



‘When I grow up I wannabe....’ Parents love to indulge their children’s wacky and wonderful ambitions, though they may not take them too seriously. But early aspirations should be carefully nurtured, says



# They have a

**B**ritish children have big hopes and dreams as young as five years old, according to a new survey from the National Childminding Association. But where do these aspirations spring from and how can parents responsibly nurture them? And crucially, how do they impact on your child’s future?

In the NCMA survey of 1,000 British parents, more than a quarter (26 per cent) said that at just five years old their children have an idea of what they want to be when they grow up. In an interesting twist, research from the government’s poverty adviser, Frank Field, shows that most children’s life chances are set out by the same age.

Susanna Dawson, NMCA chair, says: ‘Children are making plans for their future at a very young age. Helping them to explore these could have an important impact on where they end up in life.’

## Nature or nurture?

Are children born with aspirations or are they influ-

enced by family and friends? Research suggests that children’s dreams are highly influenced by the people around them. The NCMA survey revealed that children’s role models are close to home, with parents most likely to rank themselves as their child’s role model (38 per cent), followed by teachers (20 per cent).

Stephanie Ness says of her six-year-old daughter Kerenza: ‘My daughter wants to be on any given day a puppy, pony, vet, or tiger. Programmes like Animal Planet totally fascinate her. I am a nurse - so maybe between those two things, her dream to be a vet has been nurtured.’

Kerenza’s enthusiasms suggest that children’s aspirations might have a genetic element, as well as being influenced by outside factors. Stephanie says: ‘I was equally animal mad at her age and preferred animals to dolls. I wanted to be a vet, but my parents never encouraged me. Having said this, I’ve never spoken to Kerenza about it or put the idea in her head at a conscious level!’

Parents continue to be an important role model



# dream...

throughout childhood, while other role models change. Younger children tend to be most influenced by cartoon and storybook characters, while older children tend to look up to sports personalities. Throughout childhood, the media is extremely influential, highlighting the importance of monitoring what children read and watch.

## More to life than a career!

When we think about aspirations, we tend to focus on careers. But not all aspirations are career-related. Megan Fitzwater says: 'My six-year old son Kegan tells us all the time he wants to grow up and be a dad with a wife. I'm sure he got it from my husband and me. We are in a very good relationship and my husband is a good dad.'

'Kegan is also very aspirational about his appearance and likes to look smart and wear matching colours,' adds Megan. 'I've raised him to believe that if he likes the way he looks, that's what matters. Happily, he's a very confident child.'

Research suggests that Megan's encouraging ap-

proach is important for nurturing Kegan's short and long-term ambitions. Parental encouragement and guidance is hugely influential. It's well documented that parents' own aspirations for their children's educational success are linked with the children's final achievements. The same is likely to be true of other aspirations.

## Nurturing those precious dreams

Professor Tanya Byron, psychologist and author of *Child of Our Time*, says: 'It is essential that early years professionals build a strong relationship with parents, so that children's hopes and dreams can be reinforced in their home environment.'

'Kids have a strong sense of identity early on in life, and if we wait until they are teenagers to start nurturing their ambitions and career prospects then it might be too late,' she adds. 'The key message is that the earlier you start to nurture your child's aspirations, the better.'

Gill Hines, freelance education consultant and au-



“Megan’s encouraging approach is important for nurturing Kegan’s short and long-term ambitions.”

thor, says: ‘Having a range of aspirations gives you positive choice – things to look forward to, to desire, to work towards in life, however big or small. True aspirations are not dreams, they are goals. Parents should talk to children about places they would like to see, countries they would like to travel to, and hobbies and interests they might like to pursue.’ Treat your child’s early aspirations as goals she can work towards.

As Sir Ken Robinson, an international leader on education, famously said: ‘Every day, everywhere, our children spread their dreams beneath our feet; and we should tread softly.’ These are wise words.

### How aspirations are formed

It’s been found that children go through different developmental stages when forming career aspirations. Younger children are more likely to use fantasy and magical thinking while older children are more likely to consider their personal interests and abilities. But there is no set age by which children enter these stages: each child is different.

**The Association Stage** stems largely from your child’s personality. She will use fantasy to think about career choices by imagining herself in various roles or work environments. At this stage, children engage in little self-reflection and have not developed the self-awareness needed to use information about preferences, abilities, and opportunities. They choose future careers based on an association with heroes, role models, or imaginary combinations (such as astronaut princess).

**The sequence approach** is when children are able to identify how their own strengths and abilities might lead to a career choice. At this stage, children understand career choice and career attainment as being separate and are able to explain how the two are related. This is when children are more likely to be influenced by interaction with others and their environment.

## Wish upon a star

Here are some ways to help your child’s dreams come true!

- **Use role play** as a valuable tool to nurture aspirations and allow children to ‘test’ their dreams and ambitions in order to see how they feel.
- **Be a shining example to your children.** Parents are the most influential source of aspirations in children up to seven years old. They will look to you when forming their dreams and ambitions about careers, relationships and lifestyle.
- **Encourage your child’s confidence and self-esteem.** Children’s academic and social confidence will influence the types of career and other activities for which they judge themselves to be capable of. The same is true of a broad range of aspirations from raising a family to travelling the world. Research suggests that a child’s confidence is a more important factor than her capability to achieve a given aspiration.
- **Be selective with your choice of films, fairy stories, and imaginary play,** particularly if your child is under five years old. She is likely to use these media and activities to develop her early aspirations.
- **Make sure your older child is aware of her strengths and abilities,** and help her discover and explore own interests.

### More info

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