

# Gifted Children and their Parents

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## Abstract

*When celebrating the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of a talented music teacher and father of a prodigy, Leopold Mozart, it is natural to think about his influence on his son's life. Resisting the temptation to judge his behaviour specifically, in this essay I will discuss giftedness, the role of the environment in gifted children's high-level performance, and in particular the role of their parents. It is my hope that in the end we will have a more nuanced picture to refer to when trying to analyse Leopold's attitude toward his overwhelmingly talented son.*

**Keywords:** giftedness, Mozart, environment, acceleration, prodigies

## Introduction

In addition to being an iconic figure in music, Mozart is a bonafide prototype for giftedness. In fact, he is widely known first and foremost as a prodigy, namely “a young child (usually below the age of 10) who exhibits expertise at the level of performance in a given domain”<sup>1</sup>. On a continuum of giftedness prodigies would be considered to have a very high level, but this definition often

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<sup>1</sup> M., Taranu, T., Ionescu, “Prodigies”, in: M., Runco, S., Pritzker, S. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Creativity*, 3rd edition, vol. 2, Elsevier, Academic Press, 2020, p. 394.

amalgamates talent and giftedness<sup>2</sup>. Even if, in this symposium, Mozart's father Leopold is the main focus, or to be more precise his attitude and behaviour towards his prodigy child, I will not judge these retrospectively. It is too difficult to achieve this judgement when going back in time, and scientific studies are anyway best used to help improve future behaviours, based on evidence, rather than judge past behaviours. Consequently, in this short essay, I will first present giftedness as a concept, with all the difficulties that surround it with regard to its definition and mechanisms; then I will analyse the role of the environment in fostering giftedness, in particular the role of parents; and I will end with some ideas about what works best for gifted children based on the evidence we have to date.

### **Giftedness between knowns and unknowns**

The first question that comes to mind when one hears the term “giftedness” is simply “What is it?” This question has haunted humanity, since its beginnings, because in all epochs some of the members of our species were different, and succeeded to come up with novel solutions that took all humanity further as a civilisation. And even if behaviourally it seems easy to say that a gifted person is one that achieves superior performance in a domain, the big question remains: “What are the ingredients that result in that person achieving?” As already mentioned, there may be different shades of giftedness, and it is very difficult to disentangle talent from giftedness and from prodigies<sup>3</sup>, so it is no wonder that we find understanding a life like Mozart's to be an uphill struggle when looking at it after centuries!

Definitions of giftedness are historically and culturally saturated, and it continues to be difficult to conduct empirical studies in this area. How people or researchers think of giftedness differs from one period to another (giftedness as madness, for example, or giftedness as a gift from Divinity in some early periods in history) and

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<sup>2</sup> E., Winner, J. E., Drake, “Giftedness and Expertise: The Case for Genetic Potential”, *Journal of Expertise*, 1(2), 2018, p. 114-120.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*

from one culture to another: compare the giftedness of computer scientists in technological societies with the giftedness of someone searching for water sources in remote societies<sup>4</sup>. In our times, giftedness is usually associated with high intelligence, but recent thinking also includes factors such as persistent motivation, creativity, and task persistence also<sup>5</sup>. There are also many new domains in which giftedness can manifest itself, like computer science, which did not exist in previous times. The difficulty of scientifically investigating giftedness is fuelled by at least two major factors: the lack of an agreed upon definition (establishing who to include in the category of interest for study) and the small number of gifted participants available, who are also often very different from domain to domain<sup>6</sup>. This is why authors like Ziegler state that giftedness is, in the end, just a verbal label<sup>7</sup>. Most authors agree, however, that giftedness refers to the cognitive, creative, and motivational abilities that help a child to have a high performance in a given domain<sup>8</sup>.

Giftedness in music is all the more challenging because the term “talent” continues to be so widely used in this domain, bringing with it a whole discussion about innateness. Talent in specific domains like

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<sup>4</sup> S. B., Kaufman, R. J. Sternberg, “Conceptions of giftedness”, in S. I. Pfeiffer (Ed.), *Handbook of Giftedness in Children - Psychoeducational Theory, Research, and Best Practices*, Springer, 2008, p. 71-91.

