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The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

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Gifted Athletes, Artists and Musicians  
Dr. Sylvia Rimm

When children show unusual athletic, artistic, or musical abilities, parents may struggle in determining how to guide them. As parents, we shouldn't overlook opportunities to develop special talents. Unlike intellectual or creative talent, which permits many opportunities for careers, the Olympics, professional sports, symphony orchestras, choruses, successful bands, and artistic careers are limited. While those who make it to the top are rewarded with both recognition and enormous financial success, many fall by the wayside, despondent and disenchanting. Starving artists are legendary, and broken spirits have destroyed many talented young people's opportunities. There are very few opportunities for solo violinists, Olympic gymnasts or swimmers, prima ballerinas, major symphony orchestra players, or golfers like Tiger Woods.

To set such high goals, families and children must make lifelong time and financial commitments early. Sacrifices are made in other avenues of life, and for every glorious success story there are thousands of disappointment stories. As families sort out their priorities in directing their gifted children, here are some considerations:

**Consider lessons in your child's talent area.** Arrange lessons with a supportive and encouraging teacher when children show talent and interest early.

**Don't narrow children's interests too early.** Keep balanced activities and socialization in their lives.

**Arrange auditions with other teachers.** If their teacher seems to be especially impressed by their talents, ask for the opinions of other professionals.

**Encourage healthy competition.** Music, art, and sports contests abound. Talented children should have opportunities to enter such competitions to measure their talents and skills against others. Moving to higher levels of competition gradually permits them to raise the bar without feeling discouraged.

**Consider the tradeoffs.** When teachers ask young children to make greater and greater time commitments, parents need to think seriously about the wisdom of driving children's interests in a solitary direction. Children should be passionate about and extremely talented in the activity before families agree to take the big step to career commitment. Family members should think carefully about the opportunities they are giving to their children as well as those that they are taking away. If the talent area is extremely competitive, they should also realistically determine the likelihood of success. Decisions will need to be reconsidered frequently as children's development in an activity is not always predictable.

**Avoid pressuring your children.** Highly competitive arenas involve a great deal of pressure in them. It's important that enthusiasm and commitment of the parents is not translated to unfair pressure on children and that children's healthy development is not stolen from them. Parents who personalize their children's victories as if they were their own make it difficult for children to individuate and develop independently. Backing off is not easy because parental investments are also great, and talented children require parental enthusiasm and support.

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**Help children enjoy their talent area intrinsically.** If Olympics or a major orchestra are the only goals, children may lose the love of their activity. If they can enjoy their music, art, or sport, even if they are not as successful as they hoped, they will be able to continue to appreciate that activity throughout their lives. If it is too tied to difficult goals, their defeats will alienate them from lifelong enjoyment of their activity. Furthermore, there may be interesting alternative careers within their talent area. Although these may convey less status, they may be very fulfilling

**Continue other interests and skills.** Despite hours of practice in special areas, children do need to develop other skills and talents. Should their major talent not materialize, other skills provide fallback interests and direction for careers and help them to maintain self-esteem despite their disappointment.

Source:

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