

IF OUR CHILD IS SO SMART, WHY AREN'T OUR LIVES EASIER?

Dr. Linda Silverman

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Parenting gifted children is one of life's greatest challenges. Fortunately, these children are not randomly distributed. They are usually given to parents who have the internal resources (if not the external resources) to deal with them. The first lesson to be learned is that you're as smart as they are, so don't be intimidated by finding out that your child is gifted. Our research at the Gifted Development Center indicates that parents are usually within 10 IQ points of their children. We also have found that siblings are usually within 10 IQ points of each other, so don't worry about how your gifted child will affect the lives of your "nongifted" children. The chances are, if one of your children is identified as gifted, **all** of your children are gifted. Knowing this will help the family dynamics enormously (although it does little for your pocketbook). It deters your second child and your gifted daughter from hiding their abilities for the rest of their lives. It's harder to say, "I can't ..." when you know that your parents know you can.

Gifted children are expensive and time-consuming. They usually need less sleep than you do, ask more questions than you can answer, want 100 percent of your attention 24 hours a day, have obsessive hobbies, are unstimulated by the traditional school curriculum, react intensely to everything, endlessly long for a best friend who understands them completely, hold perfectionistic standards for themselves and you, want to know the meaning of life when other children only want to know how to tie their shoes, and keep their bedrooms in a condition you can never show company. If you have three or more of them and there's only one or two of you, you're outnumbered. In order to be the perfect

parent, you need unlimited funds, unlimited patience, an encyclopedic mind, and someone to sleep for you.

But don't despair. Gifted children grow up even better with imperfect parents than with perfect ones. Eminent adults rarely came from peaceful homes where all their needs were met. They came from families that exploded and made up often; that shared their interests; that stimulated their thinking; that recognized and encouraged their abilities; that loved them a whole lot; and that had *faith in them*. If you find yourself exhausted, remember that some day your-daughter-the-doctor or your son-the-artist will have you to thank. No matter what schools you put them in, it is their home life that determines what they do with their lives. Trust your intuitive judgment about their needs; no one knows them better than you do. Gifted children really enrich your family life. They have a great sense of humor and their development is so remarkable that they're exciting to watch grow. They grow up fast, so enjoy their childhood while you can.

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RECOGNIZING GIFTEDNESS

What are the Signs of Giftedness in Young Children?

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The earliest signs of giftedness that we have found in some but not all gifted children are:

- unusual alertness in infancy
- less need for sleep in infancy
- high activity level
- smiling or recognizing caretakers early
- advanced progression through the developmental milestones
- long attention span
- intense reactions to noise, pain, or frustration
- preference for novelty
- extraordinary memory
- enjoyment and speed of learning
- early and extensive language development
- fascination with books
- curiosity; asks many questions
- excellent sense of humor
- keen powers of observation
- abstract reasoning, problem solving skills, ability to generalize
- early interest in time (e.g., clocks, calendars)
- advanced ability with puzzles
- vivid imagination (e.g., imaginary companions)
- early interest in numbers
- recognition of letters before age 2
- ability to count to ten by age 3
- ability to put together a 20-piece puzzle by age 3
- ability to sight read an easy reader by age 4

In older children, the following characteristics, in addition to the ones listed above, are typical:

- extensive vocabulary
- sensitive (feelings hurt easily)
- shows compassion
- perfectionistic
- intense
- morally sensitive
- high degree of energy
- prefers older companions/adults
- has a wide range of interests
- avid reader
- concerned with justice/fairness
- judgment mature for age *at times*
- highly creative
- tends to question authority
- good at jigsaw puzzles
- independent learner

If a child exhibits ¾ of the characteristics listed above, it is likely that he or she will obtain a test score in the superior range of abilities. Assessment reveals relative strengths and weaknesses and provides important information to aid in planning a child's educational program.

For research supporting these characteristics, see Silverman, L. K. (2013). *Giftedness 101*. NY: Springer.

Parenting throughout the Lifespan

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Your children are angels who have been given into your care for the brief moment called childhood. While you are parenting babies in diapers, it feels like that moment is an eternity. But all too quickly, infants become children with wills of their own and sometimes it feels like a battle of your will versus theirs. You have been told that a good parent has control of his or her children so that you can take them in public places without embarrassment.

