Understand What Giftedness Is . . . and What It Is Not

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At a recent meeting with Jeff's mom and several of his teachers, I was amazed that the majority of the people sitting around the conference table were discussing the legitimacy of this boy's giftedness. At 14 years old, Jeff already had quite a school history, which, truth be told, fizzled more than it sparkled. With an IQ of 145, but grades of D's and F's, Jeff was a walking frustration to most adults. The teachers' conversation went something like this:

"You know, if Jeff was really gifted, he'd show it once in a while."

"Yes, and his homework is never done . . . "

" . . . And let's not even talk about his organizational skills! You know, the ones he doesn't have?"

I could tell that Jeff's mom wanted to interrupt and offer a different perspective—the one that noticed Jeff could read a 350-page historical novel in 2 days; or that he started his school career at age 5 with panache, vigor, and an urge to learn; or that Jeff's vocabulary and thinking processes were more advanced than most adults, including some of his teachers. Yet, she stayed mute. Why? She had expressed such realities before, only to be told the educational equivalent of Jeff's need to "shape-up or ship out."

"Mrs. Rogers," the school counselor concluded, "I believe it is in Jeff's best interests to be moved out of the honors level classes. Perhaps he is too stressed by their rigor."

" . . . Or not?" I added, daring to ask just a single question, "When does Jeff excel?"

This came as a jolt to many of Jeff's teachers. They had come to see this young man as lazy, disheveled, and obstinate, yet the few times Jeff did shine were when he was allowed to do projects of personal interest, or open-ended assignments with multiple right answers, or no right answers at all. He loved logic puzzles, and finished them quickly. He contributed to debates about politics or ecology or justice with a sense of sophistication and insight seldom observed in overzealous young teens who often only boast opinions without regard for the facts. In my mind, there was no doubting Jeff's giftedness. He simply chose not to display it in school activities that required him to do little more than regurgitate facts he had already learned years before. Jeff's teachers may have been disappointed in him, but the reverse was also true—Jeff was disappointed in them.

Perhaps this scenario is familiar to you, as Jeff may be a prototype for your own gifted sons or daughters who play by their own rules, not the school's. Or, you may be a parent who is sitting back thinking, "I guess I'm lucky that my child has always prized achievement." Whatever the case may be, know this: Giftedness should not—indeed, *must* not—be linked to achievement in order to be a legitimate entity. Calling Jeff (or anyone) gifted only when they can prove it by jumping through the artificial achievement hoops we place before them is equivalent to saying that a disease can only exist if its symptoms are obvious and visible.

As a parent, you may believe this already, as you have an asset that most schoolteachers do not—you knew your child from the start. Teachers, even the ones who work with our kids for several years, still see only a snapshot of their full selves; a place-in-time moment that may or may not be an accurate depiction of the fullness of the child's being. It is your long-range opinion that matters most, and the key to getting others to see the giftedness in your child as being an inherent quality rather than a report card filled with A's is knowing, first and foremost, that your impressions are accurate.

Speaking of First Impressions . . .

When I entered the realm of gifted child education in 1978, I was a doctoral student seeking answers. I didn't realize how lucky I was to become, for within a year, I met two women whose views on giftedness are the most profound and legitimate our field has ever produced. Both of them gave me answers to the issue of giftedness that have stayed with me to this day. You need to know about them, too.

The first is a woman I met only through her work, Leta S. Hollingworth. Hollingworth died in 1939, yet her work spoke to me in such a way that whenever I opened one of her books, I felt like we were sitting in a coffeeshop in overstuffed chairs with bad upholstery; I taking notes and Leta, just talking. A school psychologist by trade, Hollingworth was teaching a course at Columbia University in 1916 on the psychology of "mentally deficient children" (her phrase). Using the newly minted Stanford-Binet IQ test, Hollingworth wanted her students to see a contrast between children who scored at the lower limits of the test and one child who scored much higher. She arranged to test an 8-year-old boy called Child E, "who exhausted the scale without being fully measured by it, achieving an IQ of *at least* 187" (Hollingworth, 1942, p. xii). From this moment on, Hollingworth was hooked, as she wrote,

