My Child Refuses To Be a Tiger

## Q: I’m an Asian tiger mom. Now my child tells me she wants to major in Fashion Design or Fine Arts. She has the grades to get into Engineering or Pre-med but refuses to do so. What should I do?

## A:

When I lived in Jordan back in the late 1970’s, there was a joke about walking in the streets and stepping all over doctors and engineers. But if my toilet needed fixing, I had to call many times before getting a plumber that would agree to come. And when he finally did come, driving an expensive car, he would charge the moon!

The point is that this world needs all kinds of people. We certainly need doctors and engineers, but we also need lawyers, teachers, artists, cooks, plumbers, and yes, even garbage removal people! The reason why we have a preponderance of Asian doctors and engineers in this country is because, a few decades ago, when our home countries were growing from “Third World” or “Developing Nations” into developed nations, the white collar professionals were able to make more money than everyone else and thus created a new “meritocracy”.

However, for us who now are settled in this country, and for our children who are born and bred here, things are a bit different. They have been allowed to explore various subject matters and have figured out where their passion lies. They know they will not starve to death in this country, and a solid profession is not any more equivalent to a meal ticket for life. They ask themselves questions such as: “In 30 years, will I still enjoy doing this?”

The talented among our youth now want to become entrepreneurs, politicians, follow their passion and their dream, or even create a new type of career. Already, there are more and more successful Asian-Americans in this country in professions other than engineering and medicine. There are award-winning Asian writers; millionaire Asian sports figures, actors and stand-up comedians; top-selling Asian fashion designers; and the list goes on.

There is a Chinese saying that goes something like, “every profession can produce a valedictorian.” If we measure success in terms of dollars, I would say, any business that is run well would make more money than any salaried job. If we measure success in terms of fame, then sports and entertainment would be probably your best bet. If we measure success in terms of respect and admiration, then maybe, your child should go into politics. At this juncture, I would give a little nod, and agree that, yes, engineering and medicine do give a direct path to both respect and money, and in some cases, fame. However, if we measure success in terms of your child’s personal interest and satisfaction, then… the world’s the limit.

So, the answer to your question would be: First, discuss the matter with your daughter. Do not use a matriarchal and patronizing tone of the know-it-all, but rather, show a friendly, open, I-want-to-understand attitude. Listen. Don’t speak. The idea is to find out whether this is just a passing fad for her, or a lifelong passion. If she is talented and passionate about art, as well as smart, then she has the necessary ingredients to be successful in her career. Let her do it!

If this is a passing fad, you could propose one of two choices: A) study art as a minor or a double major. The other major has to be something that will feed her, so she can fall back on it in case the artsy world fails her. B) Finish first a Bachelor’s degree in something solid, then you will agree on a second coursework in something she likes. Consider yourself lucky! Someone I know had a child who wanted to go into Culinary Arts…

Finally, there is something that we as parents often forget when it comes to our children’s careers: The spiritual side. Maybe to them, life is not about money. Maybe they have some higher call they need to answer. Who are we to stop that? An acquaintance’s son, who had been intended for med school, said to his parents one day, “Would you be very disappointed if I told you, I think that instead of being a doctor, I want to become a teacher…”

And before the parents had time to react, “…. In an Islamic school?”