

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Information Sheet

WHAT DO GIFTED CHILDREN MOST NEED? INFORMATION FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, COUNSELLORS, MENTORS

Gifted children like all children have many needs, but they also have some that are particular to this group. Some of these needs will apply to all gifted children and some will apply to a small minority so it is very difficult to generalise but the following paragraphs attempt to tackle the key issues that all people coming into contact with gifted children should understand – because without a basic level of understanding we will continue to have many misconceptions about “giftedness” and therefore of the ways in which we should best deal with the children themselves.

Gifted children need their families, schools, and society in general, to have a realistic understanding of what a gifted child is and, perhaps most importantly, is not.

Highly gifted children tend to be those who demonstrate asynchronous development - the process whereby the intellect develops faster and further than other attributes such as social, emotional and physical development. Due to their high cognitive abilities and high intensities they experience and relate to the world in unique ways. These children are often found as a result of extremely high scores on an individually scored IQ test, generally above the commonly agreed 135 IQ threshold. Profoundly gifted children can have an IQ in excess of 170 and have prodigious abilities in specific areas such as maths, science, languages, music, art, sport. It is rarely the case that gifted children have equally high abilities in all curriculum areas.

Highly gifted children demonstrate characteristics such as the extreme need to:

- Learn at a much faster pace
- Process material to a much greater depth
- Show incredible intensity in energy, imagination, intellectual prowess, sensitivity, and emotion which are not typical in the general population

We tend to lump all gifted children together as if their characteristics and therefore the way we deal with them are the same. We “homogenise” gifted children. The child with an IQ of 170+ is as different from the child of 130 IQ as that child is different from the child of average ability (IQ 100). Current research suggests that there may be higher incidence of children in this high range than previously thought. Due to their unique characteristics, these children are particularly vulnerable and that vulnerability increases inversely to the level of our understanding – whether a parent or teacher.

Exceptionally gifted children need specialized advocacy because very little has been done to develop appropriate curriculum and non-traditional options for these children.

Intellectual Needs

This is the aspect of child development that occupies us most, probably because it is seen (not always correctly) as the most obvious need of the gifted child. Though it has been studied in depth for many years we are still some way off in really understanding how we can best provide, as parents or teachers, for these children. For example, a very young gifted child will often teach themselves to read before they go to school since they pick up language in the home and from various media, particularly the television. And schools have their reading schemes that, over the years, have shown they work for the majority of children. To force a gifted reader through the grades of books when they

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already show a good mastery of language and comprehension is to provide an early signal to the child that his or her talents have little or no worth. How can such a child feel confident about learning when their experience is so stultifying?

However, a gifted child also has to learn that not all things are possible. Most parents would want to support a particular interest or hobby of their child, whether it be swimming, learning to play chess or astronomy, but sometimes those interests may not be within the parents' power to provide. Responsible parenting requires that a reasoned explanation be provided so that the child grows to understand that meeting ALL his or her requirements and needs is not always possible.

Gifted children also need similar opportunities to follow their interests. Some might be catered for in school but most likely it will be the parents who provide the resources of time, interest and money to make them possible. Particularly for the parent of a gifted child, it will seem at times that their child's demands are never-ending and more extreme than those of a non-gifted child. When resources do not allow the take-up of a particular interest the gifted child needs to learn that that is the case and that can only be achieved through the parents taking the time to explain. That way, the gifted child will quickly grasp that resources are finite and that the parents try to do what they can because they care about child welfare. The messages to gifted and non-gifted children are the same.

Emotional and Social Needs

Finding some sort of equilibrium between the demands of an advanced intellect and the relatively "normal" social and emotional needs of a gifted child can stretch parental understanding and patience to the limits. As with so many aspects of child development these three needs will never be synchronised but in the gifted child they are widely at variance with each other and unless you have experienced the consequences as a parent or teacher it is difficult to understand which strategies can be most effective.

Whatever their demands, **gifted children need to have a childhood** and this can sometimes be very confusing to experience with them; the same child who at the age of 6 wants to investigate rigorously the effects of the two World Wars, at the age of 8 may be enthralled by play dolls, or may still have a nostalgic interest in watching Sesame Street or Play School. Parents have a tendency sometimes to feel that because the child has advanced so far in so many ways, he or she shouldn't have the need of such childish things; but gifted children need to be allowed to enjoy childhood in the way they choose to do. Some gifted children sometimes feel the need to "go back" to fill in childhood gaps, because at an earlier age the child was focused on forging ahead. Gifted children need to be allowed to progress through their childhood in unusual patterns if that seems natural to them.

At the most basic level, **gifted children need to be able to socialise at least some of the time with other children of comparable intelligence** to themselves. Unless they are very fortunate, their time in school will mostly be with their age peers and most of these will be of lower ability. This is simply the way things are and the gifted child will need to be encouraged to show understanding and patience but their own needs must also be met and responsible parents will want to find outlets that meet this need. In many countries there are voluntary groups or NGOs (such as NAGC in the UK and the Parents of Gifted Children Association in Hong Kong) that provide weekend clubs with age-related activities that gifted children can join. Supervised by parent volunteers or willing teachers

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these activities provide not only the challenge and stimulation that gifted children need but also a boost to confidence and self esteem that comes with mixing socially with intellectual peers. It is a valuable and reassuring learning exercise for a gifted child to realise that there are other gifted children in the world with the same or similar needs and that there are even some children who are more gifted than yourself!

Gifted children almost always need help from an early age not to set too high or **perfectionist standards** for themselves, and when trying to help them with this, parents need to examine their own behaviour and try to be sure that they are not modelling that behaviour themselves. Setting one's standards in life near or at perfection is a damaging habit, because no one can be perfect, and if one begins early to judge oneself as being acceptable only when one feels one has achieved perfectly or near perfectly, one is going to spend a lot of one's life unhappy. Perfectionism, in combination with other events which may well occur in life, is a risk factor for potential suicide.

Correspondingly, gifted children need others to be **realistic about their performance**. Many parents are aware of the dangers of pushing their gifted child. Gifted children inevitably are likely to be involved throughout their young lives in many highly competitive activities; they may like to take part in piano competitions where the very nature of the activity is to come as close as possible to perfection; they may want to achieve entry to Higher Education degree courses which, in the drive to get into the "best" universities, requires near perfection in secondary school exams. Therefore it's a very good idea to begin early in life to teach gifted children the difference between normal life, and these exceptional, focused, high-standard activities - and to set an example in not mixing them up.

In a P3 mathematics test, it matters very little if one achieves perfection or not, so that the parent who mutters "Forty-nine out of fifty? What happened to the other mark?" is setting a seriously bad example for a standard that the gifted child may not be able to maintain through life. Such lessons can seriously inhibit a child from tackling problems if s/he thinks they might be considered a failure if they get anything less than full marks. It is a matter of managing the child's expectations of what is reasonable to achieve at the time.

The focused, highly-competitive activities have a different mind-set and gifted children often need help not extending that mind-set to include their whole lives. To not understand this is to potentially damage the personality of the child.

Parenting or teaching a gifted child can be challenging, but it can also bring its own rewards if the characteristics and needs of this child are understood.

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