

Document name: I could do that: why role models matter  
Document date: 2012  
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OpenLearn course: Exploring sport coaching and psychology  
OpenLearn url: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/exploring-sport-coaching-and-psychology/content-section-overview>

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## **I could do that: why role models matter**

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Darling, N. (2012) 'I could do that: why role models matter', *Psychology Today* [Online]. Available at <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/thinking-about-kids/201205/i-could-do-why-role-models-matter> (Accessed 11 April 2017).

## I could do that: why role models matter

No matter what your political affiliation, you've got to be touched by today's [NY Times article](#) [2012] about a simple photograph that hangs in the White House west wing. In it, Jacob, the little boy, is touching the President [Obama]'s hair to see if it feels just like his. And it does, because both he and the President are black. And although the President rarely talks about [race](#), and no matter what you think of his [politics](#) or his policies, the fact that his father was Kenyan and he identifies as black has profound meaning for our country. Particularly for people of color.

One of the reasons that picture has remained up at the White House is that it means something important to the people who work there. President Obama looks different than every other president who has served. And many Americans can say 'he looks like me'. Just like Jacob.

**Why role models matter.** I was thinking about why role models matter the other day while getting ready for graduation. Graduations are big, boring, and often awkward celebrations. Hundreds or thousands of people line up and march across a stage. Families are hot and bored. Speeches are often lackluster. The sweltering faculty wonders why they're there – sitting in our heavy gowns and hoods feeling more like scenery than a meaningful part of the day.

It is a triumph and a celebration, but more of a transitional marker than an event that actually changes people's lives.

But sometimes graduations do.

When I graduated from Cornell, something wonderful happened to me. Not the ceremony for the 4,000 or so other students who marched across the field that day. It was something probably no one else the day of that ceremony except for me noticed.

I saw a woman get her Ph.D. She walked across the stage, shook the hand of the University president, and marched off. In her arms, she had a baby.

*'I could do that,'* I thought.

And right then and there I decided I was going to. That I could go to graduate school and still have a family. That image always stuck in my mind.

And by the time I got my Ph.D., I had done it. I marched across the stage into the arms of my wonderful supportive husband and our 3-year-old son.

*'I could do that'.*

## Why it's hard to study psychology

On and off during the last 25 years or so I've written scholarly papers about the influence of mentors and role models in people's lives. It's always a disappointing literature. When you try to quantify why grandparents or a special teacher or an uncle or a neighbor made a difference to a kid growing up, hardly anything reaches statistical significance.

Why should it? Each of these people made a difference in a different way and to a different kid. Just as physicists can predict the behavior of millions of molecules working together but are helpless predicting the behavior of one, psychologists can tell us about populations, not individuals. The influence of role models tends to be idiosyncratic. We can't document it.

But we do know some things.

One thing we know is that people don't attempt to achieve something unless they believe it can be done. We know that people are much more likely to attempt to do things if they've seen that someone like them can do it.

- First we need to know that it can be done
- Then we need to know that we can do it.

Bandura spent a career documenting that. That's what social learning theory and efficacy theory is all about.

For me, seeing that woman cross the stage with her baby told me something that had never occurred to me before. It told me a woman like me could get a doctorate and still have a family. Just as it is likely that touching President Obama's hair told Jacob something that he didn't know before: that someone who looked like him could grow up and change the world.

Those things may be hard to document. But they're important.