I had tested thousands of incompetent persons, a majority of them children . . . this thoroughgoing experience of the negative aspects of intelligence rendered the performance of E even more impressive to me than it would otherwise have been. I perceived the clear and flawless working of his mind against a contrasting

background of thousands of dull and foolish minds. It was an unforgettable observation. (p. xii)

Hollingworth did groundbreaking work in establishing the field of giftedness as a legitimate entity. In addition to being a psychologist and author, she also taught highly gifted children in a program she developed for the New York City public school system. In every regard, she came to see giftedness as a quality that can be measured at a young age, and that this quality, this giftedness, is a lifelong phenomenon that may or may not show itself in high achievement. A passage from her book, *Children Above 180 IQ*, *Stanford-Binet*, published posthumously in 1942, contains many passages that, sadly, are as true today as they were then:

This element in our juvenile population, so significant and so rarely found, passes unrecognized at present through the public schools. We have not even commenced to evolve an education suitable for a child who at 9 or 10 years of age is able to think on a college level. The idea that such children exist at all is even laughed to scorn by teachers and principals who have a quarter of a century of "experience" behind them. These children have no way of making themselves known. They become known only to those educators who "believe in" mental tests. (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 320)

If the true definition of a visionary is someone whose work is even more legitimate in the generations that follow its creation, then Leta S. Hollingworth fits the bill. A champion of gifted children as people that must be acknowledged and accommodated, Hollingworth remains a beacon of hope for today's gifted children, and those who care about them.

The other woman whom I met during my first year in studying gifted children was Annemarie Roeper. And, unlike Hollingworth, Annemarie entered my life in the real sense, and our friendship is among my most cherished possessions.

Annemarie has worked with gifted children and their families since the 1940s, when she and her husband, George, opened a school in southeastern Michigan based on a philosophy of global interdependence and personal, emotional well-being. The school had a rich foundation, as Annemarie's parents ran a boarding school in Germany with similar emphases. Yes, academic achievement was prized, but it had to be considered as only one part of a child's education; art, culture, and a firm understanding of the importance of each person's existence were the other colors on the palette of life that were essential if one were to become truly educated, truly human. Beginning humbly as a nursery school housed in the top floor of their home, The Roeper School now boasts an enrollment of more than 600 gifted and creative children from nursery school through 12th grade. As two parents said about their child's experiences at Roeper, "My son can write a paper with 35 footnotes, and he also knows that everybody deserves his respect," and "There's no division between jocks and intellectuals. It's assumed everybody has a body and a mind" (Delisle, 2000, p. 41).

The contributions made by George and Annemarie Roeper concerning the appropriate education of gifted, young minds could fill volumes, yet the most important piece of the "gifted puzzle" (from my admittedly biased perch), was a simple conception of giftedness given by Annemarie: "Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences" (Roeper, 2000, p. 33).

Go ahead—think of the gifted child or adult who brought you to open this book in the first place. Now, reread Annemarie's conception of giftedness. I'd bet a large wager that her conception of giftedness is more closely aligned to what you see in the gifted individual(s) in your life than any definition pointing to a particular IQ number or achievement test percentile. Essentially, gifted people come to our attention first and foremost because of the sophisticated ways they perceive the world around them. True, their vocabularies may arrive early and large, and their abilities to connect seemingly disparate concepts seem ingrained from an early age, but it is their overall awareness of and sensitivity to the people and surroundings that inhabit their lives that distinguish them from their age peers. And this, my friends, is giftedness.

