

## Nerves

Some years ago, I was playing the female lead in a college musical theater production. My character had to run across the stage, arms flung wide, into the waiting embrace of her true love, stepping over the prone body of an actor pretending to be dead. As I ran by him, he was to roll over and moan, clueing the audience in to the deception. One night, during a performance, as I stepped over the prone actor, he rolled over just a bit too soon, catching my foot. My running body dropped to the stage like a sack of hammers, knocking the wind out of me. Surely it only took a few seconds to recover, but sprawled face down on the stage floor in full view of the audience, it felt like hours. I finally got up and continued my run across the stage, oblivious to the fact that I had gashed my knee and had blood streaming down my upstage leg. I reached my destination, although the grin on my “true love’s” face was by then a look of horror, and Act One ended.

I knew I still had half the show to do, but I would much rather have left the theater and never faced that audience or my colleagues again. After a slightly-longer-than-usual intermission, extended to stop the bleeding from my gash and tidy up my costume, the show went on. After the show that night, and for several weeks afterward, I received dozens of compliments for the realistic pratfall at the end of the first act.

The lesson I learned was that even if the worst happens on stage, life and the show go on. Although I’ve had moments of nervousness since then, that fall was the watershed moment. It taught me that if one can not only survive falling face down on the stage, but actually receive praise for it, there’s no good reason to be nervous about performing.

Everyone who gets up on a stage, steps in front of a microphone, or has to in some way put him- or herself before an audience has encountered a state of heightened energy. Whether you call it performance anxiety, stage fright, or an adrenaline rush, most people experience some sort of emotional and/or physical response to stepping before an audience. Musicians, actors, athletes, politicians, lecturers, clergy, really anyone who has to get up in front of a group to speak or perform can experience that state of heightened energy. The key to success is learning that that energy is actually a positive thing that can be channeled into focused, intense performances.

Performance energy affects everyone a little differently. For some it’s a surge of near panic in the moments before they step out on the stage. For others it may hit earlier, creating a buzzing sense of energy for hours before the performances. Some people tremble or find their hands or knees shaking as they face an audience; some people feel nauseous. But some people feel a surge of energy that they are able to focus on the performances, overriding anything else that may have been on their minds. Those are the people to pay attention to, if you can emulate their positive use of nervous energy.

## Starting Young

As a general rule, the younger children start performing, the easier it is for them to get up in front of audiences as they get older. Children have an easier time in front of an audience if their first experience is at three or four, with Mom or Dad standing beside them, than if they have to face an audience for the first time at age five, with their entire kindergarten class. Children of five or six, noticing strange faces in the audience, react in every imaginable way. They can light up and enjoy the experience, singing or playing with great gusto, or they can freeze like deer in headlights. Some see their parents and walk off the stage to be close to them; some begin to cry, which usually starts a chain reaction; some lose bladder control. The important thing for parents is to help the children get through the performance. If that means walking them back up on stage and standing with them, do it. If that means telling them how wonderful they were, regardless of the performance, do it.

You can help a great deal in the months and weeks before that first performance by praising your child's playing or singing, waxing enthusiastic about how much fun it will be to play in the recital or concert and how much you're looking forward to hearing it. Don't ask if the child is nervous; don't say you feel nervous, if you do; and don't share your own fears of performing, if you have them. Children don't need your fears, or anyone else's, projected on them.

The reality of performance energy or nerves is that we can learn how to deal with it only by experiencing it. For most players, the more they perform, the more they understand how their bodies react to the pressure. They learn to anticipate their feelings and physical responses and to use that energy in a creative way. For some, a distinct minority, those nerves keep them from doing their best work when there's an audience present. These performers seek help from counselors, psychologists or psychiatrists, or physicians, who can prescribe something to alleviate the outward manifestations of nervousness, such as shaking hands or quivering knees.

## Expectations

Make sure that your child has a very clear idea of what to expect in any performing situation and what is expected of him or her. Sometimes nerves come more from a fear of the unknown than from an actual fear of performing. Your child's band, orchestra, or choir director can and should prepare the group for performances, complete with instructions on how to enter and exit the stage and how to handle applause.

Your child's private teacher is the best source for help with preparation for contests, recitals, and other performing situations. Make sure your child knows ahead of time how the proceedings will work—for example, whether he or she will be expected to say a few words to the audience to introduce him- or herself or the piece of music. In a solo and ensemble situation the child usually walks in, states his or her name, introduces the piece, and plays. The performance usually ends without applause, but with some comments from the judge.