
GIFTED EDUCATION: GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

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NATIONAL
ASSOCIATION OF
SCHOOL
PSYCHOLOGISTS

While we often think of *gifted* as the same as *smart*, the term *gifted* refers to a broad range of superior talent and creativity. Gifted individuals display high levels of curiosity and concentration, can generate novel ideas and make quick and broad conceptual connections, develop new skills and abilities early and rapidly, and show exceptional reasoning and memory. Their advanced awareness and problem solving can support social maturity and a highly developed sense of humor. They often show a wide array of interests and can delve deeply into certain subjects. They often prefer to discover answers for themselves rather than be fed information, and love to explore elaborations, implications, and generalizations. Their talents may extend to language, perception, athletics, music, visual arts, or leadership domains.

Gifted children are no more emotionally or socially vulnerable than any other group of children (perhaps less so), but they are at risk for some kinds of difficulties, such as depression and underachievement, simply because they are out of step with their school classes and classmates. They need educational settings that are matched to the level and pace of their learning, and similarly they need peers who are able to share their interests, their sense of humor, and their passion for learning. Parents of children with advanced abilities and talents need to be well-versed and sympathetic advocates to secure the kinds of school adaptations that will support their children's zest, health, and attainment.

Appropriate Educational Choices

Distinctions can be made between models that provide *fundamental changes* (substitute more appropriate for less appropriate activities during the school day) and complementary models that may *enrich* or *extend* the child's experience but basically leave the regular school program in place. Distinctions are also made between those models providing *acceleration* (more advanced instruction) and those providing *enrichment* (additional breadth of information that may or may not be advanced). Finally, many kinds of student groupings are possible, from in-class (regular class) grouping to specialized pull-out or self-contained classes, or special schools.

Some students are markedly advanced while others are moderately so, some are more talented in many areas while others excel in one or a few areas (this is typical), and some are more interested in age-appropriate activities than others. Because gifted students have such varied characteristics, no single program will meet the needs of all of these students.

Models of Gifted Education

It is important to recognize that simply grouping children with their intellectual or talented peers is not effective unless a *differentiated* (or advanced) *curriculum* is also provided. Here we will illustrate the major models available, but these cannot always be neatly characterized as acceleration or enrichment, since so much depends upon the way in which the curriculum is actually presented.

Acceleration

Early childhood. For preschoolers, models of acceleration include:

- Full or part-day groups with older preschoolers
- Early kindergarten entry (birthdates after the established cut-off date)

Elementary school. Once children enter school, more options are available:

- Differentiated instruction (more challenging assignments)

- In-class compacting/acceleration (skipping material the student already knows and substituting advanced work)
- Grade skipping
- Cross-grade grouping (the Joplin Plan)
- Multi-age classrooms (child advances)
- Self-contained class with acceleration
- Part-day placement with older class
- Cluster grouping (rather than dispersing intellectually gifted students in different classes within the grade, cluster several in one class)
- Special school

Secondary school. Acceleration models for middle and high school include:

- Grade-advanced courses
- Distance learning classes (online classes)
- Math/science high schools
- International Baccalaureate courses and exams
- Summer credit courses
- Advanced Placement courses and exams
- Dual high school/college enrollment (Post-Secondary Options)
- Early college entry

College. Colleges and universities often offer a number of options for gifted students:

- Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate credits
- Credits earned through dual enrollment
- Credit by exam (without enrolling in the course)
- Graduate course enrollment as undergraduate
- Co-terminal Master's degree (earning a Bachelors plus a Masters in 4 years)

Enrichment

Early childhood. Enrichment for preschoolers includes a variety of excursions and activities outside of the traditional preschool program.

Elementary school. Programs for school-age gifted children include:

- Pull-out programs
- In-class compacting
- Clubs, contests
- Junior great books
- All-school enrichment
- Summer programs
- In-class enrichment (additional activities and projects)
- Cluster grouping
- After-school class (piano, gymnastics)

Secondary school. Enrichment at the middle or high school level includes:

- Honors courses
- Pre-International Baccalaureate courses
- Mentorships (working with a veterinarian, botanist)
- Selective boarding schools
- Special interest clubs
- Contests
- Internships
- Foreign exchange semester, year

College. Options include:

- Honors classes
- Degree with honors
- Double majors
- Research projects
- Mentorships
- Junior year abroad

What Parents Can Do

Encourage independence and achievement.

