



Center for Talent Development
Northwestern University
School of Education and Social Policy

Talent

Summer 2014



NORTHWESTERN
UNIVERSITY

Director's Message

Here's to a Successful Summer!

Our campus is teeming with Summer Program students engaged in deep learning about topics that fascinate them—brain surgery, sketch comedy, robotics, roller coaster physics and more.



As part of the CTD experience, students go beyond just meeting course objectives. They learn to see opportunity in challenges, set goals and stay motivated. They are guided by enthusiastic and highly qualified teachers who help students navigate the experience of being surrounded by high achievers just like themselves and being truly challenged by a curriculum.

By walking students through these challenges, we are doing exactly what my colleague Dr. Rena Subotnik, with the American Psychological Association, recommends in this issue's "Turning Talent into High Performance." Subotnik advises educators to be explicit with students about the challenges, competition, fears and risks involved in talent development. She also espouses psychosocial strength training as an effective method for taking good performance up a notch (or many).

To provide you with more information (and even an app!) on mental skills training, we also interviewed Dr. Steve Portenga. A performance psychologist who coached athletes to and through the 2012 Olympic Games, Portenga has provided groundbreaking work in developing a curriculum for psychosocial skill development.

It's exciting to point you toward the latest research and services that promote optimal performance. It's even more thrilling to witness how much our students accomplish with support and encouragement. Let's take time this season to revel in their success...preferably while outside in the sun!

Paula Abeyuski-Kubilus

Turning Talent into High Performance

High performance requires hard work—and a lot of it. Truly thriving in the upper echelon of any field, however, requires more than that. There are a lot of talented people in the world, but only a few become renowned. What's the key?

The Key to High Performance

"It's not just about talent," says Rena Subotnik, a director with the American Psychological Association. "You need to learn the content and techniques of your chosen field, but you also need to know how to maximize the utility of your talent," Subotnik says. Unlocking the door to high performance requires competence in psychosocial skills—a set of abilities that support talent development by helping people who are doing well do even better. A list of these skills is found in figure 1 on page 2.

Psychosocial Skills: Risk and Rewards

Psychosocial skills are so crucial to high performance and talent development, in fact, that it's impossible to reach your full potential without them. "As you move through the talent development process," Subotnik explains, "you start to encounter real competition, envy and fears." Without psychosocial skills, you might miss opportunities, take envy or jealousy at face value and not understand it or be paralyzed by competition. "There are a lot of ways you could hamper your development," says Subotnik. By employing psychosocial skills effectively, however, you can rise above the obstacles.



Overcome Envy

As an example of overcoming envy, Subotnik cites "Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development," which she edited with Karen Arnold and Kate Noble. In it, a sports psychologist details the stress of high achievement in figure skating. A figure skater might find that her skating friends suddenly turn on her when she advances to a level beyond them. "If you're in isolation," Subotnik says, "you might think, 'What did I do?' It can be very self-destructive. If you have these psychosocial skills, however, you understand the foibles and complex feelings people have about other people's success. You can be more gracious and understanding about it."

Capitalize on Opportunity

Psychosocial skills also help you capitalize on opportunity," Subotnik says. "Let's say you're on a waiting list to participate in a science fair and an opening comes up. If you're overcome by fears of failure, then you won't take that opportunity." If you recognize the

continued on page 2

Turning Talent into High Performance

continued from page 1

opening as both a challenge and an opportunity, though, you'll take the risk and be the better for it.

Grow through Competition and/or Criticism

Competition and criticism become more intense the more you achieve and the higher you climb in any arena. Psychosocial skills help you handle both, and yet so often com-



petition and criticism seem to catch people by surprise.

"I'm always shocked," says Subotnik, "that when kids enter very selective programs, there is no explicit discussion about meeting people who get things more quickly than you do. We don't prepare students well for facing real criticism either."

"Very few people have thick skin," explains Subotnik. She warns that high achievers can tend to ruminate on criticisms and get stuck rather than considering criticism from a respected teacher an honor to receive. "That's how you grow," she says. "Psychosocial skills allow students to view criticism objectively, analyze it, take what is useful and move on."

Psychosocial Skill Development

In the music and sports arenas, instructing students in psychosocial skills is just part of the overall training experience. Just as exercise is fundamental to good health, psychosocial strength training is essential to athletic and musical high performance.

