

Gifted Children: Intellectually Advantaged or Children With Special Needs?

Gifted children have all the advantages, don't they? They're highly intelligent, starting out life with such great intellectual potential. They learn so quickly, so easily, sometimes it seems they can just breeze through school. They are what have been termed "the intellectually advantaged." Yet somehow we're supposed to believe that they need help, they have *special needs*. But how can that be? Either they are advantaged or disadvantaged, but they can't be both.



Or can they? Did you know, for instance, that gifted children often drop out of school? That they're more likely to get in trouble with the police? That they more often suffer from stress, loneliness, and depression—

and, some researchers suggest, are at greater risk of suicide? Gifted children—paradoxically it may seem—often suffer from learning disabilities, or at least learn in a manner that doesn't fit in with the way our schools teach. They are often "over-excitable," in many cases to the extent that their teachers regard them as troublemakers (Thomas Edison, according

to one biographer, was often in trouble as a child).

Gifted girls often create a facade of stupidity and sometimes intentionally fail. And very young gifted children are sometimes diagnosed



as "socially immature" and held back! To add insult to injury, many teachers and school districts refuse to accept that any of

their students are capable of learning more quickly than the "norm" and discourage students from getting ahead. If we wanted to create a system that would intentionally waste one of the nation's greatest resources, it's hard to imagine how we could beat the one we've already got.



Intelligence is no guarantee of success in life. We've all met highly intelligent people who appear to be "wasting their lives" in some form of

menial labor, very smart people who seemed more misfits than successes. More importantly, a high level of intelligence brings with it certain burdens that most children don't have to bear—remember the really smart kids at school? What were they called? Maybe "nerds", "snobs", "book worms" "eggheads"...or worse. Research has even shown that gifted children often suffer from the resentment and antagonism of the school *staff*. Why? Because gifted children don't fit in, they are strangers in their communities, growing up

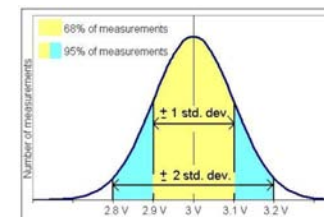
feeling like outsiders, misfits and troublemakers.

To many, including many in the teaching professions, having a few kids labeled as "nerds" is "no big deal." And if carrying a label for a few years were the extent of it, it *wouldn't* be much of a problem. But the labels are symptoms of a more serious problem. It may be no big deal for a school administrator, but to parents concerned for the happiness and success of their gifted children, the problems are very real. What is described as a *gift*—what should *be* a gift—has turned out to be a curse for many families.



What is Gifted?

What do we mean by *gifted*? The average IQ is 100. The *gifted* are traditionally defined as students whose IQ scores are two standard deviations above the mean (an IQ of approximately 130). By this definition, approximately 2% of the population is gifted. But this is the lower end of the range. A gifted child may have an IQ of 140, 160, 180 or even more.



The fact is that gifted individuals are different. They see things differently, they feel differently and often they hear things differently and speak differently. For the gifted child, learning, relating, and feeling can be a difficult and painful process. Being “smart” is often thought of as making life easier. In fact it can often make life harder, especially for a child.

What are the differences that pose social and educational challenges and dilemmas? Consider these:

An obsessive need to understand—gifted children often want to understand things at a much deeper level than their classmates. Their inability to “let it go” and their constant questioning is often seen as disruptive.

Perfectionism—gifted children are often very hard on themselves, paralyzed by the need to do everything perfectly or not at all.

The need for precision and logical analysis—

gifted children find great frustration in a world that places a low priority on logic, one that so often gives imprecise, illogical explanations.

A compulsive need for specific knowledge—gifted children often become obsessed with a particular subject, to the exclusion of everything else.

Acute self-awareness—the gifted tend towards critical self-awareness of their



position in society and life. They are often very hard on themselves, unable to forgive themselves for the slightest mistake.

