

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

Factsheet

UNDERSTANDING GIFTEDNESS ALONGSIDE TWICE EXCEPTIONALITY AND BEHAVIOUR

By Elaine Hook

Aren't we all quirky at times? Can't some of us be obsessive? Don't you find it difficult to sit still when you are bored? Do you find major changes difficult to deal with sometimes? Are there people you don't get on with? Do you enjoy being alone sometimes? How many times have you not understood a joke?

All of us have experienced some, if not all of the above at some time in our lives – does this make us Autistic or Gifted or neither? Difficult to answer isn't it?

Parents feel distressed and worried that their child might be labelled and misunderstood and in some cases they might be misdiagnosed as having Autism, Aspergers Syndrome or other characteristics or tendencies which can be confused with high ability or giftedness. Most parents feel, very strongly, this misdiagnosis is untrue, unfair and at times insulting.

Gifted, highly able (or whatever label we want to decorate it up with) children can be quirky, have a wacky sense of humour, be perfectionists and have obsessive tendencies. They can also be very sensitive, deep and have a tendency to view the world differently. They often worry about intense and difficult situations affecting them and the world and ask question after question on a subject until they have enough information and answers to satisfy themselves and feel their questions have been answered adequately. They will often be interested in a particular subject or toy for weeks on end until they have exhausted the subject or game and do not need to pursue it further.

Their intellectual skills often do not marry up with their social and emotional skills. The intellectual development matures more rapidly than the social and emotional part of the brain so they are often out of sync. A highly able child can often communicate and use language like a teenager or adult but more often than not will tend to have outbursts resembling a toddler or a child.

As a parent you will need to arm yourself with as much knowledge as possible to enable you to understand this child and respond accordingly to the different behaviours. When your child is operating in adult mode, it is important and appropriate to respond as an adult but when the child is behaving as a toddler or child you need to treat them as a child. There will be times when they want to command the respect of an adult and be given choices and responsibility but they will also need to be a child and play, suck their thumb and have a cuddle! It's a balancing act at all stages of development.

No one ever said that parenting was easy and all types of parenting on all levels bring with it a variety of challenges, as does giftedness or high ability. Just as at the lower end of the spectrum of needs we make allowances and adjustments so we need to remember the needs of children at the top end of the spectrum. And within the top end of the spectrum of needs there are a huge variety of needs linked to the personality, genes and life

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experience of each individual. Each child identified as gifted needs individual attention to ensure his/her needs are met in line with his/her and his/her family's vision.

Gifted children can appear very adult, using mature language and reading books well in advance of their chronological age. They often prefer to watch documentaries and the news rather than the latest children's TV. They are usually not comfortable with their peers but prefer much older or younger children or adult company. They can be very misunderstood by many and often find it difficult to "play" within their chronological age group.

When a bright or able child says to his or her friends in the playground that he wants to play "planets" it can cause isolation. When he then goes on to say that everyone is to choose the planet they want to be and that "we are going to replicate the Solar system," his peers will not understand, move away and continue with their game. Just as they do not understand him, he will not understand why they would not find this a fun cool game to be involved in. From here we may begin to see exclusion, isolation, solitude, loners, name calling and eventually bullying. A gifted or highly able child will tend to play alone or begin to compensate for their high ability in order to comply and "fit in." They can then start to be the class fool or clown in order to be liked and part of the group. This can then be misunderstood or diagnosed as negative behaviour or in some cases having Autistic or ADHD characteristics or tendencies.

We all have quirks, obsessions, fears, paranoia and different senses of humours but does this mean we are on the Autistic Spectrum? Maybe it does, maybe we are all a little Autistic? When an able child discusses debates or communicates on a different level and with a deep sense of passion and understanding it does not necessarily mean that the child has communication problems and is socially and emotionally inept. We must be extremely careful not to label and/or misdiagnose. Why do we not see the beauty and pleasure these wonderful little people add to our lives and the world? Why are we scared of recognising the ability we have in front of us? Why are we not encouraging and nurturing their skills and be proud to be blessed in educating these highly intelligent individuals?

When a child who, at 6 years old, is assessed as performing in many areas as a 12 year old, we must try to have empathy, understanding and compassion for such parents and share the very real and important needs of such children. I cannot stress highly enough how scary and bewildering it can be for some parents to be told the news that their child has high ability or is indeed gifted. Most parents have had to learn by trial and error or go with their gut instinct in order to fight their corner and be confident to speak out in order to achieve what they feel is the very best for the family in order to survive the challenges of raising a very intelligent child. There could be many times when a parent feels their knowledge or skills are insufficient to help and support their child, but we must encourage parents and teachers to engage with each other for the mutual benefit of the child's development and not to its detriment.

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Discussions and debates are often very challenging for parents and educators, as the able child tends to think they know best, are right and are infallible. Highly able children function, a good proportion of the time, way above their chronological age and have difficulty understanding why they cannot, in the eyes of the adults around them, do certain things due to the fact that they are not old enough or socially and emotionally mature enough to be safe.

It is important to work hard at obtaining a balance for you, the child and the family. Appropriate house and ground rules should be agreed between you all, they must be reasonable, consistent and never change. If necessary write the rules on a white board and hang it somewhere very accessible to all concerned, e.g. above the breakfast table, on the back of the bedroom door or on the wall in the loo! For younger children design a praise and reward system that works for you and the child. You will find that you have to adjust the rules and/or the system you design as able children can very quickly adjust their behaviour to the requirements and then become bored and eventually start to act up again. Remember that, you have to keep at least 5 steps ahead of your able child, sometimes 10.

Always praise the positive behaviour and try not to dwell on negatives. Give choices with consequences, which will create responsibility and ensure you stick to the ground rules. If they see that you will give in when worn down they will continue to always wear you down as they will know it's worth whining as in time it gets them what they want. Highly able children have more energy, determination and time than we do as adults! The theorist Piaget (1896-1980) advised that if a child's negative behaviour persists for 7 days it will take at least 14 days to unlearn the behaviour. Consequently years of learned negative behaviour can take years to change, be patient and persistent.

Able children love responsibility, so give it appropriately. When your child is behaving responsibly, give praise and thanks; show them how pleased and proud you are of them. When your able child turns into a toddler, explain that you will have to treat them like a toddler and discipline them accordingly by sending them to their room or sitting them on the bottom step of the stairs.

Highly able and gifted children think differently to others. As parents and educators we must arm ourselves with as much knowledge as possible about "giftedness" in order to understand how their minds work. Then we will be better equipped to support their needs and help them grow into wonderful highly intelligent human beings who will help shape the world in a variety of ways for our grandchildren and great grandchildren.

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