

Meeting the Needs of Gifted Children

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I'm writing to you today, not as a parent, but as a child. Yes, I am 37 years old, but inside me the child that I was still exists, and that child was (is?) gifted. Wait - don't go - I know what you're thinking. Yes, of course, every child has his or her own unique gifts and abilities. But there is a certain group of children that we call gifted because we don't have a better word to describe them. These children share certain characteristics, such as an intense curiosity and above average abilities in certain areas. And because there are so many myths and misunderstandings about these children, I wanted to write an article that would help, not only parents of gifted children, but everyone else as well, to better understand them and their special needs.

I know that this is a touchy subject, one that some people consider elitist. But there are very good reasons for identifying gifted children and having special programs for them. I hope that, whether or not your child is "gifted", you will keep reading with an open mind and an open heart. It is in everyone's best interest to help these children to develop to their fullest potential, for these children have a lot to contribute to society. Today's gifted child may tomorrow invent or discover something that could save or improve the quality of your life.

Who are gifted children?

What do you think of when you hear the term "gifted child?" Perhaps you think of someone like Hermione in the Harry Potter books - someone who reads lots of books and gets an "A" in every class. But what about the rebel who is always in trouble with the teachers? What about the child who never does any homework and eventually drops out of school? What about the child with a learning disability? All of these children could be gifted children.

Gifted children tend to push the envelope. Their intense curiosity, their high energy, and their tendency to question everything can cause them to be labeled as troublemakers or misdiagnosed as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

There are as many varieties of gifted children as there are gifted children. Some gifted children shine with excellence; these are easily identified as gifted. But others are not so easily identified. Some express their giftedness by asking constant questions and getting into everything. These gifted children may never be identified as gifted because they are viewed by parents and teachers as "difficult" children. Others have learned to hide their giftedness to avoid the inevitable teasing and torment. Still others may never be identified as gifted because they have a learning disability which masks their giftedness. And of course, some gifted children live in economically or socially disadvantaged situations, where their giftedness may not be recognized or valued.

Why gifted programs?

Whatever their differences, all gifted children have certain special needs. What sets gifted children apart is these special needs - and if these needs are not met it can cause great psychological distress. This is the rationale behind gifted programs. Programs for gifted children are not a benefit or reward for being gifted; they are not designed to advance one group of children above the others or give them a better chance to get into the best colleges. Gifted programs are simply designed to address the peculiar and unique needs of these children and give them a fair chance to develop to their fullest potential.

One of the deepest needs of gifted children is to have adequate mental stimulation. Think how you would feel if you were forced to watch the same movie 100 times. (If you are a parent, you may have already done this!) After the first few times, all but the most interesting movies would

become boring. And long before the 100th showing, you would be ready to scream in boredom. This is how gifted children feel in an ordinary classroom. Gifted children simply learn differently than other children, and forcing them to progress at a slower pace than they are capable of can be excruciatingly painful for them, and can cause them to "shut down" and lose interest in school and learning altogether.

Because gifted children learn so easily, many of them do not develop adequate study skills. They never learn how to learn because they don't have to. But at some point they may be faced with a challenging learning environment, and when they do, it is important to know how to study properly. Gifted children need to be challenged, and they need to learn to develop the study skills to handle those challenges.

Gifted children also need to have an opportunity to interact with other gifted children. Teased by their peers and misunderstood by teachers, gifted children often feel that they "don't fit in" and that something is wrong with them because they are different. By having a chance to interact with other gifted children, they learn that there is not something wrong with them and that there are others like them. But gifted children also need to learn how to interact with all types of children, and to have the opportunity to develop relationships with children who are different from them as well.

Finally, I believe that gifted children need a mentor and counselor, an adult who has been a gifted child. They need someone they can talk to, who will understand and who can offer advice. This counselor could be a parent or teacher, or it could be a professional counselor.

What can I do?

So what does this mean to you? If you think that your child may be gifted, it is important to have him or her tested by a qualified psychologist with expertise in gifted children. If your child is identified as a "gifted child," then you can become an advocate for him, making sure that his needs are met. My mother spent so much time in the principals office when I was a child, pushing to get me what I needed, that the poor man must have run the other way when he saw her coming. Testing is important, not only to identify your child as a gifted child, but to get a better picture of the whole child, so that you can better address his needs.

If your child doesn't fall into this category of children, it does not make your child any less important or special. But I hope that you will support, or at least understand the need for, gifted programs. All children have a right to grow up in an environment that meets their needs, and sadly, gifted children do not always have this opportunity.

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