

Bright from the Beginning

*How to Identify and Support
Giftedness in the First Five Years*

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Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York

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CHAPTER 1

BUILDING COMMUNITY TO IDENTIFY AND SUPPORT GIFTED YOUNG CHILDREN

Why are the challenges I'm facing with my baby so different from those that my friends are experiencing with their babies?

What's the difference between a child who's high achieving and one who's actually gifted? What exactly does *gifted* even mean?

Can an infant or toddler be gifted, or does that come later, when the child reaches school age?

Is there any way to know if a baby or toddler is gifted—if that's even possible?

Why do my friends think I'm lucky to have a child who's so smart when she's so much work?

Will other people understand my child's differences enough to be able to give him the support and the services he needs? I feel so alone!

Many people are unaware that how we care for gifted children impacts an entire community. I myself didn't realize the importance of identifying giftedness and supporting gifted kids

until I was about thirty years old, even though I was in gifted programs as a child. I didn't understand that giftedness is much more than whether or not I could perform well on academic tests. I didn't realize that it's more than just a label that allowed me to attend different classes in the school system. I didn't know that gifted early learners struggle with important social and emotional issues that can be better supported when the adults around them know about these issues and what resources are available for these children. And I certainly didn't know that understanding gifted issues and nurturing gifted traits can be the difference between happy, well-adjusted kids living up to their full potential versus bored, frustrated youngsters who feel as though no one will ever understand them. No one deserves to feel like that.

But it's not too late, and those of us who work with gifted children have a chance to make a difference by learning what these kids need and providing them with the tools and resources that will enable them to soar.

Giftedness is not merely a matter of being smarter than average. It's not simply the ability to get all A's without having to study. (In fact, it often isn't that at all.) And it definitely doesn't mean "easier" children, as in "Gifted kids are easier to parent because they're so smart and can do so many things on their own" or "Teaching gifted kids must be easier since they know so much and learn so quickly."

No, gifted children are not always easier; nor are they always high performers. They are, however, complex individuals who think in interesting ways. Part of that complexity comes from the plethora of gifted traits that exist among gifted individuals—but not every gifted person will have every trait, and there are

innumerable combinations of those traits. Consequently, there is as much variation in the gifted community as there is in the general population, which can make it challenging to explain “what a gifted person is like.” But we can discuss some of the things that gifted people tend to have in common, and we can talk about resources and strategies that can support them, nurture them, and encourage them to be their best selves.

Parents

If you’re reading this book, it’s probably because you’ve been told—or you suspect, despite not having been presented with a formal diagnosis—that your child is gifted. As you learn more about what giftedness means, you may realize that you and/or some of your family members are also gifted because often, if you have a child who is gifted, others in the family are gifted as well, including the child’s siblings, if there are any. There is a genetic component to giftedness, although it is unlikely to manifest in all members of a family.

Gifted people are not always recognized as being gifted or are labeled officially as such, and many gifted adults don’t know that they’re gifted; they may just think that they’re “weird” or that they feel different from other people. They may discount their extraordinary abilities as “normal” because, from their point of view, their abilities *are* normal. The idea that giftedness is the ability to do difficult things becomes a misconception when gifted people adopt it as their definition but then reason that what they’re doing isn’t difficult for them, so therefore they’re not gifted. What they may not consider is that what they’re doing *is* difficult—for other people.

Many parents don't realize that they have a gifted child until they're told that they might have one. Usually this happens when their child is in school and is being compared with other children of the same age, or it may happen at the doctor's office if the child is making developmental gains at an unusual pace. Alternatively, some parents see their child doing things that seem different than what other children in the family or their friends' children are doing. But all of these things usually occur when the child is around preschool or elementary school age, which means that critical years are lost when parents could be supporting their baby's gifted characteristics and needs, if only they knew about gifted issues earlier.

Parenting gifted children is often difficult. Most gifted children struggle with asynchrony, a hallmark characteristic of giftedness. Asynchrony means being out of sync, whether within oneself or with others. For example, a child might have different rates of development in different areas, such as being highly advanced in thinking skills but struggling with fine motor skills, or being able to hold a conversation about a complex issue at an unusually young age but then throwing a temper tantrum typical for children of that age. This means that adults can come to expect advanced behaviors from them but then find themselves surprised and frustrated when the children act their age—because, gifted or not, these children are still children. Being able to read early, for example, does not mean that a child has matured emotionally.

