

The Essential Guidebook for Parents of  
*Gifted Children*

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*“I think there’s something wrong with me.”*

– Gifted child

*“I think there’s something wrong with my kid.”*

– Parent of a gifted child

*“My child is gifted, but I already know everything  
I need to know about that.”*

– No one ever

# Introduction

This book is designed to provide parents of gifted children with the knowledge they need to understand giftedness and its attendant attributes and implications, enabling them to make smart choices about how to go about raising a gifted child in the best way possible. Giftedness by definition is uncommon, but it is by no means rare, and it has been studied by experts the world over for generations. This book emerges from decades of research and experience, standing on the shoulders of giants to push concepts and ideas ever higher so that, as a parent, your understanding of giftedness will be intelligent and informed, brave and compassionate. If you have a gifted child, this book does not contain everything you need to know, but you probably do need to know everything that is contained in it. It will, as its title befittingly suggests, guide you as you embark on the adventures that lie ahead.

If you have picked up this book and begun reading it, it's most likely because you've realized that your child is different from other children, and either you know that the child is gifted, or you suspect that that's the case. And because your child is different, there are problems, either at home or at school. Your child is not fitting in with others, is not acting like age peers, or is bored with schoolwork. For some of you, the child is so unhappy with the current state of things that the entire family has been sucked into a cycle of dealing almost exclusively with the child's unhappiness. You need information. You need to know what is happening, what to expect, what to do.

Here's the bad news. If your child is gifted, your parenting journey is going to be hard, and it will test you, and you'll probably think that you're doing everything wrong at least some of the time. Nothing you've heard, nothing you read in standard parenting books, nothing other parents (or grandparents, or teachers, or doctors) tell you will seem as though it applies to your situation. The tried-and-true solutions that other parents have used don't work. Their kids are not like your child. Nothing feels the same—because it's not. That can be isolating and frightening.

But the good news is that gifted kids can be amazing. You'll experience moments of profound wonder and joy at the intellectual heights and the emotional depths and the intuitive breadth you witness in the incredible little creature you're raising. You'll never be more grateful to be a parent

than you are when you see your child using the gifts that he or she has been endowed with to build on the promise of an extraordinary life lived with meaning and purpose.

Some parents marvel that such a complex, precocious child was born to them. But most gifted children come from gifted parents, and lots of gifted parents don't realize they're gifted until they discover it in their children. "But I used to be exactly the same way," they protest. And then it hits them. Ohhhhh. And suddenly all sorts of things begin to make sense.

But even adults who know they're gifted don't always know how to be good stewards of children who are gifted. And if you're not actually gifted, it can be even more vexing. But that's why there are books like this one. There is hope, and you'll get through it. You just need to know a completely different set of facts to raise a small gifted human into a happy, well-adjusted big one.

There are a whole lot of things you'll need to know going forward, and there are some excellent publications out there to guide you along your way. You'll need information about testing, about educational options, about advocacy for appropriate services for your child. You'll likely need to understand a variety of topics such as perfectionism and creativity and underachievement and existential depression, and you may even need to know about twice-exceptionality or being a gifted minority. There are entire books that go into every aspect of everything you're going to need to

know. The information is out there, and in many cases, it's just a click away.

But that's all stuff you can dig into once you know what you're dealing with. For now, you just need to find your footing—to get a basic understanding of what's going on and where you need to start. That is what this book will do.

## **The Straight Talk**

Let's make a deal: This book will be utterly, brutally honest about what is going on inside gifted people, and you will do your best to be thoroughly open-minded about it. The truth can be beautiful, but it can also be unflattering and unnerving. However, you can't look truth in the face if you don't accept the bad with the good.

So if we're going to approach this topic honestly, let's start big right at the beginning. A fair number of parents of gifted children confess to having experienced a pang of apprehension and even dismay upon learning that their child is gifted. If you had that experience, you probably feel guilty about it. Don't. It can be intimidating to discover that your parenting journey just got rerouted to destinations unknown. Suddenly you're headed into foreign territory, and you don't even speak the language. You have every right to be scared.

