

Parents' roles in talent development

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Abstract

Talent development research has uncovered common conditions for nurturing talented individuals: enriched early environment, appropriate instruction, long-term and deliberate practice, singleness of purpose, and centers of excellence. Talent research also reveals that parents play a critical role in arranging and facilitating these conditions and helping their child's talent to blossom. This article reports six talent-nurturing things parents do according to case-study research by Kiewra and colleagues across various talent domains such as chess, figure skating, baton twirling, violin, writing, and spelling. Parents provide an enriched early environment, arrange for appropriate instruction, facilitate long-term and deliberate practice, support singleness of purpose, gravitate to or establish a center of excellence, and are fully committed and make life-changing sacrifices to nurture their child's talents.

Keywords

Talent development, parents' roles, early experience, coaching, deliberate practice, singleness of purpose, centers of excellence

Research interest on talent development was sown by psychologist Benjamin Bloom's (1985) seminal book, *Developing Talent in Young People*. Bloom studied 120 highly talented individuals across six talent domains and discovered common factors that led to exceptional achievements across domains. In an interview, Bloom remarked:

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We at one time thought that the development of a tennis player would be very different from the development of a concert pianist or a sculptor or a mathematician or a neurologist. What we've found is that even though the content and the procedures may be enormously different in each field, there is a common set of characteristics in the home, the instruction, and the like. There is a very general process that seems to be central to the development of talent no matter what the field. (Brandt, 1985: 34)

Since then, talent development research has blossomed and uncovered the common conditions central to cultivating exceptionally talented individuals: enriched early environment, appropriate instruction, long-term and deliberate practice, singleness of purpose, and centers of excellence (Côté, 1999; Kiewra and Rom, 2019; Kiewra et al., 2006). Furthermore, contemporary talent research reveals that parents play a critical role in arranging and facilitating these conditions and, in so doing, are fully committed to nurturing their child's talent (Kiewra, 2019; Witte et al., 2015). This article presents six talent-nurturing things parents do according to case-study research by Kiewra and colleagues across various talent domains such as chess, figure skating, baton twirling, violin, writing, and spelling.

Provide an enriched early environment

Parents often introduce children to their eventual talent domain at an early age. Witte and colleagues (2015) interviewed the parents of 24 highly talented individuals, from chess players to figure skaters, and found that 22 of the children were introduced to their eventual talent domains by parents between ages two and five. The talent introduction usually comes about in one of two ways. Either parents themselves are involved in the talent area as a performer, coach, or enthusiast or parents notice that their child displays an interest in the eventual talent domain and nurtures that (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra, 2019).

There are many examples of situations where parents are already involved in the talent domain (Kiewra, 2019). One involves All-American volleyball star Lauren Cook who was raised by four-time national championship volleyball coach John Cook and wife Wendy, a former two-time volleyball All-American. John Cook said, "I think my daughter had an advantage because of my job. She grew up around volleyball. When she was a little kid, we set up a mini court in the basement and would play volleyball on our knees" (Witte et al., 2015: 87).

Another example comes from chess, where Kayden Troff sat on his father's lap as a 3-year old and watched his father, a recreational player, and older siblings play chess and begged to join in. Kayden's father playfully allowed Kayden to join in and was surprised to see how much Kayden had learned from simply watching and how passionate Kayden was about the game. Thirteen years later, Kayden became one of the youngest grandmasters in chess history.

A third example comes from speed skating where Olympic gold medalists Bonnie Blair and Dan Jansen were each born into skating families—parents who were recreational skaters and long lines of older siblings in tow. Jansen said, "Skating was just something the Jansen family did all winter. Winter would come and we would

skate . . . [As children], we were simply given a pair of skates and off we went . . . It was a fun thing to do with the entire family” (Kiewra, 2019: 32).

There are also many examples where parents had no previous link to the talent area but noticed and then fed their child’s interest. One such case was Adora Svitak, an accomplished child writer and international presenter. Adora’s parents were not writers, but they nurtured Adora’s interest and passion for literacy by reading to her every night and later supporting her writing passion. As Adora’s mother described, “She would write pages after pages, even though it was childish type writing, I knew kids that age don’t just keep writing” (Witte et al., 2015: 87). Upon discovering this budding talent, Adora’s parents purchased a computer for her and guided her in her book publishing and public speaking pursuits.

