Parenting Young, Gifted Children

By: Nancy Robinson

What are some indicators of giftedness in a very young child? What might parents or teachers observe that might lead them to wonder if a child is exceptional?

Giftedness really refers to advanced development in any set of abilities or skills. For intellectually and academically gifted children, the earliest indicators will probably be unexpected glimmers of advanced understanding: a baby sorting plastic blocks alternately by color and shape; a 14-month-old "feeding" her doll from an empty animal cracker box; a 3-year-old, having been scolded, writing: "DEER DAD, I HATE YU, LOVE MARY"; a 4-year old, impatient with his mother's explanations about where he "came from," exclaiming, "I am, so I was. Where was I?" These events have to happen spontaneously. What is unusual about each is not the event but how early it occurred. One event does not prove anything, but early patterns are worth attending to.

We do best at noticing advanced development when we are familiar with typical development and when the skill is just emerging. We have found that parents are quite good at spotting advanced language during toddlerhood. Most people have a pretty good sense of when children learn to read, when they can handle two-digit numbers, and when drawings should look more realistic. However, most parents don't have norms in their heads about, say, puzzles or pretend play. Some parents fail to notice precocity until they see other children at the park, day care, or preschool.

Parents shouldn't conclude that their child is not gifted because their advancement isn't even across domains. Asynchrony in development is very common among gifted children.

Is early reading an indicator of giftedness? Does mathematical ability show up in young children? How?

Many very bright children read before kindergarten – some as early as two or three. Many don't. Some crack the codes for reading and math with little help, and others need systematic instruction in the basic skills, though they catch on quickly. Some gifted children learn the letter names very early and plateau. Early reading is clearly a sign of being at least "medium bright," though, according to research by Nancy Jackson. Early readers tend to stay ahead, although eventually their advantage will lessen. By the time their classmates are reading well, the early readers' assets will be seen more in comprehension.

Children probably need strength in both verbal and visual-spatial reasoning to read very early. We followed for five years a group of verbally gifted children identified as unusually advanced talkers by 18 months. By 4, they were not readers, although they did know a lot about books. By first grade, they were reading well and loved to read. Often gifted children have so much to say that they become frustrated with the mechanics of writing and spelling and need help that they sometimes don't get.

No one has identified mathematically gifted children during toddlerhood, but we've found a large number of such children at ages 4 and 5. The parents were good at describing their children's skills and interests, which included not only number knowledge and a desire to play with numbers, but a passion for challenge – thinking of the "biggest number in the world," solving word problems, playing store, cooking, and measuring everything. I often ask parents of young gifted kids what amuses them in the car when there's nothing else to do. Verbally gifted kids like rhyming and playing the alphabet game with signs and license plates they see out the window; mathematically gifted kids like to solve math problems; almost everybody likes singing and playing Twenty Questions!

What behaviors are not really good indicators of giftedness in a young child? What other myths can you dispel?

We can be so impressed by children's early academic skills that we overestimate their talents. I've seen a number of children who in kindergarten and first grade were remarkable readers and calculators, but whose intellectual maturity was not as advanced. In later grades, they were better at the basic skills than at reading comprehension, or inventing ways to solve complex math problems. Academic skills are important assets, but we should not equate skills with general cognitive maturity.

Another myth is that children don't need special guidance until they get to third grade. This is wrong. Bright children can get turned off very early and lose momentum, shut off curiosity, and become depressed. One autistic girl was brought to my clinic because the teachers concluded she had nothing to learn in preschool – or probably ever! Children need appropriate schooling to stay turned on and progressing into the future and to enjoy a happy childhood filled with challenge and engagement now.

How stable are the abilities of young children?

We're not sure, however, in three studies at the University of Washington, children in groups recognized as precocious by parents stayed well ahead of their peers over a two to five-year period. They were more ahead afterward than they were beforehand.

A few reports, however, found that babies only with high scores on early infant tests did not stay ahead. When children are nominated by parents or teachers and their advancement is confirmed by objective measures, children are likely to continue to show advancement.

Do you recommend testing young children? How old must a child be for reliable test results? What kinds of testing are best?

Children can be tested at infancy, but the scores of individual children (as opposed to groups) are not very reliable in early years when they are still doing pretty much what they want, not what you want. There is no reason to test a child unless it will serve a purpose, and because test patterns can change over time, I strongly advise parents to wait as long as possible. The usual reasons for testing below age 7 are to qualify for a program (if you're lucky to have one available); to investigate why a child is bored in school and how the curriculum might be modified; or to figure out why a child is having trouble with a skill. After children have been in school for a while, their scores become a little more stable. Life experiences make a big difference.

Find a psychologist who is experienced and patient with gifted children. Low expectations can lead to thinking that a child who pauses before answering doesn't know the answer. You may need to seek someone in private practice, since school psychologists spend much more time with less capable children. They may be unaware of issues gifted children face.

Should gifted children participate in organized programs?

Young gifted children are often tiring for parents. Parents look for interesting out-of-home activities for their own respite and for their children to gain new ideas and improve fine and gross motor skills and social relationships. Parents have choices. If they are working full time, they will look for high quality care in a family or center. At-home care can be combined with day care, preschool, an informal playgroup, and/or introductory skill-based lessons in swimming, music, or interpretive dance. Most young children shouldn't be in full day care plus other lessons. Some are very sensitive to too much stimulation and can take one activity a day for a few hours, although others thrive on being on the go.

