

HELP! I think my child may be gifted – what should I do now?

By Jane Beattie

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This article aims to provide general advice and suggestions for parents of school-aged children who have identified in their child (or children) some or all of the characteristics describing academically gifted children.

Of course, just as every child is unique, so is every gifted child (not to mention their family). Some of the advice below will be of use to you, and some of it you will know already! I encourage you to read as many of these sorts of articles as you can lay your hands on, and 'filter out' the stuff which is not suitable for your child and/or situation.

1. Learn as much as you can about gifted children

It is very important for parents who suspect their child may be academically gifted to read and research as much as possible on the subject, preferably using a variety of sources. You might consider attending workshops and seminars. It might also be useful to talk to other parents and share information - but try to avoid comparisons; remember **all children are unique and special in their own way**.

You will find that there is a lot of information available for parents who suspect their children may be academically gifted. The internet is a valuable tool for parents; there are a lot of useful articles for parents available online, although simply typing '*gifted*' into a search engine may also take you deep into the heart of internet shopping websites! No internet access at home? Try your local library or online centre – enter 'gifted children – information for parents' and see what comes up. There are a number of excellent websites with parent-friendly advice out there – happy hunting! (some suggestions at the end of this article.)

During your research you may notice some or all of the 'classic' characteristics along with other indicators of giftedness. However, **this may not be an entire list of gifted characteristics and a gifted child may not display all the features at the same time**.

You are your child's primary educator – and you know your child better than anyone else. Be prepared to sift through information, and remember that well informed parents tend to make better choices! Parents tend to understand what is realistic and achievable for their family and situation.

It is important to start early, as some of the problems associated with young gifted children may be avoided with early intervention. **Remember to follow your instincts!**

2. Contact Your Local Gifted and Talented Association

There are support groups across the nation offering a wealth of experience and knowledge. These volunteer-run Associations provide a variety of resources including information packs, articles, seminars, advice and local contacts – you may be able to access people with expertise, and search the websites for the information and support you need. Try the following:

Gifted and Talented Children's Association of South Australia Inc.

Email: info@gtcasa.asn.au

Website: www.gtcasa.asn.au

Gifted and Talented Children's Association of Western Australia

Email: gatca-wa@gatcawa.org

Website: www.gatcawa.org

New South Wales Association for Gifted and Talented Children Inc.

Email: office@nswagtc.org.au

Website: www.nswagtc.org.au

Northern Territory Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented Inc.

Email: webmaster@ntaegt.org.au

Website: www.ntaegt.org.au

Professional Association of Parents and Teachers of the Gifted (ProAPT) WA

Website: www.proapt.net

Queensland Association for Gifted and Talented Children Inc.

Email: office@qagtc.org.au

Website: www.qagtc.org.au

Tasmanian Association for the Gifted Inc.

Email: office@tasgifted.org.au

Website: www.tasgifted.org.au

Victorian Association for Gifted and Talented Children Inc.

Website: www.vagtc.asn.au

3. Learn about Myths and Misunderstandings

It is important to be aware of the many myths surrounding gifted education, including the following 'regulars':

- **All children are gifted**

All children have strengths and talents. The term 'gifted' refers to children with untrained and spontaneously expressed superior natural abilities, in at least one ability domain, to a degree that places that child in at least among the top 10% of his or her age peers.

- **Gifted children will succeed regardless**

Gifted children are not always successful – without proper support there is no guarantee of the evolution of potential into performance.

- **Identifying and catering for the potentially gifted child is elitist.**

We celebrate sporting ability and speak favourably of elite sports, dance and music. It would be good if we could celebrate other abilities similarly in Australia.

- **Gifted children who read early have been 'hot-housed' by their parents and taught to read.**

These children tend to learn to read early because they have a passion for reading, and a very retentive memory for what they have read.

- **Parents who advocate for their children are 'pushy'.**

It is the right of every parent of a special needs child to advocate – parents of gifted children have no more or less right than any other.

- **Gifted children are those who behave well, and have neat handwriting. Badly behaved, poorly coordinated and under-achieving children cannot be gifted.**

This shows a lack of understanding of the meaning of the description 'gifted'.

- **The only truly gifted children are those with 'genius' level skills.**

This refers only to highly and exceptionally gifted children who form a very small percentage of the gifted population.

STEREOTYPES: Is this the 'typical' gifted student?
Cartoon by Polly 2001



How many stereotypes can you see? Try to find at least 10 (see end of article).

4. Learn About Education

It is important parents understand the education system they have chosen or are planning to enrol their child/ren in. Ask questions, research, ask about the school's gifted and talented policy and read it carefully. Try to take a copy to any relevant meetings.