A similar example comes from Kiewra and Rom’s (2019) investigation of academically talented National Merit Scholars. One parent said, “My husband and I were really active in playing with [my son] and reading to him all the time. [He] loved reading. From the time he was three, he was carrying around books that he was reading” (p. 5). Not only did the parents provide an enriched early environment for their son, but they noticed how he absorbed new information quickly: “I taught him to write his name when he was really little. I taught him phonograms when he was four from a stack of about 100 phonogram cards, and he memorized them all lickety-split” (p. 5). Based on their son’s early academic interests and potential, the parents began home schooling him well before kindergarten.

Arrange for appropriate instruction

After parents get children started in their talent domains, they soon arrange for appropriate instruction to support talent growth (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra, 2019). In many cases, parents are their children’s first coach. Among baton twirlers, for example, three-quarters of them were initially coached by their mothers, who were former twirlers or current twirling coaches themselves (Witte et al., 2015). Similarly, many chess grandmasters, elite volleyball players, and talented musicians were first coached by their parents. For example, Kayden Troff’s father, Dan, spent his lunch hours and evenings studying chess books and grandmaster games in order to develop an instructional book from which he instructed Kayden each evening (Kiewra, 2019).

Other talent parents turned to local coaches for initial instruction for their children, coaches who provided a suitable introduction to the talent domain and, most importantly, made learning about the talent domain enjoyable. One chess parent remarked about her son’s first coach, “He was a wonderful coach . . . He really got the kids to laugh enjoy . . . They would eat jelly beans” (Kiewra et al., 2006: 105).

As talented children progress, however, their talent levels surpass parents’ or local-coaches’ knowledge and skill levels, leaving parents to seek out more expert coaches (Bloom, 1985; Kiewra, 2019; Witte et al., 2015). The parent of an Olympic figure skater recalled:

I had to step in because I knew the coach was no longer the best thing for my kid. There was a long and successful relationship between that coach and [my daughter], but we had to

make a decision to leave him . . . It was one of the hardest things I ever did in my life. But just as with a kindergarten teacher, [my daughter] had to move on. But when the Olympics came, we bought him tickets and took him with us to the Olympics. So he knew that he had a magical part in her life (Witte et al., 2015: 89).

Expert coaches provide targeted instruction to hone technique. For example, Olivia Calegan, a six-time state record holder swimmer, “graduated” from her father’s early coaching to be coached by Leigh Ann Witt, a former Olympian able to pinpoint small technical adjustments needed to help Olivia improve. The coach said:

I focus on the little stroke technique things like the pitch of the hand and the height of the elbow. Little things make a big difference. I try to use my swimming background to paint a picture for my swimmers of what a good stroke feels like (Kiewra and Witte, 2018).

Expert coaches also have a growth mind-set (Dweck, 2006) that talent is made, not born, a mind-set that guides their practice-will-get-you-there coaching philosophy. Olympic fencing coach Gary Copeland said, “None of my athletes were talented because they came through the door with a fencing gene. They were talented because of the work they did. It is foolish for them or me to look for their advantage beyond practice” (Kiewra, 2019: 65).

Facilitate long-term and deliberate practice

An enriched early environment and appropriate instruction can set one on the path to Carnegie Hall but only practice, practice, and more practice can deliver her. Psychologists John Hayes (1989) and Howard Gardner (1993) suggested a uniform 10-year rule for achieving excellence or creativity, meaning that even prodigies like Amadeus Mozart in music, Pablo Picasso in art, and Bobby Fischer in chess must study intensively for 10 or more years before making a significant contribution to their talent domains. That is why in only about 10% of cases could parents and coaches surrounding Bloom’s 120 talented participants when they were 12 years old have predicted the child’s future success. It was simply too early to foresee their future eminence. Talent development takes many years of practice.

