



# G UNDERSTANDING OUR GIFTED™

Dedicated to helping gifted children reach their full potential

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## Special Problems Of Young Highly Gifted Children

Stephanie Tolan

Virtually all of the problems involved in raising and educating highly gifted children can be summed up in three words: they don't fit. We live in a world of norms and expectations; in many ways and much of the time these children function outside (often far outside) those norms and expectations.

Though we don't yet know enough about the workings of the human brain to know precisely what makes them so different, their differences are readily observable. Highly gifted children are an extremely heterogeneous group; nevertheless, there are some characteristic developmental differences that create a recognizable pattern.

Highly gifted children may sit, stand and walk early; they are likely to speak before other children, then read and do simple arithmetic at a very early age, without specific instruction; they often exhibit an unusually adult sense of humor; their vocabularies are large and varied and grow rapidly; they seem almost obsessively curious and persistent in finding the (Continued on page 7)

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## Guarding the Gifted Child

Elizabeth Meckstroth

The family in which a child grows up determines the spell under which that child lives for, perhaps, a lifetime. As parents, we are the ones entrusted with protecting the elusive facets of our children's giftedness. We need to move from **guiding** our gifted children to **guarding** their giftedness. If left to the expectations of society, many of our children's extraordinary abilities would be simply punished out of them. Their reality often extends beyond the comprehension of their companions: what they feel, see, know, is rarely perceived by others. Many—maybe most—people pare these children down to confirm their own experience. Society can become a tyranny that muffles the emergence of our children's differences. As parents, our role is to help our children acquire the strength to swim against the stream of collective prejudice so that they have the courage to be who they are and who they can become.

### THE NEWS

The gifted identification process evokes many issues for parents. Sometimes "the news" is delivered in a tone of, "Congratulations, you have a gifted (Continued on page 10)

answers to their myriad questions; they tolerate and even thrive on clutter and apparent chaos; they gravitate toward older children and adults and share their interests and activities; they often insist on their own methods of accomplishing tasks instead of trying methods suggested by others. Their energy levels are likely to be extremely high (they may need less sleep than adults) and they tend to be *intense* about almost everything.

On formal tests capable of making distinctions far above norms (e.g., *Stanford-Binet L-M*) (Silverman & Kearney, 1989) these children usually score in the 155 - 200 IQ range. Leta Hollingworth (1942) asserted that there is an "optimal" IQ range (between 125 and 155). Above that, she suggested, automatic pressures come into play that work against productivity and social/emotional adjustment. These pressures come primarily from lack of fit.

### LIFE IN THE FAMILY

In the years before school, families in which expectations are loose and flexible may adapt to the highly gifted child with relative ease. In these families a child's unusual accomplishments are noted, supported, and encouraged. Parents may be proud or they may be frightened (or a little of both) by their child's differences from others, but they do their best to cope with the child's unusual demands on their time and energies and to provide the resources the child seems to need.

Other families have more difficulty. They may have clear ideas about how children "should" behave and the highly gifted child refuses to conform to those ideas. Curiosity may be considered annoying, speaking or reading early may be thought an effort to get special attention, high energy levels may be dismissed as a lack of discipline and control. (Highly gifted children are sometimes mis-

diagnosed as suffering from attention deficit disorder.) Older siblings may have difficulty with a child who can do things they can't yet. The child's differences may also be threatening to extended family members or even to the parents themselves.

In some families parents and/or stepparents may disagree on major issues. One may revel in the child's accomplishments; the other may be threatened. One may rejoice in the gifted label; the other may refuse even to consider it. Even when they agree on the desirability of meeting the child's unusual needs, they may not agree on the best way to do that.

While some highly gifted children, then, move with relative ease and freedom through their earliest years, others encounter a painful and difficult problem of fit even within their own families. But it's safe to say that almost any family environment is more flexible than the environment highly gifted children confront when entering most American public (or private) schools.

### LIFE IN SCHOOL

Few parents whose nine month old begins speaking in full sentences tell her she must stop and wait till other nine month olds catch up. They don't disallow words and force her to practice the babbling other nine months olds are doing as a preparation for speech. But this is precisely the approach most schools routinely take to precocious children, often with a solid sense that they are absolutely right to do it. Using the developmental schedules and norms on which our educational system is based, many educators believe that a child is harmed by too rapid a movement through developmental levels and that even worse

harm is caused by any apparent skipping of developmental levels. They simply do not understand that some children have gone beyond those levels before entering school.

