



GIFTED OR HARD WORK??



In the past, I have had conversations with many of you regarding my beliefs about being born gifted vs working hard achieve the label of being gifted. Most people believe that to be a true master of the violin, you must have been born with some special innate talent. But I totally disagree with this notion. Now with the recent article about our family quartet in the [Daily Press](#)¹, I have again revisited this subject. My daughter, Justine who is 12 years old, told the reporter that although some people refer to them as prodigies, she and her brothers don't consider themselves prodigies. They believe they just practice long and hard and anyone could be as good as they are with the same type of practice and dedication. I was very proud of her!

I think that many people see greatness as unachievable, so they dismiss the hard work of high achievers and attribute their efforts to innate talent. I have been offended by this thinking because I have endured countless hours upon hours working with my children through all the tears, tribulations, and arguing. I have been a firsthand witness to the work they have put in to mastering their techniques. So I **know** it has not been something they were born with.

Even my husband once made the mistake of telling me that our son, Brendon, was simply born with the gift. And boy did that start a heated debate between us! I explained to him that I have been here every single step of the way, witnessing how much hard work our son has put into achieving his level of playing. My husband has mostly been away from the home working while this work has been happening, so he has not seen the work; he has just mostly seen the results! Then oddly enough, one day my husband came home and said, "I have to tell you that you were right about Brendon not being born talented." I was shocked, he NEVER admits to being wrong! He then continued to tell me about a book his boss, a brilliant surgeon, showed him. The book was called "[Outliers The Story of Success](#)"². The book covered the secrets of success in many different fields from musicians to mathematicians, to athletes. And the conclusion was that geniuses are made, not born, from many many hours of focused practice. The author, [Malcolm Gladwell](#)², even discussed what researchers call a magic number for true expertise: 10,000 hours of practice! This number is not just true for musicians, but any field of expertise.

So I googled "hard work or gifted" and Malcolm Gladwell and his book "Outliers" were the first to pop up along with a few other good articles. They all attributed genius to hard work and not genetics. Following are some excerpts from these fascinating articles.

[Malcolm Gladwell writes in the Guardian](#)³ about pure genius versus hard work:

In the early 90s, the psychologist K Anders Ericsson and two colleagues set up shop at Berlin's elite Academy of Music. With the help of the academy's professors, they divided the school's violinists into three groups. The first group were the stars, the students with the potential to become world-class soloists. The second were those judged to be merely "good". The third were students who were unlikely ever to play professionally, and intended to be music teachers in the school system. All the violinists were then asked the same question. Over the course of your career, ever since you first picked up the violin, how many hours have you practiced?

Everyone, from all three groups, started playing at roughly the same time - around the age of five. In those first few years, everyone practiced roughly the same amount - about two or three hours a week. But around the age of eight real differences started to emerge. The students who would end up as the best in their class began to practice more than everyone else: six hours a week by age nine, eight by age 12, 16 a week by age 14, and up and up, until by the age of 20 they were practicing well over 30 hours a week. By the age of 20, the elite performers had all totaled 10,000 hours of practice over the course of their lives. The merely good students had totaled, by contrast, 8,000 hours, and the future music teachers just over 4,000 hours.

The curious thing about Ericsson's study is that he and his colleagues couldn't find any "naturals" - musicians who could float effortlessly to the top while practicing a fraction of the time that their peers did. Nor could they find "grinds", people who worked harder than everyone else and yet just didn't have what it takes to break into the top ranks. Their research suggested that once you have enough ability to get into a top music school, the thing that distinguishes one performer from another is how hard he or she works. That's it. What's more, the people at the very top don't just work much harder than everyone else. They work much, much harder.

This idea - that excellence at a complex task requires a critical, minimum level of practice - surfaces again and again in studies of expertise. In fact, researchers have

settled on what they believe is a magic number for true expertise: 10,000 hours.

David Dobbs writes in "[How to be a Genius](#)⁴":

It seems the ability we're so fond of calling talent or even genius arises not from innate gifts but from an interplay of fair natural ability, quality instruction, and a mountain of work.

The American inventor Thomas Edison said, genius is 99 per cent perspiration - or, to be truer to the data, perhaps 1 per cent inspiration, 29 per cent good instruction and encouragement, and 70 per cent perspiration.

Examine closely even the most extreme examples - Mozart, Newton, Einstein, Stravinsky - and you find more hard-won mastery than gift. Geniuses are made, not born. It isn't magic, and it isn't born. It happens because some critical things line up so that a person of good intelligence can put in the sustained, focused effort it takes to achieve extraordinary mastery.

These people don't necessarily have an especially high IQ, but they almost always have very supportive environments, and they almost always have important mentors. And the one thing they always have is this incredible investment of effort. Scholars of elite performance speak of a 10-year rule: it seems you have to put in at least a decade of focused work to master something and bring greatness within reach.

