



home & school REPORT



Starting Young

Points and Pointers for Social and Emotional Awareness

by Dr. Robin Schader

“**M**om, that’s important to you...it’s not so important to me” or “Doooooon’t just talk like a mother.” With statements like these, my three children taught me how they needed to be parented. Now, after more than 30 years as a parent, I see that their active, rather than passive approaches to learning, were also effective ways to build a strong social and emotional foundation. While the particular strategies discussed in this report may not fit your situation as is, the four main points can serve as checkpoints to review and adapt for your family. We sometimes forget to reflect on the first topic, Parental Expectations, yet our own belief system colors how we respond to our children. The second and third sections, Talking and Listening, are often cited as essential components in any healthy relationship, but integrating them into daily life is especially important with bright children. Finally, the section on Learning highlights the need for our own continued education as parents, whether formal or informal. I remember the excitement of attending my first gifted conference. Not only were the books and resources useful, but the conversations with other parents were invaluable. As one of the 100 families selected for the book, *Back to the Family: How to Encourage Traditional Values in Complicated Times*, I was often inspired by the stories from the other parents who told of their successful, and even the not-so-successful, but creative experiences.

THINK ABOUT YOUR EXPECTATIONS

In considering the different aspects of parenting highly precocious children, it is especially important to consider the future. Examine your own hopes, dreams, and values. For example, your goal might be quite explicit about your child’s attainment of quantifiable and public achievements: high grades, awards, and prizes. I can remember the thud of disappointment when my son was third in his class instead of first. While I was never disappointed in him, or his performance, it was a rude awakening to realize the ranking was more important to me than to him. At that point I had to step back and assess my views, and ultimately I realized that my goals were really to raise an independent lifelong learner, someone who continued to be in love with “finding out,” and who would retain his lively curiosity and bright eyes as an adult.

With highly capable children, parents may be driven (even if unaware), to see how far (or fast) their child can go. As an achievement-oriented parent, there is a fine line between being supportive of competition, and becoming so overwhelmed with the development of a child’s superior abilities that healthy growth in social and emotional areas is sacrificed.

When you are clear in your expectations, it will be easier to discuss both short and long-term goals with your child. This discussion is important because the disparity between your expectations and that of your child presents a potential conflict situation, especially when your child is highly sensitive to pressure. You may also discover that you and your child do not aspire to, nor even value, the same level of achievement. My oldest daughter, now a middle school teacher, still reminds me that, “Mom, that (whatever it is...) may be important to you... but it’s not so important to me.” Over time, we have learned to continue the **conversation** about why, along with negotiations about ways to resolve the difference. What we learned about each other from these conversations, even when she was a very young child, helped build a foundation to support the more difficult later discussions when she began worrying about fitting into the world at large. Another benefit of talks about ambitions is that you may discover your child has set extremely high, possibly unrealistic, goals that can be an intense source of internal pressure. Issues such as poor self-concept, perfectionism and underachievement can also become quite apparent when discussing goals.

MORE TALKING

It my early readings about achievement, I came across research from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement called “What Works,” which asked the question, “What kind of upbringing provides children with a firm foundation for success as adults?” In considering what best nurtures children’s creativity, love of learning, and self-confidence, they reported that parents of successful adults had spent more time simply talking to their children. Interestingly, these parents mentioned having conversations or discussions with their children more often than any other family activity. Talking over ideas so that children feel heard and understood is clearly a strong element within an environ-

ment that not only fosters talent, but also allows for individual growth along with a healthy social/emotional outlook. My toddler once begged me, “Doooooont just talk like a mother.” She was telling me it is more effective to talk with interest, excitement, and engagement. This is particularly important with bright and curious children because they are typically sensitive and alert to their surroundings and will quickly learn from your reactions to situations. In particular, let your children listen to how you deal with problem solving on a daily basis, which can be a powerful way to demonstrate values. Talking out loud about how you consider, reject, modify, and accept ideas as you work can be a way for you to show not only the achievement of success (and how to handle it), but also how to deal with and respond to the inevitable failures we experience.

AND LISTENING

It is also essential to listen and allow children time to respond with their own observations. Children should be able to discuss and feel comfortable pointing out what they like, while explaining how they would improve those things they don't like. Why is this especially important with a gifted child? Although young bright children can be highly verbal, sensitive children quickly become aware of how different their views of life can be, as well as their reactions to situations that can lead to self-censorship. Careful and sensitive listening on your part might provide clues into ways to diffuse situations that could become potential problems.

