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Ambitious Parents, Mellow Children

Driven Type A's Often Struggle To Raise Type B Kids

* By SUE SHELLENBARGER

[](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052970204479504576638950410953960.html)Ron Mattocks, a former real-estate sales executive and Army captain, is a Type A personality. He is ambitious, drives himself to achieve and usually succeeds.

Tensions run high when a hard-driving, ambitious, multitasking parent sets fast-paced goals for a child who by nature is simply more methodical, dreamy or unfocused.. Sue Shellenbarger has details on Lunch Break.

One job that really tests his limits, though, is raising two laid-back Type B kids.

When his stepdaughter Avery, 8 years old, or his son Sawyer, 7, start to daydream and wander away from a chore, Mr. Mattocks occasionally erupts. "The first thing out of my mouth is, 'What the hell are you doing?' " he says.

When parents and children are temperamental opposites, the results can be explosive. Type A parents, driven by nature, often have to ease up on Type B kids, who are more dreamy and mellow. When the pattern is reversed, relaxed Type B parents often feel outpaced by revved-up Type A offspring. These matchups can cause conflict beyond the normal parenting challenges, and solutions may require parents to adjust expectations and tactics.

With more competition for college admission and a shift to more-involved parenting, Type A parents seem especially evident. The Type A and Type B labels were created decades ago by cardiologists studying the effects of a chronically driven, time-pressured personality on heart-attack risk. Researchers found no link, but the labels remained in use as shorthand for broad differences in temperament that are largely inborn.

Mr. Mattocks, a social-media marketing consultant, says three of his five children are Type A, meaning they usually strive to achieve goals and respond to consequences. Avery and Sawyer are more creative and less motivated by short-term results. When he tells Avery to clean her room, "she could be up there for hours—not cleaning her room, but playing with something she found under the bed that she hasn't seen for six months," Mr. Mattocks says.

Even her 9-year-old sister, Allie, complains about Avery's easygoing style, because it leaves her doing more chores, he says. Similarly, Sawyer often "is in his own world," playing imaginary games.

Mr. Mattocks has found a way to get them on task. He turns chores into a game. When Avery pushes dirt around the kitchen floor instead of sweeping it, Mr. Mattocks has her pretend the tile is a drawing that she has to "color" with her broom. When Sawyer forgot to rake the lawn because he was flying a helicopter made of sticks, Mr. Mattocks said, "Hey, we've got to get this all cleaned up so the helicopter can land in here."

People of either personality type can be fine parents. Effective parenting balances high expectations with warmth and emotional support, says Reginald Richardson, vice president for evaluation and clinical services at the Family Institute at Northwestern University. Research on Western societies links such "authoritative parenting" with fewer behavior problems, higher academic achievement and less depression and anxiety.

[**Discuss on The Juggle**](http://blogs.wsj.com/juggle/2011/10/19/congratulations-its-a-type-a/)

Lisa Jacobson sees many Type A parents at the 150-employee tutoring company she founded, Inspirica, in New York. "If you're a Type A parent with a Type A kid, it's pretty simple. You speak the same language," she says. "Type B parents with a Type A child are amazed at the child they spawned. They'll call us and say, 'We want a tutor who is going to just calm her down.' "

Problems arise, though, when "drive trumps compassion" and Type A parents push their kids too hard, criticizing them when they are already doing their best or piling on unreasonable demands, Ms. Jacobson says. Still, she adds, a little push can work. After graduation, many students say "they are glad their parents pushed them one level up from where they would have been."

When they are young, children of parents who push too hard may try to conform to parental pressure, the Family Institute's Dr. Richardson says. But eventually they may "feel their parents don't accept who they are" and rebel, misbehave or turn inward and become anxious or depressed.

Jim Lin, of Los Angeles, a business-development director for a software company, was raised by an ambitious [Tiger Mom](http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704111504576059713528698754.html). He grew up consumed with homework, learning Chinese, piano and violin. He is competitive, so the approach suited him in some ways, and he graduated from Harvard. "I realized my parents' dreams," he says. But it wasn't until college that he discovered his passion for martial arts.

He has resolved to raise his Type B son Marcus, age 9, differently. "My challenge raising a son is to find that fine line between letting him do things that will eventually get him into college versus letting him be a kid," Mr. Lin says. He consciously tempers his Type A tendencies and encourages Marcus to discover his own passions by trying various sports and hobbies.

Audrey Binkowski says her 12-year-old son Erek is "a daydreamer, a reader, staring off into space." She is like her son, while her husband, David, is a Type A. "We do a good job of balancing each other," says Ms. Binkowski, who with her husband co-founded a social-media marketing company in Glen Ridge, N.J.

Mr. Binkowski loves competitive sports and several years ago coached Erek's soccer and baseball teams. Erek would "get upset or ignore him," Ms. Binkowski recalls. She and her husband decided mutually that Mr. Binkowski would stop coaching. Then he tried another way to spark his son's interest. He took him along to his own adult basketball games. Seeing his dad enjoy competing has rekindled Erek's interest, Ms. Binkowski says. Erek is excited about joining his seventh-grade basketball team.

Type B kids often become more motivated as they grow up, psychologists say. Free of parental constraints, they begin to see the benefits of setting and achieving goals. Some simply "need a longer runway" where their dreamy side can mature into creative talent, says Marc D. Skelton, a clinical psychologist in Laguna Niguel, Calif.

That is what Scott Krase and his wife, Christie, see happening with their 14-year-old son Jackson. Mr. Krase is a London-based portfolio manager and Ms. Krase is a teacher, violinist and former competitive swimmer who earned straight A's through grad school. Given their Type A personalities, Ms. Krase says, she always thought, "Oh boy, I'll have very motivated kids."

But Jackson "is just wired totally differently," Ms. Krase says. He takes a casual approach to homework and for a long time he said he wanted to be a garbage man. "I thought it would be really cool to travel around on the back of a truck," Jackson says. He also toyed with becoming owner of the Philadelphia Phillies.

When Ms. Krase heard that idea, she struggled not to yell, "Oh really? And how does that happen? Does a bag of money drop from the sky?" Instead, she said, "Jackson, you have to put a little effort into life."

After talking things over with his mother, Jackson has decided he probably wouldn't like picking up garbage or make enough money to buy the Phillies. Now in ninth grade, he is figuring out how to put more effort into studying without feeling pressured or rushed. "There's no use getting all freaked out about school work," he says.

Ms. Krase is at peace with that. "I'm accepting that there are different versions of success," she says. Meanwhile, her son has writing ability, a love for travel and interest in meeting new people. After driving himself to succeed, Mr. Krase adds, he hopes Jackson will "do whatever inspires him."