Case in point: In describing the gifted child in her life, one mom said this in response to the question "What is giftedness?":

Their minds are black holes, endless pits that you just keep pouring information into as they beg for more. Life for them is an existential dichotomy—simultaneously too much and never enough. Time is not a concept they acknowledge, just an unnecessary intrusion into their world of fascination. It's true they have infinite potential . . . but being eminently aware of the infinity concept, they are often completely overwhelmed with the multitude of choices and interests that lay before them. They challenge everyone around them—parent, teacher or friend—to be the very best they can be. If you're really lucky (and it doesn't kill you), you get to be all three. (Personal communication, November 11, 1999)

Upon her retirement as headmistress of the Roeper School in 1983, Annemarie and George moved to California, where Annemarie developed the Annemarie Roeper Model of Qualitative Assessment (QA). During this assessment process, Annemarie interviews parents of a gifted child and the gifted child him- or herself, and then follows this up with a final discussion with the parents in which recommendations for schools and family interaction are offered. The core of this QA is the interview with the child, which may last up to 90 minutes. As expressed by Annemarie:

The goal is not for children to show how much they know or how bright they are, but who they are. The information presents itself in a pure form, almost like a byproduct. This is sacred information and must never be misused . . . The child

may keep a distance, seem to be oblivious of the evaluator, or get close, touch, talk trustingly, excitedly, or be eager to share. The secret is to further the flow of expression, when needed, without changing it. (Roeper, 2004, p. 33)

And, at the session's conclusion . . .

It is amazing for me to see how reluctant the children usually are to leave, even though I am old, cannot hear well, cannot get down on the floor with them, and do not have the latest toys. It is because they feel understood, recognized and accepted. (Roeper, 2004, p. 33)

In determining what giftedness "looks like," it would serve us well to consider the contributions of Leta Hollingworth and Annemarie Roeper. Both pioneers, they have established giftedness as an entity that can be measured best through observation and the careful, tender analysis of the child's abilities to perceive the world from a view that is both sophisticated and complex.

Reality Sets In

As you might imagine, the views of giftedness expressed above are not the ones used by school districts or departments of education in qualifying children for gifted program services. Far from it. Instead, the "definitions" of giftedness they use are often little more than mathematical formulae that result in two piles of kids—the "ins" and the "outs."

The small part of me that is realistic understands the reasoning behind this process. Indeed, it would be difficult to conduct a qualitative assessment similar to Roeper's on every child brought to the attention of school personnel as possibly being gifted. Time and cost prohibitive, this procedure is relinquished in favor of group test scores on aptitude and achievement tests.

To be fair, this is not a bad place to begin; test scores can tell us which children are excelling in relation to their agemates. The problem comes when the test scores become the *only* way for a child to gain access to gifted program services. As we know, some children do not test well, whether due to nervousness, a language or cultural difference, or because the child would rather make an intricate design on the bubble sheet than answer "stupid questions on a stupid test." So, if we stop at the test scores, we may be doing two bad things: not identifying gifted kids who deserve to be noticed, and overidentifying high achievers as gifted when they are little more than . . . well, high achievers.

Here is what should happen: Once test scores are collected, school personnel should pass around to the teachers the list of students who scored in the top 5% of each grade level, on aptitude (IQ), achievement, or both. Then, ask one simple question, "Who is not on this list who deserves closer examination?" Even if only a few names are suggested, these children can then be examined with a more

informal procedure, perhaps one that approximates Roeper's QA, or involves an examination of the child's body of work in or outside of school. Flawless? Hardly, yet this simple procedure could yield a bounty of gifted kids who may not qualify for the label by the more typical, numeric procedures.

If all else fails, and your child's school is reluctant (or worse) to look beyond the test scores, you may need to resort to an individual intellectual assessment conducted by the school's psychologist or a psychologist in private practice. This can be expensive, in terms of dollars and time, yet it is often worth the effort to have this test completed. Why? Because few school districts will discount the evaluation of a professional who is licensed to administer and interpret a noted IQ test like the Stanford-Binet or the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC).

