

Seven Ways Parents Help Children Unleash Their Talents



By Kenneth A. Kiewra, Ph.D.

In his work, psychologist Benjamin Bloom concluded that almost all people can learn anything if provided with the right conditions, and that when a child commits to a talent area, parents must commit as well. Author Ken Kiewra studied real-world prodigies in various domains and shares his perspective on the conditions necessary for success and on parents' roles in cultivating talent.

Amadeus Mozart, Pablo Picasso, Bobby Fischer, and Tiger Woods are household names in the music, art, chess, and golf worlds. All were child prodigies, mastering their domains with the best of adults. However, these classic artists represent just the tip of the child prodigy iceberg. What about prodigies in other domains such as chess, baton twirling, music, figure skating, volleyball, spelling, and writing? How do some youngsters get to be so good so fast?

On the surface, it might seem that talent is born. Talent researchers such as Howard Gardner, however, assert that talent is partly born, but mostly made. Mozart didn't magically play the piano at age 3 and compose at age 6 without hard work. His father was an expert musician and composer who taught Amadeus his craft; Mozart practiced relentlessly and logged more than 3,500 practice hours by age 6. Similarly, Fischer taught himself chess, developed an unbridled passion for it, and studied on his own and with some of the game's premier players in New York City—a chess talent Mecca—where Fischer happened to reside.

So, how is talent made? Often, behind every talented individual are parents pushing the right buttons and doing all they can to cultivate talent. Following are seven ways that parents help children unleash their talents.

1. Discover Element

Psychologist Ken Robinson suggests that all of us have talent potential in certain areas of biological strength. Talent is most likely to blossom when we discover and toil in our true element.

My own son showed traits as a youngster that helped me discover his element. First, he had a strong memory. Second, he was consumed by certain topics like dinosaurs or car parts and would study them for months on end. Third, he was unbeatable in strategic games like Tic-Tac-Toe and Connect Four. Given these characteristics, I reasoned he might enjoy and succeed in chess. Chess was indeed his element. Today he is an International Chess Master and professional chess coach.

Howard Gardner suggests that parents should offer their children varying opportunities, observe them, determine their interests and strengths, and feed those interests and strengths. One twirling parent I studied agrees: "Parents need to look at what a child's desire is. Matching training to that desire can be a beautiful thing. But, if parents make a child do something that *they* want the child to do, then it can be ugly."

2. Provide Early Start

In my own study of talented youth, eventual national and world-class chess players, baton twirlers, figure skaters, and musicians were routinely introduced to their talent domain when they were 3–5 years old. Moreover, many of these children were born into the talent domain, as their families were already accomplished players, coaches, or enthusiasts. The same holds true for former athlete and golf fanatic Earl Woods, who gave Tiger his first club when Tiger was just 7 months old and had Tiger sit in his high chair in the garage to watch his father hit golf balls into a net. Before Tiger turned 2, he and his father



were practicing and playing golf regularly on the course.

Time, practice, and biological development are distinct advantages to an early start. Youngsters can commit more time to their talent area when they are not busy with school and homework. The sooner one begins, the more practice hours one can log. And, Daniel Coyle documents how practice in childhood produces greater brain growth than practice in adulthood. All these advantages accumulate and multiply quickly.

Talent author Malcolm Gladwell reports that the rosters of elite junior and professional hockey teams in Canada are littered with players whose birthdays primarily fall in the first three months of the calendar year. This is not an astrological phenomenon, but one that fits with the January 1st cut-off age for junior hockey. In short, players born earlier in a particular calendar year have a physical advantage over players born later in that same calendar year. That early physical advantage leads to more playing time which leads to

greater skill development. That skill development advantage, in turn, leads to other advantages down the road such as working with better teams and coaches. Early advantages accumulate.

