CHAPTER 10
Parenting Gifted Children

This section directly addresses you, the parent, because when you and your child's teachers work together, the learning environment for your gifted student becomes more positive and productive. Educating gifted students is a responsibility that parents and teachers must share. Everyone needs to collaborate to make sure that appropriate educational opportunities are in place at school as well as at home. It is unrealistic for you to expect the school to do the entire job, and it's impossible for teachers to provide optimum results without full cooperation from parents.

This chapter considers issues related to parenting gifted children and offers tips on how to advocate for your child in school. Whole books have been written about these topics, and we don't pretend to cover everything or to go into great detail. The References and Resources for this chapter on page 10 can point you toward many possibilities for learning much more.

As you read this, please don't waste any time or energy feeling guilty about what you should have done differently in the past. If you had known what to do, you would have done it. Look forward, not back. All caring parents want the best for their children, and that includes you!

Parenting Issues

Parenting Style

Parenting is quite possibly the most difficult job *ever created*. When the child is an exceptionally capable learner, it can be even more challenging. Many of these kids seem to have been born ready for work in a courtroom. They love to argue and to bamboozle adults with their highly effective logic and impassioned opinions. They are tireless—often resurfacing after an apparent defeat, fresh for new battle with their frazzled mom or dad. Rest assured that these children need parenting, even though they sound as though they are ready to parent themselves.

The parenting style that seems most effective with gifted kids is nonauthoritarian, while still setting and enforcing reasonable limits. "Because I said so!" almost never works with gifted kids. They respond best to adults who are fair, reasonable, respectful, and sensitive to the special needs that arise when a child's mental age exceeds his or her chronological age by several years.

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Power Struggles

As a parent, do your best to avoid power struggles with your child. It may appear that you are winning, but victory is almost always temporary. Instead, consider your child's request very carefully before giving any response. Then, when you do share your decision, it will be clear that you have thought it through and feel comfortable with it. You will find it easier to resist your child's efforts to wear you down or convince you to change your mind.

A related issue is the importance of consistency. If two people are sharing parenting responsibilities, it is essential that they get their act together, out of earshot of the child, before delivering their decisions regarding rights, privileges, and consequences. Gifted kids can gain a lot of power by playing their parents against each other.

Listening

It's hard to really listen to a child who seems to talk endlessly, as some gifted kids do. One parent met this challenge by scheduling personal "sharing time" with her children every weeknight. Her husband also participated, and each week they would "switch" kids. The children were asked to keep notes about things they wanted to discuss with their parents. Each child received a parent's undivided attention for the same amount of time at the same hour each day. Appointment times could not be changed unless both parties agreed.

Careful listening to your kids includes these behaviors:

- Focus exclusively on your child and respond only to him. There should be nothing in your hands (including a cell phone) and nothing in your line of sight besides your child.
- Use body language that shows you are interested in what your child is saying. Lean forward. Maintain eye contact.
- From time to time, nod your head and say, "Okay. I understand."
- Ask for clarification when you need it.
- Do not give advice right away. Instead, ask, "So what can you do about this?"
- Occasionally, mirror what your child has just said. *Examples:* "He told the teacher you copied his homework." "She said she doesn't like you anymore." "He made you feel angry, and you wanted to get back at him."
- Every so often, comment on your child's feelings. *Examples:* "You must have been really frustrated." "That must have been pretty frightening."
- Never deny your child's feelings. If she says, "I am really scared!" Don't respond, "Oh, there's nothing to be scared about." Feelings aren't right or wrong, good or bad. Feelings just are. Acknowledge your child's right to have her feelings.

When your child knows that he can have your full attention and that you are really listening, his need to talk to you incessantly will diminish.

Comparing

Avoid comparing your child to yourself when you were young, to other kids your family knows, or to your child's siblings, if she has any. You may have one child who has been identified as gifted, while her sibling has not. However, research done by Dr. Linda Silverman, a leader in the field of gifted education, indicates that birth-related siblings are usually quite close to each other in intelligence. Apparent discrepancies are more often the result of sibling dynamics than innate smarts.

Help your child understand that individual differences exist and should be respected. Notice and praise her or his personal growth and improvement in any area of endeavor. Resist the temptation to label your child by his or her strengths, such as, "Laura's a math wiz" or "Gabriel's the writer in the family," as this may be perceived as a narrow expectation. Perhaps Gabriel wants to write now, but when he's 25, he may be interested in something else entirely.

