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Five Ways to Nurture Talent (Without Being a Psycho Parent)

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Pop quiz for parents: When you see the word wisdom, which of the following people come to mind:

- A) Socrates
- B) Thomas Jefferson
- C) Oprah Winfrey
- D) Yourself

Whatever answer you chose, it was probably not (D). Because the truth is, being a parent these days does not make you feel very wise. In fact, it's the reverse: modern parenting seems *explicitly designed* to prevent wisdom, especially when it comes to nurturing the talents of your kids.

In the last few decades, talent-nurturing has been transformed into the equivalent of an *Iron Chef* competition, in which parents frantically assemble ingredients while the clock ominously ticks. Tiger Mothers and Fathers stalk the landscape, carrying their superstar cubs in their mouths. Soccer, violin, chess, math, art, academics -- they're not activities so much as readymade funnels down which you can pour massive amounts of time, money, and anxiety.

All of which adds up to a question: is there a wiser way to navigate this world? It's the sort of question Arianna Huffington addresses in the pages of her new book *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-Being, Wisdom, and Wonder* (which is terrific, by the way).

As it happens, I've spent the last seven years visiting and studying talent hotbeds in sports, art, music, and math, and also being the dad of four kids (12-18). Over the last few years my wife Jen and I have come up with a simple list of principles that have helped around our house, a few of which I'd like to share with you.

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 middle 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 too much attention to what your kid says.

Do: Pay lots of 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 their very 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 too much pressure on them to express those feelings, 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 borrowed 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 just 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 know their stuff, and who are not afraid to take charge of the process. 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 instinctively 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

Don't: Spend the car-ride home trying to give constructive advice

Do: Remember the six-word phrase that matters most

For three decades, coaching experts Rob Miller and Bruce E. Brown made a habit of asking college-age athletes about the ways their parents had made a positive and/or negative impact on their development. After several hundred interviews, their informal survey hit upon two discoveries.

Number one: what kids hate most, by an overwhelming margin, *is the conversations during the ride home after the game*. You know, that quiet, strained, slightly uncomfortable time when parents ask questions, give praise, offer critiques, and generally get involved by saying things like:

So what happened on that last play?

What did your coach tell the team after the game?

Do you think the team could have hustled more?

These types of moments are well intentioned, and often contain truth, but the timing is toxic. The moments after a game are not the time for judgement or pressure and definitely not for instruction (which is the job of the coach, not the parent). In fact, many of the kids said they

preferred having grandparents attend games, because they are more joyful and less pressurizing than parents.

But it's not all bad news. Because there's a second finding to emerge from their work, and it might be the wisest parenting tip I've ever read.

The kids reported there was one phrase spoken by parents that brought them happiness. One simple sentence that made them feel joyful, confident, and fulfilled. Just six words.

I love to watch you play.

That's it. Six words that are the essence of parental wisdom. Because they reframe your relationship; they nudge you away from being the ferry driver and the planner and toward something simpler and wiser: a parent.

I love to watch you play.

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