Most schools in America today are organized on the basis of age. Children are admitted to kindergarten at age five or first grade at age six, with rigid enforcement that puts children

born 24 hours apart around the cut-off date in different grades. It is interesting that in many schools it is relatively easy to hold a child back on the basis of

perceived immaturity, while it is extremely difficult to move one forward on the basis of unusual ability. Again there is a fear that harm will be done if a developmental level is somehow missed.

The question of age is crucial for parents and educators because it is in regard to age-related developmental standards that highly gifted children most clearly do not fit. *How old is the highly gifted child?*

In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a "mental age" of ten and a half. If that meant that Kate had a ten year old's mind in a six year old's body, the problem, though real, would be relatively simple to handle. Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds?

Consider the case of Joshua, newly enrolled in the first grade. He reads on a (Continued on next page)

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twelfth grade level, though his comprehension is "only" at the seventh grade. He does multiplication and division with ease, understands fractions and decimals, but dislikes working pages of math problems.

He collects baseball cards and fossils, his favorite subject for study at home is astronomy, his favorite game is poker. Though he can focus his attention for hours on a subject of real interest, he is unable to sit still when bored. He has difficulty remember-

ing to raise his hand when he has something to say, he tends to hit other children when frustrated or angry and he cries easily. He loses papers, books, pencils, hats and jackets, he forgets to bring his lunch, he misses hearing announcements made in class and consistently fails to follow directions, preferring to do things his own way.

If we were to provide Joshua with a teacher who understands that he is highly gifted and wants to help him, and a school in which flexibility is encouraged, a variety of problems would still be difficult to solve. He could be put in a high level reading group — with sixth graders perhaps — to provide the necessary challenge to his ability to read. However, there are real and serious questions about whether a six year old is ready, emotionally and in terms of life experience, to understand novels and other reading matter meant for eleven year olds.

It isn't such a problem to use subject-matter acceleration for math, so he could be put with a class of fourth or fifth graders for math. However, his tendency to cry when upset or frustrated, and his physical aggressiveness, will almost certainly cause him trouble with older classmates. Sensitive counseling, both for Joshua

and for the older students, is necessary to avoid social/emotional difficulties. Further, his ability to write (or print) is unlikely to meet the demands of higher level work, and his messiness and lack of organization will work against his completing that work and turning it in on time and in acceptable condition.

In spite of acceleration in specific subject areas, Joshua will be in class with his age mates part of the time, and, given his intense demand for intellectual stimulation, he will probably find himself

bored a good part of that time. Being unable to sit still when bored, he is likely to disrupt class at such times, and the teacher must be ready not only to understand his problem, but to provide him with an activity of

sufficient challenge to focus his attention (while she manages the rest of the class of six year olds).

On the playground, Joshua will have other difficulties. He is likely to enjoy some of the rough-and-tumble games his classmates play, so if he is allowed to join those games, he may have fun with his classmates. However, he will probably play even those games differently. Six year olds tend to play with each other for the activity and interaction of it, caring little about rules. Joshua, more like a ten year old, cares very much. He will feel that the others are unfair and unreasonable if they break or disregard the rules; they, on the other hand, will quickly learn to shut him out of their games if he insists on rigid adherence to the rules.

If he is able to play with his classmates successfully in games of their choosing, Joshua will probably expect them to take turns and play games of his choosing. But since his favorite games are the complex games of older children and even adults, his classmates won't find the

games interesting or even understandable. It will be hard for him to see that it is his games that his classmates reject, not himself.

If he tries to join older children playing more complex games *at school*, where age differences are so clearly delineated and so constantly reinforced, he is likely to be rebuffed, unless an effort is made by adults to smooth the way for him. (It's important to note that older children often willingly accept a younger child into their activities if the younger child is *good at them*. But he must be given a chance to show his ability.)

