

Some parents want their child to redeem their broken dreams: New study first to test popular psychological theory

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Some parents desire for their children to fulfill their own unrealized ambitions, just as psychologists have long theorized, according to a new first-of-its-kind study.

Researchers found the more that parents see their child as part of themselves, the more likely they are to want their child to succeed in achieving their own failed dreams.

The results might help explain the actions of so-called "stage [moms](#)" or "sports [dads](#)" who push their sometimes-unwilling [children](#) to become stars of the stage or gridiron, said Brad Bushman, co-author of the study and professor of communication and psychology at The Ohio State University.

"Some parents see their children as extensions of themselves, rather than as separate people with their own hopes and dreams," Bushman said.

"These parents may be most likely to want their children to achieve the dreams that they themselves have not achieved."

The study was led by Eddie Brummelman of Utrecht University in the Netherlands. It appears online today in the journal [PLOS ONE](#).

The results, while not surprising, had not previously been the subject of

[empirical research](#), Bushman said.

"Right from the beginning of psychology, there have been theories that parents transfer their own broken dreams onto their children," he said. "But it really hasn't been experimentally tested until now."

The study, conducted in the Netherlands, involved 73 parents (89 percent mothers) of a child aged 8 to 15.

Parents first completed a scale designed to measure how much they saw their children as part of themselves – from completely separate to nearly the same. This scale is commonly used in psychology, and has been found to be very reliable, Bushman said.

The participants were then randomly separated into two groups. In one group, the parents listed two ambitions they had not been able to achieve in their lives, and wrote about why these ambitions were important to them. The other group completed a similar exercise, but focused on an [acquaintance](#)'s ambitions rather than their own.

Some of the dreams that eluded parents included becoming a professional tennis player, writing a published novel and starting a successful business.

Now that the parents were thinking about unfulfilled ambitions, they were asked several questions that probed their desire to have their child achieve their own lost dreams. For example, they were asked how strongly they agreed with statements like "I hope my child will reach goals that I wasn't able to reach."

Results showed that parents who reflected on their own lost dreams (as compared to those of acquaintances) were more likely to want their children to fulfill them – but only if they felt strongly that their child was

a part of themselves.

Moreover, those who felt strongly that their child was a part of themselves were much more likely to want their children to fulfill their dreams – but only when they were asked to write about their own unfulfilled ambitions, as opposed to those of acquaintances. (The researchers asked some [participants](#) to write about acquaintances to be sure that thinking about one's own unfulfilled ambitions was the key issue and not thinking about unfulfilled [ambitions](#) in general.)

Bushman said it was significant that parents who see their children as part of themselves were the ones who transferred their dreams onto their offspring.

"Parents then may bask in the reflected glory of their children, and lose some of the feelings of regret and disappointment that they couldn't achieve these same goals," he said. "They might be living vicariously through their children."

Future research will be needed to determine how this desire of [parents](#) for their children to fulfill their dreams may impact the mental health of their offspring, Bushman said.

Provided by The Ohio State University

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