It also takes practice carried out in a deliberate way, meaning it must be focused and effortful practice aimed at incremental improvement (Ericsson and Pool, 2016). Talent parents help their child maximize their challenging and arduous practice routines. Susan Lien, mother of six-time world champion baton twirler Steffany Lien, assists Steffany throughout every practice (Kiewra and Witte, 2018). She said:

We sometimes spend five or six hours a day in the gym . . . We usually split that time into two practices, so we’re at the gym twice a day. Steffany practices most every day, so it’s not the norm for us to skip a day. It is just part of our rhythm of the day to go to the gym and practice. Even on Christmas Eve, we figure out how we’re going to get into some gym in the morning before it closes (p. 180).

Susan handles music, times routines, and offers pointers based on things she picked up observing and filming Steffany's weekend long lessons with her coach. Steffany said:

During practice, my mom reinforces my coach's lesson tips and makes sure I practice as the coach intends . . . My mom will watch me from off to the side and correct my patterns or spot errors that can result in point deductions. There are just a lot of little things that most people would never catch that she sees because she has been around for everything—all the lessons and training. She knows just what to look for (p. 180).

Loren Hagen, mother of violin virtuoso William, also sat in on all his practices when William was a youngster. She said,

I attend his lessons and take notes for him on what the teachers ask him to do. Then I sit with him while he practices and sometimes I will say, "Hey, I thought he asked you to do this here, or have you done that?" I sit there and follow along with those notes and make sure he is doing what he should (Witte et al., 2015: 91).

National high-school rodeo champion Jayde Atkins practiced for rodeo events about five hours a day on her parents' ranch in Broken Bow, Nebraska and always with the help of parents Sonya and J. B., who themselves were experienced horse trainers and rodeo riders (Kiewra and Witte, 2018). Sonya described how she helps Jayde practice:

Today, for example, Jayde's going to want to run her barrel horse, Slim. So she'll warm him up, set up barrels, and do some drills. Meanwhile, I'll exercise one of her other horses. When Jayde finishes with Slim, I'll cool him down while Jayde next rides her cow horse and practices some calf roping. After that, Slim is rested and she'll take another run on him. We trade off that way. Also, sometimes Jayde gets frustrated with something her horse is doing and can't see what to do to fix it. So, we'll switch horses and I'll ride the horse, tell her what I feel, and what she might try (p. 184).

Support singleness of purpose

Benjamin Bloom's (1985) conclusion after studying the 120 most talented Americans in six talent domains was that almost anyone could accomplish what these talented individuals accomplished given the right conditions of learning (e.g., an early enriched start, appropriate instruction, and practice) and a singleness of purpose that is rare among most people. Given that talent development takes arduous practice for 10 or more years, it is unsurprising that talented individuals are single-minded in their pursuits, often to the exclusion of other activities.

Twenty times Grand Slam champion Roger Federer grew up playing many sports as a child. He was particularly talented in tennis and soccer and played both sports competitively until age 12. At that point, Federer had to make a difficult decision between tennis and soccer because his parents counseled that he could have only one focus if he was to attain excellence. Federer chose tennis and made that his single-minded focus. Federer's parents played a critical role in urging him to make a sports choice and supporting that

choice. When 13-year-old Federer had the opportunity to join the Swiss National Tennis Center mentoring program, his parents fully supported their son's move to a different region of Switzerland.

Kiewra and colleagues' parent interviews revealed the same kind of singleness of purpose among talented chess children (Kiewra et al., 2006). One chess parent said, "The extraordinary time we put toward this one activity takes him out of a lot of fun and games" (p. 105). Another remarked, "He's not interested in school; he's interested in chess. He just lives and breathes chess" (p. 105). That same parent said, "We once took chess away (because of low school performance) and he was miserable. It was like yanking out the soul" (p. 105). When chess parents were asked why their sons were so single-minded and committed to chess, their answers were unanimous: Passion drives single-mindedness (p. 105).

- "He is passionate about it . . . just thrilled by it . . . It gives him a lot of joy and satisfaction."
- "He loves it. He loves it. This is the thing that he loves."
- "He loves it. He just loves it."

