

# Gifted Children: Are Their Gifts Being Identified, Encouraged, or Ignored? By Julia B. Osborn, Ph.D.

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## Introduction

Children who seem "precocious" and have skills, knowledge, or abilities beyond their age have fascinated adults. For nearly a century, educators, psychologists and others working with children, have studied the development of unusually able children in an effort to understand the conditions that facilitate or impede their growth into productive adults. The debate about the education and upbringing of these children continues, with the current state of discussion and research sometimes obscuring rather than illuminating appropriate practices. Furthermore, even if professionals do agree on certain recommendations, there is wide variability in their implementation both at school and at home.

The U.S. Department of Education summed up the existing challenges faced by parents, educators, and the gifted children themselves in a report. "The United States is squandering one of its most precious resources-- the gifts, talents, and high interests of many of its students. In a broad range of intellectual and artistic endeavors, these youngsters are not challenged to do their best work. This problem is especially severe among economically disadvantaged and minority students, who have access to fewer advanced educational opportunities and whose talents often go unnoticed." (Ross, 1993). The gap is due in part to the common and mistaken belief that children endowed with remarkable intelligence and/or talents have no special educational needs. Although professionals have access to information about the special needs of mentally retarded and learning-disabled children, there is no similar set of guidelines, such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - IV (DSM-IV) for the evaluation of and planning for gifted children.

## Definitions - who is gifted?

There are a number of definitions of giftedness commonly in use. The Federal government (PL 91-230, section 806), uses the 1972 Maryland Definition (Ross, 1993), which includes several areas: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability and ability in the visual or performing arts. The widely used definitions by Tannenbaum and Gagne stress the importance of factors like societal values, education, effort, motivation and chance (Gross, 1993). Still another definition stresses the emotional experiences of gifted children and the need for them to receive modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order to facilitate optimal development (Osborn, 1999).

Psychologists who work with these gifted children are aware of significant differences within the group; in any program for gifted children there will be a wide variety of educational levels and talent areas. In an attempt to explore these differences more systematically, a number of psychologists have studied the education and emotional

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needs of gifted children as a function of their intellectual level (Gross, 1993, Hollingworth, 1942, Lovecky, 1994). Although there is no set of universally accepted levels for categorizing intellectual ability in early elementary school age children, several levels of ability have been proposed based on clinical evidence gathered from intelligence tests and academic tests (Osborn, 1999). As different intelligence tests, given to the same gifted child, will yield different scores, the levels can only be generally described.

**Gifted**, approximately 2 standard deviations above the mean, 98th percentile  
**Highly gifted**, approximately 3 standard deviations above the mean, 99th percentile  
**Exceptionally gifted**, approximately 4 standard deviations above the mean, 99.99 percentile

While many group and individually administered intelligence tests can identify gifted children (for example, Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-III, Stanford Binet -IV, Otis-Lennon), most do not discriminate well between these different levels of intellectual ability and subsequent levels of academic achievement. Consequently, there has been the mistaken idea that all gifted children are similar in intellectual level and will be similar in academic level or in enrichment needs. In fact, when children take individual tests with very challenging items or participate in challenging talent search tests, the variability in their performance levels becomes quite evident. A similar kind of variability can be seen when children perform in recitals, exhibit art and or display writing. In school settings, experienced researchers and clinicians discriminate different levels of giftedness using other tests such as the Stanford-Binet: LM or the talent search tests (Gross, 1993, Hollingworth, 1942, Osborn, 1999).

## The life of the gifted child

All of the experiences of gifted children are influenced by the degree to which they think differently from other children. Highly and exceptionally gifted children have among their other qualities, a tendency to elaborate the simple, to think precisely, to simplify the complex, to remember with unusual clarity, and to reason abstractly at an early age (Lovecky, 1994). They can make strong and unique connections among ideas as well as intense connections between ideas and emotions. Highly and exceptionally gifted children who are sensitive to social nuances and quick to analyze events can construct interpretations of events that range from sophisticated and accurate to subtly distorted and self-defeating. While gifted children's cognitive skills can be highly developed, their emotional maturity and behavioral control can be more variable. Adults need to follow the complexity of these children's thoughts, validate their experiences, help modify their emotions, and at times, model more appropriate behaviors.

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## Unique needs of gifted children

Gifted children, like other children, need appropriate education, satisfying friendships and supportive parenting. However, they have some unique needs in these areas.

## Appropriate education

One of the main tasks for educators is to match the level of the curriculum to the child's ability to learn. For the gifted child, one of the earliest challenges to development comes when the child is placed into group learning situations where the child's ability level is clearly quite discrepant from the ability level of the other members of the group. For example, the child who enters kindergarten with strong reading skills, a love of math puzzles and many ideas for creative writing requires a more challenging curriculum than other kindergarten children could tolerate. Gifted children can begin to have adjustment difficulties at the point of entrance to group learning (nursery school, kindergarten, elementary school). However, these difficulties can be significantly reduced when educational placement is appropriate for the intellectual level. Studies of children with exceptional intellectual ability, or with exceptional math ability, have documented the tendency of gifted children to learn more rapidly and with greater complexity. However, current educational practice has not kept pace with the research. The Department of Education reports that "Gifted and talented elementary school students have mastered from 35 to 50 percent of the curriculum to be offered in five basic subjects before they begin the school year" (Ross, 1993). The extensive research conducted by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented substantiates the need for modifications in the curriculum as well as the frequent lack of these modifications.

