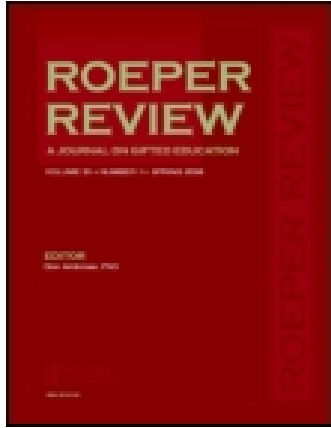


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PARENTAL SUPPORT

Parenting Talent: A Qualitative Investigation of the Roles Parents Play in Talent Development

Amanda L. Witte, Kenneth A. Kiewra, Sarah C. Kasson, and Kyle R. Perry

Previous research has linked talent development to four factors—early experience, coaching, practice, and motivation. In addition to these factors, contemporary talent experts suggest that parents play a critical role in talent development. The purpose of the present study was to uncover parents' in-time perspectives on the talent development roles they play, especially with regard to previously established talent factors. The present study used qualitative methods to collect and analyze data from the parents of 24 supremely talented children in a variety of talent domains such as chess, baton twirling, figure skating, and music. Results reconfirmed that talent is linked to the four factors and newly established that parents play a central, if not critical, role in enacting all four factors.

Keywords: athletic talent, coaching, early experience, gifted, interview, motivation, musical talent, parenting, practice, talent development

Whether watching the Olympics on TV, listening to stirring musical performances, or reading about chess-playing prodigies, talented individuals capture our attention and inspire our ambitions. Talent development also intrigues psychologists who seek to explain how once ordinary individuals learn to do extraordinary things. Psychologist Benjamin Bloom's (1985) seminal book, *Developing Talent in Young People*, ignited interest in talent development and launched the many scientific studies and popular writings that followed. In the last few years alone, several books exploring talent development have landed on bestseller lists, including Daniel Coyle's (2009) *The Talent Code*, Malcolm Gladwell's (2008) *Outliers*, and Geoff Colvin's (2008) *Talent Is Overrated*.

In essence, talent development research has uncovered four factors critical to cultivating exceptionally talented individuals: early start, coaching, deliberate practice, and motivation. First, talented individuals access the road to

talent development early and usually in their own homes (Bloom, 1985; Hayman, Polman, Taylor, Hemmings, & Borkoles, 2011; Kiewra, O'Connor, McCrudden, & Liu, 2006). Second, they train with top coaches who hone technique and cultivate artistic style (Bloom, 1985; Colvin, 2008; Kiewra et al., 2006). Third, they engage in deliberate practice for 10 or more years (Ericsson, 2002; Weissensteiner, Abernethy, Farrow, & Muller, 2008). Fourth, they possess and demonstrate strong motivation, a rage to learn and succeed (Gulbin, Oldenzel, Weissensteiner, & Gagné, 2010; Winner, 2000). In addition to these factors, contemporary talent experts suggest that parents play a critical role in talent development (Colvin, 2008; Ericsson, 1996) and that determining parents' roles is the next frontier for talent development research.

RESEARCH ON THE ROLES OF PARENTS IN TALENT DEVELOPMENT

Benjamin Bloom (1985) was the first to examine parents' roles. He conducted retrospective interviews of talented performers and their families in the domains of music, science, art, and athletics. He concluded that parents' roles changed over time as their children moved through three stages of

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talent development: early years, middle years, and later years. In the early years, parents introduced the child to the talent domain, created a home environment conducive to talent development, provided the child with a formal coach, and helped guide practice. In the middle years, as the child's talent grew, parents identified coaches who could continue to challenge the child. Parents also increased the time and resources they contributed to talent development. In the later years, when the child was accomplished in the talent domain, parents shifted the talent development responsibility to the child. Still, parents continued to provide financial and emotional support as the child dealt with the psychological stress of elite competition (see also Sloane, 1985).

In a similarly designed but smaller scale study, Côté (1999) also found that tennis and rowing athletes' parents experienced a shift in their talent development roles as the child progressed through three stages akin to those proposed by Bloom (1985). This study described the (a) sampling years (ages 6–12) when parents exposed the child to a variety of sports and athletic opportunities; (b) specializing years (ages 13–15) when parents played a facilitative role by arranging for coaches, equipment, and training facilities and by committing time and money; and (c) investment years (ages 16 and over) when parents played an advisory and supportive role as the athlete took on greater responsibility for training and success. In particular, parents offered emotional guidance and support during this third stage as the child dealt with the stress of high-level training and performance.

In a third study, Alfeld-Liro, Fredricks, Hruda, Patrick, and Ryan (1998) applied stage–environment fit theory to data collected in an in-depth study of adult influences on the development of talented, though not elite, adolescents. They interviewed adolescents who were active in a variety of talent domains (i.e., sports, music, dance, drama, and art) as well as their parents to uncover, in part, the changing roles played by parents. The researchers found that parents (a) provided access to and resources for extracurricular activities, (b) delivered emotional support and encouragement, (c) expressed positive attitudes toward extracurricular activities, (d) adapted the degree of autonomy provided to their children as they developed, and (e) maintained realistic expectations of their children's future prospects in their talent domain.

