I can speak honestly about my own learning curve as a typical, caring father who wants his kids to reach their full potential—intellectually, spiritually, and physically. Surely, this is basic instinct.

When we become dads for the first time, we are overwhelmed by the gift of parenthood, hyper-aware of the responsibilities and the possibilities. As men, it’s difficult for us to just sit back and enjoy the miracle, because we are hardwired to tinker—to reshape, re-jigger, improve, and, above all, fix. Clearly, the baby has very little use for us. It’s all about Mom. But we are driven to do something with this new project. It’s as if we confuse our babies with a kitchen remodel.
Like new mothers, most dads begin the parenting journey dazed and clueless. We have just produced (with an assist from the wife) the most perfect, pure, dynamically complicated creation imaginable. We’re in love and excited and terrified all at the same time, and there is no way we’re going to blow this gig. So, we want to roll up our sleeves and get busy. Although our child is perfect in every way, we can’t help ourselves: We are going to make that baby better.

These instincts compelled me to “help” as my first child explored her physical potential. Nothing wrong with helping, of course, but I think where I (and other fathers) get into trouble is when helping becomes pushing, when we perceive physical development as life’s first competition. Our pediatricians point to statistical charts showing what’s above and below average for various developmental stages, and we consciously or unconsciously compare our kids to their peers.

I’m proud of my kids. They are a reflection of me—everything that I am, and certainly everything I aspire to be. Naturally, it’s personally gratifying if they demonstrate advanced physical abilities. As a new father, I assumed I could (and should) assist my girl in this area. I imagined that I could “teach” her balance and coordination, to roll over, to walk, and eventually to run (really fast). While my intentions may have been good, I understand now that my motives were misguided. I wanted her to excel, to perform beyond age-appropriate measures to impress her doctor, maybe, and to give her a better shot at making the World Cup team.

I’ve read about elite athletes like Tiger Woods and Andre Agassi receiving hand/eye training from their fathers in the crib(!). Like science projects. I’ve also read that Tiger and Andre never felt that they had lived up to these father’s expectations. I’m thinking that if Tiger had been allowed to naturally—maybe play basketball, ping pong, skateboard—and he wasn’t introduced to golf until he was six, he would still be Tiger Woods. Same power, same concentration, same ability, same package. Maybe he’d even have avoided his later personal crisis (off topic, I know—but integrity is something we can teach our kids very early on by modeling).

What I know today through experience (and the gift of Janet’s modeling) is that every infant progresses physically in her own way, and in her own time. This is Nature’s expertise, not mine. Obviously, a child who is developmentally disabled presents an exception. But by tinkering with any stage of our kids’ natural development, we risk undermining the next. For most infants and toddlers, tricks like rolling over, crawling, and eventually walking do not need to be taught. Sorry, dads, but our babies really don’t need us in that way, and we need to stifle our impulses to facilitate. Turns out our kids are quite capable in this area without us, and our interference can actually put our child at physical risk.

The good news is that there will be glorious years ahead. It’s then that our time spent as a mentor, role model, coach, and friend will be invaluable, indelible, precious, and very much appreciated.