One of the most common areas of educational mismatch for gifted students, especially for highly and exceptionally gifted students, has been in the area of math education. Schools typically take differences in reading achievement into account by using flexible instructional groups and can, thereby, make adjustments in the language arts curriculum. However, math instruction is most often provided to the entire classroom simultaneously and is based upon the learning ability of the average students in the group. This can be an unnecessary impediment for mathematically able students. Middle class and affluent parents have been able to obtain better educational matches for their children by using Internet math programs, by finding weekend or summer enrichment programs or by placing their children in suburban schools or in independent schools. However, rural and low-income families with mathematically gifted children have faced exceptionally difficult obstacles to obtaining quality education.

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## Strong friendships

One of the main tasks of childhood is to establish friendships with other children, both in one-to-one relationships and in-group situations. This can sometimes be difficult for gifted children who are limited in their choice of peers either because of their exceptional abilities or because of geographic or cultural isolation. For example, the 5-year-old with an 8-year-old mind who can play chess, build complex architectural constructions and play games with rules may have difficulty finding another 5-year-old who can be a building partner, a chess companion and a willing participant in complex games. While gifted children benefit from having the social skills to interact with a wide variety of children, their more complex and creative play experiences often take place with intellectual peers.

Most programs for gifted children are organized around the provision of an enriched or accelerated curriculum, yet one of the main benefits of such programs is the opportunity for varied and satisfying friendships to emerge as similarly able children are grouped together (Gross, 1993, Hollingworth, 1942, Subotnik, Summers, Kassin & Wasser, 1993). The gifted child's social development is enhanced when an appropriate peer group is found. In clinical interviews and interest surveys, gifted children and adolescents speak openly of their need to be with other students who share their interests and abilities; they speak frankly of the strain of minimizing or hiding their talents in order to protect the feelings of others (Delisle, 1984, Kreuger, 1985). Many students who participate in the talent search summer programs experience, especially at grades 5 and above, the pleasure of being accepted for themselves and finding other students with similar interests. It is often the desire for friendships, rather than the curriculum per se, that motivates the students to return year after year to these selective programs. However, for gifted students whose parents cannot afford the tuition, locating satisfying friendships is dependent upon the structures of local, free or low-fee public institutions. In isolated geographic areas or impoverished urban areas, it can be difficult for parents to find peer groups for their children in which both friendships and academic achievement are simultaneously sustained.

## Supportive parenting

One of the main tasks of parents is to provide an emotionally secure base from which the child can venture forth into the world. The essential challenge for parents of gifted children is to support the children's unusual development and to advocate effectively for appropriate programs. At the same time, they must do so in a way that allows the children to take increasing responsibility for and satisfaction from their own development. Gifted children can have difficulties when their families have been unable to achieve an optimal balance between supportive nurturing and high expectation. In

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these situations, parents can benefit from help in learning how to modify the home environment.

Researchers have demonstrated that parents are quite good at identifying exceptional development in toddlers, preschool children and school age children (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst & Guerin 1994, Gross, 1993, Roedell, Jackson & Robinson, 1980). In addition parents play a vital role in the overall development of gifted children and in the development of their particular gifts. Parents of gifted children have an opportunity to influence their children by providing exposure to complex language (Hart & Risley, 1995), by offering stimulating experiences inside and outside the home (Gottfried et al., 1994), and by providing unusual support for talent development (Bloom, 1983). What is less obvious is the degree to which the children themselves propel their parents into the provision of exceptional opportunities. In one remarkable longitudinal study, the gifted children themselves were observed to make more requests of their parents and to respond with greater enthusiasm to their increased opportunities (Gottfried et al, 1994). The researchers discussed in detail the ways in which gifted children themselves play a major role in their own development.

## Parent and professional recommendations: how to identify and support gifted children

- Consider the child's developmental history. Pay close attention to evidence of accelerated language, motor, artistic, interpersonal and academic development.
- Attend to parental observation and report. Highly and exceptionally gifted children do unusual things and do them at unexpectedly early times.
- Catalogue and present examples of the child's performance. Portfolios of artwork and writing samples, photographs of building projects, samples of oral reading, exploration of math abilities, lists of recently read books, all provide clues to a gifted child's abilities.
- Advocate for appropriately accelerated and enriched curriculum and seek out unusual educational opportunities.
- Parents should have professionals document accelerated development and skills by administering tests with appropriately high ceilings.
- Foster special experiences for gifted children based upon common abilities and interests.
- Find appropriate social groups in which children's contributions to the welfare of the group are encouraged and acknowledged.
- Parents should seek support from other parents of similar children. Where needed, family therapy or individual therapy may be beneficial to help identify parenting practices that are supportive and appropriate for a gifted child.

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- Expect complexity in the cognitive and emotional experiences of children. Do not assume common, adult-like or child-like, explanations for unusual behaviors or emotions, explore them.

## Summary

In order to understand the development of gifted children, it is necessary to understand different levels of ability, both in intellect and other domains, and how the level of the child's ability interacts with the need for modifications in education, in parenting and in social relationships. Until there is a consensus about the most productive academic, home, and social environment in which to nurture the gifted child's talents and abilities, parents themselves may be most responsible for ensuring that their children's actual abilities are recognized and openly acknowledged and the children themselves are challenged and accepted.

## AboutOurKids Commentary

Parents should note there is ongoing controversy about whether to provide gifted students with their own self-contained educational programs or to have them integrated into mainstream classes while providing enrichment experiences. There are pros and cons to each option. Parents must decide which educational environment is best for their children based on their child's particular abilities and available opportunities.

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