

# Academic and School Concerns of Gifted Children

Giftedness is potential for excellence. In the absence of appropriate environmental supports and challenges, gifted children may not only fail to perform up to their potential, but may even perform below average. Lets look at some problems gifted children commonly face at school, and what parents can do to resolve these.

Of most concern is **under-achievement**, the gap between potential and performance. Gifted children are just as susceptible to under-achievement as the non-gifted—perhaps more so, since most classroom environments and curricula define limits to achievement based on the average student.

Defining under-achievement is tricky. The measures of potential and performance used are usually non-standardised (e.g. marks on class tests, project grades, teacher evaluations of ability). If a child changes schools and her performance drops, is she under-achieving, or are the exams at the new school objectively more difficult? Comparisons between standardised and non-standardised measures are also not clear-cut. If a child with a high score on a standardised ability test performs poorly on non-standardised school exams, is the child under-performing, or is the difference to be explained by the fact that ability tests and school exams measure different things?

Setting aside these problems in definition, most experts agree that even in countries with well-established gifted education programmes, up to 50% of gifted children underachieve through school and beyond. In India the problem is probably bigger still.



## Why does a gifted child underachieve?

a) If a child under-achieves only in some subjects, it's possible that:

1. *Her ability in those areas is actually average or below-average.* Recall that while an individual's abilities across domains are usually correlated, this correlation falls in the gifted. To expect exceptional performance from a gifted child in all areas may be unrealistic. To get an approximate measure of ability (and interest), expose the child to advanced activities or materials in different areas. For example, if a child responds to language materials with enthusiasm and creativity, but ignores or struggles with the mathematics materials, it's probable that the child has high ability in language and mediocre ability in mathematics. Parents should adjust their expectations accordingly.

2. *She has a problem with the subject, or with the teacher of that subject.* Many gifted children, with their sense of humour, preference for independent working, and advanced content knowledge are intolerant of teachers they consider overly controlling or poorly-informed, or with subjects they consider outdated, of no practical use, or requiring rote memory. Some of these children may channel their wit and energy into disrupting that class and mocking the teacher. Address this problem by explaining to the child why that subject is important. Remember, parents should never justify misbehaviour by invoking giftedness. Parents' tacit or explicit approval of the child's misbehaviour worsens the situation.

3. *She wants to study only one subject.* Many gifted children have strong interests and consider everything else a distraction. There are three-year-olds who only want to do art, or seven-year-olds who only want to study science and completely ignore languages. These

children are bored in other classes, frequently skip school, and turn in incomplete work. Teachers and parents then need to bargain with the child—a trip to the observatory if the child finishes all her language homework for a month—or find ways to teach language through science. Reasoning with a gifted child may be more beneficial than instructing her as to what she should be doing.

b) *If a child under-achieves in most areas,* she probably finds school boring, stifling, and a distraction from her independent learning and exploring. The only reliable solution is to get teachers to provide advanced worksheets or projects, or to get the school to double-promote the child so that the curriculum more closely matches her cognitive needs. Double promotion works in case of children who show giftedness across subjects. However, keep in mind that the socio-emotional development of these children may be in accordance to their biological age and hence advancing their grades may cause some concern in social aspects. The school will also need to ensure that the confidence of the child is not hampered by being compelled to compete with a peer group that is much older than her.

If faced with unresponsive schools, many parents find that the only option is to change schools; but this again is not a foolproof solution. Not all reputable, expensive, IGCSE or Montessori schools are necessarily more appropriate for gifted children. Many parents then resort to home schooling, particularly in India. It still remains to be seen whether this is a good solution.

c) *The child may be twice-exceptional.* If a previously normally- or high-achieving child has begun underachieving, she may be experiencing an emotional, psychological, or adjustment disorder. Parents should seek psychological evaluation for the child.

It would be inaccurate to view gifted children as 'all-rounders.' Research suggests that most gifted children excel in one or two areas, though they are often above-average in others. However, some children face the academic problem of **multipotentiality**; showing high ability and interest in multiple areas, and being unable to selectively commit to one area. In such a situation, parents or the school should connect the child to experts working in her areas of interest or offer exposure to the related work environments; this will give her valuable information to reach a decision as to which area she wants to commit to.

If the child decides to pursue a career outside the small number of professions valued by our society, don't reproach her for 'wasting' her talents. Parents would do well to remember how important task commitment—the motivation to pursue an area—is to achievement. The gifted child is much likelier to succeed if she makes an informed career decision prioritising her interest areas.

By Dr. Anitha Kurup and Ms. Amita Basu,  
Gifted Education Programme, NIAS,  
Bangalore, India



**The National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS)** is conducting a project on the Identification of Gifted Children.

For more information on the project and the NIAS Gifted Identification programme, access [www.prodigy.net.in](http://www.prodigy.net.in)