Ways to Help Your Little Star Shine in the Performing Arts
By LaNeta Crighton

Most days Donna Perrette of Freehold is a part-time attorney and mom to two young children, Evan and Juliana. But on this Saturday morning, it’s 7 o’clock, and she’s standing in a crowded hallway of an old school building in Manhattan with Evan, waiting for his name to be called. Today Perrette is a stage mom. In the early morning weekend hours, while most of his classmates are still asleep, Evan is busy talking with the star of the show, Edie Falco, and earning $135 an hour for his college fund.

While not every child has the opportunity to mingle with celebrities or earn an impressive hourly wage, participation in the arts can pay off in other ways. Martha Ackermann, president of the Children’s Theatre of Livingston, a non-profit organization that helps kids gain theater experience both onstage and behind the scenes, says she’s seen proof of that firsthand. Her group ranges from children looking to hone their craft, to shy and special needs kids who find the experience therapeutic. And Ackermann has seen many of these children flourish with theater training. In fact, she feels almost all kids can benefit from exposure to the arts. “It builds confidence and gives kids the tools they need to be stronger, better citizens in society,” she says. “Being part of a theater group gives kids the opportunity to be a member of the team yet still perform on their own.”

Shining bright

There may be other advantages as well. A survey released by the College Board in its 2001 National Report indicated that students who took music or arts classes scored 60 points higher on the verbal section of the SAT, and 43 points higher in math, than students who did not. In other studies, music has been found to strengthen reading skills, and learning acting lines has been shown to improve memorization skills and increase attention span. Children who participate in dance receive multiple physical benefits, including increased flexibility, muscle toning and strengthening, as well as improved balance, coordination, and posture.

If a child has an interest in performing, Ackermann suggests parents search online, look for programs in their own area, and sign up for mailing lists at community playhouses, performing arts centers, and town-run recreation programs.
Here are some other ways you can help your little star to shine.

- **Make sure it’s your child’s decision to perform.** It’s fine to encourage children to try a new experience, but be careful not to push. Remember, no child will be successful if she doesn’t want to be on stage.

- **Don’t set your child up for disappointment.** Ackermann suggests parents be honest with children about the fact that they probably won’t get most jobs/parts. That way, landing one can be a pleasant surprise.

- **Don’t spend huge amounts of money.** Look for opportunities like school plays, community theater, or summer camp to see if your child’s interest is temporary or continues.

- **Keep it in perspective.** Perrette says she has seen children miss so much school to attend auditions that youth services had to get involved.

- **Be aware of the time commitment.** Apart from commuting time, parents and children can spend hours at auditions, rehearsals, and job sites.

- **Be a vigilant guardian.** If your child does get professional work, keep him within sight and sound of a parent at all times. Pam Greenwalt, communications executive director for the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), says this is the most important rule for parents to follow.

- **Let your child be a child.** Perrette lets her son decide when he wants to work and when he would rather play sports or hang out with friends.

Performing as a featured soloist or taking center stage with a dance routine is exciting, but the reality is: it doesn’t happen often. As in sports or other competitive activities, sometimes a child doesn’t make the cut. Although 9-year-old Evan has been selected for TV parts and commercials on occasion, there have been many times he hasn’t. Perrette says sometimes selection isn’t based on skill or talent, but rather whether a child meets certain physical qualifications. Braces, a missing tooth, or red hair can keep a child from being cast in a role if those characteristics don’t fit the part.

Involvement in the performing arts is a wonderful way for children to enjoy themselves and develop skills that will help them at all stages of life. But being in the spotlight can be stressful. Whether your child is headed for the bright lights of Broadway or just having fun, veteran performers, teachers, and parents agree that the performing arts is a tough business. What’s most important is that children grow in confidence and develop healthy attitudes that will make performing fun.

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