All children need to feel secure in the knowledge that their parents love them unconditionally for who they are, not just for their achievements in intellectual or other areas. The key is to discover the areas in which your child can excel and support his corresponding talents. Learn about

multiple intelligences and learning modalities, and apply what you learn to helping your child reach his unique potential.

A few more tips to keep in mind:

- When your child brings home report cards, don't count the A's. Don't give monetary rewards for top grades. Don't display only perfect report cards (or perfect papers) on the refrigerator or family bulletin board. Don't display "My Child Made the Honor Roll" bumper stickers on your car. Any and all of these actions send the message that you love your child best when she is a perfect student, and that the sibling who brings home the highest grades is more lovable than the others.
- If you have multiple children, avoid asking a more capable sibling to help a less capable one with his schoolwork. If one of your children is struggling, talk with the teacher or get tutoring help. You're not your child's teacher, and neither are his siblings.
- Monitor your conversations with your partner, other family members, and friends, including your telephone talk. When you discuss your child's abilities and achievements, avoid making it sound as if you are proudest of how smart she is. Children need ongoing reassurance that they are valued for *who* they are, not what they can do. They need to know that they won't lose your approval if they earn less-than-perfect grades.
- Practice noticing and praising hard work rather than easy success or perfect outcomes. Learn to greet grades that are not perfect with feedback about how wonderful it is that your child has received this lower grade, so he does not have to continue to worry about what will happen when this situation first arises. Reassure him that it is better and *smarter* to complete challenging work and earn a B, than to receive an A without learning any new material at all.

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Perfectionism

Many gifted children are perfectionists. This can seriously interfere with their motivation and productivity in school. Too much praise for products that took little effort often leads kids to conclude the goal is to achieve great results without trying very hard. Too much verbal attention paid to their accomplishments gets kids hooked on adult attention and approval. This condition becomes exacerbated when kids feel intense pressure to get into the "right college" or choose the "right career." Giftedness is often accompanied by multiple talents. Career choices should be kept open as long as possible so these kids can explore their many interests.

16 Ways to Help Your Child Avoid the Perfectionism Trap

1. **Reinforce the fact that your child is separate from her accomplishments.** We are who we are, not what we do or don't do. Coach her to avoid statements like, "I am so stupid!" Help your child choose statements like, "That was a careless mistake. Next time I try this, I'll make sure I have all the information I need before I start working."
2. **Avoid the phrase, "Always do your best."** Replace it with, "Be sure to always put forth your best effort." This shifts the emphasis from the product to the learning process.
3. **Help your child learn to set realistic, short-term goals** and take satisfaction from accomplishing something he planned for today.

4. **Ease your child into competitive situations** by starting out in those where she is not competing against other kids. Gymnastics, self-defense classes, and other nonteam sports are sometimes easier for perfectionistic gifted kids to handle, since they are totally in charge of their results.
5. **Examine your own life and behaviors for signs of perfectionism.** Model how to set priorities and let go of less important tasks.
6. **Laugh at your mistakes.** Talk about the value of learning from one's mistakes. Avoid self-criticizing statements that indicate there's something wrong with a person who makes mistakes. Forgive yourself out loud to model a way to handle this type of frustration. Find opportunities to share admiring comments when you notice someone working hard at any task.
7. **Help your child find and read stories and biographies of persevering people** who achieved success only after many frustrations and failures.
8. **Let your child do things for himself** rather than jumping in to model the "right way."
9. **Don't help your child with her homework if your goal is to make it perfect.** You are not your child's schoolteacher, and when you act like one, you may be sending a message that you expect your child to be perfect all the time.
10. **Teach your child to give constructive criticism and to receive it gracefully.**
11. **Don't worry if your child does not read aloud fluently.** It is common for gifted children's thoughts and eyes to race ahead of their mouths while reading. The most valid test of a child's reading ability is comprehension.
12. **Replace praise with encouragement when you observe your child working hard at a difficult task.** Comment positively on his refusal to give up in favor of an easier task.
13. **Encourage risk-taking behavior in learning new games and skills.** Model ways in which you take calculated risks in your own life.
14. **Use these words with caution: *gifted, special, best, brightest,* and *bored.*** When your child hears them, she may repeat them at school in a context that you don't intend or that would reflect negatively on both of you.
15. **Ask your child to describe his *own* pride in his accomplishments** instead of saying, "I am so proud of you!" You want him to please himself, not worry about pleasing you. Constant praise can lead kids to do what they think we want them to do.
16. **Teach your child how to ask for help, without embarrassment, when she needs it.**

Grades

When training teachers to provide more challenging learning experiences for gifted kids, we often hear that they worry about how parents will react if their gifted children get lower-than-perfect grades, even when the work is more challenging. Teachers know that some parents share the misperception that high grades mean all is well in school and anything less means something is amiss. We suggest that teachers tell parents (and students), "Intelligence does not equal effortlessness."