A need to question rules and authority—while questioning rules and authority may be thought of as a desirable trait—this is, after all, a society built on the principle that “authority” is to be questioned if liberty is to be maintained—gifted children often find themselves in trouble with teachers and administrators. They come to see authority as illogical and corrupt, a belief that can easily lead to serious trouble.

Divergent thinking and nonconformity—gifted children tend to act and think in a way that others find as unacceptable. They ask unusual questions, dislike working in groups, and can have morbid imaginations. Generally, they are not “team players.”

Imagine the child with an intense desire to understand coupled with an obsessive interest in one subject, driven by that subject to the exclusion of eating or sleeping. If an adult does this and comes up with a cure for leukemia or a valuable invention, we think it’s wonderful. But when a six year-old does little else but observe, collect, and catalog everything he can about black widow spiders, it’s regarded as pretty strange, even an indication of a serious problem.

The need for precision and logic can be a great strain on teachers and peers. Teachers often teach in general terms and “for the sake of



simplicity” will explain things incompletely or slightly inaccurately. Details, exactness, and shades of gray are often very important to a gifted child and cannot be glossed over. The need to be totally correct is overwhelming to the



child, much to the dismay of the teacher whose train of thought and point of discussion can be lost. Classmates

also tend to label the gifted child as a “know-it-all.” Yet the gifted child’s nit picking is done not out of a need to be recognized but out of a need for exactness. And the more often an adult is wrong, the less the gifted child respects that adult.

Perfectionism can make life difficult for many of us but for a gifted child it can be crippling and often invites ridicule from classmates. To see in one’s mind a fantastic

picture and not be able to reproduce it on paper quickly can be devastating for a gifted child,



frustrating for a teacher, and can seem ridiculous to classmates. Most kids at

age six would be content to draw a dog with a head, ears, eyes, body, tail and legs. But a gifted child might need his dog to be proportional, be of a specific breed or have other traits necessary to fit his mental picture. He may begin and be so disappointed and frustrated with his performance that he quits, refuses to try again, and feels he is incompetent and incapable. His mind is often capable of imaging much more than his skills are capable of producing.

Gifted Children Have Different Learning Styles

Divergent thinking and the visual-spatial learning style—both commonly found among gifted children—are quite incompatible with the teaching methods used in most schools. Subjects taught in a series of successive blocks of time are difficult for divergent thinkers who tend to immerse themselves in a subject to learn. They find it difficult and frustrating to hop from one subject to another without feeling satisfied with one. Visual-spatial learners learn primarily by perceiving the whole.



Most people learn sequentially and can be presented a problem with pieces fed to them sequentially.

They use a step-by-step process. The visual-spatial learner needs the whole picture presented to have an understanding. The pattern perceived by looking at the

whole provides the learning experience for this person.

Gifted children are different. Most importantly, they learn in a manner different from other children. And not recognizing this can lead to serious problems for the child. Thus gifted children need to be taught in a different environment and by specially trained and experienced teachers. The gifted child required to fit in with a normal class often finds himself ridiculed by classmates and a source of frustration and irritation for teachers. Gifted children need alternative environments to foster their social, educational, and emotional growth. Our public schools are overcrowded and teachers overworked. How can we expect these schools to provide different teaching styles for different students, when the required styles are so unlike?

Children whose IQs measure two standard deviations below the mean (an IQ of 70) require special care. Few would argue that a



child with an IQ of 70 or less should be forced to endure school with average children, or that doing so would

be beneficial. In fact children whose test scores fall two standard deviations below the norm are so clearly different that they are protected by both federal and state law—laws that mandate special assessment, special curriculum, and specially trained teachers.

Is it so unreasonable, then, that a child who is two standard deviations or more *above* the

norm would have special needs as well? Whether children are above or below the norm, they learn in different ways from the norm. And if not taught in a different manner, they can suffer serious consequences.

The purpose of providing gifted children with an education suited to their needs is three fold—to ensure that these children are able to progress to their full potential; to provide an environment in which they can grow up secure and happy; and, as we enter the “information age,” to develop a critical resource that will benefit the entire nation, not just a few families.

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