

HELPING YOUR HIGHLY GIFTED CHILD

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC)
The Council for Exceptional Children
1110 N. Glebe Rd.
Arlington, VA 22201-5704
Toll Free: 1.800.328.0272
E-mail: ericec@cec.sped.org
Internet: <http://ericec.org>

ERIC EC Digest #E477
Author: Stephanie S. Tolan
1990

Most parents greet the discovery that their child is not merely gifted but highly or profoundly gifted with a combination of pride, excitement, and fear. They may set out to find experts or blocks to help them cope with raising such a child, only to find there are no real experts, only a couple of books, and very little understanding of extreme intellectual potential and how to develop it. This digest deals with some areas of concern and provide a few practical suggestions based on the experience of other parents and the modest amount of research available.

Differences

To understand high gifted child it is essential to realize that, although they are children with the same basic needs as other children, they are very different. Adults cannot ignore or gloss over their differences without doing serious damage to these children, for the differences will not go away or be outgrown. They affect almost every aspect of these children's intellectual and emotional lives.

A microscope analogy is one useful way of understanding extreme intelligence. If we say that all people look at the world through a lens, with some lenses cloudy or distorted, some clear, and some magnified, we might say that gifted individuals view the world through a microscope lens and the highly gifted view it through an electron microscope. They see ordinary things in very different ways and often see what others simply cannot see. Although there are advantages to this heightened perception, there are disadvantages as well.

Since many children eventually become aware of being different, it is important to prepare yourself for your child's reactions. When your child's giftedness has been identified, you might open a discussion using the microscope analogy. If you are concerned that such a discussion will promote arrogance, be sure to let children know that unusual gifts, like hair and eye color, are not earned. It is neither admirable nor contemptible to be highly gifted. It is what one does with one's abilities that is important.

A United Front

As in most other aspects of parenting, it is important for both parents (or the adults who bear primary responsibility for raising the child) to agree on some basic issues regarding the child's potential. Many parents of exceptionally gifted children were themselves gifted or exceptionally gifted children. If they did not learn to be accepted and understand their own giftedness, they may find it difficult to accept their child's unusual capacities. Raising a high gifted child may help parents come to terms with many difficult aspects of their own lives, but it helps if they focus first on the needs of the child and come to an agreement about how to meet them.

What the Highly Gifted Need

Exceptionally gifted children have two primary needs. First, they need to feel comfortable with themselves and with the differences that simultaneously open possibilities and create difficulty. Second, they need to develop their astonishing potential. There is a strong internal drive to develop one's abilities. Thwarting that drive may lead to crippling emotional damage. Throughout the parenting years, it is wise to keep in mind that the healthiest long term goal is not necessarily a child who gains fame, fortune, and a Nobel Prize, but one who becomes a comfortable adult and uses gifts productively.

The Early Years

Before your child begins formal schooling, differences can be handled by your willingness to follow the child's lead and meet needs as they arise. It is possible and important to treat an infant's or toddler's precocity with a degree of normalcy. For example, a 2-year-old who prefers and plays appropriately with toys designed for 6-year-olds should be given those toys. The

3-year-old who reads should be given books. The child who speaks very early and with a sophisticated vocabulary should be spoken to in kind.

Public Attitudes

Even when parents can take precocious achievements in stride, friends, family and strangers may not. Unthinking people will comment (often loudly and in front of the child) that a 2- or 3-year-old who sits in the grocery cart reading packages aloud is a phenomenon. It may be surprisingly difficult to avoid letting parental pride lure you into encouraging your children to “perform” in public. Keep in mind the goal of making the child as comfortable as possible with individual differences. The more casually you accept unusual early accomplishments, the more your children will be able to see those accomplishments as normal. Later, when the gifts are no longer quite as noticeable, the child will not feel that what made him or her valuable has somewhat been lost.

Multiple Ages

Highly gifted children are many ages simultaneously. A 5-year-old may read like a 7-year-old, play chess like a 12-year-old, talk like a 13-year-old, and share toys like a 2-year-old. A child may move with lightning speed from a reasoned discussion of the reasons for taking turns on the playground to a full-scale temper tantrum when not allowed to be first on the swing. You can help yourself maneuver among the child’s ages by reading about developmental norms (Gesell is a good guide) so that you are ready for (and avoid punishing) behavior that, though it seems childish in a precocious child, is absolutely age appropriate.

School

If your nine-month-old begins speaking in full sentences, you probably will not tell the child to stop and wait till other nine-month-olds catch up. You would not limit such a child to using nouns because that is as much speech as most nine-month-olds can handle. However, in public or private school that may be the approach some educators use.

It is important to realize that they are not purposely setting out to keep your child from learning, although that might be the effect. Many educators have never knowingly dealt with a highly gifted child. They do not recognize them and they do not know how to handle them. Some educators base teaching methods on [*sic*] development norms that are inappropriate for highly gifted children. Although they may be willing to make an effort to accommodate these youngsters, they may lack sufficient information or experience and not know what type of effort to make.