In considering Joshua's school problems we've given him a positive environment, a school that is willing to deal with him as a separate individual with unusual needs. Even then, those needs are not easy to meet. But in many schools no such flexibility exists. Norms and expectations give not an inch. In such an environment a child like Joshua is unlikely to be considered bright, let alone "highly gifted." Many of the very characteristics of unusual intelligence work against recognition in a hostile or uninformed environment.

Messiness and disorganization are in many (possibly most) highly gifted children an unchangeable reality of brain organization, as strong as right or left-handedness. But these traits are usually regarded as "fixable" in young children. (And definitely in need of fixing!) The child who cannot remember to hand in homework, who loses pencils and books, who can't keep track of assignments or even remember to bring his lunch, is labeled "immature." Far from being accelerated, such a child may face recommendations that he be held back.

Children who can already do what the school is attempting to teach frequently do the repetitive learning tasks assigned in class very poorly. Sometimes out of boredom or anger, they simply refuse. When they *do* attempt to do the work requested, because (*Continued on next page*)

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their minds are light-years ahead of their hands, they have difficulty making their handwriting neat and legible. Worse, they often tone down their ideas and thoughts to simple, easy to write sentences. The child who thinks, "The golden lion crept up on the unsuspecting antelope" may write, "The cat ate the rat." Teachers can't assess unexpressed thoughts.

Though some children may compute as accurately as calculators, gifted children who are extremely precocious with math concepts often have difficulty with computation. Long lists of problems lack any intellectual interest so are done haphazardly at best.

Bored by nearly everything that goes on in school, these children may disrupt class purposely or merely because they can't keep still when their minds are unoccupied. Sometimes, attempting to create some interest, they use that innate sense of humor to clown and joke, at the expense of other children, the teacher, or themselves. Some children become so angry at the thwarting of their natural abilities and their desire to learn, that they become openly rebellious. Others withdraw into a world of fantasy or, if allowed to read, into the many worlds of books.

Gifted children are often expected, in our culture, to "earn" the right to the special attention they need. Highly gifted children have enormous difficulty doing that. They are often considered academically inept, socially immature or even antisocial, and personally silly or withdrawn or hostile. All of this comes from the basic problem—they don't fit.

## INDIVIDUAL SOLUTIONS

How can this problem be addressed? The first step is to realize fully that being highly gifted means that the child is not normal and cannot be adequately served using normal methods. Parents and schools must

insist on recognition of the special needs of children not only at the lower ends of the intelligence scale, but on the higher ends as well. The answers need not be costly, though they are complicated. They must be based on an understanding that the highly gifted child *must be treated as an individual*. The highly gifted are rare enough that schools don't need to worry that treating each one separately will result in the demand that hundreds of children be given such individual attention.

**You cannot clothe a size 6x human being off the racks in a regular department store, even one with a big-and-tall shop that carries sizes up to 3x, no matter how many other people can be fitted there. If individual tailoring is not possible, the very least that must be provided is extreme alteration.**

Acceleration (grade-skipping) may be helpful, particularly if it is relatively radical acceleration that will take the child into an environment with reasonably appropriate intellectual challenge and classmates who are enough older that they are not too seriously threatened by the presence of a younger child. Radical acceleration in early grades may need technological support—the child may need to use a typewriter or recorder or even someone to take notes for her—to make up for lack of handwriting skills. Grade-skipping is not ideal, but it is sometimes the only alternative to age-grade lock-step rigidity. (And it's cheap!)

Acceleration by subject area is more useful, though scheduling problems and even transportation problems may work against it. If a child can be seen as many ages, then she can be placed with her actual peers for most of her activities—chronological age mates for gym, perhaps, or art, children of different ages and grade levels for academic subjects.

Homeschooling is, for some highly gifted children, a nearly ideal solution. Work can be tailored entirely to

the child's abilities and interests. Homeschooling has become far more common in recent years (Kearney, 1989) and many districts that used to threaten jail for parents who kept children out of school now cooperate with homeschooling families. This option requires enormous sacrifice from parents, but some families consider it necessary.

## SOCIALIZATION

It may be that socialization presents the greatest problem for highly gifted children regardless of school placement. Here and there around the country there are support groups for parents and children, but those are still very rare. In most parts of the country, highly gifted children feel themselves to be alone, lost in a no man's land between childhood and adulthood, fitting nowhere. Like E.T., they wish to go home, to be with others like themselves. Unlike E.T., they already are at home, so there is no place to go. While they may be comfortable with adults, they are not adults, and they long to find children with whom they can share the interests, passions, philosophies, thoughts, gripes, joys, griefs and ecstasies that for most of their lives must be kept hidden.