Subotnik would like to see psychosocial skill development become just as prevalent

in academic arenas, as well. "Having an explicit psychosocial skill development curriculum as part of one's education and talent development is really important," says Subotnik. She recommends having sports psychologists or music coaches speak with students and parents to normalize psychosocial skill development alongside talent development. "Gifted students are just as talented as tennis and tuba players, and they need the same things," she says. "They need to bolster their confidence. They need to deal with strategic risk taking.

They need to know, as Robert Sternberg says, the value of perseverance in pursuit of their chosen endeavors, but also when perseverance turns into perseveration and is no longer useful."

Currently, beyond those used in a few select athletic programs, a psychosocial skill development curriculum does not exist. Subotnik says she and her colleagues, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius and Frank Worrell, are encouraging the development of such a curriculum by identifying benchmarks of psychosocial skills that would be important at particular points.

Psychosocial skill development requires practice. Athletes train while listening to crowds cheering for the other team. Musicians take lessons after running up and

down stairs to stimulate the feelings of stage fright, such as heart palpitations or shortness of breath. "Psychosocial skill development involves practicing over and over again in the simulated scary conditions of high-stakes performance so that calming down and performing well under pressure is automatic," Subotnik says.

When asked how much psychosocial skills practice is enough, Subotnik laughs and says, "I don't know; I'm still practicing."



Rena Subotnik serves as director of the Center for Psychology in Schools and Education at the American Psychological Association (APA). Subotnik is co-editor of "Developing Giftedness

and Talent Across the Life Span" and many other texts. She is the first author of "Genius Revisited: High IQ Children Grown Up" and co-author of "Rethinking Giftedness and Gifted Education: A Proposed Direction Forward Based on Psychological Science." In 2002, Subotnik received the National Association for Gifted Children NAGC Distinguished Scholar award, and she is a 2009 American Educational Research Association fellow. ●

Figure 1: Psychosocial Skills

Psychosocial skills are determining influencers in the successful development of talent.

Psychosocial Skill	Explanation
Mindset	Believing that brains and talent are just the beginning; success requires dedication and hard work.
Persistence	Sticking with it, even when it is hard.
Strategic risk taking	Knowing when to stick with it, when to change course and choosing which course to take.
Social skills	Being collegial and gracious, showing up when expected and doing your share of the work.
Addressing fears	Exposing yourself to conditions in which you might find yourself, and learning to calm down despite the obstacles.
Mastering the game	Learning the ins and outs of moving forward in your field. Often these are taught by mentors rather than teachers and the strategies have nothing to do with your specific talent. Knowing whom to befriend in an organization or how to engage with the press are examples.
Tasteful self-promotion	Letting people know about your work without being obnoxious about it.
Finding a personal niche	Finding ways to stand out from other high performers in your field. Discovering what you want to be known for and staying true to it.

Performing Under Pressure: An Interview with Dr. Steve Portenga

Plan. Prepare. Perform. Whatever your field of study or work, this is the three-step process toward achievement. As a formula, it's short and simple. Putting it into practice, however, is another story. Fatigue, anxiety, a lack of focus, confidence or motivation can all get in the way.

Dr. Steve Portenga has built a career around helping people overcome these inhibitors and implement the three-step performance process, with great results. He has coached athletes through the Olympics, surgeons through life-and-death procedures and musicians through high-profile auditions. As a consultant, his goal is to help clients deliver their best performance when it matters most and to enjoy themselves in the process.



Center for Talent Development had the privilege of talking with Portenga about his work and its relevance to the gifted education community.

Your background is in sports psychology. How is your work applicable to gifted education?

There is a growing number of us who are trying to change sports psychology to performance psychology. A lot of people aren't aware of what we do because they hear 'sport' or 'athlete' and think, 'That's not me.' But performance is any time you plan and prepare for a moment when you will be judged, evaluated or held to a standard. This applies to everything from athletics to performing arts to high-stakes testing.

So you could help students prepare for a test, science fair or college interview?

Absolutely. A lot of the psychology of performance deals with making sure you get out what you put in. You put in a lot of hard work to do well on the SAT®, for instance, but then anxiety keeps you from doing as well as you hope. Or you go for an interview knowing the ideas you want to convey, but you walk out not having shared them. This is when performance comes into play — when you're not capable of doing in the moment what you've prepared yourself to do. Another way of wording it is helping people deal with pressure.

