

Chapter One  
Signs of a Gifted Child

Parenting is full of puzzles. We all have moments when we think that our child must be different, exceptional, gifted. But then, especially if this is our first or only child, doubts creep in, and we begin to assume that he or she is just “normal.” I certainly did.

*When Sherwyn was a baby, he was always very alert, showing lots of interest in his surroundings. At only four months old, he would laugh enthusiastically at something funny on the TV. One day I bought him some posters, the kind you see on the walls of school classrooms, with numbers, planets, national flags, organs of the body, and so on. Looking back, I can see that this is where his voracious learning first took hold; he would study the posters on the floor all day long, eventually exhausting himself and falling asleep on top of them.*

*But he was also puzzling and sometimes challenging. He was a picky eater (but, I thought, aren't many young children?). He did not welcome new things, especially clothing. He would cry if I wore a new dress, eventually forcing me back into something old. I even had to wash his own new clothes several times to convince him that they were old. He was also very sensitive to loud noises, covering his ears and screaming in protest.*

*However, Sherwyn was my first-born. In those early months, how was I to know that he was different? Why should I have thought to consult a doctor or a psychologist? To me, everything was normal.*

Now, nearly four years later and following comprehensive testing, we know that Sherwyn is a gifted child with an IQ of at least 160. But what does that mean? And what should you look for if you suspect that your child may be gifted?

### **The definition of gifted**

Definitions are really just the means for giving a child a label, but getting the right one is extremely important if you are to support your child in whatever special ways she needs. We will look later in this chapter at the potential for mislabeling a child, but first let's consider the definition of the word *gifted*.

The following definition by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC)<sup>1</sup> is typical of many:

Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).

Some educators and psychologists go further by differentiating between the term *gifted*—for children with advanced intellectual ability (relating to one or more academic skills or subjects)—and the term *talented*—for children with advanced practical skills (for example, music, sports, creative and performing arts or design). Of course, creating categories always leads to exceptions, and there are plenty of gifted children who also have advanced talents, but in this book we are concerned with the intellectually advanced child—the gifted child.

## **Normal child development**

It is helpful to pause for a moment and consider a few milestones in normal child development—certainly those that relate to the intellect. Of course, babies are learning all the time, and at the early pre-verbal stage, everything they do as a part of this learning is linked to the development of the mind (you can read more about this in Chapter Four). Here are some basic guidelines about what an “average” child should be doing and at what age. Just remember: there can be wide fluctuations in these behaviors, especially if your child is intellectually advanced.

### *0-2 years*

At this age, children learn by exploring their environment with their eyes, their hands, and their mouths. Soon they learn how to use simple objects such as spoons. The understanding of permanence develops too, so that instead of assuming that a hidden object has ceased to exist, they realize that it is still there, somewhere, waiting to be revealed.

By the age of two, most children have developed a small vocabulary of about fifty words and are beginning to put two or three of them together into simple sentences. Even so, communication continues to be based on gestures and nonverbal sounds.

### *3-5 years*

By about three years of age, children begin using words to describe things like colors, and they can accomplish simple counting. They also understand the basic concept of time (now, later, in a while, etc.). Their imaginary play becomes a common trait by this age, and they demonstrate the ability to hold a concept in mind and recreate it imaginatively.

It is hard to be specific about vocabulary during this period, but common guidelines suggest about 300 words

by age three, about 1,500 by four, and about 2,500 by five. However, this depends very much on the stimulation they receive through reading, talking, and being asked questions.

### *6-9 years*

During this period children gradually learn to read. (Some research shows that being encouraged to read leads to higher achievement later.<sup>2</sup>) Counting ability improves, and by age nine most children are beginning to learn how to multiply numbers. An intriguing sign of their increased concept of time is an interest in hearing about things from the past.

### *Milestone accuracy*

I am not suggesting that you use these simple milestone markers as a measure of your child's development—not by themselves, at least. A number of factors can affect children's mental and intellectual development, including sensory sensitivity, nurturing, and the availability of materials that satisfy their curiosity. In addition, some children—even those with a greater intellectual capacity—have learning difficulties or problems with socially relating, either of which can affect the pace of their intellectual development.

Despite the potential for variation, there are some widely recognized traits that most gifted children demonstrate—characteristics that you can spot easily and that are useful for a psychologist who is trying to assess the child to know.