THE NATURE OF OUR STUDY

Although the research of Bloom (1985), Côté (1999), and Alfeld-Liro et al. (1998) provided informative stage-oriented models of parent-facilitated talent development, all have limitations that are addressed in the present study. First, previous studies were retrospective. Bloom's participants were young adults, Côté's were age 18, and those studied by Alfeld-Liro et al. (1998) were in high school. In none of these cases were the interviewed parents able to report on their roles in real time when their children were young and parent involvement

was highest. In the present study, parents were interviewed when their children were for the most part in the early and middle years of development. Second, previous and more recent studies (e.g., Campbell, Freeley, & O'Connor-Petruso, 2012; Chan, 2005; Phillipson, 2010) focused on talented performers and how various people (e.g., coaches, parents, siblings) influenced this talent. The present study focused on parents exclusively and sought their perspectives on the roles they played in talent development. Third, previous studies did not expressly address parents' roles relative to the four talent development factors: early start, coaching, deliberate practice, and motivation. Although Bloom's (1985) and Côté's (1999) investigations suggest that these four factors are essential to talent development, they did not organize results with respect to these specific factors. The present study expressly explores parental roles with respect to these four factors. Finally, many years have elapsed since these studies were published. Perhaps in this era of "helicopter parenting" and *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (Chua, 2011), it is time to revisit the influence of parenting on talent development. The purpose of the present study, then, was to uncover parents' in-time perspectives on the talent development roles they play, especially with regard to early start, coaching, deliberate practice, and motivation. The central research questions were as follows:

1. How do parents of highly talented children perceive their roles in developing their children's talent?
2. In particular, how do parents' talent development roles relate to the following talent development factors: early start, coaching, deliberate practice, and motivation?

METHODS

Although previous talent development studies reported a stage-wise model of family involvement, they do not reveal the lived experience of that involvement. Further exploration is warranted to delve more deeply into parents' roles in talent development (Creswell, 2003; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). In keeping with the strong tradition of using qualitative research methods to investigate talent development and the lived experiences of talented individuals (e.g., Bloom, 1985; Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Ericsson, Krampe, & Tesch-Römer, 1993; Kiewra & Witte, 2013), this study adopted an inductive approach to answering research questions (Creswell, 2003). This approach allows research findings to emerge from the data by identifying the primary themes described by participants. In order to describe parents' common experiences raising supremely talented children, an open-ended data collection approach was chosen, and theme development was the focus of analysis (Creswell, 2007). The following subsections describe the participants, data sources, and data analysis.

Participants

The parents of 24 children who achieved national or world-class standing in various domains were purposefully selected for participation using criterion sampling. The authors identified five talent domains in which practitioners could distinguish themselves at a young age—music, chess, figure skating, baton twirling, and volleyball—and selected three to five children from each domain who were considered among the top in their respective fields. The musicians had won national and international competitions and had played with elite professional orchestras. The chess players were the highest rated players nationally for their age group, and several had won national or world scholastic championships. The figure skaters were United States Champions and Olympians and included two Olympic silver medalists. The baton twirlers were all national champions and several were world champions. The volleyball players included top collegiate and junior players. In addition, one Scripps national spelling bee champion was included in the study along with one writer–orator who published her first book at age 7 and who speaks to large national audiences. The authors contacted the parents of the identified children, provided a brief description of the study, and invited them to participate. The participants were middle class (most) or upper-middle class (a few) and identified as White ($n = 22$), Asian ($n = 1$), or Indian ($n = 1$).

Data Sources

The authors conducted and audio-recorded interviews (approximately 45–75 minutes each) by telephone with one parent of each child. In keeping with a qualitative approach, participants first described their experiences with little direction from the interviewer (Creswell, 2007) by answering this open-ended question: “Describe the role(s) you have played in the development of your child’s talent.” Understanding that the existing literature (Kiewra et al., 2006) identified early start, coaching, practice, and motivation as key components in talent development, follow-up questions probed parents’ involvement more deeply with respect to those areas. The follow-up questions included the following:

1. How did your child get started and what role did you have in that?
2. Did your child have coaches and what was your role in that?
3. Tell us about practice and your role in that.
4. How have you helped your child acquire the motivational, mental, and emotional skills needed to excel?
5. What types of managerial roles or duties have you fulfilled?
6. What other role/roles have you played in helping your child learn and grow in his/her talent area?
7. What advantages has your child had that were instrumental in his/her talent development, and what role have you played in helping your child gain these advantages?
8. Describe your level and type of involvement compared to most parents.
9. What effect has your child’s success had on you?
10. Why do you do the things you do to support talent development?

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed the procedures of qualitative research as described by Moustakas (1994). Following interview transcription, data analysis began with all authors reading through interview transcripts for overall understanding and noting every significant statement relevant to the experience. Examples of significant statements included “The most important thing is finding the right coach,” and “We certainly put him in plenty of competitive situations beginning at a young age.” Next, we created 15 meaning units by discerning meaning from participants’ significant statements. Then, we clustered and created themes from meaning units. For example, the meaning units high-achievement family environment, motivation monitoring, and emotional considerations were combined to form the overarching theme—fueling desire. Through this analytic process, we constructed four major themes: (a) building the foundation, (b) providing coaches, (c) managing practice and competition, and (d) fueling desire.