Aim to gain an understanding of how your school and its community works, and where gifted education, including enrichment and extension, fits into curriculum planning. Does the school offer independent education programs (IEP)? **If the answer is affirmative, try to get this in writing from the school principal or equivalent.**

5. Develop a Good Working Relationship with Your Child's School

- If your child is at school, become known to the teacher/s in positive ways e.g. parent help (you can then watch your child in action).
- When approaching teachers and schools always go with the attitude of 'How can I help you?'
- Try to understand situations from the teacher's perspective.
- Make time to share your knowledge with your child's teacher, in a respectful way (remember many teachers may lack knowledge in this area).
- Be frank, identify the strengths and weaknesses you are aware of – and realise that children may behave differently at home. Evidence shows that gifted children often hide their abilities at school, for a variety of reasons.

A strong working partnership between the primary educator (parents) and the professional educator (school) will help develop your child's potential.

- Discuss issues with the teacher – always try to make an appointment
- Develop a portfolio – and bring evidence to meetings, teachers need to see proof – for example:
 - worksheets,
 - hobby information,

- reading books,
- test results.
- Be prepared to share information about your child at regular intervals – for instance consider asking for a regular end of year planning meeting, as well as a ‘brainstorming’ session in Term 1 each year. Do not assume that information will be automatically passed on from year to year – take a positive part in sharing this advice with the relevant teacher/s.
- Be positive and professional with the teacher, and be prepared to follow up agreements and decisions.
- **Keep a written record of actions planned and decisions made.** If you and teacher have agreed on some very specific points and you want to make sure that the communication is clear, write a letter summarising what you believe happened at the meeting and mail (or email) it to the teacher, requesting a response if there is a difference of opinion.
- **Thank teachers!** Everybody likes to be thanked, and teachers need support and encouragement.



THANK TEACHERS Cartoon by Polly 2005

- Trust your instincts - you both have the best interests of the child at heart.

6. Consider Arranging for a Formal Assessment with an Educational Psychologist.

Many parents find a formal assessment of their child’s abilities, such as by psychological assessment helpful, especially where identification is complicated by issues such as disability.

Assessment may be done privately or via your child’s school. A full IQ test is a useful source of information, but should not be the only evidence used to identify gifted children. Parents should also develop a portfolio of evidence, including photocopies of examples and anecdotes which can be used in conjunction with more formal tests and results. Remember when doing this to keep original documents somewhere safe, the portfolio should contain copies only.

7. Be Aware of (and Able to Provide Answers to) Common Questions

Are gifted students enthusiastic and motivated about school work all the time?

No! Many are, but some can become bored by lack of challenge and motivation in a learning experience. Some do not have their abilities recognised at school and some will drop out early, underachieve or misbehave.

Are gifted students from a particular social group?

No! Gifted students may be found in all sectors of society, regardless of race, religious beliefs, socio-economic background, geographic location or physical ability. Rather, it is the innate gifts and ranges of experience student encounters that will develop or restrict the development of their gifts.

Do gifted students burn out?

Gifted students will remain gifted but may display their gifts in varying degrees at different times in their lives. This can depend upon their experiences, stage of development, motivation, interest and support for achievement in their learning experiences.

Are gifted students more valued than other students?

No! Gifted students may be good at one or more areas, outstanding in some areas and weak in others. Gifted students can have skill gaps through the 'out of synch' nature of their physical, social, emotional and intellectual development. They should be valued in the same way as any child.

Are gifted students born that way?

Gifted children are born with the potential to excel in their strength areas. If the child's strengths are not recognised and nurtured at home, at school and by the community they may not fully develop.

8. Be Prepared to Act as an Advocate for your Child

Recognize that how well your child is educated depends primarily on you. The person who is most important in your child's education is the one who is the most important in his/her life. That person is you.

9. Take Time to Relax and Enjoy

Do not put too much pressure on yourself or your child! It is important to schedule time for play, for socialising, for fun with other children – these are just as important as time for learning and being challenged.

Remember that education is life-long, and each year of school brings its own joys and challenges.

This article has been written with Australian parents in mind. For more information on identification of gifted and talented children I suggest the following:

- Austega Gifted Resource Centre website: www.austega.com/gifted
- Hoagies Gifted Education Page: www.hoagiesgifted.org
- Education Resources Information Center: www.eric.ed.gov
- Gifted Education Research Resource and Information Centre: www.gerric.arts.unsw.edu.au
- 'SENG' - Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted: www.sengifted.org

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'Typical Gifted Student' – you will note that

- *He is a boy,*
- *Is Caucasian*
- *Wears glasses*
- *Looks 'geeky'*
- *He is a 'teachers pet'*
- *His parents can afford a computer including webcam for him*
- *He is very organised*
- *Has neat handwriting*
- *He plays 2 instruments*
- *Einstein is his hero*

Any other myths you have come across?