### **Signs of a gifted child**

Parents have an innate tendency to believe that there is something special about their child. Most parents understand that this comes from a personal bias, a deep love for the child that is their own. However, sometimes it takes a specific trigger to awaken a parent's suspicions that there is indeed

something truly different about the child. Looking back now, I can see several triggers alerting me to Sherwyn's giftedness, but one in particular sticks in my mind, and it relates to an everyday process: toilet training.

*Sitting patiently in the bathroom as Sherwyn sat on the toilet, I noticed him looking with curiosity at the toilet paper. He began to tear off a small piece very carefully. When he had finished doing this, he handed it to me, saying, "Look Mama—Argentina!" Before I knew what to say, he had started carefully tearing another piece. "And this one is Chile," he said. He then asked me to give him back the first piece of paper. With great care, he aligned both fragments and explained, "They are neighbors, you know!" I ran downstairs to his globe; the pieces of paper fit their respective countries perfectly—and he was right, of course. They are neighbors!*

Here are some helpful signs to look out for—ones that might trigger your own suspicions that your child may be gifted.

### *Speech development*

Highly intelligent children often learn to talk earlier than their peers. They may say their first words before the age of one. By the time they are two, they often are able to talk in full sentences and have conversations with adults.

### *Reading and writing*

Many gifted children learn to read well before they reach school age. Some even teach themselves to read. They often are fascinated with letters and enjoy reading, sometimes obsessively, consuming several books a day.

Although an advanced toddler may develop strong reading skills before the age of four, writing abilities might develop later. For any child, writing requires sufficient

physical development, including hand-eye coordination. Consequently, even if a gifted child writes before her peers can, she may not master it until around the age of four.

### *Problem solving*

Gifted children tend to be brilliant problem solvers. They often enjoy puzzles and are able to solve ones designed for much older children.

### *Unusual memory*

A good memory is a sign of intelligence in toddlers and young children. Gifted children often remember even small details about stories and events, and they memorize facts more quickly than other children and with less repetition.

### *Curiosity and asking questions*

This is perhaps the most common and noticeable sign of a gifted child: a curious mind that leads to asking questions all day long. These children are often not satisfied with simple answers; they want in-depth explanations to their questions. Parents sometimes find themselves learning right alongside their children as they research answers to specific, in-depth questions about topics of interest.

### *Fast learning*

With the appetite for learning comes the ability to learn quickly. Gifted children can find conventional repetitive learning techniques unnecessary and boring, and they may lash out against them, either throwing tantrums or shutting down entirely and refusing to do the work.

### *Creativity*

Gifted children may show high ability in music, drawing, or other arts. But creativity isn't just useful in the arts. Gifted children demonstrate their creativity in standard academic

and practical ways as well. Solving mathematical problems in new ways, arranging their bedroom furniture to maximize space, and even discovering new methods of reaching the cookies on the top shelf are all ways in which children use their creative brains to their advantage.

### *Sense of humor*

Gifted children often have a good sense of humor. As infants they will laugh at funny things, and as they get older they understand puns and jokes that are too advanced for their peers, and they can remember them to tell at a later date. They often make up jokes of their own to make adults laugh.

### *Computer skills*

Many gifted children learn how to operate computers and other IT devices at a very young age. They often don't need any instruction; for most of them, it comes naturally.

### *Numeracy*

Interest in numbers tends to come to gifted children at an early age. Counting quickly develops into a strong understanding of basic arithmetic before reaching school age.

### *Lively talking*

Gifted children have active brains and typically love to talk about their favorite topics and interests. They often have difficulty switching off and can exhaust the adults around them.

### *Low sleep requirement*

Many gifted children seem to require less sleep than their peers. This can be troublesome to parents who don't understand how a young child can function on only four to

five hours of sleep a night. If your child sleeps only a few hours each night but is still full of energy the next morning, you don't need to worry. However, if the child seems tired much of the time, you should consult with your doctor.

Interestingly, some gifted children require more sleep than normal. These children are so intense that they need a greater amount of time to recover their energy, and they may need nine or more hours of sleep each night in order to function well.

In addition, many gifted children use such high levels of energy to operate their curious brains that they run out of fuel before other children do. These children seem to lag and become grouchy and irritable several hours after breakfast and again by the middle of the afternoon. A healthy dose of protein, such as a cheese stick or crackers with peanut butter on them, as a mid-morning or midday snack can refuel their brains and get them going again.

### *Food intolerances*

Some gifted children don't like the texture of certain foods or are hypersensitive to specific tastes or smells, causing them to become picky eaters. However, as most children go through a phase of not eating well, this alone is not a reliable sign of giftedness.

