

Who, Not What

“What do you want to be when you grow up?” - the seemingly default question people first ask. It may seem like a fun, simple, get-to-know-you question, but in reality it adds unneeded pressure and unwanted emphasis on choosing a job despite its innocent and even helpful intent. The question is also contributing to a self-centered culture in which individuals only worry about themselves. As many of us know, this question is very commonly asked, but we should instead be focusing on *who* kids want to be when they grow up, not what.

One might argue that the question is vital to ask kids what they want to be for the sake of their development. An article written by *Fatherly* quotes behavioral and cognitive psychologist, Shane Owens in saying “failing to engage with young children about growing up...[hinders] them from reaching their full potential.” The article elaborates that giving children a “nudge” to overcome this challenge will help them become more fulfilled adults in the future. However, when asked about their future career, many kids don’t know what they want to be, myself included. Instead of helping me overcome a difficulty in my future, it creates a new problem in my current life that I do not need. Although it is important to think about the future, asking me a question that I do not know the answer to only stresses me out; it does not prepare me. The opportunity to plan my own future at my own pace makes me a lot more comfortable and I feel a lot less pressure. There are negative repercussions when people are forced to decide their profession, such as rushing into an unwanted career. In fact, a survey done by *Onrec* of over 1,000 adults showed that 98% of them have career-related regrets, meaning consistent questioning is not actually helping people choose a fulfilling job.

Constantly asking kids what they want to be when they grow up also puts an emphasis on career over character. It implies that the most important pursuit when you age will be your job.

An article published in *The New York Times* explains that the question makes children define themselves in terms of their future occupation. The article states that when asked, “it’s not socially acceptable to say... ‘A person of integrity.’” The answer is expected to be a profession, not an attribute like intelligent, kind, or creative. The frequency and implications of the question show kids that how they will make money holds more importance than the kind of person they will be.

Instead, as a society, we need to ask children *who* they want to be, not what. It is important to teach young children that character is more important than money, as society’s influence has already negatively impacted them. A study done by Harvard Graduate School of Education found “a large majority of youth...value aspects of personal success—achievement and happiness—over concern for others.” To shift this perspective we need to teach that value comes from the kind of person you are, not what you are paid to do.

This question may not be the sole reason children value personal achievement over others, nor why adults regret their careers. However, there needs to be a shift in our culture and this is a great place to start. Though some may feel this question is needed for kids to have a plan for what they want to be, in reality it just adds extra pressure that doesn’t help the process as well as the accidental effect of valuing career over character. Switching just one word is an easy way we can hope to teach the next generation to care about the kind of person they are and how they affect others. So next time you meet someone, forgo the typical question and instead ask “*Who* do you want to be when you grow up?”

Word Count: 652 words

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