Isn't the ability to deal with pressure innate? Can it really be taught?

There are skills that impact performance that some people might think of as character traits, or attributes. They include commitment, concentration, composure and confidence. I believe you can develop and improve these.

For some people, it might take more time and effort because they are already at the upper end of the range of what they're capable of achieving. Someone else who has never been exposed to these ideas might have lots of room for improvement. So while people may not change the same amount or at the same rate, it's very rare for someone to put in time and effort and not improve.

Is it fair to say that sometimes the bigger challenge is what gifted kids expect from themselves?

Yes. Most of the pressure that people perform under is self-generated pressure. It's about how they've identified themselves, how they think people value them and what they think their skill set is. They end up creating far more pressure for themselves.

We can always give people skills to work under pressure. Alternatively, we can help them understand themselves in a way that minimizes how much pressure builds up in the first place. This latter approach takes longer, but it's much more functional in the long run.

What can parents do to help their children deal with pressure?

You're never going to get rid of pressure entirely, but you can learn to work with it and through it, and you can keep it from crossing a certain threshold. One way to do this is through attentional control training. The ability to control your attentional focus is one of the most important skills needed for elite performance.

One easy way to practice attentional control is through mindful meditation. Everyone knows to let go of negative thoughts, but we never actually train ourselves on how to do that. Mindfulness is simply training yourself to be more aware of what you're actually thinking and letting go of thoughts detrimental to your performance.

The next level involves figuring out what thoughts are most important for a particular performance and training yourself to attend to those. Before you can do that, though, you have to start with the basics.

Dr. Steve Portenga has served as a sports psychologist for USA Track & Field and as director of Sport Psychology for the University of Denver. For more information about his work, visit [iPerformance Consultants](#) or download [iPerformance Psychology](#), his mental skills training app, available on iTunes. ●

Mindful Meditation:

A Quick How-To for Parents and Kids Alike

Sit and focus on your breathing. Think about the physical sensations of breathing—how your stomach goes up when you breathe in and goes down when you breathe out. From there, inevitably, your mind is going to wander. Once you realize that it does, come up with a key word. Let go of that word and come back to the physical sensation of breathing.

Don't be surprised if, when you meditate for 20 minutes, you go 15 minutes without even realizing you're not thinking about your stomach. If your mind wanders 1,000 times in 20 minutes, you need to train yourself to let go 1,000 times. Mindfulness takes practice. Keep at it, and you will see results.





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NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS)

provides research-based assessments to accurately measure the academic ability and growth of high-achieving students. NUMATS also provides tailored resources for educators and families that support the development of identified talent areas. Registration for the 2014-2015 school year will open in August. Upcoming test dates include:

- ACT® on September 13
- SAT® on October 11
- EXPLORE® on November 8

Weekend Enrichment Programs engage students age 4 through grade 9 in hands-on, in-depth activities. The wide variety of advanced and unique courses range in duration from a single weekend to six consecutive Saturdays.

- The **Saturday Enrichment Program (SEP)** fall session begins on September 27 in locations throughout the Chicago area.
- At **Accelerated Weekend Experience (AWE)** programs, students explore topics in science, technology or engineering with

an expert in the field. Sessions are offered throughout the Midwest. The next AWE will be held on August 16-17 on the Northwestern University Evanston, IL campus.

Gifted LearningLinks (GLL) offers rigorous online courses for all ages. Nine-week enrichment courses for students, K through grade 8, start on September 15. Credit bearing honors, honors elective and AP® courses begin on the 15th of every month.

Upcoming State Gifted Conferences:

Michigan Association for Gifted Children, October 11 in Lansing.
<http://migitfiedchild.org>

Ohio Association for Gifted Children, October 12-14 in Columbus.
www.oagc.com

Wisconsin Association for Talented & Gifted, October 9-10 in Wisconsin Dells.
www.watg.org

National Association for Gifted Children Convention, November 13-16, 2014, in Baltimore, MD.
www.nagc.org

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Center for Talent Development has been accredited as a nonpublic supplementary school by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) since April 1, 1994. NCA CASI is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and has more than 100 years of experience in improving educational quality.



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