

From Daniel Coyle's Blog page:

I am not the first to point this out, but let me say it anyway: when it comes to nurturing our kids' talents, today's parents today have it tough. Not because we know too little, but because we know too much. Way, way too much.

Nurturing talent used to be a fairly simple process, because it was mostly passive. Parents sat back and waited for the talent to show itself.

Now, parental talent-nurturing is an official industry, like organic food. Soccer, violin, chess, math, art — they all provide us with nicely constructed funnels down which we can pour endless amounts of money and time as we try to help our kids become their best selves. Tiger Mothers and Fathers stalk the landscape, carrying their superstar cubs in their mouths. Science has given us terrifyingly concrete concepts, like Critical Learning Periods, where if your kid doesn't learn something by age X, the door of opportunity slams shut — forever! Being a parent has gone from feeling like a laid-back observer to feeling like a frantic gardener, racing around, trying to find the best way to help talent grow.

All of which creates a question: what's the best way to navigate this new world?

I've spent the last five years visiting and studying talent hotbeds, and also being the dad of four kids (10-17). So over the last few years my wife Jen and I have done our best to navigate this, and have come up with a simple list of rules that have helped us around your house, a few of which I'd like to share.

- Don't:** Praise kids for their abilities.
- Do:** Praise kids for their efforts.
- Why:** When you praise kids for their abilities, you diminish their willingness to take risk — after all, we're status-oriented creatures, and why would anyone who's been labeled "talented" risk their status?

When you praise kids for their efforts, on the other hand, you increase their willingness to take risk, to fail, and thus to learn. One useful phrase to use in praising kids is to say *well done*. It conveys appreciation, without calling anybody a genius.

- Don't:** Fall for the Prodigy Myth.
- Do:** Reframe struggle as positive.
- Why:** Yes, different kids learn at different rates. Yes, some kids take off like rockets; others linger in the belly of the bell curve. The thing to remember: this isn't a sprint. The majority of prodigies flame out, and the majority of successful people come from the anonymous ranks of average Joes and Josephines.

What helps is to understand that the moments of intense struggle are really the moments when learning happens fastest. Those moments aren't pretty — it's when a kid is reaching toward something new and missing — but they're fantastically productive because it's when the brain is making and honing new connections. Your job is to find ways to celebrate those moments of struggle.

- Don't:** Pay attention to what you kid says
- Do:** Pay attention to what your kid stares at.
- Why:** Let's do this one in the form of a scene, in which a kid returns from first soccer/piano/karate practice.

PARENT: So how was it? How did it go? Did you like your teacher? What did you do?

KID: Ummmmm.

PARENT: Was it fun? Were you good at it? Do you think you'll do it next week?

KID: Ummmmm.

The point is, most kids are reliably inept at expressing their inner feelings. So don't put pressure on them to express them, because it tends to speedily diminish whatever interest they might've felt.

Instead, pay attention to what they stare at. Staring is the most profound act of communication that kids perform. Staring is like a neon sign saying I LOVE THIS. Watch for the stare, and follow where it leads. One of our daughters got interested in violin because we went to a performance of a teenage bluegrass band. She stared. We didn't say much. We bought her a violin, and took her to a lesson, and she was into it. That was five years ago; she's still playing.

- Don't:** Seek a coach or teacher who's like a courteous waiter.
- Do:** Seek coaches and teachers who scare you a little.
- Why:** It's easy to confuse pleasure and comfort with actual learning. But truly good coaches and teachers are about challenging you to get to the edge of your abilities, time and time again.

Seek out coaches who are authoritative. Who know their stuff, and who take charge. A little scary is good.

- Don't:** Celebrate victories.
- Do:** Celebrate repetition.
- Why:** Too many kids (and parents) judge their progress by the scoreboard, instead of by the amount they've learned. Victories are their own reward. They do not need any extra emphasis.

Celebrating repetition, on the other hand, is not done often enough, because repetition has a bad reputation. We frequently connote it with drudgery. In fact, repetition is awesome. It's the single most powerful way the brain builds new skill circuits. So make it cool. Doing a hard task ten times in a row is great. Doing it a hundred times in a row is freaking heroic. So treat it that way.