RESULTS

The themes uncovered in this study closely align with and reaffirm the importance of the four talent development factors (early start, coaching, deliberate practice, and motivation) described in existing talent literature (e.g., Kiewra et al., 2006). The following subsections describe and exemplify what parents do to foster talent development with respect to each theme.

Building the Foundation

Interviews confirmed that parents (a) provide an early start, (b) have previous involvement in the talent area, (c) offer a casual introduction to the talent area, (d) serve as talent scouts, (e) recognize and foster natural abilities, and (f) provide early opportunities.

Parents Provide Early Start

The road to expertise begins early in a child’s life. In terms of early start, musicians began musical training as toddlers. Ice skaters began skating at age 2 or 3, twirlers

started between ages 2 and 4, and chess players started between ages 5 and 7. The writer learned to read at age 3 and began writing stories at age 4 under her mother's guidance. The spelling bee champion began competing in spelling bees at age 7. Volleyball players joined volleyball teams at an older age, usually around fourth or fifth grade, but all were exposed to volleyball at much younger ages by watching their parents play or coach, and all played sports, usually soccer, beginning in preschool.

Parents Have Previous Involvement in the Talent Area

Interviews also confirmed that most of the talented children were, in effect, born into the talent domain because parents were already involved in the domain. Of the 24 participating parents, 22 personally introduced their child to the talent domain (the other two were introduced at school or by a friend). Among those 22 parents, several were paid instructors or high-level competitors in the talent area or were involved in some meaningful way (e.g., as a hobby) prior to their child's indoctrination. For example, a volleyball player's mother was an All-American collegiate volleyball player, and her father presently coaches a Division 1 Champion collegiate volleyball team. Other examples include a pianist whose parents are both professional musicians in an elite symphony orchestra, a chess player whose father was a Russian chess master, and most twirlers—whose mothers are paid twirling coaches. The volleyball coach said:

I think my daughter had an advantage because with my job, she's been in the gym a lot. She grew up around volleyball. When she was a little kid, she was playing with balloons in the basement. We set up a little mini court and would play on our knees.

Parents Offer a Casual Introduction to the Talent Area

Even though most parents were well accomplished in the talent area, they did not introduce their children to the domain with the intention of developing a great talent but instead because the domain was important to the family. The parent of an ice skater said, "I sent [my son] out for skating lessons because we all went skating as a family, and he wanted to skate like we did." The parent of a cello player described their musical household this way: "We always played music in the house, all kinds of music, classical, the Beatles, all kinds. We always provided an avenue for the children to enjoy music and play instruments." The mother of a chess player explained that her husband taught their son to play chess simply because he wanted a playmate: "He decided that he was going to teach our kids so that he'd have someone to play, which was really his only incentive."

Parents Serve as Talent Scouts

Parents were also adept at reading signs that a particular talent area might be worth pursuing. The parent of a young writer said, "I knew that she had some kind of writing talent when she was 5 because she would write pages after pages, even though it was a childish type of writing, but I knew kids that age don't just keep writing." Upon discovering this budding talent, the writer's parents purchased a computer for her and soon helped her pursue her dream of publishing a book. A chess player's father arranged for his son's chess lessons after first noticing his son's chess interest this way:

The whole family goes on a cruise, and on the ship there's a big chess board. One day, I couldn't find my son, and when I finally did, he's down there standing in front of the chess board watching two guys play chess. I didn't bother him. I'm just sitting there far away, looking at him for hours. When those two guys finally left, he went to the board and tried to move the pieces. I thought, "Oh, okay, there's something here."

Finally, the mother of a figure skater foresaw that skating might be a good fit for her son's boundless energy. So, she signed him up for lessons at age 3. She said:

When [my son] was little, he was a really difficult kid, he was so energetic. He just didn't sit still. So when every other kid was playing in the sandbox, he'd be climbing on top of the structures in the playground and other parents would be like, "Whose kid is that?" He never really watched TV and was not a computer kid, so I never got a breath. He was just go, go, go. So when I watched him skate, I just felt like, oh this could work out great.

Parents Recognize and Foster Natural Abilities

Many parents also described their child as having some natural or innate ability that made the child especially suited to the talent area. These observations fit with Gardner's multiple intelligence theory (Gardner, 1993), which posits that people have a natural proclivity for some areas, such as music, over other areas, such as language. The parents identified their child's strengths and found the resources to develop those talents. One mother, describing how her daughter got started in baton twirling, said:

She saw me teaching baton, and I took her with me to a baton camp in the summer when she was 4. She started to find an interest in twirling and was playing with her own baton and copying a lot of the tricks. When she started to get them at age 4, I knew she had skill.