<sup>5</sup> J. J., Gallagher, “Psychology, Psychologists, and Gifted Students”, *Handbook of Giftedness in Children - Psychoeducational Theory, Research, and Best Practices*, Springer, 2008, p. 1-11.

H., Gardner, *Intelligence reframed: Multiple intelligences for the 21st century*. Basic Books, 1999.

J. S., Renzulli, “Theories, Actions, and Change: An Academic Journey in Search of Finding and Developing High Potential in Young People”, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 55(4), 2011, p. 305-308.

R. F., Subotnik, P., Olszewski-Kubilius, F. C., Worrell, “Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science”, *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 12(1), 2011, p. 3-54.

<sup>6</sup> T., Ionescu, *Copiii astfel: Trasee specifice de dezvoltare cognitivă. O analiză critică*. Presa Universitară Clujeană, Cluj-Napoca, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> A., Ziegler, H., Stoeger, W., Vialle, “Giftedness and Gifted Education. The Need for a Paradigm Change”, *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 56(4), 2012, p. 194-197.

<sup>8</sup> R. F., Subotnik, P., Olszewski-Kubilius, F. C., Worrell, *op. cit.*

music or visual arts began to be associated with giftedness only in the second half of the 20th century, especially following the appearance of the book on multiple intelligences<sup>9</sup>. Most of the researchers agree that giftedness in music is based on sensitivity for musical constructions like tonality, harmony, and rhythm; very good memory for melodies; good pitch perception; spontaneous response to music; good memory in general; and high attentional control<sup>10</sup>.

Children who are gifted, whether in an academic domain or in music, usually have very good memory, a rapid understanding of patterns, a high learning capacity, very good executive functioning, intrinsic motivation, high task engagement, and passion for the domain of interest<sup>11</sup>. Current models, however, reveal the need for a paradigm change in the study of giftedness so that we can go beyond

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<sup>9</sup> H. Gardner, *op. cit.*

J., Piirto, "Giftedness in Nonacademic Domains", *Handbook of Giftedness in Children - Psychoeducational Theory, Research, and Best Practices*, Springer, 2008, p. 367-386.

<sup>10</sup> J., Freeman, "Children's Talent in Fine Art and Music - England", *Roeper Review*, 22(2), 2000, p. 98-01.

H. Gardner, *op. cit.*

J., Piirto, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> T. W., Curby, K. M., Rudasill, S. E., Rimm-Kaufman, T. R., Konold, "The Role of Social Competence in Predicting Gifted Enrollment", *Psychology in the Schools*, 45(8), 2008, p. 729-744.

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H. H., Steiner, M., Carr, "Cognitive Development in Gifted Children: Toward a more Precise Understanding of Emerging Differences in Intelligence", *Educational Psychology Review*, 15(3), 2003, p. 215-246.

R. F., Subotnik, P., Olszewski-Kubilius, F. C., Worrell, *op. cit.*

descriptions and understand the mechanisms behind it<sup>12</sup>. This is because we have fairly good descriptions of these children's characteristics, and of their high performance in various domains, but still poor understanding of their determinant factors. Current ideas regarding gene-environment interactions are valuable<sup>13</sup>, but we still do not know exactly how these interactions happen. Moreover, precocity in the domain of music still leads some researchers to assert that there must be some innate features for musical talent, but we are yet to find out how to investigate innateness in a rigorous way, and why practice is so important for the high performance of gifted children in music.

## Environment and the role of parents

So, what is most important: innate characteristics or practice? Most people think that gifted children need nothing: they are best left to strive to succeed by themselves. In a way it is true that often they manage to succeed, and sometimes do so against all odds, but it is also the case that when they have support in their environment the results are always better<sup>14</sup>. As such, recent research points to the important interaction between innate potential and environmental factors.

For music, deliberate practice seems essential for success<sup>15</sup>. We witness spontaneous deliberate practice in prodigies, but if parents take children to be musically educated performance is always better. One might assume that this is what Leopold Mozart did with his son: his trained eye immediately observed his son's talent and then he

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<sup>12</sup> D. Y., Dai, J. A., Swanson, H., Cheng, "State of Research on Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Survey of Empirical Studies", Published During 1998—2010 (April). *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 55(2), 2011, p. 126-138.

