

Appropriate Expectations for the Gifted Child

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Appropriate Expectations for the Gifted Child

by Arlene R. DeVries

Parents and educators working cooperatively can make a significant difference in the emotional and intellectual growth of the gifted child. However, for these children to fully benefit from this combined effort, parents and schools must recognize and work together toward similar goals. Their expectations of each other need to correspond to give the child appropriate guidance, thus maximizing the chances for fulfilling potential. The following aspects are essential to the healthy educational and personal development of the gifted child.

Learning at an appropriate level and pace

At times, expectations for bright students may be set unreasonably high. Children who have proven themselves through good grades often find that they have set precedents for themselves which others expect them to uphold or surpass. More often, though, school is not sufficiently challenging to these children. If the child scores consistently high on standardized tests, is making careless mistakes on routine homework assignments, or is losing interest in school, which may indicate boredom, then differentiating curriculum through compacting or acceleration might be in order. It is important to assess the child's ability, perhaps through end-of-the-year objective-based tests or out-of-grade-level testing, to determine appropriate academic placement. Perceptive parents of bright students, with the aid of test scores or portfolio documentation, can assist teachers in determining if the school curriculum is matching the child's needs. Often, parent perceptions are as accurate as those of the teacher, who must deal with an entire classroom and may be unaware that a single student is not being properly challenged. To throw a non-swimmer into the deep end of the pool is inhumane. To demand that an Olympic swimmer remain in the shallow end until the rest of the class learns to swim is a ludicrous restraint.

Children need activities both at home and at school which allow them to exercise their minds using creative thinking and problem solving skills. Gifted children, in particular, need to be allowed to explore areas of passion to them. These children will be unconsciously building ideas and talents which will help to determine their future careers. It is absurd to assume that schools can teach the specifics which individual children will need to know for their different career paths and which they will attain on their own if they are able to freely explore their personal interests. Problem solvers and creative and critical thinkers are in great demand in the adult world of economic, environmental, social and health related issues. Learning at an appropriate level and pace is a must for these bright students.

Access to a wide variety of reading material

What a legacy we give to our children when we pass on to them a love of reading! Parents who fill their homes and teachers who fill their classrooms with books, magazines and software on a variety of topics and of varied levels of difficulty are providing an excellent resource for children. Books can serve as mentors and career explorations for gifted students as they read biographies of famous persons and the struggles involved in their life contributions. Students' vocational and avocational choices are limited if they do not have access to a wide variety of reading material. In addition, vivid creative imaginations can be developed through books. They can become a fantasy world of escape or a stress management tool for bright, intense youngsters. Those who have excellent communication skills have developed them largely by reading literature written by successful authors.

Children are never too old to have someone read aloud to them. Sharing aloud good books, particularly award-winning books which have proven themselves worthy of being read, is a wonderful way to establish emotional bonds in a family. Adults are also incredibly influential role models if they read and explore new ideas in front of their children and encourage them to do the same. Bright children need access to libraries beyond that of their local schools—public libraries, perhaps where they can get their own library cards, as well as visits to historical, medical, religious, art, scientific, college, or university libraries.

Exposure to the creative arts

Throughout the ages, societies' cultures have been passed from one generation to another through the arts. Music, drama, visual arts, creative writing and dance can fill the need for creative expression, while aiding in stress management for high achieving, high energy level children. More importantly, there is no ceiling on the individual talent that can be expressed through the arts. In contrast, there is a finiteness to the ability displayed in correctly completing a math worksheet. The depth of emotion painted on the countenance of a portrait has no limits, nor does the musicality or technical brilliance performed in an instrumental solo with a band or an orchestra. Students who take top honors in the arts are applauded and held in high esteem, even in situations in which their peers do not show universal respect for academic excellence. Opportunities in the arts will carry over to lifetime skills, either as active participants or appreciative audiences, as bright young people pursue highly technical and emotionally demanding careers.

Interactions with ability level peers

A peer for a gifted child might be an intellectual peer, an age-level peer, a social or emotional peer, or a physical peer. Because of their wide ranges of abilities and interests, true peers might be found in a number of persons in a variety of age groups. Each individual has a basic need to belong or to be able to relate to someone who is like him- or herself. When children are involved intellectually, emotionally, or artistically with others who think and act as they do, this need is generally met. Self-esteem increases when they are comfortable being their "real selves" with others who have similar interests, inquiring minds, high energy levels and a drive to learn. Students placed in classes with those of lesser ability develop feelings of isolation, frustration and withdrawal. The farther the children are from the mean of the bell-shaped curve, the more of themselves they must stifle or give up to fit in with the rest of the population. These children need to find places at school and in the community where they can interact with others of like ability, thus increasing their chances of finding "soul-mates."

A nurturing environment

In order to develop to their full potentials, the special talents of gifted children must be valued and encouraged both at home and at school. Often, traits that can be annoying to parents and teachers—bossiness, stubbornness, inappropriate humor, perfectionism, continual worry, excessive questioning, resistance to interruptions—can be re-framed to become the very characteristics which make them successful as adults—leadership, perseverance, task commitment, curiosity, empathy, high performance standards and the ability to see humor in life. It is important to guide children in channeling these abilities into productive behaviors rather than thwarting development.

When teachers, parents, siblings and peers acknowledge the high potential in gifted students, these children tend to internalize unrealistic standards of perfection for themselves. Anything short of perfect is simply not good enough. In extreme cases, stress and depression result when they are unable to reach and maintain the unreasonable expectations which they have set. Adults in these students' lives need to practice patience with perfectionists, helping them to discern when accuracy is extremely important and when it is unnecessary. They also need to remember to create an environment in which it is all right to make mistakes and in which trial and error is recognized as an essential part of learning and creativity. Bright students can use their senses of humor to move on from their mistakes. Educators and parents must express unconditional acceptance of these children and create a supportive environment in which mistakes are not criticized, but accepted as entirely human.

Gifted children can reach outstanding heights in fulfilling their potentials when parents and educators work together to help them in a few critical areas. It is imperative that we allow these children to explore their creative and inquisitive natures, and yet that we also gently guide them into appropriate educational classes,

encourage them toward challenging and stimulating reading material, expose them to the creative arts, help them to find peers with whom they can share intellectual, emotional, or artistic endeavors, and provide a nurturing environment in which they can excel. It is only through our acceptance and our guidance that these children can fully realize their potentials, blossoming into bright, healthy adults.