

ROLE MODELS

The power of Mom: Sentimental sound-off or enormous influence on kids' careers?



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THE WAY WE ARE

Legendary business leader Jack Welch has publicly credited her with teaching him his successful style of leadership.

Former Raptors basketball star Vince Carter only finished his post-secondary education because of a promise he made to her. And former U.S. president Bill Clinton writes in his autobiography that she knew almost before he did that he would devote his life to politics.

Even Bill Gates has admitted that, without her bugging him, he might not have initiated some of the most generous charitable giving in history.

Who is it that these titans of accomplishment credit with motivating them?

Their mothers.

Here we are, heading down the wire to that de rigueur celebration this weekend — Mother's Day — complete with mushy cards, hastily

bought presents and ingratiating maître d's proffering tired-looking roses as they usher mothers and their dutiful offspring into over-priced buffets.

Hallmark hype aside, it's interesting just how many successful people say they wouldn't have gotten where they did without their mothers.

Unless these guys — and yes, guys, especially professional athletes, are particularly prone to publicly thanking their mothers — are just sentimentally sounding off, their tributes underscore the enormous influence mothers can have on their children's careers.

Many achievers claim their mothers either recognized and encouraged a special talent in them or otherwise set them on the right path.

Back in 1999, American author Judith Rich Harris stunned the psychological development world with *The Nurture Assumption*.

The Pulitzer Prize-nominated book controversially argued that, apart from the major role genetics plays, the influence that parents have on a child's personality and subsequent behaviour is far outstripped by that of the child's own peers.

In other words, all the cajoling, encouraging, role-modelling, ex-

horting, nurturing, nudging and just plain loving that mothers heaped on their kids had little effect on how a child behaved as an adult.

Harrumph. Tell that to Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, who goes so far as to say that his mother, without actually knowing it, taught him "system dynamics."

Apparently when he was battling his younger brother for a Tonka truck, Mr. Martin was struck by his mother's simple admonition that "The world would be a pretty miserable place if people took each others' trucks."

Not only did he give the truck back to his brother — making him the world's most virtuous six-year-

old — but that admonition brought him to imagine a better world in which people's trucks and other property were secure.

His mother, Mr. Martin adds, has "always helped me think through the overall picture, no matter how complicated. And that has been critical to whatever success I have enjoyed."

Now that would make a nice card: Mom, you thought you were just breaking up a fight but you were showing me the discipline of understanding complex and multifaceted causal relationships.

Mr. Welch's published Mom statements are so emphatic that they don't even need a card.

"If I have any leadership style, a way of getting the best out of people, I owe it to my mother."



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This is a complex world for mothers today. The majority of us hold down jobs, raise kids and try to carve out lives of our own.

The very fact of us pursuing our own professional goals exerts a powerful influence on our children and the futures they imagine for themselves. They see the stress but they also see the striving and the sheer competence of their mothers.

Kids today are very proud of their mothers. You don't realize this until you hear a teenager say, with just a hint of boast in his voice: "My mother runs a marketing company," or "My mom knows all about pharmaceuticals."

We will have to wait to see what real effect or influence several generations of working mothers will have on their children's career choices. Some predict there will be a backlash, with young women saying there is no way they want to work as hard as their mothers did, and end up shredded like a cheese string by the competing tugs of family and work.

But it's never been that simple. Mothers have always worked and they have always motivated their kids. Sometimes, if they are lucky, their kids motivate them. Mr. Martin's mother later went on to earn undergraduate and masters degrees.

The truth about mothers today is gloriously nuanced. We yearn to be both thanked for the emotionally necessary but still heroic feat of always being there for our kids as well as appreciated for our myriad other talents and pursuits. In other words, we want to be seen as complete human beings, making our contributions to the world.

Years from now, if either of my almost grown children, in the fullness of their own careers, chooses to credit me with something, I can tell you categorically it will not be systems dynamics or leadership strategy. And of course it will no longer have anything to do with typewriter ribbons.

But whatever it is, I'm sure of one thing: It will astonish me.

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