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Motherlode

Adventures in Parenting

Our Push for 'Passion,' and Why It Harms Kids

By Lisa Heffernan April 8, 2015 7:55 am

Standing on the sidelines of my son's soccer game I chatted with the younger sibling of one of his teammates. "I don't really have a passion like my brother yet," he explained, glancing over at the field. "But my parents are helping me look for one." I waited for the note of irony that never came.

At some point in the last 20 years the notion of passion, as applied to children and teenagers, took hold. By the time a child rounds the corner into high school and certainly before he sets up an account with the Common App, the conventional wisdom is that he needs to have a passion that is deep, easy to articulate, well documented and makes him stand out from the crowd.

This passion, which he will either stumble upon or be led to by the caring adults in his life, must be pursued at the highest level his time and talent, and his parent's finances, will allow. It is understood that this will offer him fulfillment and afford him and his family bragging rights that a mere dabbler would never earn. This is madness.

Our parental obsession with passion is encouraged by the college admissions process and fed by our own fears. Anyone making the rounds of college visits and sitting through the endless parade of information sessions will have heard the word

“passion” uttered dozens of times. Every school, we are told, is brimming with qualified applicants, students who have the numbers. But the distinguishing factor is the student who shows passion, the proverbial oboe player, who stands out by standing alone in the devotion to her true love.

When *The Washington Post* disabused parents of the top 10 college admissions myths, No. 1 was that colleges want well-rounded students. Instead, it explained, “The word they most often use is passion.” When U.S. News & World Report offered suggestions on how to create a “killer college application,” it too listed passion in the top spot.

We have come to believe that only those who have passion find fulfillment and success professionally. It’s as if passion is life’s magic pixie dust. We want success for our children and believe that only passion can lead them there. We hold on to this myth despite considerable evidence that millions of people have lived long, happy, useful lives filled with joy and contentment and devoid of a defining passion.

And if passion is what makes our children look as special to colleges as they are to us, it’s also what lets us off the pushy parent hook. If a child has a “passion,” we’re not overdoing it in our zeal, or pursuing our own agenda. We’re just making their dream possible. Really, it has nothing to do with us.

If passion were just a matter of semantics, a word heedlessly thrown around in place of interest or pastime, this might not be a problem. But seeking a passion in childhood or adolescence has become an obsession in itself, and it is not without costs.

When children can’t find their elusive passions, yet feel compelled to proclaim one, they grab onto an interest, label it a passion and buy the requisite instrument or equipment. This is not a harmless charade, because fake passions crowd out real ones. When you are busy playing on the lacrosse field six days a week because in seventh grade you liked going to practices with your friends and your coach once mentioned you might have some talent, you may never discover that computer graphic design is your calling. When you take every opportunity to play piano daily in a band, orchestra and private lessons, you could easily miss the once-in-a-lifetime

joy of being a member of a field hockey team. Pseudo passions can eat up our days and lay waste to any chance of finding a real ones.

Children don't miss the message that they are supposed to find their laser focus early, and that dilettantes don't earn accolades. They feel lost and unnecessarily pressured when they hear the relentless stories of classmates who have found their calling. Parents' Facebook postings up the ante with quips like "Dance competition triumph. #Upatdawn #Passion" The drum beat gets louder in middle school and deafening in high school, when they know they will have to commit passion to paper in the form of the Common App, reporting accomplishments on a school, state and, yes, national level. It is hard not to feel that their chance to reach that level lessens every day.

And what becomes of us, the passion pushers, as we try to make something out of nothing every time our children show the slightest interest in an activity that does not involve a game console? Just look in your garage. O.K., I'll go first. There are skates for the child who joined a team and went to two practices before realizing that he was not well suited for hockey. There are drum sticks and one of those funny little practice pads (thank goodness they play on those for months!) for the child who soon lost interest in percussion. There are easels and badminton sets and there was even a squash racket, but it has had a resurgence with another son.

I'd like to think of it as evidence that we let our children try new things; instead, I think it's proof that we ran to the music, art, book, or sporting goods stores at every opportunity, lest a passing interest fail to bloom into a passion because it lacked parental money or dedication.

For most children, childhood isn't about passion, but rather about exploration. Our job as parents is to nurture that exploration, not put an end to it. When we create an expectation that children must find their one true interest so early in life, we cut short a process of discovery that may easily take a lifetime.