To aid the transition to school, group experience is important, and most young children enjoy them. A young, gifted child may be happier in dramatic play and circle time with older children than riding tricycles and napping with their age group. A basic need of gifted children is to find friends at their mental level for some activities. By the time they reach the oldest preschool group, a new setting may be needed.

What about early school entry or acceleration for young gifted children?

Good news: if young children are carefully selected – they fall within several months of the school cut-off, are a bit more mature than average for the class they are entering, are doing OK in fine and gross motor skills, and have the emotional maturity to handle it – early entrance works very well. Such early entrants often thrive academically. This step is not right for every child – particularly shy, clingy or easily stressed children. Evidence suggests being more careful with boys than girls, probably a social maturity matter.

Early entrance is the first of many accelerative options that will be open during a child's school career. Choices will include adapted curricula, advancement in one or more subjects, grade-skipping, special advanced programs, summer classes, AP classes, and early entrance to college. This is not an all-or-none affair. When the decision about early entrance is borderline, a conservative stance is best with many options available later on.

What can parents do at home to nurture children's early abilities?

When children are doing well, the parents are already doing a lot of things right! Gifted children really are labor-intensive. They usually want to be read to by the hour. They are eager for projects and home experiments; they are full of questions; they want to learn, learn, learn! Some show early talents in sports or art or music and deserve gentle introductions to those activities (not high-powered lessons at this age – those can come later). Children learn a lot from visits not just to formal places like aquariums, zoos, and museums, but also to ethnic groceries, bakeries, bookstores, small airports, repair shops, appliance stores, and farms. Outings are great opportunities for conversations and new vocabulary. Once home, children can draw pictures and report to dad or mom at the dinner table. Cooking, gardening, pet care – anything can be a learning experience. Some young children love workbooks, and there's nothing wrong with these in small doses. Activity books and guides to children's literature, and other resources can help parents with ideas. Don't invest in expensive puzzles or games that will hold children's interests only a short time; invest in materials such as building sets or a puppet stage that can be used in many ways as your child matures.

Anything else?

All children need firm rules, routines and expectations, adapted to their maturity levels. It's a big mistake to give in too often to young children's arguments just because they are so articulate!

Gifted children are difficult to parent because they operate at many maturity levels simultaneously. They are often farther ahead in some areas than others, and they may seem grown up one moment and throw a tantrum at another. Parents must accept unpredictability and avoid unrealistic expectations based on their children's highest level of maturity. Some children also show extreme sensitivities, and may be disturbed by world events or injustices that other children don't have a clue about. This is part of giftedness.

Gifted children are also enormous fun! They can tell us what they think and feel, they are funny, and they are up to something new every day. Take time to watch and enjoy them, to play silly games, to be together. Don't let their gifts become stressful burdens. This is a very precious time that won't come around again.

Books for Parents of Very Young Gifted Children

Klein, P.S., & Tannenbaum, A. (Eds.). (l992). *To be young and gifted*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex. This book is intended for researchers, but is one of very few books focusing on the very young, gifted child.

Robinson, N.M., & Weimer, L.J. (l99l). *Selection of candidates for early admission to kindergarten and first grade*. In W.T. Southern & E.D. Jones (Eds.), The academic acceleration of gifted children (pp. 29-50). New York: Teachers College Press. Considers the many issues parents and professionals need to take into account in making this important decision.

Roedell, W.C. (l989). *Early development of gifted children*. In J.L. VanTassel-Baska & P. Olszewski-Kubilius (Eds.), Patterns of influence on gifted learners: The home, the self, and the school (pp. l3-28). New York: Teachers College Press.

Saunders, J., with P. Espeland (l99l). *Bringing out the Best* (Rev.) Minneapolis: Free Spirit. Probably the single best resource for parents of young, gifted children, including parenting issues, activities, toys, and other resources. Written engagingly. Beware: The chapter on affecting brain development goes too far.

Smutney, J. F. (Ed.) (1998). *The young gifted child: Potential and promise, an anthology*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton. A mixed-bag of short articles about young gifted children.

Smutney, J.F., Veenker, K., & Veenker, S. (l989). *Your gifted child: How to recognize and develop the special talents in your child from birth to age seven*. New York: Ballantine. Full of information on how to encourage and identify advanced development.

Some popular books by authors such as Doman, White, Engleman, and Beck assert that following their program of activities will make a child more intelligent. Most have ideas for stimulating activities, but the intensive programs (particularly Doman's) are not in the best interests of children or parents. No scientific evidence exists for IQ-raising in young children already living in supportive families.

Resources from the National Research Center for the Gifted and Talented

This federally-funded research center publishes numerous helpful materials. Parents are advised to order the full-length papers even though shorter versions are available.
(www.ucc.uconn.edu/~wwwgt)

Abelman, R. *Some children under some conditions: TV and the high-potential child*.

Alvino J. *Considerations and strategies for parenting the gifted child.*

Jackson, N. E., & Roller, C. M. *Reading with young children*.

Robinson, N. M. *Parenting the young gifted child*.

Waxman, B., Robinson, N. M., & Mukhopadhyay, S. *Parents nurturing math-talented young children*.

Organization

National Association for Gifted Children, ll55 l5th Street NW, Suite l002, Washington, D.C. 2005 (202-785-4268; www.nagc.org). NAGC's magazine, *Parenting for High Potential*, is available only to members. NAGC also publishes position papers on issues about which parents have questions.

Additional recommended resources, including web sites and book guides, can be found at CTD's web site, www.ctd.northwestern.edu.

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