The parent of the spelling bee champion described her daughter as verbally gifted from a young age, saying she had an interest in word origins and foreign languages and would

carry a notebook with her at all times to write down interesting words. This parent said, “I sensed early on that my daughter had this flair for language and spelling that had to be tapped.” The parent of an ice skater said, “Our daughter had a special awareness of the body and was gifted in terms of movement. She walked at an early age, etc., so we gave her opportunities to try out her gifts.” And the father of an exceptional chess player described his son’s natural connection to chess:

The way that he touched the pieces was with the tenderness you would touch a woman you loved. There was actual enjoyment in just touching the pieces and moving them with such care and maturity. There was something unusual about this picture. So I started to study with him.

Parents Provide Early Opportunities

Parents did more than simply introduce their child to a talent area; they provided early opportunities for talent to blossom. The parent of a piano player taught her son to play the piano when he was just a toddler and then prompted him to practice for a few minutes about eight times per day. A violin player “pestered” his parents for a violin when he was 3 years old so they purchased one for him, gave him lessons, and “instilled practice discipline.”

Summary

Parents built a strong foundation for talent development. They casually introduced children at an early age to talent domains already familiar and important to the parents. They observed their children and noted the domains well suited to the child’s emerging interests or natural gifts. Once the talent domain was established, parents looked for ways to support talent growth. One primary means of support was providing coaches.

Providing Coaches

As described in early talent development literature, coaches are a critical component of talent development (Bloom, 1985). In order to achieve success, children required coaches who were among the best in their field and who were a good fit for the child. The present study revealed that parents would

- provide initial coaching,
- later select elite coaches for their children,
- go to great lengths to secure coaches,
- select coaches concerned with the whole child,
- change coaches to meet the growing needs of the child,
- not simply retreat to the sidelines—many stay involved in their child’s tutelage by working closely with coaches, and
- endure a large financial burden to pay for top-level coaching.

Parents Provide Initial Coaching

In several cases, a parent was his or her child’s first coach. Three fourths of the twirlers, for example, were initially coached by their mothers, all of whom were twirling experts or professional coaches in their own right. Much the same occurred in chess. Three fourths of the chess kids were initially coached by their fathers, one of whom was master strength. For two thirds of the volleyball players, their first volleyball teams were coached by a parent, one of whom was a collegiate volleyball coach. The writer and the spelling bee champion each had a parent who was the first coach and who remained as primary coach throughout. Two of the five musicians received their first lessons from their mothers. The mother of a violin player explained,

My husband and I decided that when we had children they would have music lessons. I started giving them lessons very early. We had our children playing violins by the time they were able to stand up without falling over.

Parents Later Select Elite Coaches

Most of the parents eventually hired elite coaches to work with their children. These coaches were current or former stars and well established in their respective fields. For example, many chess coaches were at the grandmaster level, twirling coaches were former national and world champions, skating coaches had Olympic competition backgrounds, and music teachers were professional musicians at top institutions or conservatories. Not only had these coaches been high-level performers themselves, they also had impressive coaching résumés having coached or instructed other top performers in their respective domains.

For most parents, navigating the coaching system was a new and sometimes perplexing experience. One chess mom explained:

So a fellow came up to us after a tournament where my son had placed fifth and said, “Does Mark have a coach?” I had never heard of a chess coach. I’d heard of a tennis coach but a chess coach? He said, “Oh, yeah. How do you think those other kids came in fourth, third, second, and first?” And I said, “I don’t know. I guess they’re just really good at chess?” And he said, “No, they all have coaches.”

Another chess parent had a similar experience:

One day when my son was in the first grade and I was picking him up from school, a kind of funny guy with a Russian accent [who taught chess as part of the school curriculum] gives me a business card and says, “Your son, he’s sort of good at chess. You should call me.”

And a skating parent described being surprised by how quickly her daughter progressed from taking lessons for fun to spending 6 hours a day with various coaches including

a primary coach, a coach for special tricks, and a ballet instructor. The skating parent said:

In the beginning it was just group lessons and over time coaches would say, “Oh, your child’s so gifted. She should take private lessons.” But nobody ever tells you where this is going to go, and you have no idea.

Parents Go to Great Lengths to Secure Coaches

In some cases, parents went to extraordinary lengths to link their children to top-level coaches. One skating parent relocated the family from Aspen, Colorado to Colorado Springs—a nearly 200-mile relocation—so that her son could work with an elite coach. This involved the parents quitting their jobs and slowing down their own career advancements to accommodate the move. The parent said, “I was offered a job [in the new location], but my husband really sacrificed everything for [our son]. He gave up a good job and derailed his career.” One violinist wanted to train with instructors at a summer camp, but the camp was designed for college students and he was only in middle school. In order for him to attend the camp, his mother accompanied him and spent several weeks of her summer living in a cabin. Others regularly travel long distances to meet with coaches or fly coaches to their homes. One parent flew with her son across country on a weekly basis for her son’s violin lessons. Another brought twirling coaches from Tennessee, Texas, and Ohio to work with her daughter in New York. A chess parent regularly hosted coaches in his home for several days at a time to provide his son with access to top-flight instruction.

Parents Select Coaches Concerned With the Whole Child

Selecting a coach was not as simple as finding an expert. Parents were careful to match their children with coaches who would care for the whole child while nurturing talent. One skating parent remarked:

I believe the most important thing in developing talent is finding the right coach, especially when you’re dealing with children. You’re really dealing with a role model, a teacher, somebody that your kid is going to be with more than anyone else in their lives, even more than their parents very often.

