



WHITEPAPER

Excellence and the role of the parent.

BY GARRY WATANABE

Occasionally after teaching a workshop, one of us will be approached by parents seeking advice on how to best support their child as he or she pursues expertise in a certain domain, such as the arts, academics, sport, music or other activities. Now let us say here that we have a very strong belief that *the impetus toward an activity needs to be the child's; it should never be driven by a decision by the parent that his son or daughter be the next great tennis star or violin virtuoso.* Given that, here are some guidelines based on both research and our experience in working with high performers.



KEEP IN MIND THE BIG PICTURE

It's important to remind yourself that developing expertise truly is a journey. There is a growing body of research in performance psychology indicating that it takes a minimum of 10,000 hours (occurring over 10 to 20 years) of deliberate, effortful practice to reach expert status in any activity. What this research is saying is that if you have a threshold level of talent—enough to qualify for entry into the top clubs, schools or training facilities—it is all about whether or not you do the work. Therefore, a great deal of parental support for the young performer will centre around helping the performer muster the appropriate levels of motivation, time, resources and structure to complete the necessary practice.

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MODEL AND ENCOURAGE CRITICAL VALUES

Research indicates that those who achieved expertise grew up in households where the parents were hard-working, active people. A variety of activities filled their days. These parents wanted to be involving themselves in something, learning something, working on something as often as possible. And it was not enough just to stay busy. Emphasis was placed on doing one's best—whatever the task. The parents were not of the “do as I say not as I do” type. But not only did they model their values relating to hard work and being active, they explicitly discussed with their children the importance of trying hard and doing well. Having these core values instilled at an early age greatly helped the performers do the quantity and quality of practice necessary to attain expertise.

UNDERSTAND THE PHASES OF LEARNING

Those who achieved the level of expert performer went through three distinct phases of learning. The “early years” were playful and filled with immediate rewards. The “middle years” were marked by a focus on precision and the disciplined adherence to a rigorous training/practice routine. Finally,



the “later years” were marked by complete immersion in the activity as performances moved from technical precision to personal expression—that is, performing the activity in a way that capitalized on the strengths and personality of the individual performer.

In the early years, the role of the parent was to provide encouragement, help with the organization of time and supervise and provide feedback around “homework” (training done outside formal practice time).

In the middle years, the parent’s role was to provide resources (transportation, equipment, financing) and to begin stepping back to allow the child to become the master of the activity. Technical guidance was placed completely in the hands of the formal instructor/coach. In discussing the activity with their child, the effective parents predominantly used a consulting style—asking and listening. For example, after frustrating performances, rather than providing advice, parents would ask questions such as “How are you feeling?” or “What does your coach say?”

Finally in the later years, the role of the parent became that of a supportive audience and mentor, helping the performer maintain perspective about the activity as one part of a successful life.

ASSIST WITH THE SELECTION OF TEACHERS/COACHES

Given the importance of having a good teacher/coach, parents, especially at the outset, play a critical role in the selection of the right kind of teacher/coach for each stage of learning. Effective teachers in the early years were warm, affectionate and enormously patient. Their teaching style was to instill fundamental skills through a collection of well-structured and challenging, but playful, activities. Praise was lavish and pressure was low. The teachers seemed largely unconcerned with objective measures of achievement. Exploring possibilities and engaging in a wide variety of activities took precedent over right or wrong, good or bad. Most importantly these teachers were able to create feelings of “specialness” in the performer in relation to the activity.



Teachers in the middle years had a good reputation for developing talent in the field, were considered to be the best in a certain geographical area and were selective around who they would teach. They required evidence of the student's capabilities to date, their seriousness of intention and their commitment to the activity. These teachers were demanding about the quality and quantity of practice and exhibited selective impatience. They were impatient around technical development and looked for significant technical progress in a relatively short period of time. At the same time, they were patient in terms of waiting for performance results. They had a well-defined philosophy of development, followed a long-term development plan, were knowledgeable around the opportunities for top performers in the field and were always thinking about preparing the performer for those future opportunities. Most importantly, the “middle years” teachers demonstrated the ability to quickly and completely gain the respect of the performer.

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The teacher during the later years was one of a small number (perhaps fewer than 10) of master teachers in the country in a particular field with a track record of producing “the best in the business.” Gaining acceptance from this teacher typically required significant expenditure of time and effort, including correspondence and support from previous teachers and other experts in the field.

CREATE A SAFE HAVEN

Given the significant level of devotion to the activity in the middle and later years of learning it is inevitable that the performer will go through numerous ups and downs and at moments be completely fed up with the activity, the teacher and the training environment. At such times it is critical that the performer have a safe haven to go to where their identity and significance are separate from their role as a performer. It is essential that the parent ensure that the home remains such a place—as opposed to becoming an extension of the training environment—providing the performer with a vital resource where he or she can rest, recharge and regain perspective. The



importance of this safety net cannot be overstated (see Karyn Garossino's testimonial, below).

Of course none of this guidance is meant to trump your own good judgment. In the calm of the moment when you are in control of your emotions and you step back and ask yourself "What is in the best interests of my child?" you will find the best advice.

KARYN GAROSSINO: AN OLYMPIAN'S PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Former Olympic skater Karyn Garossino explains how her parents' guidance supported her success—as an athlete and a person.

The parental support I received during my athletic career came in many forms. What I found particularly helpful were the simple things—for example, the conversations in the car and around the dinner table were rarely about skating, which was a welcome reprieve. My successes were acknowledged with humility, and the lessons in any failure were explored. Both seemed of equal value to my parents and both were met with a huge hug. My folks investigated and integrated resources throughout my career, but in a timely manner. For example, the exercise physiologist came on board when I was a national-level athlete, not a 10-year-old junior skater! Which just meant that there was a pace to my life as an athlete. Each step was just that: an opportunity to learn and develop and grow. I see now that THEY managed that pace. They were deliberate and mindful in their choices for me, but not overly attached to the result. Ironically, this attitude was a significant component of my success.

In a nutshell, my parents saw my participation in sport as the training ground for life. They weren't raising an athlete they'd be proud of, but rather a person they knew could stand on her own no matter what the game.

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