Revisiting Bloom's Developing Talent in Young People

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There are a number of resources that offer advice on how to encourage talent development in children. In this article, though, a single study will be described. It is a seminal study, conducted in the 1980s, but it continues to offer insight into developing talent in children. The study also demonstrates how various strategies can be used to develop talent in a variety of academic or nonacademic areas.

Benjamin Bloom (1985) and his colleagues attempted to describe how a number of eminently talented and creative individuals developed their skills across their lifespan. They consulted with experts to identify approximately 25 talented people in a number of fields including Olympic swimmers, mathematicians, concert pianists, sculptors, and research neurologists, as well as people from several other domains (Bloom, 1985). They asked participants about their skills, childhoods, parents, and education. The researchers also conducted similar interviews with identified individuals' parents.

What Bloom and his colleagues found was that the individuals studied seemed to develop their skills in three phases: their early age development phase, their middle years development phase, and their later years development phase (Sosniak, 1985a). The phases were not concrete, and transitions were not always obvious, but the phases did offer advice for parents to help encourage their own children's talent development.

Early Years
In the early years, parents exposed their very young children to their talent areas. Often, this exposure was "playful and filled with immediate rewards" (Sosniak, 1985a, p. 411). This involved engaging in their talent area at family functions and with parents, and was free of immediate judgment and critique. Parents also made sure to expose their children to additional activities, offering informal lessons at the child's request. Some talented individuals and parents described their early years, recalling such opportunities:

"[music] was a natural part of our life, even when we didn't have [outside] exposure to it . . .
We always kidded that [daughter] woke up in a car bed, next to the tennis courts, hearing the ping-pong of tennis balls—that was one of the first sounds she recollects probably...

Even when he was real tiny, I'd take him to a pool and put him in a playpen. He was still just a baby . . . We'd get him in the water with water wings, so he was used to the water. (Sloane, 1985, p. 447)

Gradually, these informal lessons transition to more formal instruction as parents found new teachers or coaches to provide advanced training. These lessons aided in the advancing of skills and working toward expertise.

Middle and Late Years in Talent Development
In the middle years of talent development, parents were faced with deciding whether or not to further invest (Bloom, 1985). This was an investment of time, emotion, and money—and this often involved the entire family. It involved parents constantly finding new and challenging instruction for their child's continued growth. This
allowed the child to master his or her domain and work toward additional goals. This time also represented children taking more responsibility for their own learning or development. A research mathematician recalled,

I remember that it was perhaps about ninth grade that I did some things on my own. I would go to the library and check out books on college algebra and spend evenings trying to learn, to memorize all the formulas in the book. It was entirely on my own. (Gustin, 1985, p. 301)

As children matured, parents' involvement in the talent development process culminated in finding a master teacher to help the child work toward his or her expertise (Sloane, 1985). A pianist recollected,

He [the teacher] worked with me technically as a pianist, but the distinction of becoming a musician became clear every time I took a lesson. Because we talked about music. We began trying to become more intellectual about how phrase structure [worked] and what it meant and what you were trying to say, rather than how do you accomplish this at this instrument. (Sosniak, 1985b, p. 89)

**Conclusion**
Initially, keep it light and simple, value your child's interest, and be informal. Gradually, ramp-up instruction, making it increasingly structured and challenging. Decide: Is this going to be a hobby or a life profession? Are you trying to get a college scholarship with this talent, or just a line on a resume? What does the child want? Is he or she sure? What will you do if your child changes his or her mind?

These are important considerations and objectives for parents to be mindful of. Rather than wildly spending money and time on piano or art lessons, parents should understand what they and their child want in terms of talent development. The level of natural ability in the child will determine how far he or she can go in a domain as well. Excessive practice may be fine for some, but for other children it may be a burden.

Although Bloom's (1985) research is nearing its 30th anniversary, it remains relevant for today's families with potential for exceptional gifts and talents. For those interested in reading the book in its entirety, I would highly suggest it. Written for a general audience, Bloom and his colleagues provided compelling individual narratives regarding the journey to the highest levels of competition and performance.

**References**