

What does it mean to be gifted?

“Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity and a greater ability to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.” - Annemarie Roeper.

A child is considered gifted when their IQ is above 140 or when they have specific achievements, such as excelling at math, science, or language arts.

Many think gifted kids are lucky. They think those with high IQs are overachievers who exceed in traditional academic settings. Others notice that many gifted kids struggle with a lack of social maturity and occasional interpersonal awkwardness. Few realize gifted kids don't necessarily excel in *all* academic areas. Instead, they assume that once labeled “gifted,” school and life will become easy.

Unfortunately, they are very wrong; just take it from Gretta:

Gretta is bright and sweet with high energy and speaks quickly. She reads several grade levels above her age, has advanced writing skills, engages in high level discussions in history and literature, and is incredibly creative. But she struggled in math. She had never spoken about this problem, but numbers had a habit of moving around on the page for her, and both light and noise distracted her. Gretta's mom and teachers saw her gifted ability in other subjects, so they felt she was not paying attention, or that she was being lazy and “not living up to her potential” in math class.

When Gretta reached eighth grade, her parents sought help through Bridgeway Academy's HOPE program. We tested Gretta and identified her as gifted, but also with a mild form of sensory processing disorder and dyscalculia. By tailoring her math curriculum to meet her academic level and specific learning style, we helped Gretta build the neural pathways necessary for success in math.

As she prepares for college, Gretta is more confident and willing to approach math with the same creative and critical thinking skills she uses in other subjects. She has overcome many of her sensory challenges, but is still working to better manage the intensity of frustration that can lead to difficulty taking action.

While some gifted kids have these characteristics, others don't. Just like other kids, gifted children need parents and teachers to acknowledge their idiosyncrasies and provide guidance that recognizes their struggles while utilizing their individual capabilities.

So, what is it that defines a gifted child? How can you spot one without the lengthy IQ measuring process? And, what can you do to help your gifted children realize their incredible potential?

Gifted kids have unique behavioral, emotional, learning, and creative characteristics.

Here are a few key aspects:

Behavioral

1. **Communications skills:** Gifted children tend to read easily and absorb information independently. They can construct and handle abstractions and pick up on nonverbal cues more easily than other children. Many communicate in adult language and on adult topics such as art and literature.
2. **Curiosity:** Gifted children are inquisitive, independent, and energetic. They have eclectic interests and are motivated to learn. They can be skeptical and evaluative as well.
3. **Efficient and quick processors:** Gifted children tend to see categories and relationships between information that other children might not grasp as quickly. They can be organized task producers and have great concentration.
4. **Observant:** Gifted children pick up similarities and differences in information and are quick to point out inconsistencies in information presented to them.

Learning

1. **Observant:** Gifted children enjoy finding cause-and-effect relationships. They often seek out information for its own sake, rather than for its usefulness. They can also warehouse knowledge in their fast-processing brains, and are able to recall greater volumes of information than other children.
2. **Conceptualization:** Gifted children can synthesize information across topics.
3. **Intensity:** Gifted children often read ahead of their level and read more quickly than their classmates. They tend to be quick both in thought and action. Their energy level is higher, their imagination is deeper, and their intellectual processing is faster than other children. In addition, they can become quite intense about a specific topic and dig deeper than their peers due to their hunger for knowledge and understanding.

Creative characteristics

1. **Fluency:** Gifted children are fluid thinkers, able to process across multiple areas. They are flexible thinkers and can often see alternatives to problems others can't.
2. **Unconventional:** Gifted children can make unconventional associations between information and will find relationships between items. They can embellish information and entertain complexity.
3. **Emotionally sensitive:** The ability of gifted children to pick up on nonverbal cues may also be due to a sensitivity to their environment and the emotional states of others. They can be prone to fantasy, expressive with their ideas, and may be less hesitant than other children to express their curiosity and questions.

How does a parent keep these clever kids engaged?

Here are a few tips and ideas for how to get the curious and independent gifted child to stay with the lesson plan.

Overall Themes

1. Look to identify the specific talents of the gifted child you are working with. Adopt a method from the executive coaching field and have your gifted child identify their own unique talents.
2. Be student-centered, not lesson-centered. Engage that child in a way that works for them, not a way that works for the lesson.
3. Encourage deeper development. Foster the gifted child's curiosity by allowing them to dig into the material as deeply as they desire. Remember, gifted kids are interested in knowledge for knowledge's sake!
4. Avoid boredom. Gifted children's top complaint is being bored. Ask your gifted child if they are engaged, and assess their interest frequently. In fact, if your child is scoring well, check in more often to ensure that they are feeling challenged and able to take learning deeper. Often when learning is easy, our gifted kids miss an essential element necessary for future success: hard work.

Specific Tips

1. Match your child with other quick learners. Find opportunities for your gifted child to interact with other gifted children so they can challenge and motivate each other.
2. Allow gifted children to propose a different lesson plan. Allow the gifted child to be more engaged by pivoting the lesson plan towards their abilities. In fact, gifted children can even propose their own lesson plans. Using technology, such as iPads and other devices, can help them keep up with their quick brains.
3. Teach back. Gifted children can be engaged in teaching larger groups of students. Begin by teaching your gifted children how to teach and how to work through a lesson, then allow them to prepare the lesson themselves. Gifted children can share their lesson plan on blogs, vlogs, and YouTube.
4. Level up. Gifted children, especially those who excel more in one subject than another, such as math or language arts, can be moved up to the next grade level for that subject.
5. Skip a grade. Where appropriate, gifted children can skip an entire grade or two—just be careful that you are also managing their ability to interact socially with their new peers. If your child is in a classroom setting, know that many teachers are not necessarily trained for acceleration in their programs and may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable with how to best serve a significantly younger child. Some teachers and parents think skipping a grade or two will rush the child through the education process, so you may need to go to battle to encourage the school to do what is needed to meet your child's specific needs.

