

Gifted and Talented Children

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Having assessed several gifted and talented children over the past few months, it may seem a curious anomaly that children without any apparent learning difficulty can sometimes be described as a “Special Educational Need”. In many schools, however, giftedness goes unrecognised and the resulting frustration within the gifted child can easily lead to emotional and behavioural disturbance.

The question of whether we can recognize gifted children at an early age is embedded in a larger issue: how much of a child's giftedness is attributable to nature and how much to nurture. When the nature/nurture question was first raised, its author, Sir Francis Galton (1869), declared that nature was responsible for all of one's abilities. It is now widely agreed that both genetics (nature) and environment (nurture) play a role in determining giftedness, but their relative importance is debated. Current thinking suggests that the importance of the gene is greater, though without appropriate nourishment, the gifted child's potential can often remain unfulfilled.

Children show the signs of giftedness or advanced development early in life, but whether those gifts flower into high achievements in adult life is dependent upon the nurture they receive from their environment.

In the UK, children generally considered as gifted range from five to ten percent of the general population. In the total school-age population in England, that would be about 800,000 children. In an all-ability secondary school of 1500 pupils there could be between 75 and 150 gifted pupils in total and about 18 in any year group.

Contrary to the belief that all parents think their children are gifted, recent studies have indicated that the parents of average children do see their children's development differently from parents of gifted children. In addition, the parents of the gifted tended to underestimate their children's abilities rather than overestimate them. The two groups had similar socio-economic backgrounds, and there were very few differences in physical development found between them. However, there were major differences in intellectual, imaginal and social development, as well as in talents and certain personality traits.

In a study of giftedness when parents were asked to describe their child's development over 36 months, the following interesting pattern emerged which may prove helpful to other parents who consider their child may be gifted :

Very Alert	67% Gifted	42% Average
Long Attention Span	31% Gifted	3% Average
Excellent Memory	67% Gifted	27% Average
Rapid Learner	58% Gifted	13% Average
Advanced Vocabulary	87% Gifted	34% Average
Very Observant	64% Gifted	34% Average
Very Curious	58% Gifted	40% Average
More than one imaginary friend	50% Gifted	9% Average
Vivid Imagination	46% Gifted	22% Average
High degree of creativity	66% Gifted	8% Average

One of the earliest signs of giftedness noted was alertness. "He literally consumed his world with eagerness, wanting to learn, see, feel and touch everything, all at once."

Another early sign was long attention span. One parent commented, "He would play games longer than playmates and get upset when they stopped playing and would leave".

Over 90 percent of the parents of the gifted saw their children as having an excellent memory. One gifted girl knew most of "Little Orphan Annie" at age two. The speed at which gifted children learned generally became apparent by the time these children were three years old.

If gifted children don't get appropriate education they are at-risk, for boredom, frustration, underachievement, dropping out, using drugs and, in the more extreme cases, turning to delinquency and even committing suicide.

Boredom and frustration in regular classrooms drive gifted children out of school at a rate three to five times higher than the dropout rate among the rest of the school population. In fact, studies in the USA indicate that gifted and talented children may account for 20 percent of all high school dropouts.

Those who stay in classes that do not challenge them may develop emotional problems, become juvenile delinquents or simply sink to the level of average classmates and never reach their full potential. Indeed, the characteristics displayed by many gifted children – high activity level, divergent thinking, daydreaming and continuous questioning - are sometimes misinterpreted as indicators of emotional disturbance or learning disability. At the very least, teachers who are not used to dealing with students that learn quickly, have long attention spans, are creative and want to explore subjects in great depth, consider these children's behaviours and attitudes as abnormal and an irritation.

It must be remembered that each gifted child is different. Certain characteristics will apply to your child and some will not. If you see that several of these characteristics fit your child, you may wish to seek further assessment of your child's capabilities so that you can nurture those abilities.