The parent of a cello player echoed that sentiment and explained why she changed teachers:

It is important to not just find a teacher, you need a mentor, someone that can help the child grow and develop in many different ways. For instance, when my son went to his very first cello teacher, one of the things that kind of raised alarms for me was that when he would play around on the cello and make sounds that were unusual, she got really upset, and I didn’t like that. I thought, I want my son to be able to explore.

Even though he had to learn technique, I didn’t want that creative part of him stifled.

Parents Change Coaches to Meet the Child’s Growing Needs

As the child’s talent grew, parents had to make sure that coaches continued to meet the child’s growing needs. In many cases, the child’s talent level simply outgrew that of the coach and a new coach was selected. The parent of a skater said, “If my son wanted to get serious, and he did, he could not stay with the same teacher. We loved the teacher. We wanted to stay with her, but he just needed coaching beyond her level.” The parent of another ice skater said, “In the beginning, it was just lessons in the local mall, but as [my daughter] got better she needed better and better coaches.” A volleyball parent explained:

When my son felt like he’d learned everything he could from a particular coach, it was time to try someone else. But it’s very difficult balancing the loyalty that you’ve built with coaches over many years with choosing what’s best for your child. And we struggled with that a lot.

A skating parent described the negative ramifications that sometimes come with leaving a coach:

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. He was very angry about our decision. 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.

Of course, coaches sometimes selflessly prompted a coaching change. A parent reported that her son’s skating coach said, “I can’t take him any further. You ought to consider having him work with a more elite coach.” A violin player’s mother commented, “His first teacher almost immediately said, ‘Wow, there’s really some talent here.’ And she encouraged us to take him to a different, more advanced teacher after a short while.”

Parents Work Closely With Coaches

Even though talented children were placed in the hands of elite coaches, parents remained involved. They monitored lessons and reinforced what was taught. And some even conferred with coaches about training and competitions. A twirling parent made sure she maximized the coaching her daughter received. She said:

Because we travel so far . . . her lesson lasted 4 hours, and I’m taking notes and I’m videotaping. And then my daughter

and I look at the videotape and look back over the notes when she practices. We want to make sure that our time is well spent.

Another twirling parent watched practice and competitions from a distance but still communicated with the coach when she had input. She said:

I sit in the stands and I'm intense. I text the coach and say things like, "Look, this is what I think needs fixed," and she texts me things like, "What do you think, should we throw this trick in?" And we would work like a team.

The mother of a volleyball player said that she did not attend practices but her husband did. She said:

The practices were pretty much run by the coaches but they welcomed input from my husband. He was very open to voicing his opinion on practice strategies. Definitely. If he didn't like something or saw something needed improvement, he would not hesitate to say so. There were about three dads from the team that they named "The Volleyball Mafia." And they were pretty vocal about what they thought.

Parents Sacrifice to Pay for Coaches

Elite coaching often comes at great financial expense. For example, one parent paid \$65 an hour for piano lessons and funded several lessons per week. Chess parents routinely paid \$50 or more per lesson and as much as \$250–\$300 per week. These are simply the cost of lessons and do not include the added expense of traveling to coaches or bringing coaches to the child, which several families do. To fund coaching and other talent development costs, most families made great sacrifices such as borrowing money, forgoing retirement savings, living in smaller houses, and taking second jobs. A skating mom stated bluntly, "This is an ungodly expensive sport. It really is. I can't even tell you how many times we mortgaged our house." A cello player's mom remarked, "We decided that money wasn't going to keep him from a certain teacher. So we lived off borrowed money for a time." And one chess parent remarked:

Lessons with a grandmaster require a price and it's a very high price. We've done some absolutely unbelievably crazy things to be able to make that work. We have taken second jobs—worked janitorial jobs at office buildings. We've sold things on eBay. Once, we went to a tournament in Los Angeles and the restaurants in the area were really expensive, so we brought a suitcase filled with food.

This same parent later said, "I mean the sacrifice has been huge and the money sacrifice has been huge, but the payoff to me has been well worth it." That same sentiment was echoed by many of the parents. Though they all described sacrifices, they had no regrets because it was important to them to nurture their child's growth.

Summary

Parents of talented children recognize the importance of high-quality coaching. Although they might provide the initial coaching, they eventually hire a series of elite coaches who can best take their children to the top of their fields while also addressing their general growth. Working with elite coaches, though, can burden families, who might go to great lengths to secure and finance coaches. And, even with elite coaches in place, parents remain involved in their child's talent education.

Managing Practice and Competition

Previous talent research emphasized the importance of practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). The present study does, too, but also reveals that parents are essential in facilitating practice and competition. Although the means for managing practice and competition differ across domains, all parents reported (a) fulfilling a variety of managerial roles, (b) building family life around practices and competitions, and (c) making sacrifices and going to extreme lengths to manage and support talent development.