And it's not just that you're scared for yourself; you're scared for your child, too. Lots of parents secretly want their child to be smart, but maybe not too smart. It's not that

being too smart is a bad thing in and of itself; rather, it comes with the burden of being non-average. Any time someone is exceptional in any way, other people notice, and they aren't always kind about it. Parents understandably want their children to have happy and healthy childhoods free of the attention—whether positive or negative—that comes from being different from the people around them. And gifted people are often noticeably different. In fact, they can be downright weird.

Certainly, it's not politically correct to call gifted people weird. More acceptable terminology includes words like *bright* or *advanced* or as having above-average intelligence or heightened abilities. But we're dealing in truth here, and the truth is that gifted people *are* weird. They are not like the people around them, even if they pretend that they are, and even if they're good enough at pretending to pull it off. And the smarter they are, the weirder they're likely to be. They also tend to choose friends who are weird, sometimes in ways that are quite different from their own weirdnesses. But it is precisely these weirdnesses that can make their lives difficult, especially when they are young. The world can be a hard place for people who don't fit into the typical norms.

But there's good weird and bad weird. The guy who keeps his toenail clippings? That's bad weird. We're not talking about him. The kid who wrote a whole story using an alphabet he made up? That's the kind of person this book deals with.

If we use the word *weird* to mean, plainly, not normal, then by definition, gifted people are weird. They are a statistical minority. They are generally accepted to be those who score in the top 3-5% on IQ tests, although that number can fluctuate, depending on the current trends and on the organization making the call as to what qualifies as gifted and what does not. The gifted are best served when that range of numbers is expanded slightly, especially since IQ test results are snapshots in time of only certain sets of abilities that a person is able to demonstrate on a given day in a given environment, which may or may not reflect the true intellectual potential of that person and perhaps not his or her creative potential—or any other kind of potential, for that matter.

Regardless of how they score on intelligence tests, gifted individuals are those who have a heightened capacity to learn and comprehend and above-average ability in one or more areas. They take in information more quickly and process it differently and analyze it critically and make connections synthetically and apply them creatively—usually. Some gifted people don't do all of those things. Some gifted people like to look at bigger pictures and then dive into the details, and some like to do just the reverse. Some like to read and study, chasing fact after fact about what interests them, while others like to take things apart with their hands and figure them out and put them back together in new ways. There is as much variety in the gifted community as there is in the general human population.

But when we talk about the gifted, a stereotype often comes to mind of the brainy kid who knows a whole lot about a whole lot, who is probably somewhat geeky and who has a strange way of looking at things, who can be ingeniously useful and socially stunted and uncomfortably candid. This is an obviously unfair representation of what a gifted person looks like, but it would be disingenuous to suggest that this portrait of giftedness does not exist because we know that it does. The key is that it is just one of many portraits. Other gifted people are diametrically opposite to that stereotype in almost every way: socially adept, emotionally intuitive, gracious and graceful and affable. And of course, there are gifted people who fall everywhere between those two extremes.

One of the problems that parents of gifted children often have is that, not only are their kids different from others, but they're different from other gifted kids. The huge diversity of personalities and manifestations of giftedness that exists in the gifted community can make it hard to see giftedness for what it is.

However, there are a few characteristics that stand out as signature traits in most gifted people. Knowing them will help you to establish a foundation upon which you can build your understanding about the nature of giftedness. These are some of the primary, fundamental characteristics of gifted children, but they are overarching characteristics, and they affect everything a gifted person says, does, thinks, and

feels. They are part and parcel of who these children are, and most of them will remain with the children throughout their lives. These are the characteristics that make gifted people so different from the people around them, and they are the ones that we explore in this book.