One of these public places is school. Here they are expected to be a credit to your parenting, even when you are not there to supervise them. And you hope that they will grow up to be responsible citizens who do the right things. In preparing them for responsible citizenship, you expect that they will fulfill their even-increasing responsibilities at school—following the rules, doing their homework, studying for exams, and getting good grades so that they can attend good colleges and lay the foundation for a secure future.

If you buy without question this picture of parenting, you are overlooking something very important. Childhood is but a small portion of a person's life—and it is becoming smaller and smaller as the life span increases. In Mel Brooks' "2000-Year-Old Man," he says, "Who needed divorce? We had death!" The lifespan was considerably shorter than it is now. And the prescriptions for parenting that have come down to us from generation to generation are based upon the economic survival needs of generations of parents who had much shorter life spans.

My parents lived to be 94 and 98. When they were in their 80s, they rented an apartment two doors away from my sister's,

their eldest child. Their parent-child relationship lasted over 70 years, and my sister spent more years being responsible for their welfare than they spent being responsible for hers.

If you can look beyond the roles of parent and child, you can begin to appreciate that this presence you have brought into your life is a lifelong companion, friend, and fellow traveler on this journey called life. Look deeply into your child's eyes and you will see a unique individual with special gifts to bring you. Even the challenges they present are gifts to assist your own growth. If you have more than one child, you know how unique each child really is. This journey you are on together will hopefully last many decades, and, in the end, the roles will be reversed and they will parent you.

You must develop a relationship with your child that is robust enough to survive throughout the lifespan and transform as developmental changes transform your roles. You can demand that children be responsible and respectful, but you cannot demand love and genuine caring. These can only be given freely by children who have received your love. They can care for you out of duty or because they love you.

When your children become adults, what kind of relationship do you want with them? How would you like your adult children to feel about you? Take a moment and write down what you hope your relationship with your children will be like during their adult years.

The first group with whom I did this exercise wrote down the following ideas:

Guidelines for Parents of the Gifted

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Giftedness develops in a stimulating home environment. A rich family life includes shared meals, peppered with lively discussions and salted with humor; times to work and play together; exposure to cultural activities, such as museums, art exhibits, symphonies, theaters, dance recitals; family trips; and shared family interests (e.g., singing, playing musical instruments, sports, computer programming, preparing meals together, storytelling, playing chess and word games, building models, gardening, or redecorating).

In addition to a rich family life, which is good for all children, gifted children need early opportunities to develop special talents. Some abilities need to be fostered well before school age in order for their full potential to be actualized. Such talents include exceptional skiing, skating, swimming, gymnastics, ballet, and playing musical instruments. If your child shows potential in any of these areas, expert guidance and training is needed, as well as continuous encouragement from family and friends.

Expose your child to a wide variety of activities. When he or she begins to show interest in an area, this is when you can be influential by providing the next step. This may involve encouragement, materials, professional instruction, good questions, suggestions, ideas to explore to carry the interest further, role models to interact with, or just listening and appreciation so that your child can share the excitement of discovery.

Like gifted children, gifted families are all unique, and each has something different to offer. Therefore, no guidelines for parenting the gifted can be applicable to all families unless they are so general that they could be considered good common sense in rearing

any child. These recommendations have been derived in answer to the most common concerns that I have heard expressed by parents of the gifted, and from advice parents have given to each other.

- Talk with your children in an adult manner. Their minds are like sponges, absorbing everything around them: vocabulary, language patterns, attitudes, values, interests, and tastes.
- Private times are good to have with each child. Some families have private times each day or arrange opportunities for each child to go out to dinner, a movie, or a sports event alone with a parent. This provides a time for sharing personal feelings and experiences.
- Gifted children often seem to require more attention than others and they want to be included in most things. It is important for everyone's welfare that boundaries be set for them. They must have bedtimes and be taught to respect adult needs for alone time and privacy.
- Reading to your children every night is a good habit, even after they are able to read to themselves. They should be introduced to the library while still toddlers, and given library cards as soon as they can read. It may be necessary to talk with the librarian to obtain permission for the child to take out books written for much older children or adults.
- Praise your children for taking risks, even little ones like trying new foods. Many gifted children dread failure or looking foolish. They need

to do that unless they are supported for their own viewpoints as well.

