



Dr Patricia Edgar

I think I can, I think I can

Research demonstrates that it is not innate talent but practice – concentrated, gruelling effort – that makes someone excel at what they do.

How many times have we heard the claim that someone is a born leader, or that an athlete, musician, or writer has natural talent? Such assertions let the rest of us off the hook. We couldn't be expected to demonstrate such success if we weren't born smart like Einstein or Darwin, or athletic like Tiger Woods or David Beckham.

But remember the little engine that could: *I think I can, I think I can*, it said as it chugged its big load up the incline.

The belief that we are born to win is under challenge from the Swedish researcher Anders Ericsson whose research demonstrates that it is not innate talent but practice; concentrated, gruelling effort that makes someone excel at what they do. He recommends 'deliberate practice' as the path to brilliance; apply yourself from an early age and almost everyone has the capacity to excel he argues. (Shelly Gare, 'Success is all in the mind', *The Australian*, January 24, 2009).

John Stuart Mill, the 19th-century English philosopher, was one such success story. He was crammed with learning by his father from an early age and duly developed as a prodigy whose prolific writings have stood the test of time. Mozart, commonly regarded as a genius, had by

the age of six actually studied music for 3500 hours and wrote his first masterwork at age 21.

I have seen my grandchildren master spelling, times tables, ball games, magic tricks, the rubic cube, drumming and dancing when they have been so determined to do so they practise and practise. But how do you inspire such hard work and persistence, and how can a teacher turn a kid who is disinterested into a highly motivated student willing to engage in 'deliberate practice'?

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Praise can be a powerful motivator, but not all praise is equal. Carol Dweck, a psychologist at Stanford University in California has studied smart kids and their achievements and found that too much praise can backfire, leading to performance anxiety and sapping motivation. Smart kids have been told so often how great they are they see all peers as rivals, often lie about their test scores, and actually perform less well

the more praise they get for being smart.

In contrast, when they are praised for the process – how they tackle a maths problem rather than whether or not they get it right – and for trying, for the effort put into a task, their performance improves. Emphasising effort gives the child a variable that they can control. Emphasising natural intelligence takes the task out of the child's control, and provides no good recipe for responding to failure.

This is a powerful lesson for parents as well as teachers. Kids have a pretty good inbuilt crap detector. They know when praise is false and when praise given is not warranted and it's pretty scary having to be best all the time.

Ericsson believes in constant critical feedback and in pushing beyond what has already been achieved: 'Improvement is never effortless', he argues.

This means telling children that hard work, effort and persistence are the path to achievement. We need to rethink the way we deal with children. It's no longer a matter of doing well in standard school tests and getting through to college or university. It's more a matter of cultivating minds that are capable of thinking and acting in disciplined, creative ways through sustained effort; learning a capacity for hard work and sticking at a task until it is fully understood – whether it is maths, pottery, cricket or a foreign language. This takes years of consistent effort.

Yes, developing children need a confident sense of themselves, they need to feel they can tackle any task and achieve some level of competence, but they don't need to be told continually how clever they are. It is the experience of real success that makes them feel good about themselves. ■

*Dr Patricia Edgar is an author, television producer, educator and founding director of the Australian Children's Television Foundation. Her latest book is **The New Child: In search of smarter grown-ups.***



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