

Gifted Development Center a service of *The Institute for the Study of Advanced Development*

What is Giftedness?

Every gift contains a danger. Whatever gift we have we are compelled to express. And if the expression of that gift is blocked, distorted, or merely allowed to languish, then the gift turns against us, and we suffer. (Johnson, 1993, p. 15)

What is giftedness all about? It certainly is a term that makes people uncomfortable. I remember going to a back-to-school night in 1976 and offering to find a mentor for any child who wanted to learn something he or she wasn't learning in school. There was no cost for the mentor. All the parents had to do was join the Boulder Association for the Gifted for \$5 per year. I had no takers. One father stopped me afterwards and said something to the effect that his daughter was reading several years above grade level, and had a chemistry lab in the basement, etc., but he was "sure" his daughter wasn't gifted!

Since those days, I have endeavored to discover what *gifted* means to different people. Most of my work has been with parents, and I began to notice that mothers usually called the Gifted Development Center to inquire about testing, while fathers often viewed the assessment with skepticism. When I spoke to parent groups, mothers would nod and smile and fathers would sit with crossed arms and question marks on their faces. One father came up to me after a presentation and told me about his son who had won all kinds of awards as a scholar at Stanford University, but he, too, was certain his son wasn't gifted. I asked him, "What would he have to do to be gifted in your eyes?" The father retorted, "Well, he's no Einstein."

Then I came across a study in which the researcher thought mothers labeled one child in the family as gifted for their own "narcissistic needs." An incidental finding of this study was that when the school had labeled the child, *gifted*, the mothers believed the label and the fathers denied it, which led to marital conflict (Cornell, 1984). That was when the light bulb went on for me. I realized that mothers and fathers were defining giftedness differently. The more I thought about it, the clearer it seemed that the male writers in the field tended to view giftedness very much like the fathers I had run across and most female writers seemed to share the perspective of the mothers (Silverman, 1986; Silverman & Miller, 2009).

Men equate giftedness with achievement. After we tested his son, one Dad said to us, "He's only five. What could he have *done* in five years to be gifted?" Women, on the other hand, perceive giftedness as **developmental advancement**. If a Mom sees that her daughter is asking names of objects at 11 months, and memorizing books at 17 months, and asking complex questions before she's two years old, she gets very anxious. "How will she *fit in* with the other children?" "What will the teacher do with her if she's already reading in kindergarten?" "Should I hide the books? I don't want them to think I'm another 'pushy parent'."

Developing faster than other children makes a child vulnerable, and mothers are keenly aware of this vulnerability. When they can ignore it no longer, when the fear of “What will happen to my child?” rises in their throats, they gulp twice and call a specialist for guidance on their child’s unique developmental progress [with one part of them screaming in their heads, “Do you realize how foolish you’re going to look if you’re wrong and this is all in your head?”]. Despite the myth that “All parents think their children are gifted,” nine out of ten of the parents who break down and make that phone call are right.

The achievement view of giftedness has been with us from the very beginning, with Sir Francis Galton’s (1869) study of eminent men. Today, educators are still looking for children who have the potential to be *eminent men*. The eminent child in school is the winner of the competition for grades and awards. All the emphasis is placed on products, performance, portfolios—the external trappings. And the child is expected to keep up the hard work throughout life, performing, producing, achieving. So *gifted* has become the label bestowed by schools on “task committed,” hard working students who get good grades. Clearly, these are the students with the greatest potential for achievement in our competitive society. Is that what giftedness is all about?

When we equate giftedness with achievement in school, or with the potential for noteworthy achievement in adult life, we create an inequitable criterion for children of color, children who are economically disadvantaged, and females. Throughout history, those who attain eminence have been predominantly white, middle or upper class males (Hollingworth, 1926; Silverman & Miller, 2009). By way of contrast, giftedness is color-blind, is found in equal proportions in males and females (Silverman & Miller, 2009), and is distributed across all socio-economic levels (Dickinson, 1970). While the percentage of gifted students among the upper classes may be higher, the vast majority of gifted children come from the lower classes (Zigler & Farber, 1985). Throughout the world, there are more poor gifted children than rich ones.

Far from being “elitist,” public school programs for gifted children allow children who are economically disadvantaged the only opportunities they might have to develop their talents. Those who want to abolish classes for the gifted are penalizing the gifted poor, because the rich can afford private education. And many middle class families are choosing to homeschool their children rather than force them to relearn day after day after day what they already know.

So what is giftedness? The Moms are right. It is developmental advancement that can be observed in early childhood. But the child doesn't advance equally in all areas. As she asks what happens after you die and “How do we know we aren't part of someone else's dream?” she still can't tie her shoes! An eleven-year-old highly gifted boy got off the plane with his calculus book in one hand and his well-worn Curious George in the other. The higher the child's IQ, the more difficulty he or she has finding playmates or conforming to the lock-step school curriculum. The greater the discrepancy between a child's strengths and weaknesses, the harder it is for him or her to fit in anywhere.

Rita Dickinson (1970), the founder of gifted education in Colorado, reported that a large percentage of the gifted children she tested in the Denver Public Schools were referred for behavior problems. She discovered that at least half of their parents had no idea their children were gifted, and when the parents didn't recognize it, the school didn't either.

Gifted children most likely to be overlooked were from low socio-economic backgrounds or culturally diverse or both.

Boys are far more likely to be brought for testing than girls. At the Gifted Development Center, 60% of the 6,000+ children tested over the last 35 years are male and 40% are female. Boys are more likely than girls to act out when they are insufficiently challenged at school. Therefore, they are more likely to get their parents' attention and concern. It is essential for gifted girls to be identified early, before they go into hiding.

And Moms, a word about you. I would like a dollar for every mother who has sat in my office and said, "He gets it from his *father*." Our society has such an achievement orientation toward giftedness that most women can't relate the concept to themselves at all. "I'm *only* a mother. I haven't *done* anything gifted." For decades, I've been promising that my "next book" would be about unrecognized giftedness in women: "***I'm Not Gifted, I'm Just Busy!***" Maybe this year...

Gifted children and adults see the world differently because of the complexity of their thought processes and their emotional intensity. People often say to them, "Why do you make everything so complicated?" "Why do you take everything so seriously?" "Why is everything so important to you?" The gifted are "too" everything: too sensitive, too intense, too driven, too honest, too idealistic, too moral, too perfectionistic, too much for other people! Even if they try their entire lives to fit in, they still feel like misfits. The damage we do to gifted children and adults by ignoring this phenomenon is far greater than the damage we do by labeling it. Without the label for their differences, the gifted come up with their own label: "I must be *crazy*. No one else is upset by this injustice but me."

It's time we took giftedness out of the closet and separated it entirely from the concept of achievement. It's time we recognized it, valued it and nurtured it in our schools and in our families.

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