Gifted Children: Myths and Realities

General Information for Parents, Teachers and other Professionals with an interest in Giftedness and/or High Ability

Gifted children, like all children have many needs, but they also have some that are particular to this group. Some of these needs will apply to all gifted children and some will apply to a small minority. It is very difficult to generalise but the following paragraphs attempt to tackle the key issues that all people coming into contact with gifted children should understand, because without a basic level of understanding we will continue to have many misconceptions about 'giftedness' and therefore of the ways in which we should best deal with the children themselves.

Gifted children need their families, schools, and society in general, to have a realistic understanding of what a gifted child is, and perhaps most importantly, is not.

Highly gifted children tend to be those who demonstrate asynchronous development- the process whereby the intellect develops faster and further than other attributes such as social, emotional and physical development. Due to their high cognitive abilities and high intensities, they experience and relate to the world in unique ways. These children are often found as a result of extremely high scores on an individually scored IQ test, generally above the 135 IQ threshold. Profoundly gifted children can have an IQ in excess of 170 and have prodigious abilities in specific areas such as maths, science, languages, music, art and sport. It is not always the case that gifted children have equally high abilities in all curriculum areas.

Highly gifted children demonstrate characteristics such as the extreme need to:

1. Learn at a much faster pace.
2. Process material to a much greater depth.
3. Show incredible intensity in energy, imagination, intellectual prowess, sensitivity, and emotion which are not typical in the general population.

We tend to lump all gifted children together as if their characteristics and therefore the way we deal with them are the same. The child with an IQ of 170+ is as different from the child of 130 IQ as that child is different from the child of average ability (IQ 100). Current research suggests that there may be a higher incidence of children in this high range than previously thought. Due to their unique characteristics, these children are particularly vulnerable and that vulnerability increases inversely to the level of our understanding - whether a parent or teacher.
Highly gifted children need a specialized advocacy because very little has been done to develop appropriate curriculum and non-traditional options for these children.

Gifted Children: Some Myths

- All gifted children are high achievers; they don't have to work hard for exam success.
- Gifted children can accomplish anything they put their minds to; they just have to apply themselves.
- Gifted children don't need help with study skills; they can manage on their own.
- Gifted children have fewer problems than others; they do not need or deserve extra time and attention.
- Gifted children are self-directed; they know where they are heading.
- Gifted children will reveal their 'gifts' in school and will want to emphasise them.
- Gifted children enjoy serving as examples for other children.
- Gifted underachievers just need to try harder and get organized.
- The primary value of the gifted child is in his or her brain power.
- A gifted child's family always prizes his or her abilities.
- Gifted children need to serve as examples to others and they should always assume extra responsibility.
- Gifted children need to go through school with their age peer group 'Giftedness' is something to be envious of.

Gifted Children: Some Realities

- Gifted children are often perfectionists and idealists and may equate achievement and grades with self-esteem and self-worth. This can lead to fear of failure and can interfere with their achievement in and out of school.
- The social and emotional development of a gifted child will probably not be at the same level as their intellectual development.
- Gifted children may experience heightened sensitivity to their own expectations and those of others, producing constant guilt over achievements or grades perceived to be low.
- Some gifted children are "mappers" (Sequential learners), while others are "leapers" (Spatial learners). Leapers often can't say how they got a "right answer". Mappers may get lost in the steps leading to the right answer.
- Gifted children may be so far ahead of their peer-age friends that they know more than half the curriculum before the school year begins! Their boredom can result in low achievement and grades.
- In school, gifted children may need real problems to work on in order to achieve at high levels. Gifted pupils often refuse to work for grades alone.
- Gifted children often think abstractly and with such complexity that they may need help with study and test taking skills. They can often justify **all** the answers in a multiple choice question, or skip reading test instructions because they are impatient.
- Gifted children who do well in school may define success as getting an "A", and failure as any grade less than an "A". By early adolescence they may be unwilling to try anything where they are not certain of guaranteed success

So What Can We Learn from These?

Though there are no clear-cut answers the evidence seems to show that:

- Gifted students benefit from learning together and being placed with similar students in their areas of strength (Literacy, numeracy, music etc).

- Many teachers lack the confidence and training to differentiate the curriculum to meet the needs of gifted students in mixed ability classrooms.
- Many gifted students think and learn differently from their chronological age peers who are not gifted. They tend to better understand, accept, and use their learning differences as assets when they are grouped together. When they are provided with consistent appropriate academic challenge, they tend to be more comfortable with themselves, and others.
- When cooperative learning has been used in the mainstream classroom environment, gifted students often become tutors and learn less academic content. The other students may depend on them to do most of the work, or do the work that is difficult, and therefore the regular education students also learn less academic content.
- Gifted students frequently know many of the concepts introduced in the regular education class and waste a lot of time. They often develop bad habits, such as constant daydreaming.
- Gifted students are more likely to socialize "normally" when they are with students who share their interests and learning style. This is most likely to occur with intellectual age peers, regardless of chronological age.

National Association for Gifted Children
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