

PARENTING Q & A

expert answers to your questions

This month meet...

Dr. James Delisle

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Parenting Q & A (questions and answers) is a regular column in which readers' questions are answered by experts in the field of raising and/or teaching high potential children. In each issue a different expert will address readers' concerns. If you have a question you would like answered in this column, please send it to: Dr. James Alvino, Editor-in-Chief, PHP magazine, 3452 Windspun Drive, Huntington Beach, CA 92649. Neither PHP nor NAGC necessarily endorse the experts' opinions offered in this column.

Question

A parent from Buena Park, California, writes: "I don't know if I have a gifted child or not, although the school says my son is being recommended for a special program. What does all this mean? And what am I supposed to do now? Please help!"

Answer

Imagine the joy! You have just learned from your child's teacher that your son or daughter is being recommended for the school's gifted and talented program.

Imagine the questions! "What exactly does 'gifted' mean?" "What should I now expect in terms of school grades?" "What if my child is found not to qualify for the g/t program?"

Imagine the responsibility! As a conscientious parent, you have always tried to instill a love of learning in your children. Yet as aware as you are of offering challenges to your kids, you also want to temper this with the fact that fine-tuned minds are often housed in the bodies of 6- or 10- or 14-year-olds. You search for balance, that elusive "happy medium" that allows talents to emerge without infringing on the necessary innocence of childhood play.

Igniting your child's potential requires a blend of King Solomon's wisdom and Erma Bombeck's wit. If nothing else, gifted children will give you many chances to use those parenting classes you sat through (or wish you did!) or Dr. Spock books you read (or meant to read!). Still, you will find that with just a few "trade secrets," raising gifted children can be interesting to you and exciting for them.

Three Trade Secrets

As both a parent and educator of gifted children, I have learned that there is no single way to maximize a gifted child's potential. This is true for several reasons:

1) *Not all gifted kids are the same.* Some are quite analytic and sequential in their thinking, while others are so creative that they bounce from idea to idea in quick succession. And even if most gifted kids have similar goals in life — to be happy, to attend college, to find a worthwhile career — one child may get there by taking the direct path, while another appreciates the directions offered by traveling life's scenic route. Once you understand this, it'll be easier to accept that even bright kids from the same family can be, as my mother would say, "as different as chalk and cheese."

2) *Not all high potential children are socially and emotionally advanced.* The most intelligent 7-year-old still enjoys second grade snack time. The 16-year-old honors student might still skip a class to schedule an appointment for a driver's license test. The 10-year-old computer whiz will still argue with siblings about whose turn it is to take the dog out for a walk. Remember that intellectual competence does not guarantee an equally advanced level of social or emotional development. So, when your very smart 7-year-old begins to blow bubbles to overflowing in his chocolate milk, he is merely acting his age — his chronological age.

3) *Our goals are not always their goals.* I have long believed that "underachievement" is in the eyes of the beholder, because every high potential child with whom I have ever worked had achieved success in something important to him or her — often something that was not related at all to school! (In fact, I've replaced the term "underachiever" with "selective consumer" — it seems to elevate the gifted child's self-worth, while validating their goals as important.) What this means to parents of high

potential kids is that before you can set goals for them, you must ask about goals your children have set for themselves. Only then can ignition take place in sparking your child's interests.

These three trade secrets are not meant to intimidate you into the role of backseat passenger on your child's drive to success. Rather, they are meant to forewarn you: there is no recipe, no cookbook approach, that will work with all these children. Instead, you must rely on your child's strengths, interests, personality and maturity before rushing head-long into any plan that sounds good in theory only to fall apart in practice.

Some Guidelines for Appreciating High Potential

Before beginning a program of enrichment that includes after-school foreign language classes and weekend computer camps, sit down and take an inventory about this child whom you or others "suspect" is gifted or talented. During this inventory, highlight the following:

- *Areas of interest your child self-selects, when given the chance.*
- *The ways your child prefers to learn — for example, is your child a voracious reader, or perhaps someone who needs hands-on activities or visual cues to keep her interested?* Does she prefer learning alone, with a partner, or in a larger group (e.g. Scouts)?
- *The amount of "down time" your child needs.* Some kids operate at warp speed from the minute they awaken until the moment they collapse in exhaustion at bedtime. Others require quiet or reflective time between activities. Neither style is inherently good or bad, but each of us does have our own preferred pace.

• *Your child's attitude toward free-time involvement with you.* Some kids view their parents as all-knowing partners on the quest toward knowledge, while others prefer keeping mom or dad at a distance when it comes to learning. It's not that this latter group doesn't appreciate your willingness to help, it's just that they prefer you not adopt the role of "teacher" with them — and all that role implies. If you're unsure where your child fits in this comfort equation (and many parents don't know), ask your child to tell you of some of his or her favorite times with you — was it in unstructured play or more specialized learning experiences? Both are okay, but remember: just as we had ways that we preferred interacting with our parents, your kids have the same preferences about you.

• *Your child's attitude toward exploring new areas or topics.* Many bright children are used to having things come pretty easily to them — in fact, many have never had to study for school tests and they get A's. Their attitudes toward personal success and failure may — and probably will — have an impact on their willingness to embark upon new learning paths. For example, a child who is very self-critical or perfectionistic may state unwill-

ingness to get involved in something new by using reasons like "it's dumb" or "sounds boring." In fact, the child may be telling you that he or she is afraid to enter into an area where an immediate success is not assured.