# Intensity

Gifted people are intense. You don't have to be an expert to know that. Children especially can display their intensity in unreserved ways, not yet having the ability to tamp it down for outward appearances. Parents, teachers, and other adults who spend time with gifted children know that their behaviors and reactions can seem extreme. The children often know it, too. In fact, if they spend time around children of average ability levels, gifted children tend to feel that they are outliers—that there is something about them that is different, and not necessarily for the better. People tell them to calm down, to settle down, to stop making mountains out of molehills, to take it down a notch. But to these children, their experiences and behaviors are justified, and the fact that no one around them gets that can be discouraging and isolating. What, they wonder, is wrong with them?

It is important for gifted children to understand their intensities. Their experiences and behaviors may not be

typical for children their age, but they are absolutely normal for children who are gifted, and it is imperative that they know that. Books and other resources that teach these children about themselves can allow them to find self-acceptance, which is the first step toward a healthy self-esteem, a positive self-identity, and the pinnacle of emotional health: self-love.

But children aren't the only ones who need to learn about the intensities that affect them. Parents and other adults need to understand them, too. This enables them to deal with the children sensitively and fairly, and gifted children in particular need that. An additional benefit is that, for parents especially, the discovery of the characteristics of intense gifted children often leads to realizations about the self as well, since there is a strong genetic component to giftedness.

Intensity is the number-one hallmark characteristic of giftedness. It has been observed throughout history, although rarely is it considered in the context of giftedness. Alexander the Great was ambitious. The Buddha was empathetic. Tubman was fearless. Darwin was curious. Plato was relentless. Dante was imaginative. Swift was scathing. Galileo was open-minded. Austen was realistic. Gutenberg was inventive. Caesar was determined. Earhart was intrepid. All of these people were intense, and we celebrate their intensities. But none of them were slouches, either.

Of course, the intensities do not always lead to eminence, nor do they necessarily lead to world-changing heroism.

Hitler was brutal. Joseph Stalin was...well, also brutal. Ivan the Terrible, Vlad the Impaler, Caligula—all brutal. Closer to home, men like Timothy McVeigh, Ted Kaczynski, Jeffrey Dahmer, and Ted Bundy were known to be extremely intelligent but also—you guessed it—brutal.

As a side note: In searching for evil geniuses throughout history, one comes upon a number of white men. Women and people of color don't appear much, and that's likely because people must have some sort of power in order to exert it over others in ways that cause those individuals to become notorious later, and much of history has denied that to anyone but white males. But given equal opportunities for expression, it seems likely—even certain—that the list of evil geniuses would be multigendered and multiracial.

The common thread among all of these individuals, both heroic and villainous, is their intensity. They aren't known to us because they were smart, although sometimes that is either overtly stated or obviously implied. They are known to us because they did something big; they used their intensities to change people's lives, and often the world.

In the 1960s and '70s, Polish psychologist and psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski studied intellectually and artistically gifted youths and couldn't help but notice the intense, sensitive, and emotionally reactive characteristics that seemed to be common among them. He published his observations and findings, describing the intensities as *overexcitabilities*—sort of. The Polish word that he used

actually translates into English as “superstimulatabilities,” but somehow we got *overexcitabilities* instead. It means a heightened reaction to stimulation, whether to outside stimuli or to internal thoughts and emotions.

Some people dislike the distorted translation of Dabrowski’s original term. The stem *over* implies that these excitabilities are too much, that there is an optimal range and that the people who have them are outside of what is considered normal and healthy. It may remind one of the push a few decades ago by some women to reject the term *overweight* in relation to body size. *Overweight*, they argued, implies that there is an optimal weight, and no one should be forced to fit into a predetermined ideal of what the human body should look like. Interestingly, they preferred the word *fat* instead. The problem, of course, is that there actually is an optimal weight range for the human body—not because of aesthetics but because that is the range at which the body functions in the physically healthiest way. That problem does not apply to the word *overexcitability*. There is not an optimal way of experiencing the world. There is only a common way of experiencing it, and that is not the same thing at all.

As a matter of fact, many gifted people who are overexcitable (and note that not all of them are) would argue that their heightened reactions to stimuli are by far the best way to experience the world. They notice and are able to respond to things that might pass by the majority of