

TALENT ZONES

10 TOOLS TO HELP KIDS DEVELOP THEIR TALENTS



Lee HANCOCK, Ph.D.
Foreword by Tom Byer

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Praise for **TALENT ZONES**

“A call to the culture to rethink our methods around developing youth, asking administrators, educators, parents, and coaches to reflect on misguided adult exclusionary tactics around nurturing talent and, in the process, awaken to new, more effective and compassionate ways of developing kids. Lee has clearly ‘honed his talent’ for summarizing complex information and presenting it in a down-to-earth, relatable way, making this book pragmatic, interesting, and insightful.”

—Dr. John O’Brien, psychologist and former Ajax and US Men’s National Team player

“Lee Hancock starts with a meditation that flips the script: let’s line up ten kids and decide who among them is talented. Feel confident? What if the kid tapped as ‘without talent’ is your child? What then? What if we rewrote the playbook of selection and opportunity and teaching on behalf of the whole group of ten? This is a profound and important meditation on the thing we call ‘talent,’ which we assume we understand are able to see.”

—Doug Lemov, managing director of Uncommon School and author of *Teach like a Champion* and *The Coach’s Guide to Teaching*

“*Talent Zones* is a book that could not come at a better time. In our world of competitive overparenting, it is so helpful to have a resource and guide to really get to the root of the definition of talent—where it lies, and how it can be cultivated, nurtured, and built in healthy ways. Hancock encourages readers to focus on the journey and not the destination, to embrace and view failure as an opportunity, and to help kids develop grit. Hancock has deeply researched for readers on a topic we all want to know more about: talent. What it is? How is it identified and sometimes mislabeled? What is the history of its meaning? This is a fascinating read for parents, coaches, educators, or anyone who works with kids.”

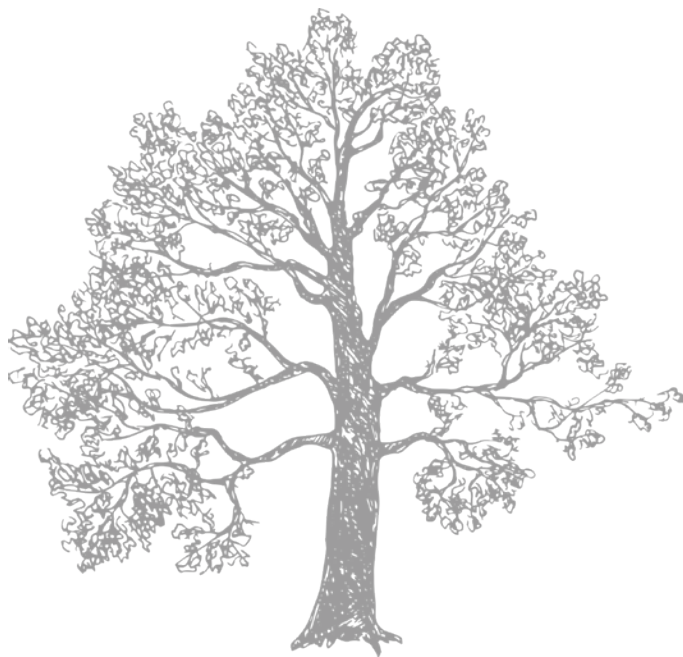
—Cynthia C. Muchnick, author of six education-related books, co-author of *The Parent Compass: Navigating Your Teen’s Wellness and Academic Journey in Today’s Competitive World*, and parent of Division 1 college athletes

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Dedication

To my sons, Jaden, Gavin, and Owen. You each have unique talents. It has been an amazing journey for your mom and me to watch you pursue your talents over the years. Hopefully you get a chance to read this book and feel we have created Talent Zones for you in your lives. We are so proud of you and can't wait to watch you continue to become amazing young men. Follow your passions and be the best versions of you that you can be. Love you!

Acknowledgments

To my parents: Thank you for giving me the freedom and flexibility to explore my talents in my own time and in my own ways.

To my wife: Thank you for being an understanding and tolerant spouse throughout my career, and of course, during this long and often arduous book writing process. It is true: I do have a fun job, and you have been amazingly supportive of my passions for all the years we have been together.