Be aware, though, that an unusually large proportion of the gifted population suffers from allergies, whether to foods or to other environmental allergens. Children who exhibit food allergies may have to have their diets modified, sometimes to a particularly inconvenient degree.<sup>3</sup>

### *Preference for adult company*

Gifted children usually do not act their chronological age. They may be in the body of a six-year-old, but their mind might work at the advanced rate of a twelve-year-old.



Because of this, gifted children tend to prefer the company of older children or adults. Playing with children in their own age group can be difficult, as they lack common interests. Kids their age can seem babyish and boring to them, and typical age-appropriate games can feel simple and dull.

Because they are looking to add excitement and interest to their play, gifted children often create complicated rules and strategies to the games they play with others—rules that other children cannot remember or even understand, with frustration on all sides as a result. This leads to labels of bossiness in gifted children, as they try to orchestrate the play of those around them, often with little success. It is little wonder, then, that they prefer the company of older children and adults, who are better matched to them in intellectual age.

### *Delayed social and emotional development*

Having a higher mental age does not go hand in hand with equally advanced social and emotional development. In fact, the discrepancy between gifted children's intellectual development and their emotional development can appear dramatic. With their advanced vocabularies and reasoning skills, adults often make the mistake of treating these children as though they are older than they actually are. But for gifted children, being able to speak intelligently about mature topics does not mean that they are equipped to handle the emotional aspects of those same topics.

Gifted children can also show delayed social development. Again, this may be the result of adults expecting these children to act their intellectual age instead of their chronological age. However, many gifted children do have some difficulty with social interactions. This is often in response to dissatisfying or negative reactions from their age peers. According to gifted expert Wendy Roedell,

“The potential social alienation of extremely able children can be avoided by special efforts to help such children find companions with similar interests and abilities. Unless such efforts are made, highly gifted children run the risk of being labeled different and strange by their age mates, and may internalize this designation and become eccentric social isolates.”<sup>4</sup>

In addition, a greater-than-average number of gifted people tend to be introverts, preferring to be alone or to be in limited company rather than to be part of a crowd of people.<sup>5</sup> Worried parents often try to force their gifted child to interact with her peers, but this usually causes undue stress to the child and is not productive.

It is important to note that children who exhibit an aversion to social situations are not necessarily demonstrating disorders like autism or Asperger’s Syndrome. Certainly these disorders exist among the gifted population, but parents should first investigate the greater likelihood of the child simply demonstrating a natural proclivity toward introversion and perhaps feelings of alienation at not having found intellectual or social peers with whom she can relate.

### *Oversensitive physical reactions*

Many gifted children show strong adverse responses to different sensory experiences. Loud noises can be distracting or even upsetting. Flickering lights can be almost painful to their eyes. Tastes and smells can be overwhelming. Certain textures on their skin can be intolerable. These children seem to be the epitome of extreme reactions, and parents are often frustrated that their child can make so much of what seems to be so little. But these extraordinary experiences are very real to these children. Many of them need to have their environments modified to help accommodate them with their sensitivities until they can learn how to manage them

effectively on their own. This may mean using a white noise machine while the child is studying or sleeping to block outside sounds, or cutting the tags out of all of the child's clothes, or foregoing the garlic on tonight's pasta dinner.

The flip side of this characteristic is that these children who struggle with oversensitive reactions to outside stimuli are the same ones who are particularly excited and soothed by other environmental sensations. Some may find themselves transfixed by certain kinds of music or brought to tears of joy by the light of a lovely sunset. They may find intense comfort in the softness of their favorite blanket or the aroma of their favorite dinner cooking on the stove. Again, these children may seem extreme to those around them, but the sensations are quite real to the children and can be a source of passionate joy.

### *Intense emotional sensitivity*

One of the hallmark characteristics of gifted children is their intensity. Gifted kids are often overwhelmed by their emotions, and it takes them time and experience to learn how to manage their feelings—or at least how to manage their behaviors as reactions to their feelings. They easily can become distraught by the sight of a classmate being bullied or by the story of a disastrous event on the news. They are compassionate, idealistic, and have a strong concern for justice. They also tend to be thin-skinned and are particularly sensitive to comments by others. Parents must remember that these children cannot be talked out of their feelings—they cannot be told to “stop making mountains out of molehills”; it doesn't happen so easily for a sensitive child. Understand that the intensely emotional child is not purposefully over-reactive any more than she is responsible for her height and shoe size. Kindness and consideration for her feelings are necessary.

