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Raising Gifted Children

The Do's and Don'ts for Raising Gifted Kids

By Deborah L. Ruf, Ph.D. ©1999

Parents have usually reached the "We're desperate!" stage by the time they seek out a person to help them with their gifted child. In fact, although all the background information on IQ scores, gifted programs, and affective needs is nice, what parents really want is to staunch the bleeding. Their formerly bright-eyed, bushy-tailed pre-schooler has lost the spark, turned sullen, or worse, hates school. Different but often equally troubling, some kids actually make such a good adjustment to school that they no longer seem to be learning anything new at all beyond "fitting in" skills.

Many parents, like their own parents before them, figure that someone in the schools will tell them if the child is gifted; therefore, if the parent is the only one thinking something is amiss, something is probably wrong with the parent (or the kid). Fortunately, sometimes the parent has enough confidence and courage to persevere on behalf of the child despite all the apparent odds. It is a good sign if you are a parent reading this article. You have taken some important steps to learning what you can about what ails your child, and about what you might do to make it better. Here are some ideas to get you started.

Do provide intellectual challenge in and out of school. Gifted children *learn to underachieve* in the early grades. Accomplishing what their classmates accomplish is done with no effort, no practice, and great speed. Test anxiety, perfectionism, and fear of failure may all be associated with this early conditioning and lack of challenge in school. Give your child chances to be frustrated, to need to work hard and to take extra time to figure something out. Try to arrange this opportunity as often as possible in the school setting.

Sometimes, however, "in the school setting" is not a quickly available option. You might have to work around the schools when they are not prepared to be collaborative with you and your child except on their own terms. You can set up meaningful intellectual challenges during non-school times and during school times that do not meaningfully contribute to any facet of your child's growth. Read on.

Don't over-schedule your gifted child; that is not the same as providing challenge. Give your child exposure to many different skills and activities that may uncover talent and passion in the child. Give your child the freedom and opportunity to make choices regarding clubs, activities, and extra-curriculars. Give your child enough down time to process, read for fun, vegetate, let ideas simmer. Don't judge the value of your child's choices during the free and down times (except for safety and health issues).

Rather than tacking activities onto her long school day, consider giving your child regular school breaks for learning at her own pace and depth at home, especially during early elementary grades when she is reading at the 5th grade level while her classmates are working on beginning readers. Some kids would quickly zoom ahead in math if only given the

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opportunity. Some schools will allow you to have your child tutored, usually at your own additional expense, on school property during the school day, but that is not common or completely comfortable to arrange. The home school laws available in every state also enable you to part-time home school. (You don't have to make an endless, daily, all the time commitment to home school). You can decide which times of the school day are not contributing to your child's intellectual or emotional growth and give your child challenging, meaningful experiences elsewhere during those times. You can get all the information you need to get you started on the Internet under "home school".

Don't focus the challenge on either your child's strengths or weaknesses. Allow the child to really pursue her highest interests and abilities. Help the child recognize which skills and knowledge will be important for any normally functioning adult citizen. In other words, help her to recognize the necessary "hoops". Then believe it yourself and let go of total perfection. Remember, perfect grades probably mean good "reading of the teacher" more than the quality of the academic or intellectual learning that has taken place.

At the same time, there are virtually no career opportunities that allow a person to circumvent the need for clear writing, filling in forms (tax preparation, job applications), or doing simple math. No excuses; these are examples of necessary "hoops." Gifted children, however, just as with any other children, should be taught and accelerated at their own readiness level and pace. A gifted child does not need three to five years of elementary school to learn basic math facts. If that is what is happening to your child, it is not a necessary "hoop", it is a waste of time and will build in underachievement.

Do give compliments to your child for his abilities and efforts. Gifted children need recognition for their abilities from people whose opinions matter most to them just as much as anyone else. Try to be particularly aware of when your child really has put a great deal of effort or thought into something and needs encouragement or positive feedback. If the child has a talent area (art, music, games, anything) acknowledge it. Look for ways to help the child know himself.

Don't hold your child up as an example for siblings or other children to emulate, compete with, or follow. Each person is unique and abilities affect interests and goals as much and often more than effort. Comparisons might make you child tone down her abilities so as not to feel freakish or disliked. Comparisons can put other children in an untenable, unfair position.

Do demonstrate how to prioritize, schedule, and let go. Gifted individuals discover early that they have many interests and can get more done, wear more hats, than most other people. Sometimes they get over-involved and can't decide how to lower their stress and their commitments. Even gifted people need down time and processing time, so they must learn how to pick and choose carefully in order to allow the time necessary for emotional growth and self-discovery. Help them learn to recognize the difference between their own goals and someone else's. Help them learn that some goals are necessary "hoops".

Do give your gifted child the same information you have about her IQ and relative ability level. If you don't know how to do this or don't feel comfortable, get professional help to prepare yourself. Children who are within a normal, average range can certainly handle that they "fit in" and are normal. Children who differ from the norm and who therefore experience many things in life differently for that reason need help in understanding why. I believe the specifics can be shared by the time the child's mental age is about 12. You can roughly estimate your child's mental age by recalling when your child reached certain developmental

milestones compared to those charts you had on preschool behavior. Toys have an age range on the box, for example. Did your child enjoy and do puzzles well earlier than the box suggested? Don't think you can simply compare your child to the children of friends. That can cause you to underestimate your child's intellectual level. Remember, you and your friends are very likely within similar intellectual ranges; that's part of how you found each other. Just because your child isn't ahead of your friend's kids does not mean he's not gifted! It's possible, and likely, that they both are gifted.

Don't worry that helping your gifted child know himself (or herself) better will lead to a "big head", a know-it-all attitude, or undue vanity. True giftedness that is understood by the possessor leads to a more open understanding and acceptance of others (if it has been explained well). The more intellectually gifted a person is, the more likely the person will know how much he doesn't know yet. Don't worry that the child will feel superior to you; children need to look up to their parents and you are better equipped than you may realize.

Do enjoy this wonderful time in your life; have fun. One of the hallmarks of giftedness is sense of humor. Other common traits are excellent vocabulary and high levels of perceptivity. You and your gifted children have much in common. As you get to know each other and grow together, take time to appreciate what a gift you are to each other. No matter what your child's level of giftedness or your school's level of support, you should be able to end most days saying to yourself, "Wow! Am I ever lucky!"

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