To my sons: Thank you for being my proving ground for the development of talent. I know I talk a lot about life lessons, being a good person, doing your best, and so on and so forth, but it really is easy when I have such fantastic people to work with every day. Thanks for being awesome kids and making my job—as a parent and talent developer—always exciting and never dull!

To the amazing people at Free Spirit: Thanks! I am in awe of the work you did with my writing. You took a manuscript and made it a book. That manuscript took a long time to write, and I always felt that the ideas in it deserved a set of talented individuals who would make it look and feel like a finished product. I am proud of the work we have done, and I hope I represent your work as well as you have represented mine.

And finally, to John Lincoln: What can I say . . . you laid the groundwork for this book in so many ways. Personally, you challenged me, poked me, prodded me, barked at me, put your arm around me, taught me, and overall treated me as if I could, not as if I couldn't. You never allowed me to make an excuse or blame anyone or anything. You made me a better teacher, coach, parent, and person. You taught me that every single child can learn and should have the opportunity to learn—period. This gift of open eyes, and a passion to pursue education and talent development with that approach, is why this book exists today.

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FOREWORD

by TOM BYER

In my three and a half decades as a technical skills developer for young soccer players, I have traveled the world presenting my work in more than thirty countries. One of the great benefits of presenting at conferences is that you get to be around a lot of really smart people. Although you are there so people can learn from you, you are also learning from everyone else. One of my favorite sayings is *If you are the smartest person in the room, you are in the wrong room.*

On one occasion I was invited to Geneva, Switzerland, to present to a group of top professional youth development coaches. It was there that I met Dr. Lee Hancock. We were both presenting at the conference, and a mutual friend had suggested we meet up on the sidelines.

Since meeting Lee in Geneva, I have had many opportunities to talk things over with him—in person, over the telephone, and by text. We are always discussing development, and because of my interest in psychology, I am constantly picking Lee's brain because he's always the smart guy in that particular room. Lee's expertise is multifaceted; he is a teacher, father, researcher, and coach all in one.

Lee traveled in 2019 to Tokyo, where I live, as the sports psychologist for the Canadian women's beach volleyball team. The team had just won the world championship and was playing in a pre-Olympic tournament to get accustomed to Japan. I remember Lee telling me he was writing a book. He said it was taking a huge amount of time because of all the research he was conducting. Well, that book has finally arrived!

Talent Zones puts us in the room with many smart people. Lee has done an outstanding job of seeking them out and dissecting their work, explaining it in detail, and weaving these ideas together into a development model that works—not only in sports, but also in academics and the arts. Many of the experts he quotes are people I look up to, who are all tops in their fields. This book, while small, is actually several books in one. It took me a long time to read because I wrote down so many notes for my own practical use.

After reading this book, I could not help recalling a fourth grader who was always fidgeting in class, clowning around, and distracting other kids. He was labeled as a low achiever. This little boy's teacher once dragged him out of the classroom into the hallway and told him, "You have the brain the size of a pea!" The teacher said he was not smart enough for fifth grade, and his mom agreed to hold him back to repeat a year. Having to repeat a grade is a traumatic experience for any young person. They become ashamed of staying behind while all their classmates advance to the next grade. This boy later tried out for his local Little League baseball team but was once again told he wasn't good enough and played for the Farm League team instead.

But his sister believed in her little brother. She always cheered him on. When he changed from baseball to soccer, she often played soccer with him and encouraged him. She saw his talent and nourished it. He became quite good at soccer and excelled in high school, until he hit another bump. He tried out for the regional all-star team but was told again that he just wasn't

good enough. The next high school season he scored the most goals on his high school team and was voted MVP of the league in New York State. This kid went on to play successful collegiate and professional soccer. After his retirement from playing, he helped transform Japan's youth soccer development program. The little boy who'd been told he wouldn't amount to much of anything in his life would also publish four books and five DVDs and win the Golden Boot Award from Adidas International for his contributions to grassroots soccer.

That person is me, Tom Byer. Like many of the people whose stories are told in *Talent Zones*, I was deemed "untalented"—not because I had no talent, but because I needed help finding my passion, growing it into talent, and persevering through rough patches. If it hadn't been for my sister, whose constant encouragement helped me believe in myself, my life would have turned out quite differently.

