
FAST COMPANY

FROM KINDERGARTEN TO THE BOARDROOM

A KICK IN THE CAREER: HAS THE OVER ACHIEVEMENT OF SOME ADULTS RESULTED IN ACHIEVEMENT OBSESSION FOR THEIR KIDS? IN THIS WEEK'S COLUMN, HUMORIST AND CAREERS EXPERT TOM STERN PONDS WHETHER WE'RE PREPARING OUR KIDS TO TAKE OVER THE WORLD FAR TOO EARLY IN THEIR LIVES.

BY: TOM STERN

Sometimes, when the daily grind gets to me, I think back to my carefree days in pre-school, when they gave you a nice nap in the middle of the day. Alas, it's forty some-odd years later, and corporate America does not allow for naps. Even though sometimes, as the economy spirals downward, it appears as if many of our barons of industry are in a perpetual state of slumber. But, never mind about the rigors of corporate America with its takeovers, bankruptcies, and cauldron of cutthroat competitiveness, we're here to talk about a truly terrifying arena of one-upsmanship and rivalry: kindergarten.

Here in Southern California, kindergarten naps are a thing of the past. Kids are now given a major reading skills test in second grade (because after all when you get stopped for speeding on your Big Wheel, you'll be able to read the fine print on the citation and pay your fine in Monopoly money so you don't end up incarcerated with a four-year old hardened criminal named Stanky, the convicted leader of a black market Ding-Dong ring). Today kids are asked to not only comprehend, but also interpret the subtler meanings behind the children's stories they're told. The really sharp ones know that Jack & Jill isn't just a about two small children who needed to have their thirst quenched but a metaphor for the futility and irreversible entropy that not only eviscerates the core of our own self-belief but leaves us cursing our fate as we flog ourselves with multicolored licorice sticks. I don't even want to tell you what Little Red Riding Hood is about, but it is obvious that more is expected these days of four-year olds than of most CEO's.

The late George Carlin once proposed that, in our regimented play-date culture, children should be required to stare out the window and daydream for one hour per day. In that very touching sentiment is a longing for simpler times, when, as they say, a kid could be a kid. Well, forget it. Those days are gone. And if we just suck it up and get our offspring on the fast track, they won't expect things to be any different. Start now. Pick up some fairytales that are a little more applicable to a child's early indoctrination into the world of competitive business. "Hansel & Gretel & Deloitte & Touche," "Goldilocks and the Three Bear Markets," "Jack and the Penny Stock," plus Donald "Trump" Duck's life story, which extols the merits of building sand castles as well as delineating a five step, easy to follow plan for taking them condo.

And it's never too early for your little one to get a good, solid resume together:

OBJECTIVE

To obtain a rewarding position in Bounce House development or Animal Cracker design.

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Sponge Bob and Dora The Explorer Picnics – 2008 to present
Have consistently jumped higher than 80 percent of my peers in both houses. Successfully—and peacefully—suckered Mommy into 30 more minutes of Bounce House time.

Animal Cracker Versatility Supervisor – 2006 to present
Have pioneered methods of dunking lions, tigers and bears in milk, as well as maniacally laughing while I bite their heads off.

CERTIFICATIONS

Thumb sucker

Knee Scraper

Eating machine

Knowing how to say the word “pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeease!” in seven languages

AFFILIATIONS

Board of Directors, Council of Imaginary Friends

Acting President, Committee to Eliminate Bath Time

Then, once the resume is out there, instill a budding sense of cross-functionally based core competencies in your very junior vice-presidents. Juice and cookies time can be used for valuable networking. In the current drive-to-succeed climate of the modern kindergarten, that kid who just started using grown-up underwear could well be the man they groom to become head of product development at Gymboree. And Disney is going to need somebody on the inside to start reporting kids who doodle Tinkerbell in their notebooks for intellectual property infringement. Your toddler may even be in the presence of greatness: a child whose first job in the infant marketplace was the coveted position of spit-up tester for Gerber. Making these kinds of contacts is how you get ahead at three-and-a-half years old these days!

Soon, of course, will come the job interview, and you will want

your child to be prepared for the classic questions with answers like these:

What are your three greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Strengths: Sippy Cup-Level 8, Defacing Harold and the Purple Crayon with Red Crayon, and Screaming

Weaknesses: Violent Cartoons, Eating sugar until I am moving faster than your average bullet train, and Disobeying

Where do you see yourself in five years?

On a pony.

Why did you leave your last job?

They were pooppy heads.

Do you consider yourself a team player?

Yes, as long as it doesn't involve anyone else.

It has been posited that the pressure on kindergartners to succeed stems from their getting an earlier introduction to basic skills due to the prevalence of day care over the last several decades; a service necessitated by the staggering amount of households in which both parents work. It is assumed, then, that kids will get the play out of their system earlier and come to kindergarten ready to kick butt. We're in Romper Room, and we're already preparing kids for the boardroom. Soon playground conversation will sound like this: "Jimmy, I really appreciate you backing me up during dodgeball, and I understand how the Elmer's Glue on your fingers compromised your dexterity during pick-up-sticks, but after what will heretofore be known as 'the hopscotch debacle,'" and your total lack of hand-eye synchronization during 'Hot Cross Buns,' I'm afraid to say you are no longer needed as Vice-President of Play-Doh procurement."

And all because mommy and daddy need to leave the little ones somewhere for the day so they can try to claim their piece of the American Dream in an increasingly difficult economy. All our hard work, it seems, has led to our kids being raised in a culture of achievement-obsession. A distant memory are the days of our

childhood, when one's greatest achievement was simultaneously pulling pigtails, making mudpies, and eating paste while humming the theme song to the *Patty Duke Show*. Oh well, times have changed and normally I would say all these cross-generational discrepancies are ironic, except that if my five-year old doesn't shape up and pass that kindergarten interview, she can forget about ever listing me as a reference.

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