Parents Fulfill a Variety of Managerial Roles

All of the parents described spending immense time and effort managing their child's practice and competition routines by assuming many of the following roles: accountant, fundraiser, secretary, hairdresser, costume maker, travel agent, travel companion, lesson scheduler, press agent, medical assistant, dietician, chauffeur, school liaison, videographer, gopher, and practice monitor. No matter is too big or detail too small for these parents to consider and manage, and they often described their collective duties as a full-time job. The parent of one skater aptly remarked:

I'm the one who signed him up for ballet or off-ice conditioning. I was involved in the costume design and finding the costume maker . . . and helping narrow down music choices for the program. I contact specialists. . . . I do all drug testing paperwork, flight arrangements, hotel arrangements, rental cars. . . . I'm like his personal secretary. I'm his assistant. For half the day, all I do is skating work.

Parents Build Family Life Around Practices and Competitions

Because deliberate practice (Ericsson et al., 1993) is crucial to talent development, the children spend many hours practicing. As one skating parent said of her daughter, "She has trained about 4 hours a day on the ice and an additional 2 hours a day off-ice 6 days a week for 14 years." Therefore, parents devote substantial time and go to surprising lengths arranging and monitoring practice. One family built an additional great room with a cathedral ceiling onto their home to accommodate their daughter's need for baton twirling

practice space. Another parent rented a private indoor tennis court so that her daughter could practice twirling. Another flies across country with her son to observe his weekly music lessons so she can better help him practice at home.

Many parents closely monitor practice to ensure that practice time is maximized. They attend lessons, take notes, and even video record training sessions in order to facilitate practice time later. The mother of a violinist explained:

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 this?" I sit there following along with those notes and make sure he is doing what he should.

A skating parent commented:

I lived at the rink so I could watch him practice. I drove him there every day, and I stayed and watched him while he was skating. My son has asthma, and I was always afraid that if he had an asthma attack no one would know what to do. . . . So, for years, I would just stay and watch him every day at the rink. I pretty much knew everybody and everything that was going on. And it was a lot of fun, but it was tiring too.

The spelling bee champion practiced with her whole family. Her mother said, "It's a lot of hard work, countless hours of hard work." In order to ensure that her daughter was doing her school work and that the family was giving her enough practice help, they "set minimum and maximum amounts of practice time for weekdays and weekends." After dinner, the speller's parents quizzed her on words, her brother identified new words for her to learn, and the speller would present new information about word origins to the family. Spelling practice dominated all of their family time.

Competitions also require parental planning and time commitment. Here's how one father described it:

Of course, I would travel to all the tournaments. International tournaments last from 10 days to 2 weeks and I make all the arrangements. I write to the organizers, send the entrance fee, plan the schedule, buy the tickets, and organize transportation. Everything.

Competitions are emotional for parents as well as the children. One skating parent described the ultimate competition—the Olympics—like this:

The coaches like to say, "It's just a competition." Baloney! It's not . . . it's totally and completely overwhelming. It is always out there like Jabba the Hutt—a big monster-thing that circles every 4 years and sucks you in. I mean it is truly, truly overwhelming—not only for the athletes but for families as well.

Many parents also described the benefits of a family life built around talent development. The mother of a violinist explained that her son and his father would never have connected so closely without music. She said:

My husband was not a very affectionate father when the kids were born. He did not grow up in that kind of environment and he didn't know how to be close. But, through music, my son has formed a great connection with his father.

The mother of the spelling champion expressed a similar sentiment: "I got my daughter into spelling competitions for a selfish reason—it brought my daughter closer to the family. We took up spelling as a family."

A skater's mother also described the family joy that came from a talent development lifestyle:

Skating has brought us the greatest joy. It has made the family united. Skating competitions have allowed us to see the world, learn so much, and join together. Skating has helped make us what we are as a family.

Parents Make Sacrifices and Go to Extreme Measures to Manage and Support Talent Development

Parents frequently made sacrifices to accommodate their children's talent development. The parent of the young writer quit her own career to help foster her daughter's talent development. She described her role as challenging but rewarding:

It is a full-time job and sometimes even more than full-time 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. At one point I said to my daughter, "This is so much work for me, would you rather I hire some kind of professional? Someone who can do a better job?" And she said, "But who will rub my tummy when I have a tummy ache?" We just don't see how anyone else could take on my role.

The parents of a volleyball player made a decision to regularly miss church services to accommodate their son's competition schedule:

We made a huge sacrifice. We would listen to people judge us about it, but we told [our son] that if he was doing well in church and being a good person, then he could continue to play volleyball on Sundays. But if we saw that his character was breaking down, or he was letting bad things influence him, then we would have to reevaluate and maybe not play on Sundays.

Parents often went to extreme measures to ensure that the child had the time and resources needed for practice and competition. One extreme measure was putting talent

development ahead of schooling. For example, one parent arranged for his son to delay ninth grade for a year to pursue chess full time. Another chess parent encouraged his son to delay college so that he could study chess intensively. A skater's mom explained, "My daughter misses 10–12 weeks of school every year." Missed school equates to even more work for parents, who must remain in frequent contact with teachers and principals, organize make-up work, and schedule make-up assessments. Other families opted for home-schooling to ensure a flexible schedule for practice and competition. With this decision, though, parents take on the added time and responsibility for the child's education.

