

PARENTING GIFTED CHILDREN – NOT A CAKEWALK

With the prevailing (incorrect) view that gifted children have it easy, parents of gifted children don't get much sympathy. However, as Feldman and Piirto (2002) observe, parenting a gifted child is one of the most daunting and often discouraging challenges that family life has to offer. In this article, we will address some special challenges faced by parents of gifted children.

Existing research on gifted parenting is limited; the small sample sizes and methodological limitations of most of these studies make it difficult to generalise results (Schader 2008). For example, there's no research consensus on two important questions: a) what parenting style is best for gifted children (authoritative, authoritarian, indulgent-permissive)? and b) Does a peaceful, stable family environment (rather than a tense, eventful one) optimise talent development? Despite this information gap, advice on gifted parenting abounds on the internet. When evaluating this advice, please keep

in mind that the existing research simply does not support strong recommendations or conclusions.

The biggest problem for parents of gifted children is locating reliable information on how to support their child's development (Ruf 2005). Parents want to know "How can I find out whether my child is gifted?" and "How can I support her development?"

Before we move on, we remind parents that giftedness is developmental; intelligence and ability may change over the lifespan. A child who shows potential may not always perform at that level.

This is particularly true of child prodigies: children who display extraordinary abilities (usually in memory, mathematics, music, or chess) at an early age. Prodigies master the content and processes of a domain rapidly; however they rarely go on to become creative achievers like Mozart (Csikszentmihalyi 1999; Winner 2000). We cite prodigies as one instance of the changeable nature of ability. While investments in your child's development will often pay off — and families are critical in this regard — this does not guarantee sustained high achievement.



In earlier issues of ParentEdge, we discussed the identification of giftedness; now we address the role of parents in gift development. Parents are particularly important in the preschool years, and in situations where school-based options for advanced or extracurricular content are limited. How do you stimulate the child without over-burdening her and potentially extinguishing her interest? A rule of thumb is to respond to the child's initiative. Outside school, one of the most valuable investments a parent can make in gift development is to seek mentorship. A mentor is a subject-expert

who spends time with the child providing content knowledge, process training, and educational and pragmatic guidance (e.g. showing the child what it's like to be a scientist at a research university). Another useful effort is to link the child to other gifted children in the neighbourhood. Often, gifted children in mainstream classrooms feel intellectually and emotionally isolated. Meeting with intellectual peers provides opportunities for play, collaboration on projects, and the discussion of unique challenges (particularly for gifted adolescents).

While out-of-school resources are important, parents shouldn't neglect the school itself. Though most schools have no special provisions for the gifted, one or two sympathetic teachers who know the child well may be willing to provide special resources. The parents of the gifted child plays a crucial role in advocating gifted education in schools. While the indifference or even hostility of teachers to your gifted child's needs may be frustrating, teachers and parents can work together to optimise the child's potential and adjustment.

In what ways do gifted children make unique demands from parents? Recall the concept of asynchrony — different facets of development occurring at uneven rates. A child aged seven may demonstrate the intellectual development of a 10-year-old, yet his socio-emotional development may be at the six-year-old level. The child may fail to follow rules and instructions, misbehave, and enter into conflicts with peers — leading in many cases to negative evaluations by teachers and lowered socio-emotional adjustment. The best way to foster socio-emotional development is by fulfilling the child's cognitive needs. Misbehaviour and inattention in class are often the symptoms of frustration due to an under-challenging curriculum and a structure that restricts creativity and independent learning. If you can demonstrate to teachers that boredom is contributing to your child's behavioral difficulties, she may be more willing to work with you to offer appropriate educational challenges.

At the same time, remember that giftedness does not constitute an excuse

for mis-behaviour ("they're like that") — you should set the same behavioural standards for a gifted child as for a non-gifted child, and work with the child to achieve those standards. Because of their advanced cognitive and (often) moral development, discussion and explanation of rules works better than direction.

Two special concerns of gifted children make unique parenting demands. Gifted children may be more prone to perfectionism, setting unrealistically high standards for themselves which they then fail to fulfill, leading to frustration and lowered effort. Research has now identified dimensions within perfectionism: positive (high standards, attention to detail, organisation) and negative (concern with errors, unrealistic time pressure). While perfectionism is no longer considered a maladaptive trait, gifted parents should watch for negative signs and work with children to develop more healthy, realistic goals and standards. Parents of course need to be watchful over their own expectations and the way in which they communicate these to their children.

Dabrowski (1972) proposed that gifted individuals display 'over-excitabilities' — heightened sensitivity to stimulation in the sensory, psychomotor, intellectual, imaginal and emotional domains. Research on the over excitabilities is inconclusive; most research finds only a modest difference between gifted and non-gifted individuals in some but not all dimensions. As with asynchrony and socio-emotional difficulties, over excitabilities are more likely to appear as the degree of giftedness increases. If over excitabilities cause significant distress or maladjustment, parents may need to work with a counsellor.

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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