### *Unusual habits and obsessions*

Gifted children may not accept change easily. This can appear in many different ways, from not liking new clothing or meeting new people to insisting on arranging their books and toys in a precise way.

### *If I'd known then what I know now...*

If I had been given this list at the start, I would have been able to recognize most of the items on it as descriptions of Sherwyn. For example, by twenty months he was speaking in full sentences and asking questions all day long, and he was always sensitive to loud noises. I remember clearly one embarrassing occasion in a restaurant. We were enjoying our meal when a little girl at a neighboring table developed a tantrum and began to scream. Sherwyn's face crumpled, and he began to cry. Nothing would console him, and we decided to beat a hasty retreat. These are just a few of the examples; there are many, many more.

It is important to remember that this is a list of possible signs of giftedness, not a rigid profile that every gifted child must fit into. Some characteristics are more common than others, but all are useful when trying to assess a potentially gifted child.

### **ASD and the potential for misdiagnosis**

Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) raises its head frequently when parents are trying to find a definitive diagnosis for a child with advanced intellectual abilities. Asperger's Syndrome (AS) in particular (sitting at the high-functioning end of the spectrum) is the common diagnosis offered to parents, and it is perfectly possible for a gifted child to have a dual diagnosis of giftedness and Asperger's. However, it is equally possible for this to be an incorrect

conclusion, leading to a completely inappropriate educational program for the child.

Before shedding some light on the differences between giftedness and ASD, we need to discuss asynchrony, something we will cover more fully in Chapter Three. In essence, asynchrony is the difference in the various developmental rates of children. A child may, for example, exhibit the intellect of a much older child, the emotional traits of a child her actual age, and perhaps the physical abilities of a younger child. It can all be a bit of a muddle, especially for the children themselves as they try to make sense of their surroundings, their contemporaries, and of course, their own differences. Handled badly, this can cause some behaviors or traits to appear even more like Asperger's, making a misdiagnosis even more likely.

There is an interesting and helpful article written by Maureen Neihart titled "Gifted Children with Asperger's Syndrome."<sup>6</sup> Although the main theme of the article is how to support children with a genuine dual diagnosis, Neihart suggests some useful distinctions to help avoid an incorrect diagnoses of Asperger's. She lists the following seven principal differences:

1. *Speech patterns*: Both gifted and AS children possess fluent speech characterized by original and analytic thinking. However, the AS child's talking may be more pedantic and lack structure, running facts, ideas, and answers to questions together seamlessly as if unaware of the listener's inability to follow and decipher them.
2. *Responding to routines and structure*: Although both gifted and AS children can resist changes to routine at home and at school, gifted children are more able to

tolerate these, perhaps protesting but not panicking or becoming aggressive, as some AS children might.

3. *Whimsical or eccentric behavior*: Both the gifted and the AS child may behave in ways that seem strange or hard to explain. However, while the AS child may have no awareness that her behavior seems odd to others, the gifted child often does, not suffering the same lack of empathy or insight to others that people on the autism spectrum do. As she grows older, the AS child will make references to events but will not understand why they make little sense to the listener who has not shared the experiences being talked about; the gifted child is able to work this out.
4. *Response to distraction*: Both gifted and AS children can have attentional difficulties and can easily be distracted from their tasks. For the gifted child, this usually comes from outside themselves—something in the environment—whereas for the AS child, it is often an internal distraction—an impulse or stimulus diverting her attention from within.
5. *Quality of humor*: Children with AS may be clever with wordplay, even creating witty puns, but they lack the two-way social aspect of sharing humor. Often these children do not laugh at the things most people laugh at and do not understand jokes. This deficit does not generally affect gifted children, who are more tuned in to reciprocal humor.
6. *Emotional expression*: Children with AS often present flattened or restricted emotional responses, or exaggerated and inappropriate responses (for example, laughing at something sad). Again, this is not something generally exhibited by gifted children.

7. *Social awareness*: This is perhaps the single biggest difference between gifted children and children with AS. Asperger's children often lack any sense of normal social patterns—i.e., taking turns in conversations, staying until the conversation has ended, sensing when the listener is bored—and they are not easily taught these skills. Gifted children usually have a stronger social awareness and are able to use it.

Just from this first chapter, you can see how complicated it is to identify, interpret, and fully understand what lies behind a young child's unusual behaviors. This overview should help you to step back and ponder your child's traits more objectively, as well as give you some facts to discuss with professionals. What will probably happen next is some form of testing to assess your child's intellectual ability, which we discuss in the next chapter.

