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Learning About Gifted Children

Title: Is My Child Gifted?	
Author: Joanne Foster	Online since: April 2010
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The title query, “**Is my child gifted?**” is the focus of this article.

Although this question may seem useful, and it is certainly one that many parents ask, I can’t help but wonder about its practical value. Let’s consider the utility of the question. Regardless of whether the answer is “*yes*” or “*no*,” it immediately leads to another question—“*Now what?*”

Therefore, it would make sense to reframe the initial question so that the answer invites more than just a curt *yes* or *no* (or even *maybe*). These responses lack depth and do little if anything to provide intelligent information—which is what parents need for decision-making purposes and in order to find educational solutions that will lead to favorable developmental outcomes for their children.

Although there are many reasons why parents might wonder about the nature and extent of their child’s capabilities, parents of high-ability learners should think about what kinds of questions will shed light on educational and other learning needs, as opposed to focusing on a gifted label and whether or not it is applicable. It would be far more useful for parents to ask, “How can we find out if our child has gifted learning needs?” Or “How can we support our child’s advanced-level abilities?” Or “What do we need to know about high-level development?” These questions invite answers that are far more constructive. They are action-oriented.

Moreover, because individual learning needs vary across different subjects, times in a child’s life, and contexts, it makes sense to ask questions that are geared toward finding the right opportunities for a solid learning match for the here and now. The gifted label is not what matters. How to go about encouraging children’s well-being and

supporting their optimal growth at a particular point in time is what parents really need to know. Questions that are aligned in that way are practical, and they are more compatible with the fluid nature of gifted development because they shift the focus away from categorizing giftedness and toward learning, ability-matching, and helping children thrive.

Sometimes parents require more information than they already have in order to determine if their child has exceptional learning needs and, if so, in what domains. Therefore, the questions adults ask, and the answers generated as a result, should not be designed to establish if a child fits a category (gifted or not-gifted) but should be designed to be diagnostic. That is, they should be of use in figuring out what a child knows, what he or she still needs and wants to know, and how to go about teaching it most effectively.

Looked at in this way, the reason for gifted identification is not to decide whether or not a child “is gifted.” Rather, it is to identify areas of strength and weakness, including whether the child’s development is so far advanced that some kind of differentiation is necessary, and, if so, what type of planning should be undertaken to ensure swift provision of targeted learning opportunities and programming adaptations. The most defensible use of the term “gifted” is when a student’s exceptional subject-specific advancement might be otherwise compromised such that he or she is not likely to receive the best possible education. If the gifted label is the ticket (as is still the case in many jurisdictions), then it is, admittedly, difficult to steer clear of categorization practices and narrowly focused questions. (Sigh.) Parents and teachers have to work together to change the emphasis from *being* to *doing*.

There are countless pathways to giftedness, and each one is unique. Giftedness is variable, and it is not, as many people believe, a “once and forever” endowment. A child who exhibits exceptional learning needs in one domain or at a particular time may not always have these same needs or abilities. The best way to assess an individual’s giftedness is to use a multiple measures approach. Parents and teachers can use many different sources of information. This might include careful consideration of prior achievement in specific domains (as indicated by school-based reports); subject-specific scores on high-ceiling tests of abstract reasoning; and a determination of whether an individual has a mastery orientation toward learning (in other words, demonstrates motivation, engagement, and persistence in the tasks and activities required to reach exceptional levels of achievement). When all is said and done, the best identification measures are a melding of thorough and up to date information about children’s developmental levels across abilities. This provides more than just a categorical designation of gifted or not-gifted.

“Is my child gifted?” happens to be the cover question on a brochure published jointly by SENG and NAGC (available online and by mail). It is, admittedly, a question that parents will continue to ask as long as “being

gifted” remains a customary means for a child to acquire appropriate programming accommodations and learning opportunities. However, every child has the right to educational address that is commensurate with his or her abilities. The question that I believe all parents *should* be asking is, “What can we do to support our child’s learning?” Most importantly, parents need to ask it often—of teachers, and of the many others they will likely encounter on their child’s experiential pathways. Parents also have to be open-minded and willing to listen to answers, and then be prepared to respond in ways that are loving, informed, thoughtful, flexible, and proactive.

Author’s Note: Readers are invited to ponder these questions and to [send me](#) their comments, questions, or concerns. I welcome the input of others.

Joanne Foster, Ed.D. teaches Educational Psychology as well as Gifted Education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. As a consultant, she works alongside educators, conducting professional development workshops and providing teacher training in support of gifted/high-ability learners. She also facilitates parent forums and community outreach, focusing on understandings of giftedness and high-level development, and on ways to accommodate the diverse needs of advanced learners. Dr. Foster serves on various advisory committees, is the author of numerous articles and scholarly presentations, and co-wrote with Dona Matthews the award-winning Being Smart about Gifted Education: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents, 2nd Edition (2009).

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P.O. Box 488, Poughquag, NY 12570

office@sengifted.org

(845)797-5054