When a child enters school already able to do what the teachers intends to teach, there is seldom a variety of mechanisms for teaching that child something else. Even if there were a way to provide time, attention, and an appropriate curriculum, it would be necessary for the teacher to use different teaching methods. Highly gifted children learn not only faster than others, but also differently. Standard teaching methods take complex subjects and break them into small, simple bits presented one at a time. Highly gifted minds can consume large amounts of information in a single gulp, and they thrive on complexity. Giving these children simple bits of information is like feeding an elephant one blade of grass at a time – he will starve before he even realizes that anyone is trying to feed him.

When forced to work with the methods and pace of a typical school, highly gifted children may look not more capable than their peers, but less capable. Many of their normal characteristics add to this problem. Their handwriting might be very messy because their hands do not keep pace with their quick minds. Many spell poorly because they read for comprehension and do not see the words as collections of separate letters. When they try to “sound out” a word, their logical spelling of an illogical language results in errors. Most have difficulty with rote memorization, a standard learning method in the early grades.

Lack of Fit

The difficulty with highly gifted children in school may be summarized in three words: they don’t fit. Almost all American schools organize groups of children by age. As we have seen, the highly gifted child is many ages. The child’s intellectual needs might be years ahead of same-age peers, although the gulf may be larger in some subject areas than in others.

Imagine 6-year-old Rachel. She reads on a 12th grade level, although her comprehension is “only” that of a 7th grader. She does multiplication and division, understands fractions and decimals, but counts on her fingers because she has never memorized addition and subtraction facts or multiplication tables. Her favorite interests at home are paleontology and astronomy; at school her favorite interests are lunch and recess. She collects stamps and plays chess. Although she can concentrate at her telescope for hours at a time, she cannot sit still when she’s bored. She cries easily, loses her temper often, bosses other children when they “don’t do it right,” and can’t keep track of her personal belongings. She has a sophisticated sense of humor that disarms adults but is not understood by other children.

Putting Rachel into a normal first grade without paying special attention to her differences is a recipe for social, emotional and educational disaster. Even if a gifted program is available (they commonly being in third or fourth grade), it is unlikely to meet her extreme needs.

Educating a highly gifted child in school is like clothing a 6X child in a store where the largest available garment is a 3 (or with a gifted program, 3X). Parents have to resort to alterations or individual tailoring of whatever kind they can manage.

In dealing with school issues, it's important to remember that you know more about your child than anyone else. Your knowledge, information, and instincts are useful and important, and they should be recognized in designing a school program. Your child genuinely needs individual attention. Anything else may be directly and seriously harmful.

There is no ideal school pattern for the highly gifted. However, when normal school patterns lead to difficulty, it is important to obtain real differentiation.

Acceleration

Because highly gifted children may be in school already knowing much of the material covered in early grades and because they learn quickly, some type of acceleration is necessary. For some children and in some situations, grade skipping is the best choice. Placing a child with older children who share interests may be socially and intellectually beneficial and result in a more appropriate curriculum. It is also a simple and economical solution for the school. Some children begin school early; other skip several early grades; other skip whole educational levels, such as a junior high or even high school. Skipping a single year is seldom helpful, because the difference between one grade and the next is too small. Grade skipping is not without problems, but allowing highly gifted children to stay in class that meets few if any of their needs may do serious and long-term damage.

Another type of acceleration is subject matter acceleration. A child may take math with a class four grades ahead, reading with a class two grades ahead, physical education with age peers. This type of acceleration considers the varying developmental ages of the highly gifted child. For further flexibility, you might consider evening classes or weekend classes at a high school or college and ask the school to excuse coverage of those subjects in regular classes. A child might go to school with age mates only in the morning or only in the afternoon. This method calls for school and parental flexibility and may lead to logistical problems such as scheduling and transportation, but is often more satisfactory than grade skipping because the child associates at least part of the time with age peers.

When the School Will Not Change

When parents approach teachers and administrators with information and documentation, in a spirit of cooperation instead of confrontation, offering suggestions and help instead of attacking, some positive changes in normal methods usually result. Sometimes, however, schools refuse to make changes for one child. When this happens, parents have few choices. One is to move to a school system that will make changes. Another is home schooling.

For many highly gifted children home school is a nearly ideal solution to the program of fit. Instead of laboriously altering read-made programs, parents can tailor an education precisely to the child's need. Clubs, sports, scouting, and other activities supply social interaction with other children while parents serve as teachers or facilitators or engage tutors or mentors in various subject areas.

Home schooling is seldom an easy choice. In some districts it is either illegal or beset with regulations that make it almost as rigid as classroom schooling. When both parents or the single resident parent must work, it may be impossible. Some parents and children find the level of togetherness stifling, while others cannot avoid pushing and demanding too much. However, home schooling in the early years into high school or college when their intellectual needs outgrow the home environment. One of the major benefits to education at home is the maintenance of self-esteem, which is highly problematic in a school environment.

Social/Emotional Needs

In the movie *E.T.* there was something heartrending in the small alien's attempts to "phone home," in his constant longing for others of his kind despite the loving concern of the family who cared for him. Highly gifted children endure some of that same pain. It is hard for them to find kindred spirits, hard for them to feel they fit into the only world they know.