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As a parent, you *want* your child's teacher to provide a challenging environment and high expectations. You *want* your child to learn not to fear hard work. It is extremely rare for college applications to ask for transcripts from middle schools, and they never ask for elementary grades. Therefore, grades K–8 are the best, safest times for your child to learn to welcome hard work rather than avoid it—even if it means he does not earn straight A's.

You certainly don't want your child to glide from kindergarten through high school, get high grades with little or no effort, and then go off to a highly competitive college with no clue as to how to study effectively and work hard to learn. This is a recipe for disaster. Even if your son or daughter graduates in the top 5 percent of his or her high school class, it's likely that all of the *other* students in his or her freshman college class did as well. Most gifted kids are accustomed to getting all A's in school. College doesn't work that way. Many students will get low grades for the first time in their lives. When that happens, they can become seriously discouraged or even depressed.

It's much better if your child understands that real learning means "progress from wherever one enters the learning process." So instead of marching into school at the first sign of a lower grade, toting all of your child's perfect report cards and asking the teacher how she or he can be the one to ruin your child's perfect record, send the teacher flowers and count your blessings. Be ready to celebrate the first less-than-perfect grade your child receives when working on *truly* challenging material to demonstrate that her fears about lower grades were groundless.

Down Time

Make sure that your child has plenty of down time. Resist his insistence (or yours) on getting involved in too many activities or lessons. Suggest that your child focus each year on a few areas he wants to excel in, and maybe even one in which your child feels inadequate and would like to improve. When he has to struggle in some area in which other youngsters are easily better, he may become more empathetic for classmates whose weakness is in academics. Encourage daydreaming, socializing, and goofing off. Emphasize the importance of a balanced life.

Social Skills

Do whatever you can to help your child find suitable friends. Don't worry if the friends she chooses are older or younger than she. Children who learn at a level that exceeds their chronological age by two or three years may not be comfortable with kids their own age. Think of your friends. Now think of how many are within one year of your own age, and you'll understand the point more clearly. Some activities your child will want to share with her age peers, and others where age will be irrelevant and interest and maturation are much more important.

Help your child develop physical and social interaction skills that may not be in line with his precocious abilities in other learning areas. Coach him in areas of physical education or sports where your child may feel inferior. This gives your child insight into how it feels to work hard to learn something difficult. Teach him how to be tolerant of individual differences in much the same way he would like others to be tolerant of his exceptional learning abilities.

If your child is having trouble finding friends who understand and appreciate her just the way she is, and with whom she can be her very smart self without worries about having to hide her intelligence, look to groups and opportunities outside of school. For example, if art is her passion, sign her up for art classes at a local museum.

If you can afford it, arrange for your child to attend Saturday classes or summer camps for gifted kids. Those experiences provide priceless validation that "I'm okay just the way I am." They also give children the chance to form lasting friendships with like-minded kids. Your child will love the chance to be with kids who understand and appreciate him, and you'll be relieved to observe that he does have social skills after all. With today's technology, it's easier than ever to stay in touch with long-distance friends. Contact your state department of education and the education departments of local colleges and universities to find out what opportunities they offer, or Google "summer programs for gifted youth."

Apply for participation in an academic talent search for your gifted children when they are in grades 6 and 7. Students who have high scores on their standardized tests get to take the SAT for the first time way before it counts for college entrance. Don't tutor your child to prepare for the test; however, do practice test-taking strategies and read about test-taking tips for the SAT. For those students who score in the top 5 percent of

all kids taking the test, extended learning opportunities may be available that will allow your child to interact with other gifted kids in stimulating learning environments.

Gifted Girls

Many of today's gifted girls still believe they have to choose between being smart and being popular. Gifted girls need ongoing interaction with other gifted girls in order to maintain a positive attitude toward high achievement and the self-confidence needed to pursue career goals. Some studies show significant benefits for girls who attend same-sex schools in high school and college.

