

Why "Slow and Steady" Helps Young Children Thrive

By Dr Justin Coulson

When a three-year-old shows early signs of talent—whether drawing detailed pictures, humming complex melodies, or counting to twenty—it's natural for parents to feel excited. "Sign them up to the class!" "They're gifted and talented!"

But research reveals a counterintuitive truth: **pushing too hard, too soon, often backfires spectacularly.**

In [Range: Why Generalists Triumph in a Specialized World](#), investigative journalist David Epstein examined developmental paths of people who experience exceptional outcomes in life. Most world-class performers didn't specialise early. They sampled widely across multiple activities during childhood before focusing later. Roger Federer played basketball, badminton, and football alongside tennis. Serena Williams did ballet, gymnastics, and tae kwon do. Athletes who specialised earliest were also most likely to suffer overuse injuries and burnout.

Why Play Matters More Than Practice

Unstructured, hands-off, no-pressure play enhances brain structure and function, promotes executive function skills like working memory and impulse control, and supports the formation of safe, nurturing relationships that children need to [thrive](#). Australian [research](#) tracking over 2,000 children found that more time in unstructured play during toddler and preschool years predicted significantly better self-regulation at ages four to seven.

When a four-year-old builds a block tower that keeps falling, she's learning physics, spatial reasoning, frustration tolerance, and problem-solving. When preschoolers role-play "shops," they're developing negotiation, empathy, language, and cooperation that no structured class can replicate.

How to Nurture Talent Without Pressure

If you think your child has talent, the following ideas are going to help them through their early years and beyond:

Protect Unstructured Time Ensure daily free play without schedules or planned activities. Make the environment rich. Engage them with friends as often as possible.

Follow Their Lead Observe where curiosity naturally flows. If they enjoy drawing, provide materials. If they like music, offer simple instruments. Avoid rigid expectations or formal lessons before age five or six. (I'd rather you delay til eight or nine if you can. But every child and family are different.)

Delay Structured Activities Medical organisations [recommend](#) delaying sports *specialisation* until **late adolescence**. Early specialisation is [defined](#) as intensive training in one sport before age 12 for more than eight months yearly, excluding other activities. This applies equally to music lessons, academic tutoring, and other structured pursuits during the preschool years.

Embrace Wide Sampling [Breadth](#) of early experiences improves "match quality"—the degree to which a child's interests align with their abilities. Let your preschooler try different activities without commitment.

Reduce Competition Until Adolescence [Research](#) with elite athletes shows that those who reached professional status accumulated more hours in unstructured activities between ages 6-12, not formal competition. Save competitive environments for after age 12, when children have developed the emotional regulation to handle pressure constructively.

Long-Term Benefits

Children who grow at their own pace maintain their love of learning and develop lifelong resilience. The modern world increasingly demands people who think across contexts and transfer learning between fields—skills developed through broad childhood experiences, not narrow early focus.

Your children don't need advanced placement, a push into early specialisation, or "Genius School", regardless of the format or their perceived talent. Take the pressure off. Let them enjoy childhood, competition free.

Your challenge: This week, replace one structured activity with unstructured free play. Observe what your child chooses when given genuine freedom—you might be surprised.

For more parenting help, grab a copy of my book [What Your Child Needs From You](#).



Dr Justin Coulson is a dad to 6 daughters and grandfather to 1 granddaughter. He is the parenting expert and co-host of Channel Nine's Parental Guidance, and he and his wife host Australia's #1 podcast for parents and family: The Happy Families Podcast. He has written 9 books about families and parenting. For further details visit happyfamilies.com.au.