Highly gifted children may have trouble establishing fulfilling friendships with people of their own age when there are few or no other highly gifted children with whom to interact. As a high school student told his mother, "I can be that part of myself that is like my classmates, and we get along fine. But, there's no one I can share the rest of me with, no one who understands

what means the most to me.” For most highly gifted children, social relationships with age peers necessitate a constant monitoring of thoughts, words, and behavior.

One of the greatest benefits of the talent searches proliferating in colleges across the country is the chance for highly gifted children to spend time with others like themselves. For three weeks in the summer, children who qualify (by scoring high enough on the SAT or ACT in the seventh grade or earlier) attend class on a college campus with other highly gifted children. Rather than feeling like oddballs, they suddenly feel normal. Lifelong friendships may form in a matter of days. Many summer program participants consider the social interaction as valuable as the classes.

What else can you do to help highly gifted children find friends? It helps children to understand that there are different types of friends. They may play baseball, ride bikes, and watch TV with one person, talk about books or movies with another, and play chess or discuss astronomy with another. Some of these friends may be their own age, some may be younger, or more often, older. Only in school is it suggested that people must be within a few months of each other in age to form meaningful relationships.

Conclusion

Raising a highly gifted child may be ecstasy, agony, and everything between. Adults must perform almost impossible feats of balance – supporting a child’s gifts without pushing, valuing without overinvesting, championing without taking over. It is costly, physically and emotionally draining, and intellectually demanding. In the first flush of pride, few parents realize that their task is in many ways similar to the task faced by parents of a child with severe handicaps. Our world does not accommodate differences easily, and it matters little whether the difference is perceived to be a deficit or an overabundance.

We have covered only a few issues in this space, but the most important help you can give your highly gifted child or children can be expressed in a single sentence: Give them a safe home, a refuge where they feel love and genuine acceptance, even of their differences. As adults with a safe home in their background, they can put together lives of productivity and fulfillment.

Resources

- Boyer, A. (1989). Surviving the blessing: Parenting the highly gifted child. *Understanding our Gifted*, 1 (3), pp. 5, 17, 20-21
- Dirks, J. (1979). Parents’ reactions to identification of the gifted. *Roeper Review*, 2 (2), 9-10.
- Feldman, D. H., with Goldsmith, L. T. (1986). *Nature’s gambit: Child Prodigies and the development of human potential*. New York: Basic Books.
- Grost, A. (1970). *Genius in Residence*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hill.
- Higham, S., & Buescher, T. M. (1987) What young gifted adolescents understand about feeling different. In T. M. Buescher (Ed.), *Understanding gifted and talented adolescents* (pp. 26-30). Evanston, IL: The Center for Talent Development, Northwestern University.
- Hollingsworth, L. S. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and Development*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book.
- Janos, P. M., Marwood, K.A., & Robinson, N. M. (1985). Friendship patterns in high intelligent children. *Roeper Review*, 8 (1), 46-49
- Janos, P. M., Marwood, K.A., & Robinson, N. M. (1985). The performance of students in a program of radical acceleration at the university level. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 29 (4), 175-179.
- Kearney, K. (1989). Home schooling gifted children. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 1 (3), pp. 1, 12-13, 15-16.
- Kline, B. E. & Meckstroth, E.A. (1985). Understanding and encouraging the exceptionally gifted. *Roeper Review*, 8 (1), 24-30.
- Lewis, G. (1984). Alternatives to acceleration for the highly gifted child. *Roeper Review*, 6 (3), 133-136.
- Powell, P. M., & Haden, T. (1987). The intellectual and psychosocial nature of extreme giftedness. *Roeper Review*, 6 (3), 127-130

Silverman, L. K. (1989). The highly gifted. In J. F. Feldhusen, J. Van Tassel-Baska, & K. R. Seeley (Eds.), *Excellences in educating the gifted* (pp. 71-83). Denver: Love

Silverman, L. K. & Kearney, K. (1989). Parents of the extraordinarily gifted. *Advanced Development*, 1, 41-56.

Tolan, S. S. (1982). An open letter to parents, teachers, and others: From parents of an exceptionally gifted child. In Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E.A., & Tolan, S. S. *Guiding the gifted child*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Psychology Publishing Co.

Tolan, S. S. (1989). Special problems of young high gifted children. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 1 (5), 1, 7-10.

Tolan, S. S. (1985 Jan.). Stop accepting, start demanding! *Gifted Child Monthly* 6 (1), p. 6.

Tolan, S. S. (1985 Nov/Dec). Stuck in another dimension: The exceptionally gifted child in school. *G/C/T* (41), 22-26.

Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E. A., & Tolan, S. S. (1982). *Guiding the gifted child*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Psychology Publishing Co.

Copyright, 1989, Stephanie S. Tolan. Properly attributed, this material may be reproduced. Stephanie Tolan is a noted author of children's books and one of the authors of *Guiding the Gifted Child*.

Copyright © 1997
ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education
<http://ericec.org>