Asynchrony as compared with others is generally easier for adults to identify. Young gifted children, for example, might make up complex rules for a playground game and then get angry when the other children can't understand them or don't care to play by

them. Often these children have difficulty finding age peers with the same interests. In fact, many gifted youngsters find friends who are older than they are because finding same-age peers who are at the same intellectual level can be a challenge.

As gifted children develop, their asynchrony can lead to scenarios that are frustrating and anxiety-producing, both for themselves and for those around them. That, combined with their insatiable desire to learn and experience novel things, often pushes them into direct conflict with their caretakers, whether parents, teachers, relatives, or someone else. Thus, the sooner parents of gifted children realize they are raising a gifted child and learn what to expect, the better for everyone involved.

Relatives and friends

It's hard to raise gifted children without emotional support. Often that support comes from family and friends, so it makes sense that those people should understand your child's unique development and traits. Many people don't know much about giftedness, so this gives you a good opportunity to share what you're learning about giftedness with them so they can support you and your child as much as possible.

If you are a friend or a relative of someone who has a gifted child and you're reading this book, thank you for your support! Gifted children are often misunderstood, and there are so many misleading stereotypes out there about what giftedness means. By showing your interest in learning about gifted children, you can help dispel myths and stereotypes and instead promote facts and useful information.

CHAPTER 2

UNDERSTANDING GIFTEDNESS

What does being gifted mean for my child?

What do others believe about giftedness that may impact my toddler when she's older?

Will people see my child's traits as positive or negative?

What about other learning challenges? How does being gifted affect the diagnosis of a learning or behavioral disorder?

How can I learn more about giftedness and how it will affect our family?

What it means to be gifted

The term *gifted* has been defined in a variety of ways, some positive and productive, others harmful and stereotyping. So let's start with what being gifted really means.

The official federal definition of giftedness was originally developed in 1972 but has since been revised several times. The current definition is as follows (NAGC, n.d.):

Students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.

The good thing about this definition is that it acknowledges different ways in which individuals can be gifted. The bad thing is that it bases the determination of whether or not a child is gifted on performance—on giving “evidence of high achievement capability”—which can leave out children who are not performing at the levels they should be for any number of reasons. More significantly, however, the federal definition only pertains to giftedness as it relates to children in school settings. It doesn’t even attempt to deal with children outside of the realm of academic achievement.

That said, gifted education decisions are typically made at the state and local levels anyway, so while the federal definition does set certain standards, state laws and local policies will largely determine whether or not a child is identified as gifted. Many states use the federal definition of giftedness or base their definition on it, although they are not required to, and local districts do the same with the state definitions. Generally, most states require a school-aged child to have an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 130 points or higher and/or to show talent in academics in order to be considered gifted and thereby to get public school gifted services, but this can vary from state to state. Local districts tend to use that benchmark as well, but they, too, can set their own definitions of what a gifted child is and what services are required for students who are labeled as gifted. The result of all of these various definitions is an inconsistent view of what is considered giftedness from one place to another, as well as disparities in services offered and funding allocated to accommodate the needs of gifted learners. No wonder there is confusion!

Despite all of the different definitions, however, most schools use achievement to measure high ability, and they label as gifted those who can achieve at high levels compared with others in their age group. This is determined using standardized ability and/or achievement tests. However, research shows that using an IQ score or the results of an achievement test to determine giftedness leaves out many truly gifted children, especially those in populations that historically have been under-identified (e.g., children who are non-Caucasian, are from low-income homes, and are English language learners), as well as those who have difficulty demonstrating their giftedness because of factors ranging from test anxiety to a learning disability. To compensate for this, some school districts will accept the results of other identification measures, including tests that are touted as being more culturally sensitive or that ask children to demonstrate their giftedness in other ways, such as nonverbally. Some districts will even consider less-traditional identification measures such as portfolios, rating scales of gifted characteristics, and more.

But no matter the method, it is problematic to use achievement as a way of identifying gifted children. In fact, children do not have to be high performers to be gifted, and many gifted people do not demonstrate extraordinary talent in a specific domain. Giftedness is not about performance; that's merely the outward expression of what's going on in a gifted person's brain. "Although the path to outstanding performance may begin with demonstrated potential, giftedness must be developed and sustained by way of training and interventions in domain-specific skills, the acquisition of the psychological and social skills needed to pursue difficult new paths, and the individual's conscious decision to engage fully in a domain.

