

# The Importance of Early Identification of the Gifted

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**"For the first time in the history of education, we are now able to identify the highly endowed while they are in early childhood, and to educate them as we see fit. This is a serious responsibility for the intellectual guardians of youth--educators. Whether we shall choose to act as though we were ignorant of this new knowledge, or whether we shall accept the responsibility for it by...modification of current practice...remains to be seen."**

Leta Stetter Hollingworth

*"How Should Gifted Children Be Educated?"*

It is commonly held that giftedness cannot be ascertained until third grade; however, this belief is not supported by research. Evidence that it is possible to accurately identify the gifted in primary grades, preschool, and even younger has been available for over half a century. In summarizing the research, Witty (1958) wrote:

"...later studies and analyses have yielded information about very young gifted children. These studies make it possible to set forth, with considerable clarity, the characteristics of such children. These studies suggest the importance to the child's later development of early identification and of parent understanding of his nature and needs.

Evidence of superiority may be readily observed in most gifted children when they are very young." (p. 48)

In her research with highly gifted children, Hollingworth (1942) likewise reported that the earlier these children were identified, the more favorable their development. Studies of eminent individuals indicate that most showed evidence of superior ability and precocious development before elementary school (Albert, 1978; Cox, 1926; Goertzel, Goertzel & Goertzel, 1978; McCurdy, 1957; Pressey, 1955; Terman, 1925). Pressey (1955) and Bloom (1982; 1985) both found that adults who had attained acclaim for their achievements were usually identified very early in life, usually in the preschool years, and provided with excellent opportunities to develop their talents.

A study conducted with parents of gifted children revealed that 35 percent of the children were recognized by their parents as gifted between the ages of three and five; the other 65 percent were recognized after the age of six (Dembinski & Mauser, 1978). The Seattle Project has been successful at identifying gifted children in the two- to three-year-old range (Robinson, Roedell & Jackson, 1979; Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980). White indicates that children who are either unusually rapid or unusually slow in

their development show signs of their exceptionality as early as 18 months (White & Watts, 1973).

## Why Is Early Identification of Gifted Children Resisted?

The tenacity of the conviction that early identification is not possible is probably due in part to budgetary considerations. Identifying gifted children early is costly: it means providing programs for primary students. Few districts do this unless they are required to by state mandates.

There is also a widespread concern that early identification may find the wrong children. It is believed that IQ scores are unstable in the early years, and that children who look developmentally advanced when they enter school lose their advantage in subsequent years. The myth of the instability of IQ scores was refuted by both Hollingworth (Hollingworth & Kaunitz, 1934) and Terman (Terman & Oden, 1947; 1959) and, more recently, by Elizabeth Hagen, co-creator of the *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Fourth Edition*, and the *Cognitive Abilities Test*.

"The correlations between scores obtained at ages four or five and later IQ scores are slightly lower than those obtained at age nine, but not that much lower." (Hagen, as quoted in Silverman, 1986a)

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A careful examination of those children who test in the gifted range in preschool and primary years and appear to lose ground by the middle grades reveals that an inordinate proportion of them are female (Silverman, 1986b). They may actually have lost their giftedness in a few years of school (Borland, 1986) or they may be hiding their abilities so that they fit in with their peers. The former possibility is even more alarming than the latter. By assuming that early indications of high ability are inaccurate, we may be overlooking a much more critical issue: the loss of talent in gifted girls through neglect.

One of the most misguided notions in education is that high IQ scores in young children are simply an artifact of a good environment, that they can be artificially inflated by parents' reading to children or by the children attending a good preschool. Intelligence is certainly a combination of heredity and environment, but who has had more environmental opportunities: the 4 year old or the 9 year old? Therefore, which score is likely to be the most influenced by a good environment? The impact of the environment on IQ increases with age; therefore, the scores of third graders are unquestionably more influenced by the environment than the scores of kindergartners.

An equally tenacious and equally bizarre belief is that somehow, magically, all the other children will "catch up" to the gifted child. If two children have different capacities for obtaining information from the environment--for storing, organizing, remembering, retrieving, associating, and applying that information--how on earth could one "catch up" to the other? This would be like saying that a 1972 computer could "catch up" to a 1992 computer, when the former has less memory capacity and speed and less sophisticated organization than the latter. The only way this can appear to happen is when we use only a fraction of the abilities of the child.

Another frequently expressed concern is that if we identify gifted children early, we may overlook some children who later turn out to be very capable. This may be true, but it is insufficient reason for ignoring the information we have that can positively identify a large portion of gifted children. There is no method of identification that finds all gifted children; all methods will miss some who are exceptionally bright. Therefore, multiple means must be employed at different stages of development.

Ability and achievement are two very different concepts often confused in the identification of the gifted. Whereas achievement is easier to identify in older students, ability is best identified in younger children (Silverman, 1986b). Only a portion of gifted children demonstrate their ability through school achievement. However, in our research at the Gifted Child Development Center, we have found that most "late

bloomers" exhibit the majority of traits in early childhood that characterize other gifted children. Even when they do not shine in school, these children do shine on ability measures, particularly between the ages of 4 and 7. In our studies and others, parents have been found to be excellent identifiers of giftedness in young children (Ciha, Harris, Hoffman, & Potter, 1974; Jacobs, 1971; Silverman, Chitwood & Waters, 1986). To reduce the number of late bloomers who are overlooked, parent identification methods should be used to glean information about the child outside of the school setting and opportunities should be made available throughout the grades for later identification and entrance into programs.

When we realize that gifted children are children with special needs--another branch of special education--the importance of early identification becomes clearer. At what age do we consider it appropriate to identify a retarded child? The answer is obvious: "as early as possible." We even have prenatal diagnosis through amniocentesis. Why do we identify the retarded at the very earliest possible moment? Because everyone agrees that early intervention makes the most difference in a child's life. Why wouldn't the same general principles of development apply to the gifted? Of course, they do. We are legally bound to identify and serve retarded children not only in the primary years, but also in the preschool years. We are morally bound to identify and serve gifted children in their early years if we want these children to be able to contribute their gifts to society.

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