Occasionally, though, parents provide a motivation boost. Marc Arnold, an eventual chess grandmaster, needed his mother's support to stay chess focused for a time during adolescence (Kiewra and Witte, 2013). His mother recalled, "Marc's motivation waned during his teenage years because there were other interests, and it wasn't so cool at that point to be a good chess player" (p. 148). But his mother urged him to remain focused as he was closing in on the international master title, saying: "Come on, let's go. Let's do this. Hold off on other interests for a while and get this done. If you become an international master, nobody can ever take that away from you" (p. 148). Similarly, the parent of a National Spelling Bee champion described her motivational intervention:

They are children and when they have time, they tend to waste it, so I remind them and say, "You know I don't like you watching TV. It makes you happy, I can see, but . . . when you watch TV, you are losing out on your dream" (Witte et al., 2015: 92).

Gravitate to or establish a center of excellence

Talent development researchers (e.g., Gardner, 1993; Kiewra and Witte, 2013; Ott Schacht and Kiewra, 2018) have found that talented individuals often live near or gravitate to centers of excellence, where top coaches and rising stars congregate. For decades, New York City has been a chess hotbed, replete with strong grandmasters, renowned chess clubs, frequent tournaments, and chess-in-school programs (Kiewra et al., 2006; Kiewra and Witte, 2013). A study of three American Olympic speed skaters (Ott Schacht and Kiewra, 2018) revealed that all three were raised in northern parts of the Midwest, where they had access to Milwaukee's Olympic-size training facility to practice and compete. Dan Jansen, one of America's most decorated speed skaters, remarked:

People like Bonnie Blair and others I got to know from Minnesota, Illinois, and other neighboring states would come to Milwaukee. Some would stay at our house and even enroll in school there so that they could train at the oval with other top skaters. If you weren't from there, you came and trained there. If you were a serious speed skater, you just had to be there (p. 26).

Indeed, not every talented individual happens to reside in a center of excellence. When living outside a center of excellence, some families relocate. Such was the case for the family of an eventual Olympic figure skater. Her parents quit their jobs, sold their house, and moved their family 200 miles away to live near the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs (Witte et al., 2015). Such was also the case for Jack Sock, the Wimbledon and U.S. Open doubles champion. After traveling 6 hours roundtrip from Nebraska to Kansas each week for tennis training, he and his family eventually relocated to Kansas where Jack enrolled full time in a prestigious tennis academy.

Other times, parents established a center of excellence at home. Sandy Hamm, father of Olympic gymnasts Paul and Morgan, said: "People expected us to ship the boys out for training, but we were not going to do that. We were not going to give up our children when they were young kids" (Kiewra, 2019: 72). Instead, Sandy, who was on the board of directors at the gym where his sons trained locally, arranged to have elite Soviet coaches come to America, live with his family, and train his sons and other local gymnasts. Similarly, a baton-twirling parent arranged for her daughter to work with three out-of-state coaches and flew each one to their home in New York about four times a year (Kiewra and Witte, 2015).

Academically talented children also benefited from self-made or nearby centers of excellence. In the study of National Merit Scholarship winners (Kiewra and Rom, 2019), several Merit Scholars credited their parents for home-schooling them or for choosing a school or academic program with high-quality teaching and academically driven classmates. One student commented:

The classes I took there were way more advanced than what most kids my age were taking. It was almost like a prep school. I got to go ahead in math, which was really beneficial because it led to my always being advanced in math (p. 6).

Commit and sacrifice

Benjamin Bloom (1985) said that it is not enough for the child to commit to the pursuit of talent, parents must commit as well. Kiewra (2019) reported several examples of parental commitment and sacrifice. The parent of a pianist said, "My work, especially before age 12, was critical in his development. I was intensely involved managing him" (p. 119). A chess parent warned:

You have to be willing to pay the price. If you're not, it won't happen. It's a huge burden. Absolutely. It's not overstating that our life is entirely structured around his chess. I spend several hours a week managing his chess career. It's a part-time job (p. 119).

The parent of an Olympic figure skater said, “I’m his personal secretary. I’m his assistant. It’s work. For half the day, all I do is skating work” (p. 119).