Parents also went to extremes in terms of financing competitions. Elite competition often requires tournament or event fees, travel (often international), and, for some domains, special equipment such as multiple costumes that can cost up to \$6,000 each. When asked how much he spends on his son's chess competition, a father answered:

Tournament fees in the United States can easily be \$200 to \$400. Add hotels and tickets for two because he doesn't travel alone. So when he goes to Philadelphia for the World Open, do the calculation: two airline tickets, 6 days in the hotel, 6 days for food, plus the \$400 entrance fee. You're talking about \$2,500, give or take. If this is an international tournament, double that. Each ticket for him and his mom is about \$1,500, 10 days for a hotel is another \$1,000, plus entrance fees. So let's say \$5,000. Now do the multiplication. Three to four international tournaments a year, three to four national tournaments a year, and let's say four local tournaments, which also require entrance fees and maybe a hotel. Add to this his study materials, coach costs, and memberships and I would guesstimate that total cost is north of \$50,000. Easily.

Summary

Parents of talented children do it all. They handle everything that comes their way and manage all of the details required to ensure that their children have the opportunity to practice effectively and compete at the highest levels. Parents build family life around talent development and go to great lengths to manage and support it. As a chess parent explained, "It's not overstating it to say that our life is entirely structured around his chess."

Fueling Desire

Motivation is a key factor in talent development (Winner, 2000). Although a child's passion for a talent domain might stem, in part, from a good match between the child's pervasive intelligence and domain requirements (Gardner, 1993), findings from the present study suggest that parents help fuel desire too. Specifically, parents (a) model and advocate a hard-work ethic, (b) boost motivation when necessary, (c) advocate rest to recharge motivation, and (d) support the emotional health needed to work hard and excel.

Parents Model and Advocate a Hard-Work Ethic

Parents were generally high achievers as well and modeled a hard-work ethic. Several held elite positions such as company vice president, physician, collegiate coach, television producer, and college professor. Parents also bolstered motivation by creating an environment of excellence in their homes. Below are examples of how parents described their home environments:

- "We have a failure is not an [ultimate] option mentality. Good work begets good work."
- "Everybody in our house is a hard worker, we strive for excellence, making sure what we do, we do well."
- "We expect our children to put in maximum effort."
- "We have this phrase—work hard, play harder."
- "In the environment we provide for her, there's no limit to how much she can learn—there's no impossible goal."
- "His dad is very outwardly competitive, and I'm silently competitive, and our son is some of both."
- "We have taught our kids from the time they were teeny that they can do anything that they want to do. There's no limit to what they can accomplish if they are willing to work hard for it."

The parent of the spelling bee champion stated: "Culturally, as Indians, our life revolves around kids. They are the center of any decisions we make. I think that sends a clear message to the kids that expectations are high for them."

Parents Boost Motivation When Necessary

Although most parents described their children as self-motivated, some certainly supplied motivation as needed. The mother of the spelling bee champion described her role:

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 you know you have to read. When you watch TV, you're losing out on your dream."

A chess parent explained that his son was motivated to pursue some aspects of talent development such as attending competitions but that he needed parental prompting to pursue other aspects such as completing homework assigned by his coach. He said his son "lacked the discipline to do the homework, and we, his parents, have definitely filled that role." And multiple volleyball parents reminded their children that they had committed to a team and owed it to the team to practice hard.

When children's motivation waned, parents also reminded them that parent support was contingent on children's effort. Several parents in effect say: "Developing talent has to be your choice and dream. If that is your

choice, we'll help you however we can. If you commit, then we'll commit. However, if you are not fully committed, then we won't be either." Similarly, when one parent of a musician was asked how she motivated her son to practice, she explained:

It was just expectation in our family that when you get to play an instrument, it's a privilege, and with that privilege comes the expectation that you must practice. It was expected. It was something that he never thought about arguing.

Parents Advocate Rest to Recharge Motivation

Several parents encouraged their talented children to take time away from their domain in order to keep fresh or jump-start motivation. A skating parent said, "If we're taking a family vacation or if we're having a family dinner, or it's somebody's birthday, I make sure that we say, you're not skating now, these breaks are important." A twirling mom said, "You have to take a mental break. You can't have a kid be intense her whole life, they can't do it. You've got to be able to know when to back off and take a break." Another twirling mom said, "She takes August off from competition. She still twirls everyday but just for fun. We try to plan a fun twirling event for her that's not competition."

Parents Support the Emotional Health Needed to Work Hard and Excel

High-level competition can be emotionally fraught, and many parents described how they helped their children process the uncomfortable emotions that accompany the pursuit of excellence and sometimes threaten the child's motivation to continue to pursue the talent area. One chess parent said, "I would say my biggest role is providing his emotional support. I travel with him everywhere he goes. We talk a lot, I'm his anchor." The parent of a cello player explained how she and her husband approach a harsh review from a competition judge with their son in order to keep emotions positive:

We reiterate that music is very subjective. If you have done what is a joy to you, then that's the most important thing. It doesn't matter if some people don't get what you're doing, because they'll find the music that they love.

