

# “ONE SIZE FITS ALL”

## Doesn't Work When Selecting a Mentor

*“If I have seen farther (than you and Descartes) it is by standing upon the shoulders of Giants.”*  
— Sir Isaac Newton, in a letter to Robert Hooke, 1675

by Dr. Del Siegle

Parents, classroom teachers, and teachers of the gifted cannot be all things to all young people. The nature and diversity of gifted students' interests demand resources well beyond the confines of the school and demonstrate the need for mentors and other resource people. Mentors provide content sophistication that normally would not be accessible from traditional resources.

Selecting the right mentor for children is not as simple as finding the most knowledgeable person in children's areas of interest. Like the clothing that children wear, there isn't a “one size fits all” mentor. Dr. Benjamin Bloom, an eminent educational researcher at the University of Chicago, published a revealing study on talent development in 1985. He and his colleagues conducted a four-year study of 150 world-class pianists, sculptors, tennis champions, research mathematicians, and research neurologists. They discovered that all the individuals progressed through three distinct phases of learning. The length of these phases, the type of interaction involved at each phase, and the sequence of the phases helped determine the course of the protégé's talent development. He wrote:

“... no matter what the initial characteristics (or gifts) of the individuals, unless there is a long and intensive process of encouragement, nurturance, education, and training, the individuals will not attain extreme levels of capability in ... [their] fields.” (p. 3)

### HOW TALENT DEVELOPS

#### *First Level of Interaction:* PLAY AND ROMANCE

Bloom found that the early years of talent development were playful and filled with immediate rewards. The children enjoyed the activities and received much encouragement from their first mentors. The first mentors were usually selected for their close proximity to the home, rather than for any special teaching ability. They were very “kind and nice” and enormously patient. They offered frequent rewards that ranged from gold stars to candy. The

interaction between the mentor and mentee was informal and was less concerned with right and wrong and measurable objectives than with exploring the field and having fun with it. This phase was characterized by “enormous encouragement of interest and involvement, stimulation, freedom to explore, and immediate rewards.” The child became involved, captivated, and eager for more information and expertise.

Children are often attracted to activities that their parents enjoy. I became interested in photography by observing my father record family events with an adjustable camera he purchased during his Army stint in Germany. If children observe their parents enjoying an activity, they may express an interest in learning more about it. Any mentor at this point in the child's development must reflect that same passion.

When a child first expresses interest in a topic, parents should ask themselves: Has my child really fallen in love with the topic? If he or she hasn't, then they ought to seek enthusiastic mentors who will playfully engage their child in the talent area. This individual must love children and exhibit a vibrant passion for the talent field. At the same time, the mentor begins to develop the child's talent. The key to successful talent development during the initial stages is to locate a mentor who has the skills to begin developing the child's talent while helping him or her fall in love with the talent area.

#### *Second Level of Interaction:*

#### PRECISION AND DISCIPLINE

The second mentors in Bloom's study were remarkably different from the first. They were usually selected for their

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expertise in the talent field and often the first mentors helped select them. This was a move from the “nice” teacher to one with expertise and connections in the talent field. Instruction was rational and focused on technical skill development and perfecting the small details of the talent field. The personal bond between the teachers and students changed from one of affection to one of respect. The teachers set the standards and the direction for what to study. “Skill, technique, and the habit of accuracy” were dominant at this level.

This is the desired mentor for children who have shown promise and commitment to a talent area. Parents can ask themselves, “Does our child already love the topic and is he or she ready for more advanced technical training? The mentor’s understanding of the skills needed to succeed in the talent area is very important during this phase. This mentor is usually not someone who lives down the street. Expertise at this level is paramount. Parents should investigate how this potential mentor’s peers appraise his or her ability to develop talent. They may need to travel several hours for the child to meet with this mentor. A friend of mine who lived on a ranch in the west drove over 100 miles each week for her daughter’s piano lessons.

*Third Level of Interaction:*

GENERALIZATION AND INTEGRATION

The move to the third phase involved a transition from technical precision to personal expression. The mentors at this phase were masters, only a few of whom exist in any given talent field. The learners auditioned in order to study with these mentors.

These mentors did not tolerate sloppiness or laziness, assigned work that required tremendous amounts of time and effort, and let the mentees know when the expected standards had not been met. The students often lived with peers from the talent field. This was the time to “make the ‘learned’ an integral part of the learner; the time to find the meaning and emotion of the larger experience, and to make [the talent field] one’s own.” It was a period during which the development of individuality became paramount. A career was set during this last stage and the mentees spent most of their time perfecting their style and performance.

Very few children may reach the level where they need to interact with the third type of mentor. However, some do. Once children reach this level and demonstrate mastery of the technical skills of a area, they are ready to discover how they can contribute uniquely to the talent field. This requires a special mentor. This mentor is often found through a connection with a previous mentor. It could be a specialist from a

summer camp. This mentor has a unique ability to discover what is special about his or her mentee and help the mentee express his or her talent in a way that only the mentee can. The close working relationship between the wiser mentor and the talented mentee, both of whom share a passion for their common field of study or talent, represents a classic mentorship.

**A PERSONAL EXAMPLE**

I have seen how this sequence of stages can be paramount. As a former professional photographer, I dissuaded hundreds of young people from photography. For many years I taught photography at a summer camp for gifted students. I insisted that the students use adjustable cameras and master the relationship between f-stops, shutter speeds, and ISO ratings. I included the relationship between foot candles and camera settings just for fun. Many of the students soon lost interest in making photographs. Reflecting on Bloom’s study, I realized I was functioning at the second level of interaction at a time when I ought to have been functioning at the first. I abandoned the adjustable cameras in favor of automatic ones and replaced f-stops with concepts. I began with an exercise where the students made photographs that represented concepts such as “people without people” or “near and far.” I was amazed at the images that the young people produced. One young man photographed his grandfather. When I asked how that depicted “people without people” he replied, “My grandfather has Alzheimer’s. He’s here, but he really isn’t here.” Another student photographed a pregnant woman for “near and far.” She said, “The baby is near, but still very far away.”

Once the students were captivated with the joy of expressing themselves through photography, they often wanted to improve the quality of their images. It was at this point that f-stops and foot candles became important. I, like Bloom, learned that precision and discipline must follow, rather than precede, play and romance.

As you in your role as parents search for potential mentors for your children, consider Bloom’s work. Assess your children’s position in the talent development sequence and determine the kind of mentor that would be most appropriate. During different stages of talent development, different mentoring experiences are required. By considering children’s placement with mentors carefully, you can contribute to your children’s continuing enthusiasm and mastery of their talents. ♣

Recommended Reading

Bloom, B.S. (Ed.). (1985). *Developing Talent in Young People*. New York: Ballantine Books.

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