McKenzie Steiner is a two-talent star in softball and music thanks in large part to her father, Scott. Scott coached McKenzie in softball year-round up until high school. Scott also formed a band around McKenzie and is the band’s manager and promoter. Eric, the band’s drummer said, “We’ve not had to hire a manager. Scott’s doing that because he loves it and he really wants McKenzie to play. He does this all from love” (p. 118). Scott said, “I’m more of a ‘dadanger’ than manager; managers get paid. I’m more of an encourager than anything else, but if encouraging McKenzie and bragging about her is managing, then I guess I’m a manager” (p. 118).

And, Olivia Calegan’s father, Robert, literally quit his job to coach Olivia in swimming. Robert said,

I was always there during Olivia’s practices so I figured I would become more involved. I became vice president of her swim club and eventually president. But the more I was around the practices, the more I felt like I could contribute more, so I started coaching Olivia’s swim team (p. 38).

At first, Robert coached swimming around his work hours—mornings, evenings, and weekends, but eventually became a fulltime coach. He said:

I tried to maintain my day job but little by little my life transitioned more into coaching than my day job could handle. So, when an opportunity arose to coach a couple clubs, including Olivia’s, I quit my job and became a fulltime swim coach (p. 38).

Reflecting on his commitment and sacrifice, Robert added:

My wife and I complain that we don’t have enough time and money. I’ve had to cut my salary by a third and be gone every morning, evening, and weekend. I’m not saying that to have a champion or Olympian that you have to give up everything, but there is a lot of sacrifice, and we’ve maybe taken it way beyond what a normal family would do (Kiewra and Witte, 2018: 182).

A commitment to talent development also has a financial price, a price that burdens many talent families who reported borrowing money, forgoing retirement savings, living in smaller homes, and taking second jobs to make ends meet. One chess parent estimated spending \$50,000 a year on lessons with elite coaches, domestic and international travel, and tournament fees (Witte et al., 2015). The parent of a figure skater said, “This is an ungodly expensive sport. I can’t tell you how many times we remortgaged our house” (Kiewra, 2014: 18). A cello player’s parent remarked, “We decided that money wasn’t going to keep him from working with a certain teacher. So, we lived off borrowed money for a time” (Kiewra, 2019: 77).

When parents were asked why they make the commitments and sacrifices they do, their responses were unanimous: They love their children and their talents (Kiewra et al., 2006: 105).

- “Well, I knew he had talent and I didn’t want to see it wither. If you’re really good in one thing, you’re very, very fortunate so I just wanted to encourage that in him. I was proud of his skill. I just knew it gave him joy.”
- “It is a fulltime job and sometimes more than a fulltime job and it can be hard. But the reason I keep doing it is that I don’t just manage somebody. The person I manage is my daughter.”
- “I have no regrets. Everything that seemed to be a mistake or a hardship or a sacrifice was the right thing done at the right time. I feel lucky to share this with my son.”
- “Because he’s my son and I love him and I want him to be whatever he can be. And, if that happens to be chess that’s what I want for him. I want him to be happy. And, I love his chess too.”

Conclusion

Kiewra and colleagues’ research on talented individuals across various domains offered insights into the unique roles that parents play nurturing talent development. First, parents provide an enriched early environment where children are introduced to a talent area in enjoyable ways. Eventually, parents arrange for coaching that is appropriate for the child’s growing talents. Even with elite coaches in place, parents help their children practice and support their growing singleness of purpose. Often, parents help children gravitate to centers of excellence, where top coaches and performers gather, or establish a center of excellence at home by bringing in elite coaches. Parents are committed to nurturing their child’s talents and make life-changing sacrifices to do so, because they love their children and their talents.

In closing, we offer one more important idea: Talent development is not for the few, but for the many. Kiewra (2019) writes:

Talent is neither a starting point nor an endpoint. People are not born with talent, and talent development is not finite. Talent is a continuum, a process of increasing growth. This process viewpoint means that all people are somewhere on that talent continuum and that talent growth can proceed indefinitely. There are no winners and losers, only developers. Talent, then is a pursuit and growth available to all (p. 6).

The real talent goal is to enjoy the talent process whether the final destination turns out to be Carnegie Hall or community band, chess championships or chess clubs.

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