a career counselor," he says. "Because they won't make judgments, they can open people to new opportunities. And they can encourage their grandkids to nurture the skills and abilities that may not necessarily be income-producing, but that may lead to a lifetime of satisfaction.

"I knew a chemistry professor whose son had just announced that he didn't want to go to college," he recalls. "He was going to go bike around Europe for a while, and his dad was upset about this. And I said, 'Why don't you just let him do this for a year or two? Try to think of it as a lifestyle change - he'll be healthy and not as worried about money, and maybe it'll add five or six years to his life.' He told me he'd never thought of it that way."

In other words, he'd never thought like a grandparent.