Recognize that your expectations and involvement are the most important influences on your child's motivation and interests. Warmly engaged families that have relatively high expectations for their children and encourage their independence tend to have children who not only pursue the development of their talents, but also feel happy and confident.

Encourage family activities. Engage your child in family routines and activities in gentle and playful ways when your child is young. Examples include dinner table conversations, parent hobbies and interests, trips to interesting places, listening to music, playing sports, age-appropriate planning and problem solving, and thinking games and puzzles. If your child begins to develop a significant talent, find a teacher who really enjoys young children, and watch to see if your child's own motivation takes off.

Encourage positive views of learning. Share your own love of learning, and let your child know how your education has paid off for you. Do not forget to give a view of being a grown up that is positive and optimistic.

Consider evaluation. Develop a clear and realistic picture of your child's abilities. Secure an assessment of ability and academic achievement. This will give you a framework for talking with teachers. Evaluations of giftedness may be available through your school district. In many cases, though, this evaluation must be arranged with a psychologist in independent practice.

Foster positive relationships with teachers. Develop a positive relationship with your child's elementary school teachers. Older children may prefer

that you back off in secondary school, but still let teachers and your child know that you are interested and more than willing to help when needed.

Collaborate with teachers. Learn how to be a principled and reasonable negotiator on behalf of your child. Teachers may not be aware of your child's special needs or your child's feelings about school, and so the teacher can learn from you. Brainstorm some ideas about adaptations in the school or classroom that might be useful and ask for a conference to talk these over, as well as any ideas the teacher may suggest. Pick one or more ideas with the teacher to try out to see whether the ideas are helpful. Remember to evaluate these alternatives after a few weeks, fine tune them, or substitute a new plan.

Promote new challenges. If your child is reluctant to try a new challenging activity or program (for example, to go to a higher grade for reading or to enter a special class) be willing to take charge and let your child know you expect him or her to give it a try for several weeks. Even very unhappy gifted children are often reluctant to give up the only teacher and friends they know for the sake of an (unknown) better option. However, take care to only push your child as far as he or she is really ready to go, and pay attention to your child's reactions and adjustment before finalizing the new plan.

Private program options. Sometimes the best available option is a private school or program. However, these can be very expensive (many can be as much as some private colleges) and may not be realistic options for many families. In some families, grandparents or other relatives may be able and willing to help out financially. Many private schools offer scholarships and have liberal financial aid programs.

Summary

Thoughtful approaches to gifted education can provide these children with appropriate levels of stimulation and development, as well as help them feel more satisfied and confident in their learning. A variety of options are available to meet the diverse needs of these exceptional students, both in their regular education classes and in special programs.

Resources

Coleman, M. R. (2003). Identification of students who are gifted. (ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education). Available: <http://ericec.org/digests/e644.html>

An overview of issues in identifying gifted students.

Neihart, M., Reis, S. M., Robinson, N. M., & Moon, S. M. (Eds.) (2002). *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* Waco, TX: Prufrock. ISBN: 1882664779.

A summary created by a task force of the National Association for Gifted Children.

Rogers, K. B. (2001). *Re-forming gifted education: Matching the program to the child.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press. ISBN: 0910707464.

For parents about the various models available and the process of matching an education to a child's needs. A must read.

Winebrenner, S. (2000). *Teaching gifted kids in the regular classroom: Strategies and techniques every teacher can use to meet the academic needs of the gifted and talented* (rev. ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit. ISBN: 1575420899.

Invaluable. Helps teachers see how to compact the curriculum so that children do not have to spend time re-learning what they already know well, and how to extend and deepen teaching—without driving themselves crazy in the process. Also a good introduction for parents seeking to understand how differentiated efforts in the classroom can help their children.

Websites and Organizations

Belin-Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development (University of Iowa)—www.uiowa.edu/~belinctr

Includes links to publications and other sites as well as updates on research and specific programs and includes information on international aspects of gifted education.

Davidson Institute on Talent Development—www.ditd.org
This new organization offers help for families of profoundly gifted children but provides many Internet resources for all families of gifted children, including a huge number of articles.

Hoagie's Gifted Education Page—www.hoagiesgifted.org
Gifted Child Monthly—www.gifted-children.com

National Association for Gifted Children—www.nagc.org
Has a number of publications, including Parenting for High Potential, an excellent magazine for parents.

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