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Cultivating a Gifted Mind: How Parents Can Foster Exceptional Learners

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There is no single gifted child profile. Each child and situation is unique. Recognizing giftedness is a matter of identifying exceptional learning needs at a particular point in time—and then, of course, providing the right kinds of opportunities for the child's optimal development.

Assessing a child's abilities should include several different measures. This might include dynamic classroom assessment (which involves figuring out what a child knows at the beginning of any unit of study and then embarking on a cycle of assess—teach—assess—teach), standardized achievement tests, intelligence tests, and student portfolios (records of work or other outside learning activities).

There are many misconceptions about gifted learners—who they are, how they act, and what they can accomplish. For example, people may think that all gifted learners are avid readers, high achievers, demonstrate excellent study skills, and are easy for teachers to spot. Not necessarily so—children's developmental pathways are different and unpredictable. Giftedness is an individual differences phenomenon. The boy who always responds excitedly in class may or may not be gifted. The girl at the back of the room who rarely speaks up may or may not be gifted.

Gifted learners are not all alike. They have different interests, experiences, learning preferences, and ways of functioning. Every person has an active role in creating his or her own intelligence and there are all kinds of influences along the way.

Nevertheless, people often ask me what "gifted" means. Here is a workable definition: *A gifted learner is one who is exceptionally capable for his or her age or grade in one or more subject areas, and needs special programming for happy and productive engagement in learning.* This definition is practical because it ties identification to educational programming.

Here are some other questions—and answers.

- **Is there a stigma associated with being gifted?**

The gifted label is like a flower with thorns. It has positive and negative aspects.

Labels may carry problematic connotations that can be hard for children to reconcile. Moreover, labeling certain children as gifted implies that other children are *not*, or that they lack special abilities or gifts.

The gifted categorization sometimes evokes teasing or rejection from peers, conflicting expectations from parents and teachers, and concerns about developmental issues. Some children may think that because they have heightened ability they don't have to put forth effort, whereas others may worry about how they're going to keep up. There tends to be misinformation and controversy about what the label means. On the other hand, it is a validation of a child's abilities, and is sometimes the necessary ticket for appropriate programming and/or special educational services. Generally speaking, if a child can be in a learning environment that is appropriately challenging *without* having to have the gifted label, then that is probably best.

It would be ideal if "being gifted" was understood simply as the identification of exceptional learning needs. This way of looking at it removes some of the elitism, mystery, and confusion often associated with the label, and much of the stigma frequently attached to it and to gifted education. Instead of labeling children, an effective alternative is to label educational services. Schools should offer a variety of options to all students who are interested in and capable of taking advantage of them.

- **How do you test kids for giftedness?**

Any testing process should be an ongoing process and not based on a single test. There should be regular evaluation of children's abilities as they mature. It should be diagnostic (that is, indicating areas where children are very capable and less so), and it should specify programming implications. The exceptional learning needs (not the child) should be identified as gifted.

The topic of IQ testing continues to be controversial. Although there are alternative ways to identifying academic and other needs, IQ tests can provide valuable information about a child's learning styles and areas of cognitive strength and weakness. This information can be used by teachers for developing programs and planning adaptive instruction. Remember: the value of any test lies in its interpretation, and in understandings of test-related issues.

- **What programming is best for exceptional learning needs?**

Gifted programming can occur in specialized or regular classes, enrichment programs, cluster groups, at home, or in other learning environments. Wherever it happens, it should incorporate choice and a range of learning options.

The process of matching a child's needs, interests, and abilities varies from one person to the next. Sometimes a gifted class provides the right setting and mix of learning activities. A regular classroom works well when teachers are able to differentiate programming and target instruction appropriately. Pull-out enrichment programs or flexible groupings may be the best option for some children.

In the whole scheme of things, one cannot categorize individual development, and thus there is no set path leading to guaranteed success for every child.

The best approach for working with high-ability learners is to provide lots of relevant educational opportunities, and to take into account a variety of learning styles and preferences. Children can also be encouraged to become actively involved in planning their learning experiences. This enables them to take responsibility, to set reasonable standards for themselves, and to feel good about their accomplishments.

- **How do gifted learners achieve life balance?**

Some children experience difficulty managing the social and academic aspects of their lives; others experience no trouble whatsoever. Most gifted learners are at least as socially and emotionally competent as others their age, although their levels of cognitive functioning may be more highly developed.

Parents and teachers have to be attuned to what's happening in a child's life and offer guidance, reassurance, and support, keeping in mind that these children are, indeed, still children.

The sense of being different is a prevalent problem for exceptional learners, including those who are gifted. It can be particularly painful at adolescence, a time when identity and social acceptance issues are heightened. Boredom and frustration are other concerns. These often result from a poor fit between children's learning needs and programming provisions. Fear of failure, fear of too much success, and self-confidence issues can also pose problems.

Parents and teachers should look at the whole child, ensure that the school program is adapted to the individual, and foster emotional and social intelligence in the context of daily activities. Adults should also seek information about giftedness from multiple sources. Most importantly, parents should facilitate children's play because it lays a foundation for learning how to get along with others.

When children's difficulties compromise their well-being it may be prudent to enlist the help of a counseling professional. A school's administrative team or a family doctor should have suggestions.

- **What if you don't put a gifted child in special programming?**

A school is only as good as its teachers and administrators, the communication network it sets up with parents and the community, and the resources and materials it provides for inquiry-based learning. There are countless educators in "regular classrooms" who offer exciting and relevant educational experiences for gifted learners. These teachers differentiate programs effectively and creatively, they motivate students, and they empower children to be happy, life-long learners, both in school and out.

Bright capable children can and certainly do fare very well in programs that are not specifically designated as gifted. If a child is being appropriately challenged and feels happy about life and learning then that is good. Moreover, there are many ways to provide beyond the classroom learning opportunities. Examples include mentorships; community service partnerships; extracurricular programs; real and virtual travel; career exploration; and educational offerings at places such as galleries, theatres, music venues, and museums.

- **Will gifted education help kids prepare for university?**

Gifted programs often provide students with motivating and real-world learning options, focus on fine-tuning study skills; cultivate inquiry; and adopt flexible approaches to learning and teaching—all excellent preparation for university. And, inevitably, most regular school programs will claim that they also provide these services.

Parents and teachers can help prepare children for post secondary school by ensuring that they feel safe, productive, and have a healthy balance in their lives. How to accomplish this? Offer children choice within an abundance of suitable learning opportunities, celebrate their day-to-day accomplishments, and provide them with guidance, love, and a nurturing environment throughout their school years. That's the best readiness for university, and for life itself.

Author's Note: Dr. Joanne Foster is a Gifted Education Consultant, and teaches Educational Psychology as well as Gifted Studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto. Read about the award-winning *Being Smart about Gifted Education, 2nd Edition: A Guidebook for Educators and Parents* (2009) by Dona Matthews and Joanne Foster, and access more information and online resources at www.beingsmart.ca