

Being ambitious and being a dad

When I was going through YC, I didn't mention my seven month old daughter to anyone. Now a few years later I have two kids, a dog and a very packed schedule. My kids are the best thing in my life. For years, my work was my life. Now my life competes with my work.

I don't think I'm alone. Here's Paul Graham in [Having Kids](#):

"Some of my worries about having kids were right, though. They definitely make you less productive. I know having kids makes some people get their act together, but if your act was already together, you're going to have less time to do it in."

I love building, learning, and competing. Life before kids was straightforward: I worked hard and centered my life around things I love: computers, technology, friends. I moved to SF, worked at some awesome companies, met a wonderful girl and built a strong relationship. A huge amount of my time was spent on work, and yet there was still some left for that and more. Turns out, you have a lot of time when you don't have dependents.

All the people I admire most are builders. I have devoured biographies and studied many great founders. Unfortunately this led me to an uncomfortable conclusion: most of them are horrible parents.

Steve Jobs literally abandoned his daughter Lisa because "the time wasn't right" (he was focused on Apple). Einstein abandoned one kid¹ and was constantly absent, daydreaming about work around his other two, to the point where his wife divorced him and took them. Elon Musk has so many children and companies that he mechanically cannot spend any significant amount of time with any of them. Edison, Ford, Ferrari,... the list goes on and on. Most biographies of great founders I've read have had another story etched in between the lines: a pretty bleak one of a bad parent.

I know many ambitious parents; it's not an uncommon combination. Most of them are willing to make a choice that I will not: delegate the parenting away. I do not believe the quality time theory. I firmly believe in maximizing the quantity of time spent with them; there are no diminishing returns for them on that front. This is somewhat problematic, and unfortunately it gets worse. The time spent is even more important when they're young, which of course happens to coincide with the prime of my career.

I'll find myself planning my work or reflecting on how much I accomplished today or in the last week and the result is clear. I'm a productive and well organized person, but comparing the output of parent-me to the kidless-me in a given week reveals a visible gap. Everyone knows life is short. Now that I have kids, it feels 10x shorter.

This sucks. I am ambitious: I wake up every morning with a burning fire in my stomach to build awesome things. In this, I differ from Paul Graham:

"I hate to say this, because being ambitious has always been a part of my identity, but having kids may make one less ambitious."

I am not less ambitious. But I am *also* ambitious about being a great dad.

My anecdotal observations show a pretty strict dichotomy: great fathers and great achievers rarely overlap. Rarely is not never though. Some figures in technology (Paul Graham, DHH, Jeff Dean, even Mark Zuckerberg) seem to be pushing on both fronts with rare success. Often the pattern is early success, but not always. Frankly even if I couldn't find the pattern, I would still not accept defeat.

I don't have a perfect magical solution. I'm voicing a frustration, but I am also rejecting the choice. I've come to redefine ambition for myself: ambition is being a great dad *as well* as building great things. I acknowledge and accept that it is *much* more difficult than just aiming for one or the other, and both are hard enough in their own right. But hard is the point of ambition, right?

My strategy is pretty simple: stay focused, don't waste time on bullshit, keep improving execution. I do this by carefully clarifying what I want my work to be, focusing on health to maximize energy, setting clear rules on time with kids (weekday dinners, weekends prioritize family) and completely removing time-wasting activities. With clear goals and discipline, my plan is to achieve compounding gains.

I am writing this because I never hear anyone say it.

Be ambitious enough to be an ambitious dad.

Footnotes

1. It's actually not clear whether it was abandonment or early death — see the [Einstein family](#). 

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