3. Establish Center of Excellence

Talent author Matthew Syed discovered that one small British road and immediate neighborhood produced more outstanding table tennis players in the 1980s than all the other roads throughout England combined. How was this possible? It wasn't the drinking water, but rather the influence of a charismatic schoolteacher. This teacher was an elite and avid table tennis player and opened an after-school program in a dilapidated facility for neighborhood kids. All the kids had keys and near round-the-clock access. In a short time, this facility became a Ping-Pong center of excellence.

Such centers of excellence are fairly widespread. New York City, as mentioned, is a center of excellence for chess and was the starting point for Bobby Fischer, Josh

Waitzkin, and other chess prodigies. Similarly, the Rocky Mountain region is a natural haven for winter sport athletes. When kids grow up in such areas, they have access to elite coaches and other competitors who can push them and help them grow. Parents should look in their own backyards for such talent development opportunities.

Enterprising parents can establish their own centers of excellence. In my work, I discovered parents bring elite coaches to visit or live in their home for a time. Twirler parents hold community exhibitions and competitions that build interest and attract new competitors to the domain. Chess parents create a chess culture in their hometowns by organizing camps and tournaments.

In addition, centers of excellence might soon become as widespread as the Internet allows. Previously, chess talent emerged only from major cities where competitive tournaments and top-flight instructors were available. Now players everywhere have easy access to the world's top instructors via Skype and a computer chess interface. Players can also play live competitive games anytime with the click of a mouse, or search game archives to analyze moves. Computer-assisted training is possible in other domains, too, and makes excellence available to all.

4. Facilitate Practice

An enriched early environment might jump-start a child on the road to Carnegie Hall, but it takes practice, practice, and more practice to deliver him. Retrospective studies such as Gardner's confirm that talented musicians like Mozart and artists like Picasso, despite their early talents, practiced arduously for 10 or more years before completing a significant work. This 10-year rule has more recently been extended to a variety of other domains such as chess, math, science, swimming, tennis, and literature.

Practice, though, is different from playing or performing. Talent author Geoff

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Colvin illustrates that practice must be deliberate. This means that learners must work repeatedly on specific skills outside their comfort zones.

Josh Waitzkin credits his world-class rise in two domains to deliberate practice. As a chess competitor, Josh didn't practice by just playing a lot of games. Instead, he painstakingly studied the variations that arose from a single chess position for days. Later, as a martial artist, Josh deliberately practiced against stronger competitors asking them to target his weaknesses so that he could strengthen them. And, when he broke his dominant hand, he practiced fighting with the other hand to make that one equally dominant.

Parents often go to great lengths to ensure their talented children can practice. In my studies, one parent of an ice skater attended all her daughter's practices for the past 14 years: 4 hours a day on the ice, 2 hours a day off the ice, 6 days every week. The parent of a twirler rented an indoor tennis court so her daughter could practice when gym space was unavailable; another built a great room with an extra high ceiling in her home so that her daughter could practice indoors during inclement weather.

5. Arrange for Instruction

Getting budding talent to bloom also depends on securing teachers who can build early interest, hone technical skills, and develop a personal style. Bloom found that talented children often progress through a series of mentors. First mentors introduce the child to the talent area, teach the basics, and establish a love for the domain. When the child is ready to move on, a second mentor is secured—a technical expert, a perfectionist who emphasizes precision and accuracy. Finally, the best of the best often secure a third mentor, a master expert recognized as an elite teacher in the field. These masters help students to analyze and correct minor flaws and to develop a personal style.

All of the young stars I studied worked with a series of coaches as described by Bloom. Often, a parent serves as the child's first coach and introduces the child to the talent domain in a playful way. In some cases, parents continue on as technical coaches, particularly those who are accomplished in their own right. Nearly all of the twirler moms I studied were professional twirling coaches, most chess dads were competent players, and the volleyball parents were often former players. One chess parent was merely a recreational player when his son caught the chess bug. This father studied chess on his own about 20 hours a week in order to teach his son.

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All parents, though, eventually enlist master teachers to teach their children, often at the suggestion of the former coach. Master teachers are International Grandmasters, national or world champion twirlers, skaters with Olympic experience, and musicians employed at leading universities or conservatories.

