

PARENTING

YOUR GIFTED CHILD

BY AJAY CHANDRA

To help your gifted child transform his potential into performance, identify and nurture his needs and passion

Gifted children are those children who show advanced abilities or high potential compared to that of their peer group. You may have come across many such children; for instance, a child who exhibits a greater understanding of scientific concepts or displays an in-depth knowledge about how an aeroplane operates can be called a gifted child. Such children tend to show their exceptional abilities and potential over a wide range of areas, varying from paleontology to rocket science.

What are the general characteristics of gifted children? Can these children be identified? As parents, how do you handle your gifted child? These are a few of the challenging issues we face when we talk about gifted children.

◆ BEHAVIOURAL TRAITS

Gifted children tend to show a number of behaviour traits which make them different from their peers. And this difference is largely because they develop these behaviour traits at a very advanced level when compared to other children of their age group.



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So while identifying a gifted child, it is important to have clarity in terms of the concept of expression and presence of the behavioural traits. All the traits mentioned (see box on the side), may not be expressed by one single gifted child. These traits just give a general understanding of the behavioural aspects of a gifted child. And it is quite natural that we come across children who also show some of these gifted behavioural traits, but who may not fall into the gifted children category per se. Thus, it is important to remember that a child showing gifted behaviour is different from the child who is actually gifted.

◆ **ROLE OF FAMILY**

In order to help a gifted child to transform his potential into performance, their needs and potential must be identified and nurtured. The needs of a gifted child may be academic or intellectual, socio-emotional or psychological. If these needs are not sufficiently met, there is always a possibility of a gifted child ending up with some negative consequences.

Development of the potential in gifted children and helping the child to perform at exceptional levels is often influenced by many factors like school, home and family environment, social environment and enrichment programmes.

Research in the area of giftedness often shows that early identification and enrichment provided at the family level has resulted in exceptional achievements among the gifted children.

There are two important components involved in here:

1. Identifying the giftedness in the child, and
2. Providing appropriate learning opportunities (challenging activities) to the child after identification.

Family is the place where early promotion of 'giftedness' takes place. In most cases, it is the parents who are able to spot the 'special something' in their child (they see the spark in the child), and they provide proper nurturance to their child's gift.

For example, in one of the case studies, it was observed that the child's interest on learning about aeronautics was identified when the child was very young and the potential was enhanced by providing appropriate nourishment from the parents.

The parents were able to provide resources, books, encyclopedias, and access to Internet. They also took their child to museums and air shows. So the parents noted their child's strong interest in a particular field, and then they nurtured the child by giving appropriate enrichment.

So what becomes important is the creation of a conducive environment, without which even the child with great potential may fail to transform that potential into talent or performance.

12 BEHAVIOURAL TRAITS EXHIBITED BY GIFTED CHILDREN:

- showing longer attention span
- well-organized memory
- advanced language skills
- extreme curiosity
- large vocabulary base
- high level of information processing skills
- higher order thinking skills
- voracious reading habits
- intense interests in one or more areas / activities
- leadership skills
- problem-solving, creative thinking, meta cognition skills
- dislike for repetition



Few parenting tips for nurturing a gifted child:

- Provide learning opportunities in areas of the child's interest.
- Maintain a positive interaction with your child.
- Provide suitable materials and activities.
- Give emotional freedom and support to your child.
- Don't pressurize your child towards high performance.

◆ SOCIO-EMOTIONAL NEEDS

Another issue that needs to be dealt within the family environment is addressing the socio-emotional needs of the gifted children. Since gifted children have a precocious development in many areas like cognition, emotional maturity, content mastery etc, they are way ahead with respect to their peer group.

This creates a gap between the peer group and the gifted child, where the gifted child finds it hard to relate himself or herself to the peer group. And this is often the reason why gifted children have less close friends from the same age group. However, a majority of the gifted children seem to be well-adjusted in areas of social and emotional functioning. But still, there may be few cases of maladjustment in social and emotional domains, and so addressing the problems becomes important.

Deficits in areas of socio-emotional functioning will affect the

functionality in other areas by affecting the curiosity of the child; inducing lower levels of motivation, lower self-esteem, lesser productivity, underachievement in academics, depression and friendlessness.

It is in this context that parental role and support become important for the all-round development of a gifted child. A number of studies have shown that the things that parents and children do together have a positive effect on the development of a child. Thus, inclusion of appropriate parenting strategies at crucial times of development becomes important.

