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Gifted-friendly parenting strategies

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Source: 2004

Parenting is a cacophony of joys and challenges; particularly if your child is intellectually advanced.

There are dozens of books, guides and websites that offer advice on parenting gifted children, and we recommend that you read deeply and widely. Just as there are thousands of gifted children, there are equally as many strategies that work for parenting them. This article is a compilation of seven suggestions that both parents and experts agree are an important foundation for parenting gifted children.

1 - Accept and love your child unconditionally

All children need unconditional acceptance and love. Unfortunately, because of their exceptional abilities, gifted children often get the message that they are loved and appreciated only for what they can do or what they produce - not for who they are. Like all children, gifted children need to be nurtured. Seek a balance between recognizing your child's abilities and accepting who they are independent of their abilities.

2 - Expose your child to a plethora of learning opportunities

Childhood should be about exploration and for gifted children that means providing access to a wide variety of intellectual experiences. Follow your child's lead and support and encourage the development of his or her interests while gently introducing new ones. Encourage your child to follow through on his or her commitments, instead of bouncing from one thing to another - especially when something is challenging. By keeping your child engaged and challenged, you may be heading off other problems such as perfectionism, performance anxiety and underachievement (Ruf, 1999). Also, by presenting your child with a broad spectrum of possibilities, he or she will have a better understanding of diversity and be more flexible in his or her thinking. (Schultz, 2003)

3 - Don't overload your child

Gifted children have varied interests, and their exceptional abilities allow them to try - and often excel in - many things. Schultz (2003) offers a simple rule of thumb for gauging how much is too much. Sit down with your child and make a list of the daily activities in which he or she is involved. If your list is more than 10 items long or requires more than 15 hours, you have too much, and it's time to cut back.

4 - Help your child dispel unwarranted feelings of inadequacy

It's no surprise that gifted people of all ages tend to describe themselves as perfectionists. Because of their uncommon abilities, people expect more from the gifted, and the gifted expect more from themselves.

Perfectionism is a combination of the desire to be perfect, the fear of not being able to be perfect, and the sense that personal acceptance hinges on being perfect. Gifted young people are often very driven and their expectations of themselves often exceed their development, training and skills. This state of disequilibrium can leave a child with unwarranted feelings of inadequacy.

A child who is used to having the correct answer or making a keen observation may feel threatened when he or she has made a mistake. Are the messages you're sending your child promoting security and acceptance, or are they implicitly telling him or her that his or her worth is dependent on performance? You can minimize the deleterious effects of perfectionism through a dialog that reaffirms the child's worth and emphasizes that making mistakes is a natural part of the learning process.

5 - Communicate with your child about his or her abilities

There is a consensus among professionals who work with gifted children that sharing information about their abilities in a sensitive manner may help promote healthy development. While helping a child understand that he or she may think and learn differently than age-mates is a reasonable way to approach this, sharing IQ numbers and making comparisons is not. You may wish to discuss your specific situation with a psychologist before talking with your child. Remember, gifted children may have adult-like reasoning power, but they do not have the life experience to accompany it. It's important not to treat them like adults, particularly when it comes to talking with them about their abilities.

6 - Be Aware of your own baggage

Parents of gifted children are often gifted themselves. If you or your spouse is gifted, there may be unresolved issues stemming from your own childhood experiences. Take the time to realistically assess these feelings and issues - before they are projected, directly or indirectly, onto your child's situation.

7 - Enjoy your child

Even though gifted children have a remarkable intellectual capacity, it's important to remember that they are still children. Focusing too much on the future (preparing for college, scoring well on placement tests) or on the past (I could have... I should have...) can take away from experiencing the joy of raising a wonderful, unique child. Consistently let your child know, through your own behavior, that being gifted is not a curse. Encourage your child to embrace diversity and to develop his or her talents to make a positive difference. And, most of all, remember to laugh and explore the joy of living with your child. Childhood is fleeting - make the most of it.

Articles of Interest

Helping adolescents adjust to giftedness.

Buescher, T. & Higham. (1990). ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education. This article discusses challenges to adjustment and coping strategies. The adjustment section discusses ownership, dissonance, taking risks, competing expectations and more.

Tips for parents: The real world of gifted teens.

Jacobsen, M. (2003). Davidson Institute for Talent Development This full text article discusses the many issues that gifted teens face in school, in their social lives, and at home. Strategies for helping teens through these difficult times are suggested.

The dos and don'ts for raising gifted kids.

Ruf, D. (1999). Educational Options. Written by a professional in the field, these recommendations are straightforward, easy to understand and easy to implement.

Tips for parents on highly gifted / profoundly gifted adolescents.

Schultz, R. (2003). Davidson Institute for Talent Development. These tips for parents were derived from an online seminar given by Dr. Robert Schultz for parents of Young Scholars. In this full-text article, he addresses tactics parents can use to better communicate and understand their gifted adolescent.

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