Avoid at All Costs

There is one conception of giftedness some schools have selected to use that will put your child at a decided disadvantage. Developed by Joseph Renzulli in 1978, the so-called Three-Ring conception of giftedness relies on the following qualities to be identified: above-average intelligence (no problem there), creativity (and how is this measured?), and task commitment (sustained efforts on all things academic). However, these qualities alone are not sufficient to be identified as gifted; according to Renzulli, the child *must* show that he or she is applying these attributes in a visible way, in a tangible product. If not, the gifted door is shut to him or her. Thus, a child of 7 who asks questions about life and death and God would not be considered gifted, unless he chose to put together some type of project—a diorama of the universe, perhaps? And, a ninth grader with a 140 IQ would not be considered gifted unless she manufactured some type of product to prove how smart she is. Her keen insights into the human condition would not suffice to qualify her as gifted. And kids who underachieve in school? Forgetaboutit. Using Renzulli's conception of giftedness, an "underachieving gifted child" is a contradiction of terms.

Based solely on the work of grown-ups who have achieved eminence due to their adult accomplishments, this view of giftedness has no place in the world of children.

Just a Word on Leveling

Before I began my career in working with and for gifted children, my area of specialty was mental retardation. I taught children who were called, at the time, "educable mentally retarded." These kids had some skills in language, reading, and comprehending social interactions. They learned slowly, yet they were often able to function in society with varying levels of assistance. In the classroom next to mine was a group of children who were called "trainable mentally retarded." Seldom could these children be left unattended, as their levels of skill and logic

were very low. Often, their education consisted of learning to dress or feed themselves, and language, if present at all, consisted of words, not sentences. Obviously, children in these two classrooms had very different learning needs, and our curriculum adjusted for these individual idiosyncrasies.

When I entered the field of gifted child education, I assumed the same distinction would apply. However, I would come to know children who were "gifted" and others who were, well . . . "super gifted." I soon learned that few school districts take the time to differentiate between levels of giftedness the same way they do for children with disabilities. Instead, all the gifted kids were clustered under one label, often receiving the same services in the same classroom. Yet, even if IQ alone were used to identify these children, the range of scores might be from 130–180+, which is a far greater range of IQ then I ever dealt with in my class for children who were mentally retarded.

Although it is hard to generalize about the needs of children I have not met, my experiences with gifted children lead me to state the following:

- Children with IQs in the 130–140 range can often be accommodated in regular classrooms where teachers adjust the curriculum to meet their advanced abilities. Social and emotional difficulties are uncommon, as there is a large enough pool of children with similar abilities that legitimate friendships can be formed.
- Children with IQ's in the 140–160 range can seldom be accommodated sufficiently in an educational environment that merely "stretches" or enriches the curriculum. Intensive modification of curriculum, including grade skipping, needs to be considered as viable. Too, agemates may offer little social sustenance, as these children will prefer—and need—the company of older, intelligent children and/or adults.
- Children with IQs above 160 have academic and intellectual needs that are so unique that typical school resources will be unable to provide fully for their education. For these rare children, a team of professionals (including a teacher, gifted expert, parents, and a psychologist) will need to be convened, much as a similar team would be gathered for a child with severe learning difficulties. Intellectually, socially, and emotionally, these profoundly gifted children are more at risk than others if their level of giftedness is not addressed directly.

In recent years, more information and resources have become available for highly gifted children and their parents. Just know this: Because giftedness varies in both depth and range, your advocacy efforts on behalf of your child will need to take into account both of these realities. If "one-size-fits-all" isn't true in shoes, shirts, or pantyhose, then it is equally unrealistic to believe that a single gifted program can serve the needs of its many unique members.

Talking the Talk

A wise 14-year-old girl, highly gifted and highly verbal, once asked me the following questions: "Have you watched adults squirm, and listened to their responses when you ask them if they're gifted? What does this say about how they define giftedness, and what messages does this send to people, especially kids, about giftedness being OK?"

Even though most parents see giftedness as a positive attribute, they are often reluctant to talk openly about the term and its implications with their children. Fearing their gifted children will become "elitist" or "big-headed" if the term is discussed, parents downplay the term and advise their gifted children to do the same, "so that other kids don't feel bad."

