Should Your Child Become A Doctor?

[Editor’s Note: This is a guest post from a Northern California cardiologist who blogs about parenting and personal finance at DadsDollarsDebts.com. This is a great post that explores where medicine and parenting collide. We have no financial relationship. Enjoy!]

Raising kids is tough but rewarding work. It is honestly the hardest thing I have done. Harder than being on call. Worse than telling a loved one that their family member has died unexpectedly. Definitely worse than dealing with my dislike of confrontation. [Wait, isn’t that the definition of parenting?-ed]

Still it is the most rewarding thing I have ever done. Watching all of those synapses connect and all of the experimentation that goes on in my little ones head. It is quite incredible. As I am raising mini me my biggest thoughts are about how to not screw this up–how to raise a productive member of society instead of a serial killer.

Parents and Kids

DDD and Mini-DDD

It seems that all of our interactions, starting at a very young age shape who we are. Parents are kids biggest influencers. From the time we are 1 day old, we are watching the actions of our parents, learning from their communication
styles, and figuring out how important relationships work. We have to watch what we do and say in front of our kids, even when they can’t communicate.

For example, Mrs. DDD and I have a pretty solid relationship. It is rare to get in a dispute, but like all relationships it happens occasionally. A few months back, we had a slightly heated conversation in front of our then 18 month old boy. He quickly changed his smiling face and started crying.

It was obvious to Mrs. DDD and me that we had screwed up. We quickly changed our tune. That memory sticks in my head going forward every day. How quickly my son absorbed that feeling of conflict and emotionally reacted to it! Now I continue to try and be positive with him about all my daily interactions, including doctoring.

**Role Modeling**

Interactions and role modeling also are true for careers. When someone asks me why I became a doctor, I really don’t have a cool answer like “I wanted to help people” or “I really loved science”. Don’t get me wrong, I like helping people. This is a very rewarding job and there are days where I really feel like I have made a difference. There are days too, where I just feel like a customer service rep at your local chain store. With patient satisfaction forms and checkboxes that need to be clicked, it is hard not to get disheartened at times.

So why did I become a doctor? Role modeling. My father is a physician and his grandfather was a physician before him. So I became a physician. I really never gave it any thought. It was just what I was going to do. It was expected. I assume that’s why firefighter and policeman families exist. One person does it and the rest follow suit. So I wonder if my kid will want to become a doctor, and if so should I dissuade him?

This is a tough topic. When I poll my colleagues, most say
they would not want their kids in medicine. We all understand how fortunate we are to be in a high paying job where we are actually helping people. For the most part we are all our own bosses (yes, even the employed physicians maintain some degree of autonomy). I am also in the camp that I hope my son does not choose a career in medicine. It seems sad to say so. I, however, will never tell him this and will try to model the positives in our fields. [Ha ha, wait until he reads this as PGY2!-ed] So how can I go forward and raise a kid who wants to do something else?

Supporting Interests

My plan is to be supportive of all of my kid’s interests and talents. I say interests AND talents because he may have interest and want to pursue basketball. If he is anything like me, he will lack the LeBron genes and talents. Sorry kid, you will have to go to college! As he grows and his interests change, we will support those too.

Hopefully over time he will find what he is interested in and devote a lot of time to it (10,000 hours anyone?) Become talented. Make a living. This is much like the boy who built a nuclear reactor in high school, Taylor Wilson. I will try to not discourage any of his interests until he figures this out. Then if he wants to become a physician, I will support that too. If, however, he wants to become a rockstar, I am ready to buy an RV and travel around the county being his number one fan. Man I hope he becomes a rockstar.

5 Reasons I Do Not Want My Kid To Be a Doctor

1. Emotional fatigue- As a cardiologist there are days when
I am dealing with very sick and dying people. There are days people die unexpectedly. This is very trying on the soul and can lead to physician burnout. More importantly, it can lead to emotional fatigue so that when I get home, I do not have the energy to bring it for my wife and kid. I try my best to distance work from home, but some days I am just beat by the time I get home and am not as patient handling my toddler.

2. Sacrifice- Burning his 20s in medical school and residency (minimum 7 years with some people doing up to 12 years). He will be missing out on potential earnings at that point and time with friends. Though residency was quite fun and most residents know how to party. As they say, work hard play hard!

3. Bureaucracy- Medicine is an ever changing field where Congress, insurance companies, pharmaceutical companies, and people with MBAs who have never touched a patient have more control over your practice then you do.

4. Sunk cost fallacy- As I discussed previously, once he has committed 7 to 12 years of life towards a task, it is hard to leave it even if he hates it. [Especially if he owes $500K in student loans.-ed] So once in medicine it is likely he will stay in medicine until he retires. That makes me itch. I like movement, change, and entropy. Other careers may allow for more lateral or upward movement. For instance, leaving a $100K job for another $100K job in a different field is easy. Leaving a $300K job in medicine for a $150K job in tech is hard.

5. Physical fatigue- There are a lot more physically taxing jobs like construction work. Still some of our colleagues, like Orthopedic surgeons, wear body lead for 8 hour surgeries. This takes a toll on the back and knees over time. Not to mention hazards such as radiation exposure, etc. The other side of this equation is that some “non-physician” jobs have you sit at a desk all day which is also harmful. Actually, my job requires me to sit in front of a computer all day. Darn
5 Reasons Why I Am Okay If My Kid Chooses Medicine

1. Freedom to Choose- It’s his choice. If he wants to pursue medicine, without my pushing, then I am all for it. I will help him to my full abilities, though I may recommend a call-light field like dermatology or allergy.

2. Service-oriented- He can help people. This is a job where every day I go in and know that I am helping at least 1 person. Really making a difference in their lives. That is pretty satisfying.

3. Nice living- He will make a stable living and likely a good income. I think a career in medicine is quite stable with very rare occasions for unexpected job loss. Plus, it is a way to make over $100K and up to $1,000,000 depending on the chosen field. Will it be as lucrative in 26 years when Young DDD is ready to practice? Nobody knows, but I suspect it will still be in the upper middle class range.

4. Great relationships- Training allows for meeting great friends. There is nothing as good for forming friendships as putting people through hardships. Medical school, residency, and fellowship all do that and the relationships built become quite strong. Some of my best friends are from these periods of my life and I am thankful for it.

5. Job mobility- As a physician you can move practically anywhere, especially if you are a generalist. As a general cardiologist I can live in small town America or big city USA. It doesn’t matter. It may take some time to find the job I want in the area I want, but I can do it with patience and perseverance. There are not many jobs that can do that.
Going forward we will see where life leads. It is so cool to watch him grow as I continue on my path to financial independence so hopefully by the time he is 10 and I am 45, I can leave work if I want and help him continue to grow into a good human being.

What do you think? Would you want your kids in medicine? Why and why not? Comment below!