The "talent searches" that are proliferating on college campuses<sup>1</sup>, though they don't help very young highly gifted children, hold out a promise of some belonging to children between 10 and 13 (12 or 13 is the standard age for participation). Those who score high enough on the SAT tests may attend classes at one of the sponsoring universities during the summer. There, surrounded by several hundred other highly gifted children, they become, for a brief time (usually three to three and a half weeks), normal. It is an experience most of them value for the rest of their lives—a time during which they can be themselves. They take appropriately challenging classes, some for college credit, but most agree (*Continued on next page*)

child. She can be anything she wants to be!" From such glorifications, parents may begin to perceive their gifted children as paragons of virtue. One mother was told that her son tested in the top 1%. She said that this event was the beginning of disaster for her family because she and her husband then imposed all the expectations of what a "top 1%" child should be. In their recovery process, Mom became a gifted program coordinator! We need to avoid a gifted/nongifted dichotomy, and focus, instead, on the particular abilities, sensitivities, personality, temperament and interests of our children. Our goal is to appreciate how these children's needs are different, not just the way they demonstrate achievement.

### "BUT IT'S NOT NORMAL"

Sometimes a parent will plead, "If you don't label him 'gifted,' then he may still have a chance to be normal!" We need to allow our children not to be normal. We all have our own perceptions of what it means to be normal, primarily determined by how we, ourselves, were raised. Many of our ideas of "normal" become our "shoulds" — the myths we live by. One myth is the directive that we

should do our "best" at all times. As parents, we may inadvertently give our children contradictory messages: "Do your best" and "Fit in" (which translates, "Be less than your best").

Would you expect children who are well into the retarded range to be like average children except for their achievement in academic subjects? We lovingly allow differences in every aspect of retarded children's social, emotional, and intellectual development, yet we coax our exceptionally gifted children to fit in, to be normal. It is important to appreciate our children's differences if we want them to appreciate themselves.

### I ALWAYS THOUGHT THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH ME

The most prevalent response I hear from people who have read our book, *Guiding the Gifted Child* (Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982) is something like, "I read that book for my child, but I saw myself on those pages. Now I know why I never seemed to fit in. I always thought there was something wrong with me. Now I know I was gifted too. I'm going back and putting together the puzzle pieces of my life in a different way."

Here and there such a child survives and prospers. How many we have lost we will never know. What they could be, what they could do — for themselves, for us, for a troubled planet — if they were accepted for who they are, no matter how different, and nourished from the beginning, we have yet to find out. If these children don't fit our culture, we must begin changing that culture to accommodate them. ■

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Based on the program begun at Johns Hopkins University, now called the Center for Talented Youth (CTY).

As an individual's intelligence deviates from the norm, so does the possibility for isolation and misunderstanding. Do you remember how difficult it was for you to get people to take you seriously when you were a child? We never seem to outgrow the pain of being misunderstood in childhood. But our own experiences sensitize us to the frustrations of our children, and enable us to support our children's exceptional ideals, heightened emotional responses, and fanciful imaginations.

To appreciate some of the elusive, immeasurable qualities of giftedness in ourselves and in our children requires redefining certain "erratic" behaviors as strengths. Sometimes when we think that a person is "too much" of something, we are actually observing a realm of giftedness. Some of these qualities can be understood within the context of Dabrowski's "overexcitabilities": intellectual, emotional, imaginal, sensual and psychomotor (Piechowski, 1979). We recognize that people who love theories, who close out the world in deep concentration, who read constantly, who stick with a problem until it is solved, and who continually ask, "Why?" are **intellectually gifted**. But that is only one type of giftedness.

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that the greatest benefit is that sense of fitting in — finally (Higham & Buescher, 1987). These programs are short-term and expensive (financial aid may be available, particularly for minorities) but their social, emotional and educational value is inestimable.

Parents and educators need to look very closely at the needs of the highly gifted child, accept that those needs are far outside the norm, and find ways to begin meeting them. As a country we have never done this.