



## Helping Your Children Develop Their Talents

What a great lifetime investment parents make when they help their children discover and develop their talents! Some psychologists say the principle job of parents is to help their children become themselves—to discover their passions and their abilities and to put them to use in making the world a better place.

The process begins with very young children. Sensitive parents notice children's preferences and respond to them helpfully. If a baby loves to shake things, the parent provides a rattle. When an infant likes to chew things, the parent provides a teething biscuit. When a toddler wants to climb things, a parent provides boxes and cushions. When a child wants to draw things, the parent provides finger paints, markers, and crayons.

Of course, parents cannot provide children with everything they want. But there is usually some good way to provide the experience they want and need. You may not want them to climb a fence, but you can help them run the hill. You may not choose to buy a fancy playset, but you can throw a blanket over a table to make a hideaway.

The first thing parents can do is help their children explore and discover various talents. Notice the things your child likes; comment on them. "You really love to watch bugs." "You seem to have a talent for making friends." "I love the way you express yourself with finger paints." Loving parents can be very helpful social mirrors by giving specific, positive feedback to their children.

Most children are interested in or collect certain things. If your child loves insects, help him or her collect them. Get books about them from the library. Buy an ant colony. Go on bug safaris together. Ask your child to tell you what he or she has learned. Buy bug posters for your child's room. Make displays together of your child's projects and interests. Help your children discover and develop talents by noticing and supporting their interests.

At some point, most children compare themselves to other children. They might feel inferior to a child who is good at playing ball. They might feel like a failure at poetry. Parents can respond in ways that support all talents. "Yes, Susie is amazing at soccer. Tom has a real way with words. What great talents! But I have never known a person who understands bugs as you do! I love the way you are developing your talents." Your child may want to explore other talents but should never understate his or her own talents.

I have a wise friend whose teenage son was interested in flight. The man encouraged his boy to check a book out of the library on gliding. After the boy read the book, the father took his son to the airport where he arranged for his son to go gliding with an instructor. What a great way for a teen to progressively explore his talents. As it happened, a combination of a big lunch and a bumpy ride had a big impact on the boy's career plans.

One neglected area of talent development is helping children use their talents to make life better for other people. A child who is good at math might tutor a child who struggles. A child who loves nature might help a neighbor with her yard. A tender child might befriend a lonely child. We do not have talents so that we can compete with other people; we have talents so we can help them.

Life is rich when we learn to discover our talents, develop them, celebrate them, and use them to help other people.