- Take time to listen to your children. If they jabber constantly, don't tune them out. Let them know when you are too busy to give them your full attention and set aside a time when your mind is free to really listen the way you would to a friend.
- Be open to their questions. Gifted children are very curious. They often have early concerns about the meaning of life, death, justice, war, sexuality. Be the person they trust to ask these questions. It is not necessary to know the answers to their questions. Instead, ask the child, "What do **you** think?" This gives you a better idea of their thinking processes and gives them opportunities to hypothesize and solve problems on their own rather than being dependent upon authorities for the answers.
- Some gifted children are naturally gregarious and others are naturally introverted. Rarely are attempts made to create introverts out of extraverts, but the opposite is often the case. Many gifted children have diverse interests and have difficulty setting priorities, whereas others specialize early and remain devoted to their chosen disciplines. Recognize that children differ in temperament, personality, interests, and goals. Allow your child to develop in his or her own unique manner.
- Don't expect that your child will respond the way you did to a particular school provision. Some adults regretted that they were sent to private schools or accelerated, so they vow never to make those same mistakes with their children. Each child is unique and needs provisions

that suit him or her, even if it was inappropriate for you.

- Don't overschedule your children with activities. Give them time to think, to play, to daydream, to be children.
- Cherish them, respect them, spend time with them. Enjoy them and they will want to spend time with you for the rest of their lives.



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Allowing Your Child to Reach for the Stars

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What does “reaching for the stars” mean to you? Does it mean being successful in school and in life? Does it mean attaining fame—“stardom”? Does it mean being the best that you can be? Does it mean actualizing your potential? Does it mean developing your talents to their fullest? We hold different values and have diverse pictures of this concept.

Some define success for their children as completing school tasks eagerly, getting accepted into a “good” college, and making a six-figure salary in adult life. Some hope that their children will become the very best in their fields. And others just want their children to be happy, no matter what their life choices.

Studying the gifted for over 50 years, I have found that those who are happy as children and adults have parents who love and accept them for who they are. These are *responsive parents* who respond to the needs and desires of their children, rather than imposing their own agenda on their children. *Creator parents* believe that they can create a gifted child much like a yuppie pasta. Attempting to mold their child, they give him or her all the “right” early experiences and expect their child to live up to their expectations. They pour all their unfulfilled hopes and dreams into their child. Their attempts to live through their offspring leaves him or her feeling disempowered.

Annemarie Roeper (2004) teaches us that children come into this world with their own agendas. They are not empty slates. They are born with unique personalities and temperaments. I believe that each human being has a mission to fulfill and that life is about discovering that mission. As parents, we serve *not* as shapers, but as guides.

Some of the children I’ve worked with seemed to know at a very young age that they wanted to be ice skaters, artists, dancers, musicians, scientists, etc. They became enthralled with a discipline the first time they were exposed to it. These children exude a single-minded passion. Parents and teachers worry that such children are not “well-rounded.” But those who become noted in their fields in adult life are rarely well-rounded as children.

Children who are driven to actualize enormous potential have characteristics that are difficult to live with: perfectionism, intensity, overexcitabilities. These traits are essential for Olympic champions, for success in the fine arts, for scientific breakthroughs. If we are serious about allowing our children to reach for the stars, we have to respect and cherish the aspects of our children that make them different from others.

Those who have attained prominence in young adulthood all credit their parents for having supported their passions to the best of their abilities (Bloom & Sosniak, 1985). These parents managed to walk a fine line between responding and encouraging their children, taking their own egos out of the equation. They did not own their child’s talents or take credit for their development. They were willing to make many sacrifices of time and money, without being invested in the outcome. Not an easy road.

Parents are unsung heroes, devoting their lives to helping their children fulfill their potential. We are forever in their debt.

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How Parents Can Support Gifted Children

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Being a parent of a gifted child is even more difficult than being a gifted child. Unfortunately, these complicated little people do not come with instruction manuals. A new definition of giftedness highlights the complexity of raising gifted children.