No accepted measure of innate or basic intelligence, whether IQ or other metrics, reliably predicts that a person will develop extraordinary ability. Hence, high IQ does not ensure greatness. In other words, the IQs of the great would not predict their level of accomplishments, nor would their accomplishments predict their IQs.

The same even goes for those few who seem born with supreme talent; Mozart was playing the violin at 3 years of age and received expert, focused instruction from the start. He was precocious, writing symphonies at age 7, but he didn't produce the work that made him a giant until his teens.

I do believe that there are other factors that affect ones level of achieving greatness. I like the Dobbs formula for genius "1 per cent inspiration, 29 per cent good

instruction and encouragement, and 70 per cent perspiration."

During the heated debate between me and my husband, and his later realization that our son was not born a prodigy, we both came to the same conclusion. We do notice a difference in our 3 children. Although they are each advanced for their ages, but they are not all equally advanced, especially compared to our oldest child. Why is this, they all practice the same number of hours per day? Well, partly because he is older and has had more time to put in those hours of practice. But we think there is something else there under the surface and that is "motivation".

Motivation has to be part of the equation too. If one does not want to be great at something, then they probably won't be great. Our oldest son wants to be one of the greatest violin players. This motivation has led to more focused and intense practice. He has even agreed to practice 1 hour extra than our other 2 children, during the past summer, so that he could achieve certain important goals. He practiced his extra hour each day, without any complaints.

Cellist Yo-Yo Ma once said, the most proficient and renowned musicians are not necessarily those who outshone everyone as youths, but rather those who had "fire in the belly".

Now don't think because your child doesn't like the violin, he will never be good at it. None of my children immediately liked playing especially because it required that they needed to practice. Each one of them had to endure what I call a "breaking in" period, where I had to show them that this was something they were going to do no matter how much they cried or complained. I believe that children can learn to love their instrument. It is a process that parents must have patience for. Parents must constantly seek out opportunities to provide their children with experiences to give them motivation. I take my children anywhere and everywhere I can to perform. And we take all negative comments with a grain of salt. Don't give in to the negativity; use it to make you stronger.

The other part of the equation is good instruction. This is also important because no matter how badly you want to be great and no matter how many hours you work to be the best, it likely won't happen if you don't have the proper instruction. This comes from their teachers and their parents. No need to say anything more here.

Although lots of hard work is not the only factor, it is by far the most important factor! And now I am so excited

that there is some data to support my belief that prodigies are not born, but made. We must be dedicated to practice if we want to be great at something. I've seen many students compare themselves to my kids and even admit that they are not as dedicated to practicing as we are. But yet, they still think that my kids are born with something extra!

We all know the saying "Anything worth having is worth fighting for." Well, I believe excelling as a musician is worth fighting for. Even if my kids don't use the skill professionally, I know it will enhance their lives to have the skills to play proficiently and beautifully. So I don't give up or give in to the pressure to quit.

Which brings me to my next point; most parents don't see the value of making their kids practice the amount of time necessary to be great. We are so afraid that our kids will hate us for making them. I don't believe this. Children cannot understand the long term value of playing an instrument with a high level of proficiency. Children only think in the short term. And the short term is telling them that they must work hard, and that is not fun to them. The fun comes later when they can play effortlessly!

If you are going to study the violin, then you should study to be the best you can be. Not everyone has to be at prodigy level, but at least we should strive to be proficient. My father always said "Don't do a half a__ job!" We should make sure our children practice to be proficient at playing the violin or else, what is the point?

So you ask, how much should they practice? Here is the minimum in my opinion:

Pretwinklers:	15 minutes to 30 minutes
Book 1 – Book 3	30 minutes to 45 minutes
Book 4 – Book 5	1 hour to 1 ½ hour
Book 6 – Book 10	2 hours to 3 hours

The range shows that as one gets to the high end of the category, they should be practicing the higher time e.g. Book 1 – 30 minutes, but by the time you arrive to Book 3 it should be at least 45 minutes.

So you say, well we don't have that kind of time or commitment. Then maybe you shouldn't be studying the violin. Or maybe you have arrived at the decision to just have your child study so that they can play a little and never achieve true mastery of the instrument. That is fine, however, for me, I much prefer to teach the student who desires to master the instrument. There is no better satisfaction than seeing this happen!



Resources

1. Daily Press article February 27, 2009
www.elliottfamilyquartet.com/dailypressarticle.pdf
2. Outliers The Story of Success. Malcolm Gladwell
www.boingboing.net/2008/11/12/malcolm-gladwells-ne.html.
<http://www.gladwell.com/outliers/index.html>
3. The Guardian Article. Malcolm Gladwell.
<http://satsueisha.com/2008/11/16/gifted-or-hard-work/>
4. How to be a Genius. David Dobbs.
<http://talentdevelop.com/articles/HTBAG.html>