On the other hand, your child may hold an attitude that success is measured by the risks one is willing to take. To this child the "grade" or "performance level" is not nearly as important as is the willingness to try, and maybe learn, something new. Observe your child to note his or her comfort level when it comes to new areas of exploration.

Once you've completed this inventory of your child's learning patterns and preferences, take it a step further and do an inventory on yourself. Thus, in addition to determining your answers to the above items, ask yourself the following:

- *What are your views on giftedness and talents?* If your child asks you what those terms mean, how would you answer? Further, if your 9-year-old asks, "Mom, if I'm gifted does that mean that you are, too?," what would be your honest response?
- *Do you need a school-imposed label or special class to determine whether your child is gifted or talented?* Since most parents of gifted children indicate that they realized their child's unique talents prior to school enrollment, what indicators do you have that cause you to think of your child this way?
- *Will you change your attitude or behaviors toward your child once the label of "gifted/talented" has*

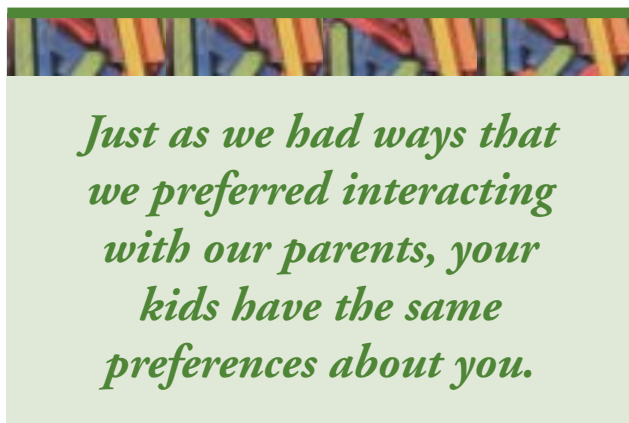
been applied? I certainly hope not, even though this is a natural reaction of many parents. More instructive would be for you to reflect on what you and others have done with this child that may have contributed to the emergence of his or her gifts and talents.

A Place to Start

When you began reading this response, you may have been hoping for a bag of tricks that you could pull out and use to capitalize on your child's unique abilities. I'm afraid, though, that each reader will have to realize that there is no generic bag of tricks that works for one and all. For even if we could gather together the estimated 3 million gifted kids who inhabit our nation, each one would still be an individual whose strengths and styles are as unique as are their fingerprints.

The accompanying chart explains some of the characteristics of gifted children, what these can mean, and how you can encourage your child's talent development.

In something as complex as parenting, there are no foolproof recipes. All we have is the following: common sense enough to know that before we can help children achieve their goals, we first must ask what is important in their lives and what is important in our lives. From this foundation, we can build any child's future.



CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

WHAT THEY ARE, WHAT THEY MEAN, WHAT TO DO...



IF YOUR CHILD:

- is an avid reader, consuming everything from Time Magazine to Life cereal boxes
- seems very emotional, reacts to happy or sad situations with a great degree of intensity
- prefers friendships and relationships with people older than she
- refuses to do schoolwork or homework that he is quite capable of doing
- often “fidgets” or is out of her seat at school, seemingly existing in a world of her own
- imagines out loud, creating make-believe worlds and conversing with imaginary friends
- scores very well on standardized IQ and achievement tests, but has low grades in school
- understands humor that is more subtle than “toilet jokes” and appreciates life’s funnier moments in an adult-like manner
- understands complex concepts and sees patterns in language and behaviors, seeming to “make connections” between ideas that, at first glance, seem very different
- is highly-focused on one topic, often to the exclusion of others, but this intense desire to discover new knowledge shifts frequently from topic to topic

THIS CAN MEAN:

- that she takes both pleasure and information from the printed word
- that his ability to perceive pain, loss and joy is very mature, resembling that of adults more than children
- that her sense of socialization is more refined than most children, and she is seeking someone who is an intellectual peer — a soulmate
- that the required tasks might be so easy that your child finds them purposeless
- that her need for intellectual stimulation is going unmet, causing increasing nervous system agitation
- that you have a “yeah... but” child, someone who sees all the nuances and gray areas, while others see merely black and white
- your child doesn’t see the purpose of “learning” something they already know how to do
- that she has a fine command of language, and is able to comprehend the nuances of jokes, puns and irony
- that your child is a conceptual (global) thinker, rather than a rote (piece-by-piece) thinker
- that he is absorbing so much new information rapidly that one new discovery leads to other areas and questions, until a seemingly endless cycle of “exploration-intense interest-explanation” emerges

ENCOURAGE THIS TALENT BY:

- reading with your child, asking her to read to you, and reading yourself as her #1 role model
- reassuring your child that such intensity is okay, and by finding ways to help him act upon his caring (for example, sending letters to leaders, raising funds for charities)
- locating other gifted children to serve as social contacts and allowing gifted children to play and talk with older children and adults
- talking with his teacher, asking that your child be allowed to move through curriculum at a pace that accommodates his knowledge level
- observing when your child is most “on task” and able to concentrate and sharing these situations with her teacher
- playing along with this imagination, asking for more details. Also, you can allow your child to see your own creative expressions — be they in the art of dance, writing, cooking — whatever!
- telling your child that learning can and does occur anywhere, so that even if he finds school unfulfilling, that fact does not have to stifle his love of learning
- sharing different types of word games and puzzles that rely on advanced understanding of language for full understanding
- studying and playing with big ideas — for example, the invention of different number systems — instead of memorizing math facts or perfecting one’s handwriting
- exposing your child to new ideas, books, people, museums, etc. that allow him to gain familiarity with many areas of potential interest