Through stories and research and his own experience, Dr. Hancock teaches the importance of recognizing the possibilities in all kids and building their self-belief so they can realize their own potential. He offers adults ten Talent Development Zones—practical, evidence-based, developmentally appropriate ways to help kids grow their talent. This is a book that all adults who work with kids—including parents, teachers, and coaches—can benefit from keeping on their nightstand, coffee table, desk, or mobile device, and referring to it as much as possible.

Thank you, Lee, for sharing your wisdom. I will be applying it in both my parenting and my professional work, and I think many other readers will find it just as helpful as I have.

Good luck to everyone involved with developing talent in kids!

TOM BYER

INTRODUCTION

As an educator, sports psychology coach (someone who works with athletes on the mental aspect of their game), and parent, I have worked with talented individuals of all ages and in multiple arenas—from kindergarten classrooms to the Olympics, from high-level young athletes to students in “at-risk” programs. In addition, I have worked with youth talent identifiers and talent developers (teachers, coaches, and leaders) in music, sports, and academic programs. These talent developers have been employed in gifted and talented programs as well as general education classrooms and in elite arts and sports programs as well as grassroots clubs. And in each of these environments, talent—special skill or ability—has emerged.

At the outset, I should clarify that I am focusing on the idea of *talent* and talent development in education, fine arts, and sport as opposed to *giftedness*. The terms *gifted* and *talented* are words used to describe individuals with natural abilities, and in the context of education, these two terms have specific meanings. *Giftedness* in education often refers to natural ability, usually in one or more academic subjects (such as math, writing, or science), that places a child far ahead of their same-age peers. *Talent* in education also refers to natural ability, but usually in nonacademic subjects such as music, dance, or physical activity; talent is often considered innate but also malleable.

Professionals and groups dedicated to the education of gifted and talented children have their own definitions. The National Association for Gifted Children says, “Students with gifts and talents perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains” (2021b). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 defined gifted and talented students as “Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” The most recent reauthorization of ESEA, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, retains this definition (Woods 2016). Talent developers in sports would probably agree with each of these definitions, but would define this ability as *talent* and see it as something that is innate yet also built.

This idea—that talent is innate yet built—is what intrigues me about talent, and it’s where I focus my attention. My primary message in this book is that we—as educators, coaches, and other invested adults—have the opportunity and the responsibility to help more kids build, strengthen,

“
We—as educators, coaches, and other invested adults—have the opportunity and the responsibility to help more kids build, strengthen, and explore their innate talents.”

and explore their innate talents. And the choice to label kids has profound consequences for them—both positive and negative—early on in school, sports, and the arts.

In sports, education, and fine arts, kids are either placed in or denied access to talent development programs every day based on tests, anecdotal evidence, or other talent markers (or ability to pay for the programs). Adults identify a small percentage of kids as “talented” at an early age and, by omission, unconsciously identify the others as “not talented”—with no proof that kids identified as talented when young will become talented adults, or conversely that kids identified as not talented will not become talented adults. We pour resources into talent development programs while often relegating the unselected to lesser learning environments, where they fend for themselves and either develop their potential or don’t.

Why I Wrote This Book

We spend so much time focusing on a small percentage of “talented” kids based on our subjective markers while not providing other potentially talented kids a chance to develop their talents. This book explains why we can and should keep an open mind as it relates to talent in children and how we can give a much greater percentage of children that chance.

Who This Book Is For

This book is for educators, sports coaches, music teachers, fine arts teachers, parents, and really anyone who works with kids in performance settings. As you read the book, I would like you to keep an open mind about talent in kids, including the labeling of talent, the development of talent, and the management—or mismanagement—of talent. For example, I understand that gifted and talented programs in schools, sports, and the fine arts have been around for years, and some are based on sound research. My goal is not to argue against having these programs. Rather, my goals are:

- to examine the idea of talent in relation to sports, education, and the arts, including how we create cutoffs without looking at enough criteria or the right criteria
- to explain how kids who are not labeled as talented can still be talented

About This Book

In this book I describe what I believe talent really should mean when it comes to children. I explain how early talent is currently “found” and mined and how that isn’t always the best approach for developing long-term talent. I show how we have been defining talent all wrong, especially in kids. I discuss how being deemed untalented can be either a major opportunity or a catastrophe, depending on one’s mindset. I look for ways to redefine the *talent* label as a journey, not a destination. I discuss research-based, practical ideas to help teachers, coaches, and parents create Talent