

Keeping the Light in Their Eyes

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It has taken years for me to recognize the significance of seeing light in a child's eyes. They were years of raising my own children, founding the Music House project (a home-away-from-home for highly gifted young musicians from all over the world), conducting research in the field of gifted education and talent development, and working with teachers and parents of twice-exceptional children.



As subjective as it may seem, bright eyes are perhaps the most important indicator of learning — one that we may be tempted initially to discount or ignore when looking at the broad topic of talent development. To keep the light in their eyes, I suggest that it's neither the specific things one does nor the things that one provides that are crucial. It's the approach and attitude one takes. Parents are effective when they mediate information and experiences with their child — not when they manage or monitor.

In synthesizing results from research and personal lives, there are five important elements that consistently stand out:

Meaningful Conversations

An Action Research Approach

Role Modeling

Partnering in Learning

Opportunity Making

While the items on the list are based on empirical research and confirmed through experience, they do not represent a formula for all parenting situations. Rather they represent WAYS each of us can support and encourage the development of a child's abilities. The process will be different for each of us because our individual circumstances are unique. What works in one family isn't necessarily the answer for another. In fact, for that matter, what works with one child in a family often isn't successful with another. Developing talent is far more complex — and interesting — than a simple recipe.

It is also important to think of the list of five as a bundled package, not discrete items. They all work together. Here's a quick overview:

Meaningful Conversation: There's an overarching need for interesting, safe, attentive, and rich conversation — with children, of course, but also among friends, colleagues, and relatives. While it seems obvious, sometimes in the hustle and bustle of daily life, we think we're having conversations when we're really only talking about the particulars of what's happening around us: "Did you remember your music?" "Have you put away the groceries?" "What did the teacher think about your project?" "What should we get for Susannah's birthday present?" "The flowers really need to be watered, etc., etc.

Instead, talk about ideas. Talk about what you find interesting. Share observations. Ask questions about what intrigues others. Don't become stuck in a comfort zone of what you already know. When grappling with new ideas, what comes out of your mouth can sound radically different from what you have in your head. Yet the ideas will become more refined as you struggle with exposing them to air. At first you'll want a sympathetic audience but, to grow, you'll need to be able to convince those less understanding.

Action Research: While scientific research provides knowledge of the world through verifiable

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experimentation, the results and conclusions are impersonal. It can be a stretch to relate what you read to what you experience. And, to further complicate the application of research to one's own life, what is published and what makes the news depends on how the results are interpreted and reported.

Stay aware of current research, but also build another type of research into your life. "Action Research" is trying what sounds like the most reasonable solution to a problem. If it works, keep doing it. If it doesn't, change tactics. Think of it as a step beyond "trial and error," for you to keep track of what works and what doesn't. Think about creating a large, joint calendar or a journal to follow results. Written documentation helps make the journey understandable.

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As a young, talented musician's mom, I often found myself morphing into a "pushy mom." When my daughter avoided deep practice but I knew a concert date or competition was approaching, I would go wild with worry. I would try all sorts of things to manipulate her into practicing while also trying to maintain an air of ease. I'll confess that many times I crossed the line into active "managing," but my daughter was unfailing in letting me know when I had. Fortunately, one of my dear, valued mentors put it into perspective. She told me not to be afraid to cross the line, for she pointed out that if one didn't cross it once in awhile, he or she wasn't exploring new territory. However, she noted, once you know you've gone too far, it's important to acknowledge it and back up quickly. That, she said, is a hallmark of good parenting. Trying new approaches, as well as changing course when needed, are two basic components of Action Research!

Role Model: Know that you're a role model — for better or for worse — whether you want to be, or not. Those around you, including your own children, WILL notice how you respond to situations, how you deal with problems, and how you value and preserve the light in your own eyes.

Partner in Learning: Share the enjoyment. Parents need to consistently invite children to learn with them. It's one way (during the learning) that parents can demonstrate their own approach to discovering new things, practicing to develop skills, listening to those with more knowledge, as well as ways of dealing with the inevitable frustrations and failures. Our children learn about hard work and perseverance from combinations of observing others and feeling their own successes when they do something they believe is meaningful, purposeful, and valued. Include some time for mutual learning as you look at the weeks and months ahead. (A cooking class? Foreign language? Juggling? Calligraphy?)

Opportunity Maker: In my research on their perceptions of parental influence in talent development with 396 female U.S. Olympians, one young woman described her parents as "opportunity makers." These words resonated immediately as both a wonderful tribute and an idea full of implication for parents. Children thrive when parents are willing to explore, adapt, and be flexible in providing educational experiences that are appropriately challenging.

The Olympian noted that her parents would bring home clippings from the paper, tags torn from flyers, or notes from bulletin boards about upcoming events. At the dinner table, conversation would invariably turn to plans for the days ahead. For example, the mother might have said, "I saw that Lisa See is speaking Thursday night about her book "Shanghai Girls." I'm really interested in hearing her and learning more about the Angel Island Immigration Station. Does anyone want to go with me? [Note: The mother asked if anyone wanted to go. And she will go whether or not anyone joins her. And she will report back, with shining eyes, about the wonderful experience. In other words, she's serving as a role model (re: learning new things, staying open and eager, keeping the light in her own eyes, etc.) AND she's taking the position of "partner in learning," as she's openly inviting others to join her. This mother is not just offering an opportunity. She's a participant in the opportunity.] Shared events are an excellent basis for meaningful conversations.