Securing elite coaching does not come easily or cheaply. One skating family relocated hundreds of miles from their home so their son could work with a top coach. The parent of a violinist flies with her son across country every week so that he can study with a top-flight music coach. Another music parent accompanies her son to a summer-long music camp because he is too young to attend alone. Lessons, meanwhile, cost about \$100 per hour, with several lessons required per week. To secure and pay for top coaches, many families make sacrifices such as borrowing money, forgoing retirement savings, living in smaller homes, and taking second jobs. A skating mom said bluntly: “This is an ungodly expensive sport. It really is. I can’t tell you how many times we remortgaged our house.” 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.”

6. Support Singleness of Purpose

Long and daily practice sessions, lessons with mentors, and numerous competitions leave talented individuals with little time for outside activities. But, most prefer it that way. They have a singleness of purpose. When I asked chess parents why their talented kids spent so much time on chess, all credited the child’s chess passion. One parent remarked: “He is passionate about it, just thrilled by it. It gives him a



lot of joy and satisfaction, and he’s not really happy when he’s not playing. If someone were to take chess away from him, he just wouldn’t be a complete person. We once took chess away and he was miserable; it was like yanking out the soul.”

To most people, such single-mindedness seems unnatural or unhealthy. Still, a pinpoint focus is the hallmark of talent. Talent experts such as Gladwell perhaps sum things up best when they say talented individuals simply practice a lot because they want to and like to practice. Their hard work and singleness of purpose is the product of a rage to learn and master.

In my work, parents play a central role in their children’s single-minded pursuit of talent. They are often high achievers themselves, and they espouse and model a hard-work ethic. They strive for excellence, set no limits, and teach that no goal is impossible.

Parents also support their children’s single-mindedness by being single-minded about talent development. In Poker terms, parents go all in. They recognize the rarity of their child’s talent and their responsibility to nurture it. One parent said, “I’ve made a commitment to him that as long as he continues to work and grow and do his best, we’ll use whatever resources we have to get him where he wants to go.”

7. Make Full Commitment

All parents I interviewed describe a full commitment to talent development. In some cases, they support alternate education options or even put school on the back burner. One parent arranged for his son to delay ninth grade to pursue chess full time for a year. Another chess parent advocated delaying college for a year to study chess intensively. Other families choose to homeschool or have their children miss school—sometimes for weeks—to attend competitions.

Parents also take on roles beyond normal parenthood. They act as coach, accountant, fund-raiser, secretary, hairdresser, costume designer, press agent, travel agent, travel companion, medical assistant, dietician, chauffeur, school liaison, videographer, gopher, and practice monitor. No job is too big or too small. Parents often described their collective duties as a second or full-time job.

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

The parent of a young writer who quit her job to foster her daughter’s talent said,



“It’s a full-time job—sometimes even more than full-time—and 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.”

Final Thoughts

The road to excellence is passable for those who discover their element, gain early access to the talent domain, link to a center of excellence, engage in deliberate practice, work with top coaches, and have a singleness of purpose. No child, though, can complete this journey alone. A fully committed parent must help at every turn. But, regardless of how far the road is traveled, parents contend that the joys and benefits from talent development come as much from the journey as the destination. Parents discover their children learn bigger life lessons as they toil in their talent areas. One twirling parent remarked, “My daughter has learned many life skills along the way that have nothing to do with twirling a baton. She better understands teamwork, cooperation, and how to get a job done—skills that carry over to school and life.”

Parents also discover that the pursuit of talent brings them closer as a family. One parent remarked, “I have no regrets because every single thing that I did [to help develop talent] has brought my son into my life. Everything that seemed to be a mistake or a hardship or a sacrifice was the right thing done at the right time. I felt lucky to share this with my son.”

As for why parents make the commitments and sacrifices they do, one chess parent said this: “Because he’s my son and I want him to be whatever he can be. And, if that happens to be chess, then that’s what I want for him. I want him to be happy. I love him, and I love his chess too.” ♡

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