



## Articles & Resources

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### Learning About Gifted Children

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#### What Should I Do If My Child Isn't Sufficiently Challenged at School?

This question, extracted directly from the SENG service bulletin (an informational brochure published jointly with NAGC) is one that many parents ask, and rightly so. The answers provided in the brochure make good sense because they are *doable*. They include forging strong parent-teacher liaisons (such as consultations, and shared observations of strengths and interests), tapping into available resources (different people, places, and material), finding programming options that are suited to children's individual needs (including special classes, flexible grouping, acceleration, or independent study opportunities), and becoming actively involved in parent advocacy (such as associations, and advisory groups). These are four excellent ways to generate greater challenge for learners.

This article is the second of a series written expressly for the SENG newsletter, and with each piece I discuss one of the questions featured in their brochure. In response to the above title question about

insufficient challenge at school, I'm going to extend the ideas by focusing on the advocacy aspect, while also taking into consideration some of the affective implications that can occur when children are not adequately challenged. For example, sometimes children become frustrated, or bored, or they're teased for wanting to take on more demanding or stimulating learning opportunities. What can parents do?

Consider the following three scenarios.

*Angie is restless. The science lab topic is interesting. It has to do with the mutation of birds over time and the effects of the environment on evolution but she finds the specific group assignments far too simple. Moreover, she recognizes inherent flaws in the teacher's protocol for the steps they are to take, and the various recording procedures. Angie doesn't know how to deal with this. Should she speak up and possibly be put down, or should she simply acquiesce?*

*Mack refuses to write things down. He hates having to copy notes from the board--something he is expected to do every day, in every class. He already knows all the material they're covering in the history unit on peacekeeping troops over the years. He's read a lot about it. He thinks, "This class is a colossal waste of time! I'd rather learn how these peacekeeping efforts apply to real families, to the future of my country, to technological advances."□*

*Stefan is working on the best technique to scrunch up paper in order to send it directly into the garbage can in the back corner of the classroom. He's investigating the number and nature of folds, and whether a big compact wad is more flight-efficient than a small one. So far he's thrown seven such missiles. Problem is, he can only do this when Miss Dunlop's back is turned because he's supposed to be working on a series of algebra problems (that he already knows the answers to and could do in his head last year). And, his experiment is getting on the nerves of his classmates, four of whom have narrowly missed being hit—today.*

Angie is frustrated, Mack is bored, and Stefan is constantly teased because he typically acts out in some way or other when things get tedious, which seems to be often. The SENG/NAGC brochure advises that when a child is not sufficiently challenged, it is important to be respectful and patient, but equally important to persevere and be determined.□

To that end, parents can and should talk openly with their children, asking them what they're feeling, and why. Parents should listen carefully to their responses, discuss any behavioural concerns, and

encourage their children to take some responsibility for finding solutions to underlying or overarching problems. Children's confidence increases when they feel their ideas matter, and when their views are valued by others. Parents can demonstrate support for children by advocating for and also alongside them

Parents can also help children understand what advocacy is all about. How? By modeling, and demonstrating both foresight and forbearance. When advocating for more challenging programs at school, the driving principle being to find or create a better fit between the individual child and the schooling situation, here are some basic steps to keep in mind. They are all important, and are in no precise order.

- **Prioritize.** Think carefully about focus and relevance. What are the child's specific strengths and needs?
- **Stay calm.** Be practical and realistic about what can be coordinated or altered.
- **Maintain resolve.** Remember that problem solving can be labor-intensive. Keep working and generating momentum.
- **Communicate.** A school community is a complex and interdependent workplace, so strive to nurture collaboration, a climate of trust, and mutual respect. Productive working relationships are characterized by open communication channels and free-flowing dialogue.
- **Encourage.** Teachers can use a range of instructional methods (to enrich children's understanding of concepts) and various assessment methods (so students can demonstrate their learning in different ways).
- **Gather information.** Tip #1: Pay close attention to sources that provide insight into the particular kinds of support you might require. (For example, you might be dealing with issues having to do with a new classroom setting, curricular expectations, motivation, social concerns, or your child's uneven development.) Tip #2: Find out about different kinds of learning opportunities. (For example, tap into community resources in order to build rich, multi-dimensional, and collaborative learning environments. Many sectors of society, including business, industry, media, seniors, and professionals, provide ways of extending the range of programming options.)
- **Be explicit.** Offer ideas calmly, respectfully, and concisely. Consider putting them into writing. (Keep the length reasonable.)

- **Establish a sensible time-line.** Set fair tasks and responsibilities, and workable parameters. Then be flexible, and patient.
- **Be proactive.** Ask for increased professional development opportunities for teachers, enabling them to learn more about gifted education and how to encourage and support children's high-level development.

Successful change is complex and depends on the interaction of many variables, including educational setting, teacher commitment, administrative support, parent-teacher collaboration, and a child's ability to cope with whatever comes along. Parents can also help their children get the most out of classroom experiences by enabling them to cultivate interests and areas of strength, using these as springboards to other learning ventures.

Parents can be effective advocates, but children also have an important role to play. Students like Angie, Mack, Stefan, and countless others whose learning needs are not being met should not be frustrated, bored, teased, or disenfranchised from daily learning processes. Rather, their perspectives, social/emotional concerns, and learning preferences should be an integral part of those processes. Parents can teach them to speak up for themselves in ways that are informative and sensible, polite yet firm. Children require confidence to do this. And, there are specific skills involved, such as learning to be courteous and sensitive to others, recognizing how their own behaviors can contribute to problems or to their advancement at school, paying attention to the realities of time and space constraints, and understanding that there are curricular expectations that students must meet. Becoming a good advocate means being respectfully assertive, fair-minded, and appropriately targeted in one's approach. Parents can talk with children about the various steps of advocacy and help them to become more confident, to generate and enjoy challenges, and to make the most of learning from day to day.

*Author's Note: Readers are invited to ponder the questions posed in the SENG service bulletin (a publication available by mail and online) and [email me](#) their comments, questions, or concerns about them for upcoming articles. I welcome the input of others with respect to these questions.*

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