Giftedness is **asynchronous development** in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Asynchrony means being out of sync, both internally and externally. Gifted children develop at a much faster rate cognitively than physically; ideas forged by eight-year-old minds may not be able to be produced with five-year-old hands. Their advanced cognition brings information into their awareness for which they are not emotionally prepared as their emotional needs are still age appropriate. They tend to experience all of life with greater intensity, rendering them emotionally complex. These children do not usually fit the cultural norms for age peers; they have more advanced play interests and often are academically far ahead of their compatriots. The brighter the child, the greater the asynchrony and vulnerability.

She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (Tolan, p. 7)

Therefore, it is critical that parents be aware of the inherent developmental differences of their children and prepared to act as their advocates.

Recognition

Parents are unquestionably the main source of support for gifted children. The first task of the parent is **recognition** of the child's advanced development. Some of the earliest signs of giftedness include:

- *unusual alertness in infancy*
- *less need for sleep in infancy*
- *long attention span*

- *high activity level*
- *smiling or recognizing caretakers early*
- *intense reactions to noise, pain, frustration*
- *advanced progression through the developmental milestones*
- *extraordinary memory*
- *enjoyment and speed of learning*
- *early and extensive language development*
- *fascination with books*
- *curiosity; asks many questions*
- *excellent sense of humor*
- *keen powers of observation*
- *abstract reasoning, problem solving skills, ability to generalize*
- *early interest in time*
- *vivid imagination (e.g., imaginary companions)*
- *early development of a sense of humor*
- *sensitivity and compassion*

Children who exhibit three-fourths of these characteristics usually test in the superior range of intelligence and should be assessed by an experienced examiner to confirm their giftedness. Firstborn children are recognized as gifted to a greater extent than their siblings. When one child in the family is gifted, it is likely that the rest are also gifted. Early identification is recommended (ages 5 - 9) as it permits early intervention, which is as important for the gifted as for any other special education population.

Responsive Parenting

Responsive parents spend time with their child, tune in to their child's interests, and respond by offering the next step in instruction. They delight in discovering who this little person is and who he or she will become. "Creator parents" (Montour, 1977), on the other hand, try to mold their children to fit preconceived ideas. They disregard the fact that they are raising a unique human being with his or her own agenda. Fortunately, few gifted children have "creator" parents (Silverman, 1993).

Responsive parents attempt to enter the child's world from infancy on—imitating gestures and facial expressions, talking to their baby, playing, singing, holding, comforting, and delighting in the new life

mind trying to relate to five year olds! The best solution is to find him true peers—boys his own age who are intellectually advanced. Retention is not recommended.

Parent Advocacy

When special schools or programs for the gifted are not available, parents need to become strong advocates for their children. It was only through parent advocacy that the needs of disabled children were recognized in the schools, and it will take persistence of large groups of parents of the gifted in order to assure that provisions for gifted children are firmly in place.

It is important for any parent of a child with special needs to inform the child's teacher about those needs early in the school year. Teachers should not be expected to "discover" gifted students on their own. Parents and teachers should work together to determine an appropriate program for the child and to trouble-shoot if problems arise. Home/school collaboration is much more effective than blaming and defensiveness. Parents can offer to assist their child's teacher by making or locating materials, designing units of instruction, finding mentors, helping in the classroom, offering their expertise to small groups of students, and even financing a workshop or course on educating the gifted.

Effective parents stay involved in their children's education; they also stay informed about the field and tactfully share that information with their child's teacher. When a teacher goes that extra mile to assist a gifted child, parents should be sure to show their appreciation and commend the teacher to the principal.

Conclusion

Parents are the most potent influence in gifted children's development. Many times parents of the gifted become their children's best friends. This type of family bonding is unusual in our modern era, but it is not unhealthy. There often is a great deal of emotional intensity and intellectual stimulation in families of the gifted. The key to raising gifted children is respect: respect for their uniqueness, respect for their opinions and ideas, respect for their dreams. They need parents who are responsive and flexible, who will go to bat for them when they are too young to do so for themselves. It is painful for parents to watch their children feeling out-of-sync

with others, but it is unwise to emphasize the importance of fitting in. Children get enough of that message in the outside world. At home, they need to know that their uniqueness is cherished and that they are appreciated just for being themselves.

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