A skating parent had a similar approach:

As a parent, when you watch your child go through these [emotional highs and lows], you have to help them deal with the emotions in some way. And you don't want it to be all internalized because that's the wrong response, it'll chew them up and destroy them. So you have to find a way to let them have a proper outlet for disappointments and criticism.

Some parents sought outside help when they believed they lacked the tools to help their children cope. The parent of a cellist explained, "My husband and I realized that we needed

help and we hired a psychologist who works with us to figure out how to best parent our young, gifted children." Other parents enlisted professional help too. Some hired sports psychologists to help their children maintain motivation and deal with the pressures of elite competition.

Summary

Parents of supremely talented children were high achievers, too, so they naturally instill and model a hard-work ethic. Although the talented children are highly motivated most times, parents provide a motivational boost when necessary. But parents do not allow their talented children to grow fatigued and stale. They advocate and furnish restorative rest periods. And parents recognize the importance of emotional health and take steps to keep their children positive.

DISCUSSION

Findings reconfirmed existing research on talent development (e.g., Kiewra et al., 2006) by highlighting the critical importance of early introduction to the talent area, access to elite coaches, deliberate practice, and a strong motivation to pursue talent excellence. More important, findings newly established that parents of talented youth go to great lengths to enact these factors. As one skating parent aptly put it, "The parent's role is crucial in the development of a kid's talent. They can't do it without parent involvement." Here, we summarize the parenting lessons that emerged from stories parents told about their roles raising supremely talented children.

First, parents introduced their children to their eventual talent domain at a young age. Often, this introduction was the result of children, in effect, being born into the talent area because a parent was involved as a competitor or coach. Other times, parents noticed when their children demonstrated a certain aptitude and worked to match that aptitude to a suitable talent domain. Although the link between natural aptitude and performance area contributes to success, research shows that biological advantages are not sufficient for attaining talent; certain environmental factors that stem from the parent-child relationship must be in play (Hunt, 2006). And that is certainly the overriding conclusion we draw from the present findings. Parents went to great lengths to build an early environment for talent growth and to later provide optimal coaching, maximize practice and competition opportunities, and fuel desire.

Once parents observed and fostered their child's promise, they worked to arrange appropriate coaching. Parents were often the child's first coach but eventually recognized the need for additional or more advanced coaching as their child's talent grew. Monitoring the child's skill level, identifying appropriate coaches, financing coaches, and navigating

the emotion-laden waters of coach–family relationships were all critical aspects of parenting talent.

Along with elite coaching comes added practice and competition. Managing their child’s practice and competition routines was like a second job, and none of the parents shirked their managerial responsibilities. They handled all managerial duties such as monitoring progress; purchasing materials, equipment, or costumes; scheduling competitions; making travel plans and traveling extensively to national and international events; financing all of this; and having their young star psychologically ready for peak performance.

From a psychological standpoint, parents set a high bar for performance by modeling high achievement themselves. They created home environments carefully crafted to inspire and support high achievement. Most parents did not need to motivate their children directly because the children were often passionate about their domain and were fierce competitors. But sometimes they needed to fuel desire. Parents occasionally directed the child’s focus away from leisure and other activities back to practice and reminded the child that parent commitment only goes as far as the child’s. Other times, parents encouraged their young charges to back off and to recharge their motivational batteries. Moreover, parents understood the pressure that accompanies high levels of competition and sought help from outside consultants and psychologists when needed.

In the end, parents’ actions are instrumental, if not critical, to their child’s talent development. Talent might partially be born, but it is largely made—made by parents who devote their full measure to fostering their children’s talent development. By investigating the practices and experiences of parents who raised supremely talented children, we gained insights that might help other parents promote talent development at the highest levels and perhaps help all children reach their potentials.

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study was limited by the homogenous nature of the sample, which included mostly White, American, middle- to upper-middle class households. The sample lacked variation in race, culture, ethnicity, and social class. Although one participating parent discussed how her Indian American culture contributed to the family’s focus on the children’s talent development, the scope of this study did not allow for in-depth exploration of cultural influences on parenting. However, other researchers are conducting talent development research in Asia (e.g., Chan, 2005), among cultural subgroups in the United States (e.g., Wu, 2008), and among the poor (e.g., Araújo et al., 2010). In order to understand whether the lessons learned from the families in this study apply to families in other regions of the world, future studies should consider conducting cross-cultural investigations of parents with talented children.

Another direction for future research is investigating how technological advances might influence talent development. For example, distance-education technology is making it possible for coaches and instructors from around the world to provide lessons to students in any location. In particular, advances in computer software and databases have recently revolutionized the study of chess. Young chess scholars, for example, no longer need access to a center of excellence to prosper. Now they can easily link with seasoned coaches (around the planet) and with on-line tutorials, observe live games and those from recent and centuries-old databases, and analyze chess moves using computer programs that operate beyond world-champion strength. Future studies might examine how technology alters parents’ talent development roles in chess and other areas.

Finally, although the present study attempted to capture the primary roles described by parents, the interviews provided more information than could be contained in a single article. Parents introduced topics (e.g., sibling rivalry, family sacrifices, and the limited role of schools) that could not be addressed fully here but that remain viable topics for future studies.

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