Emotional Needs

As mentioned above, gifted children often have a different set of emotional needs. They can be more sensitive and in tune with both their own emotions and the emotions of those around them. Additionally, we often set our gifted kids up for feeling “different” from other students because of how we recognize their intellectual abilities. This can lead to emotional concerns when they face intellectual challenges for the first time. Why? Because when everything is easy for so long, a challenge can lead them to question their own identity as gifted or “smart.”

A few tips for working with gifted children who have emotional needs include:

1. Easy is not Smart. When a gifted child encounters a challenging problem, remind them that they are still clever. Identity crises can arise in children who have been praised for being smart.
2. Assist your gifted child in understanding that their quick brains do not mean they are different from other children. Note the similarities in other children in their social circles, including things like favorite holidays or the love of pizza parties. Create opportunities for unity by elevating the importance of areas of similarity, such as weekend and after-school activities.
3. Give gifted children the security of understanding that they are normal children with gifts and skills, not gifted children with faults and setbacks.
4. Understand the intensity. Gifted children’s brains are geared towards intensity. That means those children may have busy minds that need help settling. They may internalize comments others make about them, and may be prone to digging into the larger spiritual questions without appropriate direction.
5. Acknowledge the higher expectations. Gifted children struggle with the pressure to be perfect, and can sometimes feel that adults expect them to get everything right the first time. Acknowledge this feeling in your gifted child by allowing them to discuss it directly with you.
6. Allow gifted children to understand the difference between peers and agemates. Gifted children may have easier conversations and more engagement with kids that operate on their level than kids that are their same age. Creating opportunities for gifted children to interact with children older than them, closer to their peer level, can help assuage some of the social awkwardness they may have. This interaction can help relieve the gifted child of some feelings of isolation.
7. Use examples of other famous gifted children. Having a role model may help gifted children feel less isolated. Looking to historical characters, such as Einstein, or more recent examples, such as Bill Gates, can help gifted children know they aren’t alone.

Resources:

1. <http://www.freepirit.com/>: Free Spirit Publishing has resources on social skill enhancement for gifted children.
2. <http://oedb.org/ilibrarian/50-essential-links-for-the-parents-of-gifted-children/>: A laundry list of links that may be of assistance to parents of gifted children.
3. <http://www.giftedstudy.org/resources/>: Summer Institute for the Gifted, a way to keep your child engaged during the summer. It includes lessons and classes.

Gifted children and Sensory Processing Disorder

In addition to the special emotional needs of gifted children, it is estimated that nearly one-third of gifted children also have a [sensory processing disorder](#). These disorders usually involve intense reactions to pain, noise, light, and emotions. This heightened response can lead to emotional volatility, and increase the social awkwardness the gifted child may already be experiencing.

Also, be aware that, because gifted children may have advanced functioning skills, they are often able to mask their problem behind their gifts.

Gifted children with sensory processing problems may exhibit the following behavior patterns and be: oppositional, demanding, controlling, distractible, obsessive, hyperactive, lazy, passive, unmotivated, or underachieving.

Learning to identify your gifted child's triggers can assist in keeping those kids motivated and engaged. Some educators and researchers have noted that there has been a dearth of interaction between those studying and working with gifted children, and those working on sensory processing disorders. Greater interaction is needed between these two areas.

Resources:

1. Tips for parents with gifted children with sensory processing issues: <http://www.davidsongifted.org/Search-Database/entry/A10527>
2. How to recognize and treat a child with sensory processing disorders. *The Out-of-Sync Child* (Kranowitz, 1998): https://www.amazon.com/Out-Sync-Child-Recognizing-Processing/dp/0399531653/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1478923926&sr=8-1&keywords=The+out+of+sync+child
3. Explaining the relationship between sensory processing, at different levels, and the gifted child: <http://sengifted.org/asynchronous-development-and-sensory-integration-intervention-in-the-gifted-and-talented-population/>
4. Reviewing recent research findings on SPD and gifted children: <https://www.spdstar.org/basic/gifted>
5. Strategies for helping your child with a SPD: https://www.homeschoolacademy.com/wp-content/Tips_for_Dealing_with_Sensory_Processing_Disorders.pdf

Contact information

Jessica Parnell—mom, homeschool evaluator, teacher, and president of Bridgeway Academy—is happy to provide additional guidance and support. With more than 20 years of experience as a homeschool professional, Jessica has worked with hundreds of children and families who seek alternative approaches to education. Jessica knows there is no such thing as a “cookie-cutter child,” and is committed to teaching in a way that inspires children to reach for their unique potential. Jessica graduated from Kutztown University with a Bachelor of Science in Education and a Masters in English, and is currently pursuing a degree in Neuroleadership.

Contact Jessica at Jessica@polyweb.net.