**Is Your Child a Prodigy ?**

**Source: Abhijit Bhadury, Talent Management Expert& Author**

[**Andrew Solomon**](http://www.andrewsolomon.com/) is a writer and lecturer on psychology, politics, and the arts; winner of the National Book Award; and an activist in LGBT rights, mental health, and the arts.  His new book, [**Far From the Tree**](http://www.farfromthetree.com/) has been hailed by the New York Times as “generous, humane, and compassionate…wise and beautiful.” His last book, The Noonday Demon: An Atlas of Depression, won the 2001 National Book Award, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, and was included in the London Times list of one hundred best books of the decade.  Solomon is a trustee of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and lives with his husband and son in New York and London.

Parenting changes not only the child but also the parent.

Bill Clinton says, “In Far from the Tree, Andrew Solomon reminds us that nothing is more powerful in a child’s development than the love of a parent.”

**Question: How does a parent know that their child is a prodigy?**

**Andrew:** Parents should pay attention to the child’s early expression of a particular skill–some children, for example, are precocious in their development of language; some show an affinity for sound; some seem to understand mathematical principles and are able to express that understanding.  One mother of a prodigy described to me how she was reading to her son when he was 18 months old and skipped a word; he pointed to it on the page, and she realized that he could read.  Another said that her son would stop in his tracks at any sound, and could soon name the calls of various birds.  Yet another said that when her son was digging in the garden, he explained the principle of leverage to her.  Another said her son would hear a piece of music once and sing it back–whole Bach cantatas and so on.  This kind of remarkable early ability makes itself known; it can then be nurtured, but it cannot be created.

**Question:** **At which age can prodigies first be identified?**

**Andrew:** The conventional wisdom is that prodigies must show remarkable adult-like ability in some domain before the age of twelve.  So the recognition generally happens then.  But as the examples above indicate, many child prodigies are obvious at an early age, some showing signs of advancement even at a year old.  In general, prodigiousness is recognized in children who are in mid-childhood, often about age six or seven.

**Question: Are there fields where it is harder or easier to discover a prodigy?**

**Andrew:** Prodigies tend to have a single very advanced skill, and there are certain areas in which such skill may manifest.  The most common are chess, music, mathematics, and athletics.  There have been claims of child prodigy painters and poets, but those are domains in which true expression requires emotional experience; in music, the mechanisms of emotional experience can substitute for the experience itself.  Chess, math, and music are all fields in which a very high degree of sophisticated abstraction is involved.  Musical prodigies often share with mathematical and chess prodigies the ability to function at a high level of abstraction; they share with athletic prodigies the ability to control motor skills.  Athletic prodigies are of course unusually well-coordinated–but since athletic prowess is in general manifest early and exhausted before midlife, the contrast may not always be quite so striking.

**Question: What would say are three things any parent can do to help any kid achieve their potential.**

**Andrew:** Helping children achieve their potential is a different matter from nurturing a prodigy.  What is consistent is the balance between nurturing your child’s talents and pressuring your child.  It is important to provide as much support as possible and to allow your child to thrive accordingly.  But between talent and achievement there lies a gulf called education.  Without a good and proper education, great talent is useless.  It’s important to ensure that a child of any abilities has the supports needed to succeed at school.  One wants to foster confidence and discipline; children must learn how to concentrate and focus, and should be encouraged to do so.  When learning is pleasurable and rewarding, people learn more–but it can’t be all fun and games, because a work ethic counts for more than almost anything else.

**Question: What are the common parenting mistakes that thwart the child’s achievement.**

**Andrew:** It’s important to praise what your child does rather than simply who he is.  Children who are constantly told they are brilliant shy away from doing things at which they will not immediately excel, and feel this is the only way to keep their “brilliance” intact.  If, on the other hand, you praise the child’s performance of a piece of music, or his reading, or his achievement on an athletic field, that stimulates him to seek to perform better and better and so to earn more praise**.  Success requires resilience, and resilience can emerge only when children are allowed to fail and to learn from their failure, rather than to be censored for them.  Above all, children who feel secure in their parents’ affection are more likely to achieve than are children who feel that their parents’ love is contingent on their accomplishments.**(Emphasis is mine not Andrews)

**Question:** **Are prodigies happy human beings?**

**Andrew:** As for any category of humanity, some prodigies are happy and some are miserable and most are in between.  But there are some challenges that are specific to prodigies.  Having an adult mind in a child’s body and with a child’s emotional maturity can be very uncomfortable.  Such children may find themselves spending time either with age peers who don’t understand any of the topics that interest them, or with intellectual peers who don’t understand the emotional concerns of a child.  The isolation many prodigies experience can be lonely and hard, and may cast a long shadow over their subsequent experience.  Also, having one’s primary emotional relationship with a piece of wood–a piano, a violin, a chess board–can cut children off from the other forms of emotional nurturance they need.

**Question:** **Is managing the high potential and high achiever in an organization the same as managing a prodigy? Can the parenting lessons apply in the context of work?**

**Andrew:** I think they can.  It’s important for someone who achieves well in a company to be praised but not kowtowed to; to be required to sustain a real work ethic; and to be granted some leeway as an unusual person.  Of course, mature adults can interpret such processes more readily than small children, and they are less easily pressed into activities they wish to resist.  But the basic principles of controlled nurturance are the same.