

Understanding the Unique Needs of the Gifted Child: Your Role as Parents

By Jan Pierce

If you have a child who has been identified as gifted, you're aware of the challenges he or she faces. Gifted children have unique needs. While every individual is wonderfully designed and no two have exactly the same needs, gifted children possess characteristics that set them apart.

Mary Ann Paradise, an educator working with gifted students in the Chicago area during the 1990s, listed these characteristics of the gifted student:

- They prefer finding answers in their own way
- They tolerate high levels of ambiguity
- They see familiar things in unusual ways
- They enjoy working alone to solve problems.¹

Joan Smutney, Director of the Center for Gifted at National-Louis University, Illinois, came up with this list:

Gifted children often

- Express curiosity
- Show creativity
- Have an extensive vocabulary
- Are good at problem-solving in unique ways
- Have exceptional memories
- Apply their learning to new situations
- Are artistic, musical or dramatic with well-developed imaginations
- Enjoy working independently
- Display wit and humor
- Have a sustained attention span²

In light of these differences from the average or bright learner, gifted children need material that honors their high degree of intelligence, challenges them to excellence, and supports their individual social and emotional needs. Here are some of the ways parents and teachers can meet the needs of gifted children:

Accelerate Instruction

Gifted children learn new information quickly and remember it well. They don't need more than one or two lessons to master a new skill. Once they process new information and fit it into their larger picture of related subject matter, they're ready to move on. Repetitive lessons are not needed and will both interrupt learning and frustrate the student.

The better method for teaching the gifted child is to introduce new material and then turn her loose to do research of her choosing within the subject area. For instance if the lesson is learning the geography of South America, allow the gifted child to choose a country or cultural group and

do independent study. Those who require the gifted child to memorize all the countries and their major exports will find the gifted child's attention long gone.

Teach in Whole Units

A large percentage of the curriculum in America is written from a “part to whole” approach. If we want children to learn about the literature of the Civil War Era we take an excerpt from *Gone with the Wind* and use it to teach about the time period. Gifted children do not want to learn in bits and pieces—they want the broad picture. They want to read the entire book. This is a huge problem in nearly every subject because gifted children need to work with whole concepts to progress to a problem solving level. They want to see all the facts and then manipulate the information in new and creative ways.

Allow Freedom to Explore

It's difficult to differentiate every lesson to fit the needs of a gifted child, but fortunately gifted thinkers want to come up with their own projects. They want to explore relationships between two bodies of information or they want to try an experiment to test a current theory. They need permission to proceed, and the respect of their parents or mentors to learn independently. Gifted learners don't want to learn in lockstep with others; they need freedom to follow their own interests in their own way.

Understand Quirky Behavior

Gifted children are, after all, children. They will have all the emotional and social concerns we expect of their age group. But in addition, many gifted children find it difficult to make friends, listen to instruction that seems boring, or even to follow expected rules and regulations of a larger institution. Gifted kids can be quirky. They may be hyper-sensitive to noise or light. They may be emotionally fragile and worry about world situations that average children don't even consider. They may need a high level of encouragement to do their best work. They need acceptance just as they are. It isn't easy to be different from other kids. The kind and encouraging attention of a positive learning environment can make the difference between success and disaster for the gifted learner.

Here are some of the quirky behaviors that can cause problems for the gifted child:

- May show impatience with slower learners and dislike routines.
- May ask embarrassing questions
- May be strong-willed and resist directions.
- May question teaching procedures.
- May dislike unclear or illogical presentations.
- May worry about humanitarian issues.
- May construct complicated rules.
- May be bossy, intolerant, a perfectionist or become depressed.
- May be seen as disruptive and out of step with others.
- May neglect duties when focused on own interests.
- May be ultra-sensitive to criticism or rejection.

- May reject parent, teacher or peer input.
- May appear disorganized, scattered, frustrated.
- May use humor to attract attention.³

A Word to the Parents of Gifted Children

You have a tough job. You know your child's abilities, and you want the best for him. You watch as he struggles with issues beyond the scope of most children. It doesn't seem fair, but the reality is that gifted children have to cope with understandings beyond their years. They know about wars in far-off lands. They know about injustice before they have the emotional maturity to deal with such information. How can you protect them while at the same time supporting their learning?

You are your child's best advocate. You'll come up with an instructional setting best suited to your child's needs. You may choose to work with advanced curriculum through a local college or an online course of study. You may find that a mentoring relationship is important to your gifted learner.

Know that there are other parents in your shoes. Get into a support group with other families of gifted children. It will be of invaluable help. You'll have the opportunity to share your "war stories" and glean information on things that work for others. You can find curriculum, materials, courses of study, and more.

Your gifted child is truly unique. With your support and guidance, the world will be a richer place as your student makes his or her contributions to the world.

Find more information on supporting the unique needs of gifted children:

www.gifted-children.com

www.gtworld.org

www.hoagiesgifted.org

www.sengifted.org

Jan Pierce, M.Ed., is a retired teacher and freelance writer. She lives in the Pacific Northwest and specializes in education and family life articles. She is the author of *Homegrown Readers: Simple Ways to Help Your Child Learn to Read* available online at [Barnes and Noble](#) and [Amazon](#).

Resources

1. *Who Are the Gifted?* by James R. Parker, Fremont School District, Mundelein, Illinois. Published in *Gifted Education International*, Vol. 12, pp85-90, 1997.
2. *Is Your Child Gifted?* by Sue Douglass Fliess, www.education.com, July 29, 2009.
3. *Nurturing Social-Emotional Development of Gifted Children* by James T. Webb, eric.hoagiesgifted.org, EC Digest #E527, 1994.

For Background Information:

The Emotional Needs of the Gifted Child, by Annemarie Roeper, www.sengifted.org, 2012.

Competing with Myths about the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students, by Tracy L. Cross, www.sengifted.org, 2012.

Nurturing Social-Emotional Development of Gifted Children, by James T. Webb, ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education, 1996-98.

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