◆ NO STEREOTYPING, BRANDING

Another area where the parent of gifted children needs to be sensitized is about the attitude towards the gifted child. Once the parents have identified the gift in their child, it is very important that parents should not pressurize the child to continuously perform at high

levels, and by asking him to attend challenging activities or competition against his wish.

Sometimes even over-publicity of the child's talent may have negative effect. A gifted child should be treated just like any other child; the focus should be on the child rather than on the gift that the child possesses. Stereotyping or branding the child as 'gifted' is not a good idea. Stereotyping may give rise to other problems as the society or people around perceive the child differently from that of other children. It may lead to branding, and differential attitudes often tend to persist among many people who come across the child. Stereotyping may lead to psychological problems in the child in terms of adjustment.

◆ SPECIAL SCHOOLS FOR GIFTED CHILDREN?

Another common question asked by parents of a gifted child is whether special schools are available for their schooling. Right now, in India, there are no special or separate schools meant for gifted children. In addition India does not even have a national level education programme for these gifted children unlike countries like China, Singapore, and the US.

To fill this gap, the National Institute of Advanced Studies (NIAS), Bengaluru, has undertaken a national level programme for identifying gifted children in Math and Science (for further info please refer www.prodigy.in.com). So in order to meet the academic needs of a gifted child, schools may design IEP (Individual Education Plans), so that advanced curriculum can be introduced to the child to learn. ●

(FOR FURTHER DETAILS, PLEASE CONTACT DR ANITHA KURUP, PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR OF THE GIFTED EDUCATION PROJECT, NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDIES (NIAS IISC CAMPUS, BENGALURU) OR CALL AJAY CHANDRA, RESEARCH ASSOCIATE, GIFTED EDUCATION PROJECT, NIAS @ 9916161322 / WWW.PRODIGY.IN.COM



FAQ

1 What is giftedness?

The National Association of Gifted Education (NAGE), India defines giftedness as performance or potential in the top 3% of age-group for children between 3-15 years. Gifted children may excel in multiple areas, or show a more narrow range of abilities and interests. NAGE-India caters to children who show advanced ability in any area, with the focus being on Math and Science.

For example, a gifted child may show an extraordinary interest in insects, and he may do his independent research in this area by reading up lots of books and visiting websites, come out with his own explanations for certain behaviour of insects, and ask very deep questions that is rather unusual for his age. Gifted children can also flit from one area to another, with a child interested in insects suddenly showing an interest in, let's say, mechanics!

3 Will NAGE India certify my child as gifted?

NAGE India does not certify any child as gifted. Giftedness is a fluid category, as a child considered gifted today may not be so next year.

5 If my child is gifted, why does he not do well academically?

Often, gifted children may not perform well academically. They may find the presentation of content in textbooks impersonal and disjointed, or they may be disenchanted with assessment systems in schools. In other words, a gifted child may fail to do well academically because the school setup does not provide opportunities for her to demonstrate her abilities.

A coexisting learning disorder or other disability can also affect a child's performance at school. Some gifted children deliberately mask their abilities and under-perform academically to fit in with peers. Others may fail to demonstrate their potential in school because their home backgrounds do not provide levels of stimulation comparable to those of their peers – a problem that is sure to appear in integrated classrooms under RTE, where teachers will inevitably but unfairly compare children from disadvantaged backgrounds with their more-advantaged peers.

2 How does the NIAS gifted education identification process work?

Potentially gifted children are identified via nominations from parents/teachers. Nominations are made using an observation checklist developed after extensive field research with gifted children in classrooms, as well as profiles of gifted children developed via interviews with parents and other significant people.

Children are assessed using measures of ability and creativity that have been adapted to the Indian context. These measures are context-appropriate and culture-fair, so that children are not penalized because of differences in linguistic, educational, or family background. After assessment, in-depth profiles of some children are created. Later, children may be linked up with mentors, and can avail of resources.

4 What factors can affect my child's giftedness?

Giftedness is correlated with achievement/performance to some extent. Ability is only one of the numerous factors that affect performance. Other factors include interest, home environment, education, parental and socio-economic variables, and personality variables like persistence and resilience. A child's ability level and his/her performance do not correlate perfectly.

6 Does a double promotion take care of a gifted child's needs?

Though gifted children may show advanced interest in certain areas, when they are put in a higher class with older kids, their confidence may break as they may not be good in all the subjects. Besides, emotionally, they are still less mature than the older kids, and that may affect their social skills and self-esteem. So a double promotion may not be the perfect way of acknowledging the giftedness of a child. ☉

(Adapted from www.prodigy.net.in, with inputs from Dr Anitha Kurup)