T. Ionescu, *op. cit.*

A., Ziegler, H., Stoeger, W., Vialle, *op. cit.*

<sup>13</sup> J. J., Gallagher, *op.cit.*

H. R., Schaffer, *Introducere în psihologia copilului*, Ed. a 3-a, Ed. ASCR, Cluj-Napoca, 2010.

<sup>14</sup> J., Freeman, *op. cit.*

G., McPherson, S., Hallam, "Musical Potential", S. Hallam, I. Cross, & M. Thaut (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Music Psychology*, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 255-264.

<sup>15</sup> G., McPherson, S., Hallam, *op. cit.*

fostered it, but it is also true that it matters how a parent does this fostering; the literature shows that authoritative parenting, in which parents are both warm with their children and demanding (i.e. being attentive to their needs but also setting firm and appropriate limits for their behaviour) has the best results with regard to raising a child<sup>16</sup>. This holds true with gifted children: the parent needs to observe the gift of the child, foster it, put the child's need in first place, be very affectionate with the child, but also set firm limits like shaping a practice programme. It is also true that research into parenting is relatively new, and that even today there are cultures in which parents are predominantly authoritarian, rather than authoritative, with little warmth, lots of limits and controls. Perhaps it is this authoritarian style which was the norm back when Mozart lived.

Contemporary researchers say that “for a child with talent, the influence of the family can be the determining factor as to whether the ability is developed to a high level or not” and that “parents engineer the environment to support talent development”<sup>17</sup>. Because of the constant gene-environment interactions, the environment also shapes biology, as intensive musical practice reshapes brain development: for example, studies show differences in the auditive cortex that are instrument specific<sup>18</sup>. As such, parents are essential in guiding gifted children on their path to achieving their potential. It will be them to choose among alternatives like homeschooling, accelerating or

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<sup>16</sup> D., Baumrind, “The Development of Instrumental Competence through Socialization”, in A. Pick (Ed.), *Minnesota symposia on child psychology*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973, p. 3-46.

E. E., Maccoby, J. A., Martin, “Socialization in the Context of the Family: Parent-Child Interaction”, in P. H. Mussen, & E. M. Hetherington (Eds.), *Handbook of Child Psychology: Vol. 4. Socialization, Personality, and Social Development*, New York: Wiley, 1983, p. 1-101.

<sup>17</sup> P., Olszewski-Kubilius, “The Role of the Family in Talent Development”, *Handbook of Giftedness in Children - Psychoeducational Theory, Research, and Best Practices*, Springer, 2018, p. 53.

<sup>18</sup> D. J., Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music: The Science of a Human Obsession*, Penguin Group, USA, 2006.

I., Peretz, R. J., Zatorre, “Brain Organization for Music Processing”, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 56, 2005, p. 89-114.

enriching their children's learning path, as the literature offers both support and shortcomings for each of the above.<sup>19</sup> We can now easily understand how difficult it can be to be a gifted child's parent, in any epoch.

We can then end this essay by asking ourselves: was Leopold's attitude and behaviour toward his son appropriate? Based on all of the above a definitive answer is difficult to give, but it may well be that he did try hard to foster Wolfgang's talent early on, with the methods he had back then; and the results were indeed amazing.

### **Closing remarks**

Who knows whether Mozart would have been the Mozart he became without the father that he had? No one can tell. But gifted children certainly need special parents, who can observe the giftedness in their children and nourish it for it to flourish. We know today that if innate potential (and not innate fixed characteristics) encounters a fostering environment, gifted children have higher chances for the actualisation of their potential<sup>20</sup>. For future parents this perhaps means that they should observe, and then foster, any little sign of early talent, but with guidance rather than authority, so that their children have the chance to perform in the respective domain if they want to.

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<sup>19</sup> J., Freeman, "Teaching the Gifted and Talented", *Education Today*, 54(3), 2004, p. 17-21.

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<sup>20</sup> R. F., Subotnik, P., Olszewski-Kubilius, F. C., Worrell, *op. cit.*

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