The goal of this developmental process is to transform potential talent during youth into outstanding performance and innovation in adulthood” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011). In short, although gifted people do not have to perform, if we want to provide our gifted children with opportunities to do well in the things they choose to do in life, then we need to support them—not just with domain-specific skills but with psychological and social skills as well.

The National Association for Gifted Children published its own definition of giftedness, which puts the focus on a deeper understanding of what it means to be gifted, in all its messy complexities (NAGC, 2019):

Students with gifts and talents perform—or have the capability to perform—at higher levels compared to others of the same age, experience, and environment in one or more domains. They require modification(s) to their educational experience(s) to learn and realize their potential. Students with gifts and talents:

- Come from all racial, ethnic, and cultural populations, as well as all economic strata.
- Require sufficient access to appropriate learning opportunities to realize their potential.
- Can have learning and processing disorders that require specialized intervention and accommodation.
- Need support and guidance to develop socially and emotionally as well as in their areas of talent.
- Require varied services based on their changing needs.

This definition gives a much clearer description of what giftedness is in terms of the whole child, not just how a gifted child should perform academically, but it, too, focuses on the educational

experiences of gifted children, not on what gifted children are like or what they need in other areas of their life.

It was the Columbus Group that set the most widely accepted definition of giftedness in the gifted community, back in 1991. This definition does not focus on education; instead, it has at its core the concept of asynchrony:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Note that this definition—and also the one set by the NAGC, despite its shortcomings—does not rely on academic achievement to define and identify giftedness; rather, it focuses on the gifted individual's experiences. In fact, both definitions enable one thing that all of the definitions of giftedness set out by federal, state, and local governments do not address: how to identify and support gifted children *before* they go to school. How can we identify gifted children who are younger than five years old, which is when they're making the largest cognitive developmental gains of their lives? To define giftedness in children at pre-elementary school ages, we need to discuss what giftedness means as a whole, not just what it means in terms of academics and school achievement.

Misconceptions about what giftedness means

With all the confusion surrounding the various definitions of giftedness, there is a whole host of myths and misconceptions about what being gifted means. Many people believe that gifted children are gifted in all areas of learning, that *gifted* means the same thing as *high achieving*, that gifted kids are only smart because their parents have pushed them too hard, or that gifted kids are easier to raise than most other children. These are all myths. There is a widespread lack of understanding about what giftedness truly is. Gifted people don't have to behave in certain ways or produce anything extraordinary in order to be gifted. Their brains are wired in ways that promote learning and that help them think deeply about issues, but that doesn't mean they always shine in intellectual and academic endeavors—or that they even want to.

Some gifted kids perform well at academic tasks, and some do not. Some have amazing math skills, and some excel at language arts. Some are great at anything they put their minds to, and some have such high levels of anxiety or perfectionism or problems with ADHD that they don't demonstrate their gifts well at all. Some have learning disabilities and are considered twice-exceptional (or 2e, meaning that they have an exceptionality at both ends of the spectrum), and some have disabilities that are never discovered because their extraordinary abilities enable them to achieve just well enough that no one suspects that anything could be wrong. The truth is that gifted children are not all smart in every subject (in fact, most of them are not), they are not all high-achieving, and they are not immune to learning disorders, attentional and behavioral disorders, and mental health challenges. Although they are intrinsically different from others in many important

ways, they are still children, with all of the potential for the same problems that affect the human race as a whole.

And they are not easier to parent. They can be, certainly, but gifted children often confound their parents by following exactly none of the developmental stages found in baby and parenting books and doing virtually nothing at the same age and rate that the children of friends and family members are doing. Many parents feel as though their experiences of raising their gifted children are so different from the experiences of others that they can't share stories of what's happening at home because people think they're either bragging, exaggerating, or outright lying. It can be a lonely experience to parent a gifted child, who is often constantly surging ahead toward new experiences and new learning opportunities. The idea that the parents are pushing these children is one that most parents of gifted kids would find laughable. On the contrary, usually the parents are the ones who are scrambling to keep up as they struggle to get the children the resources and materials they need to sate their unending curiosity.

Another misconception about giftedness is the oft-repeated statement that *all* children are gifted. All children have value and deserve love and attention, certainly, but not all children are gifted. To say that they are is an injustice both to gifted kids and to those who are not actually gifted. Gifted children experience the world differently, and as a result, they have different needs as they grow and develop. Treating all children as though they are the same is to ignore the fundamental differences of who they are, how they learn, how they feel about themselves and others, and what they need to grow into happy, well-adjusted adults.