One way for parents to establish strong lines of communication is to develop the habit of “debating/discussing” in a controlled setting. For example, “small” time can be set aside for non-confrontational debates while traveling in the car or preparing dinner. My children always had a million reasons to explain their behavior. And they asked multi-faceted questions such as, “Why do some states have laws about smoking in restaurants?” The various aspects of situations like this can go on and on, so we developed “small debates for two.” We would select a question and then flip a coin. Heads would argue the pros and tails would take the cons. Using a digital kitchen timer, each of us would have three minutes to state our case (not necessarily arguing on the side of our own beliefs), followed by a one-minute each rebuttal. Then the subject was closed for that moment. There was no winner and no loser, and there were many benefits from this activity. Since we were forced to present the rationale for a point of view decided by the flip of a coin, we learned to put ourselves in unfamiliar shoes. We learned to think on our feet and be creative in providing examples to back up our position, as well as clearly present our ideas. But, the most important benefit was the establishment of a forum with rules of discussion that allowed difficult ideas to be addressed. For example, one of my children shoplifted a thirty-five-cent toy and I discovered it as we were driving home. Her answer, through tears, to my angry question of “Why” was, “Because I wondered how hard it

would be, and if I could do it.” We ended up talking about it in a much less emotionally charged atmosphere by using the timer technique: “Should shoplifting be enforced for low-cost items as well as high?”

Once children are accustomed to the rules of this method of discussion, you can use it to debate sensitive topics just as easily as less personal topics from the current news. This type of meaningful conversation at an early age can help establish a respect for your child's individuality and independence that is far more important than force-fed lessons.

KEEP LEARNING

Knowledge about your child's high ability can be heavy, and you may feel a great sense of responsibility to develop your child's gifts, while at the same time harboring anxieties about how you can help your child adjust socially and emotionally. I remember reading that gifted children have social and emotional difficulties at a higher rate than schoolchildren at large and I began to scrutinize my children carefully, anticipating the worst. Fortunately, a mentor took the weight off my shoulders by providing additional books, articles, and contrasting opinions. My fear was reduced by learning from the vast literature in gifted education. While it isn't necessary to gulp down stacks of books, it is helpful to know where and how to find clean, clear, research-based, or experience-based answers to your questions. When you show curiosity along with willingness to search out answers to questions you do not know, your children will become more comfortable when learning new material since they will have witnessed the process first-hand. High-ability children may become distressed when they first encounter situations in which they do not immediately succeed. By developing an atmosphere of mutual learning within your family, you have the opportunity to present positive examples of determination and achievement. Fortunately there are many print resources available in the field of gifted education. In addition, there are networking opportunities with others who share similar concerns through the parent affiliate groups in each state. You will find a number of

helpful resources, and links to many organizations, on the NAGC website (www.nagc.org).

It's true that gifted children, due to their heightened sensibilities, can become depressed, anxious, or insecure as they try to fit into societal patterns.

However, parents who have developed an interactive, understanding relationship with their children will recognize the warning signs when
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their children are not behaving in their usual pattern and, if necessary, be able to seek support either through a school or private counselor.

Researchers use the terms "tolerance for ambiguity" and "ability to maintain direction" as characteristics of creative people. I think they are terms to be applied to the process of parenting gifted children. Now that my children are adults, we sometimes talk about the challenges of growing up. The stories they tell most frequently are those that involve problem solving and sharing, the times we worked together as a team to create the best possible solution.

When my oldest child was still in grade school, a friend (without children in her life) asked a pointed question, "What's so different about raising a so-called gifted child?" I stumbled over answers then, and even now it is not easy to clearly explain distinct differences. Parents play a crucial role in maintaining the social and emotional health of their children, but is that role substantially different for the parents of a creative, academically gifted, or talented child? If we look at what happens in the classroom, we know that "good teaching" is "good teaching" for ALL students. Yet the successful teacher of the gifted recognizes and honors an individual child's speed of assimilation, excitement for learning, and need for additional depth and breadth in

some content areas. That same speed, excitement, and intense need to know more carries over into social and emotional areas. So, "good parenting is good parenting," but the developmental speed and type of issues may be different.

As parents, we know that the strategies that work one day are not generally useful the next time a situation arises. Therefore, the best advice is to be creative and proactive: develop a large toolbox by reading (not just in the field of gifted education) and learning how others have navigated the sometimes fast and tricky waters of raising a gifted child. As another mother in the "Back to the Family" study said, "Children are vocal and as they speak their minds, you learn. Listen to their sounds, to the way they're behaving, to the way they're reacting. It's an incredible way to learn."

RESOURCES

Guarendi, R. and Eich, D. P. (1990). *Back to the Family: How to Encourage Traditional Values in Complicated Times*. New York: Villard Books.

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