It's through stories and examples (from research, real life experiences, even fables) that we sift, sort, and weigh ideas to see if they're workable for us. We continually balance, adding something here...changing our approach there (Action Research). Here is a story — not a recipe — that

hopefully will offer a fresh perspective on encouraging the light:

When my youngest daughter first soloed with an orchestra the week of her 10th birthday, there happened to be a critic in the audience. Without our knowledge, he wrote about her to some well-known pianists and, about two months after the concert, we received a handwritten letter from Gunnar Johansen that began something like, "I have received word of your daughter from Mr. F, who heard her play. I understand that a letter addressing the 'care and feeding' of prodigies is in order." Mr. Johansen continued on with pages of insight from his perspective as a pianist, teacher, performer, composer, and renaissance thinker.

Gunnar was a good friend of Victor Borge (in fact they were students together at the Hochschule für Musik in Vienna). Coincidentally, my daughter had been drawn to Borge videos from the time she was a toddler. So, with this connection, when we saw an opportunity to hear Victor Borge live in a benefit concert, it seemed like a natural thing to do. Just before the concert, my daughter met Mr. Borge and gave him a couple of her compositions. I thought she was going to explode with joy.



Less than a month later, Mr. B wrote her about the music she had written and, of course, she wrote back. This slow, but steady correspondence continued until one letter that began something like this: "I've never heard you play. We talk and write to each other and I've read your music, but I would like to hear you at the piano. I will be playing with the San Francisco Symphony next month and wondered if you would like to be at the rehearsal. After I excuse the orchestra, you can play for me." On the appointed day, off we drove — mother, father, and grandmother, together in a car for six hours of anticipation.

After the rehearsal, as the orchestra filed off the stage, Mr. B shielded his eyes from the light and looked out into the almost empty seats. He called out to my daughter, "Are you there?"

She actually bounded onto the stage, sat right down, and Mr. B asked her what she would like to play. The next 45 minutes were like any other coaching, audition, lesson. She played. He talked, demonstrated, asked. She talked, asked. She played. She experimented. Then Mr. B asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up (she was then 11 years old). She looked down and didn't say anything. Mr. B asked again. She was still quiet. Then Mr. B spoke these words that hit me right in the stomach: "I hope you don't say you want to be the world's best little concert pianist."

With my "mother hat" firmly in place, I had instantly "translated" his words into meaning she wasn't good enough and he didn't want her to have false hopes or spend too much time and energy in a fruitless obsession. BUT ...

Mr. B continued to talk. "No," he said, "Look at this." (He made a triangle with his hands — tips of finger touching as the apex and thumbs touching as the base.) "This is the mountain of the world's good little pianists. How much room is there at the top?" (As he said this, he tipped 'the mountain' toward her so she could see where the fingertips touched together making the top.) "Hmmm. Let's see," he continued, (now tipping his hands back so the fingertips pointed back toward his chest.) "I think there's room on the tip for four or five best little concert pianists ... hmmm." He hesitated, appearing to contemplate where his fingers touched together.

"Well, for you, we probably could squeeze in six, but that's not what I want." He stopped talking for

a moment. “No,” he said (now more quietly), “Look at this mountain.” He separated his hands, leaving the left hand still in “mountain” shape. With the right hand he began to slowly move his index finger horizontally back and forth and with each back/forth he tapped up the remaining “side” of the mountain. “I want you to seek out ideas, pack in experiences, try lots of thing.” (By now his finger was just over halfway up the side.) “And do you know what you’ll be doing? You’ll be building your own mountain and, when you do, you’ll be the natural top.” He paused again for emphasis. “Yes, that’s what I want for you.”

If you are familiar with Victor Borge’s work, you’ll know that he did exactly that. He wasn’t the world’s best pianist (yet he was superb), comedian (he was incredible — he passed away in December 2000 but still holds the record for the longest run of a solo Broadway show), nor was he the best linguist, composer, transcriber, director, conductor, teacher, writer, activist, clown, etc. He wasn’t the BEST in any of those categories, but he created his own mountain and he was the natural top. Today there are even Victor Borge impersonators.

I think back to that afternoon whenever I worry that what I’m doing isn’t good enough. Or I compare myself with the many awesome people who are doing outstanding work in the same area as I. It’s easy to fall prey to imposter syndrome, or perfectionism, or the lure of underachievement. After all, how can I possibly write as well or speak as well or publish as much, knowing that I’m a latecomer to my chosen field of work. During graduate school I was sometimes so low and overwhelmed, I felt like I would slither out to my car after a long, challenging day. BUT then I would remember Mr. B and whisper to myself, “Why are you trying to climb someone else’s mountain?” Because that’s generally what had happened. I was spending lots of energy in comparison. My focus was on “what I’m not able to do as well as ...” or “what I need to do to be better than that other person” rather than “what I am becoming” and/or “what is my unique contribution or perspective.”

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Think about those people in your community with shining eyes. They have curiosities and interests and, as they pursue them, they continue to tie together disparate ideas and a wide variety of skills and information in unforeseen ways. They are building. They are excited.

If we are the first keepers of the light in our children’s eyes, we must be willing to be reflective parents. Every once in awhile, don’t you think we must shine the light on our own our own perceptions, beliefs, values, hopes, and dreams to see if we are pre-judging (and therefore precluding) how our children might manifest their abilities?

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