Yeah . . . just like you'd be quiet about it if your child happened to be a star athlete!

By not discussing giftedness, or by telling your gifted child to avoid mention of it around others, you are sending a confusing, mixed message—be proud of your abilities, but don't let anyone know that you have them.

An attitude of humility regarding one's advanced abilities is understandable, but it can go too far. When it gets to the point that a gifted child appears downright embarrassed to say that he is in a gifted program, or that he has skipped a grade because of his strong academic abilities, the child is not being humble, but dishonest. So are you, if you promote such behavior.

When your child is identified as gifted, take time to sit down with him or her and explain *in your own words* what you think this term means. Give your child some cues that you picked up at an early age ("You know, Shawna, I remember you were reading cereal boxes and road signs when you were not even 2 years old."), and let them know that just because they may learn quicker than other kids, that doesn't imply an inherent superiority as a human being. Your child might be *better at* many things than the kid next door, but that does not mean that they are *better than* that child in any way. Next, ask your gifted children if they ever noticed that they can do things or understand things that many kids their age do not yet get. And, ask them if they often find that they like talking or playing with older kids or adults, as the level of understanding or camaraderie in these mixed-age groupings just seems like a comfortable, intellectual fit. If they say they do like the company of elders, tell them that this is common among gifted kids.

Next, be ready for the inevitable question, "Mom (Dad) . . . were you gifted?" First, you will chuckle, as kids always ask this question in the past tense, as if your own giftedness as a parent somehow went away or awry in the adult years. Follow your guffaw with a genuine answer that doesn't fall back to the standard nonresponse of "We didn't have gifted programs when I was in school." Your children are not asking whether you were placed in gifted classes. They are

asking, “Are you one of me?” Be honest with a genuine “yes” or “no,” as it can open the door up to a conversation about a word that needs to be taken out of the closet and shaken from its musty, stale image: *gifted*.

One last thing: When your child comes home with the tears flowing after a bad day at school (it’ll happen) because someone made fun of her for getting a low grade on some meaningless test, she’ll probably ask you this, “Why do I have to be gifted? Why can’t I just be normal like everyone else?” You need to be prepared. The word *normal* is a loaded word, as its opposite, *abnormal*, is something few of us aspire to be. Contrasting the terms *gifted,* and *normal* implies that giftedness is an aberration, a flaw, something to be avoided. Hear your child out, and then ask her to substitute only one word—change *normal* to *typical*. The plaintive cry of “Why can’t I be typical?” sounds just a bit less harsh than “normal,” doesn’t it? With a little cajoling and a dose of hot cocoa, you might even get into a discussion of how giftedness is often determined by a child’s doing things in advance of when most other kids do. It may be atypical to know your alphabet by 18 months, but because all kids learn the alphabet in their own time, there’s nothing abnormal about that, is there?

In the next chapter, we’ll take a closer look at that distinction between *better at* and *better than*, especially as it might impact social relationships. For now, though, I leave you with some wise words that might spur even more discussion with your children about the meaning of this often misunderstood term, *gifted*.

Gifted Children Speak Out

“I have always felt different somehow—misplaced or misborn. I remember being perplexed and vaguely disappointed on the first day of school because it seemed so simplistic. I wondered about the competency and qualifications of my teacher. In the middle of fourth grade, I was pulled from my classroom and sent to a closet with a teacher and two other students. It was a month or so before I realized I had been *identified* as gifted and was now receiving *enrichment*. No one ever told me.”
—Evan, age 14

“When I was first placed in the gifted program, nobody explained to me what that meant. So, when people would ask me and I couldn’t tell them, they would say that I should know because I was smarter than they were.”
—Stephanie, age 13

“No one ever told us what exactly ‘gifted’ means—or what ‘ungifted’ means. It could mean that I can ace tests, but I still can’t write a decent essay for beans. But an ‘ungifted’ kid I know can write like an author but flunks tests because he freezes. So, which of us is ‘gifted’ and which is ‘ungifted?’”
—Josh, age 14

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