Gifted girls also benefit from affirmation of assertive behaviors and from interaction with positive female role models. If their mothers work outside the home, gifted girls need consistent feedback that Mom enjoys being in the working world. They also need evidence that Mom doesn't need to be perfect in every aspect of her life. Shortcuts in housework and cooking are effective ways to model your attempts to keep life well balanced and that you do not have to be perfect in everything you try to do.

Encourage gifted girls to take as many math and science courses as possible. The U.S. Department of Labor predicts that anyone who finishes high school without four years of high school math and science has effectively closed the door to a significant percentage of available careers. If you didn't do well in math or science, don't let it affect how your daughter views those subjects. That fact really has no bearing on her potential.

Gifted Boys

Gifted boys have their own unique concerns. Some worry about being labeled "nerds" and teased about their giftedness. They may feel strong peer pressure to fit in and conform. Especially if they have a very sensitive and artistic nature, they may encounter negative attitudes and bullying because they are perceived as being feminine. They may find themselves in direct conflict with cultural stereotypes of how boys are supposed to be, namely strong, athletic, and interested in competitive activities. Finding like-minded friends may be very difficult for them.

Like gifted girls, boys who experience these pressures may choose to hide their interests and abilities. Rather than do what is best for themselves, they may try to meet others' expectations. Here are ways to support your gifted boy:

- Encourage him to feel and express his emotions.
- Invite him to share his hopes, dreams, fears, and insecurities with you. Listen and empathize.
- Talk about how gender stereotyping and expectations limit both boys and girls.
- Encourage him to follow his own interests and make time to learn about things he wants to know.
- Help him look for and identify interest-based groups he might want to join. He's likely to find new friends there who can appreciate him and accept him as he is.

Peer Pressure

Peer pressure against students who want to achieve in school can be seen in most middle and high schools, regardless of socioeconomic conditions. Many gifted kids will ask themselves, "Can I still be popular with my peers if I work hard in school and get high grades?" Gifted boys who are also talented in sports can use their athletic abilities to gain peer acceptance. Girls don't seem to have a similar advantage.

Sylvia Rimm has addressed this issue with refreshing originality. She suggests that you encourage your children to be true to their abilities, and to value their differences, even if they lose some friends along the way. She tells gifted kids to remember that the benefits of conformity end on the night of high school graduation.

Role-play with your kids about things they might say to deflect peer ridicule about their work in school. Above all, make sure your children know the difference between real friends and people whose friendship is not worth seeking.

Role Models

All children need strong, positive role models. Gifted children in particular need proof that being smart, capable, and "different" can lead to interesting options later in life. Look around your family, neighborhood, and community for adults you can point to as good role models. If your child seems interested in occupations that challenge gender stereotypes, make a special effort to locate positive role models in those careers.

The Future

Many gifted kids suffer from what author and educator Jim Delisle calls "an embarrassment of riches." They have so many strengths that the prospect of choosing just one career is depressing. They can take heart in knowing that most workers in this century will change careers numerous times before they retire, so even if one career path is not exceptionally satisfying, they can always explore another.

Getting Help If You Need It

If your child appears to be depressed or in need of professional help for identity and validation issues, please arrange for it to happen. It is important that you do not assume that all counselors and psychologists know about the special challenges gifted children face. Your state gifted education department may be able to refer you to a counselor with some training in the special psychological issues experienced by gifted kids and their families. Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) exists for this exact purpose. SENG has a listing of psychologists and counselors around the country who can help parents connect with mental health professionals trained in the special needs of gifted children and their parents.

Special Cases

Some gifted children are twice-exceptional. They are gifted, but they also have some type of learning disability, attention deficit disorder, or physical or emotional challenge, which may qualify them for special education services.

Advocating for Your Child at School

As a parent, you know your child better than anyone. If you think your child has exceptional abilities, you are probably right. But what if your child's teacher or school has not yet recognized what is obvious to you?

Deciding how to approach your child's teachers to discuss the possibility that your child may need a differentiated learning experience may be one of the most daunting challenges you will ever face. You may even be reluctant to tell anyone that you believe your child is gifted. Parents who do are often perceived as bragging or labeled "pushy parents." You may also be concerned that going to the teacher may have a negative effect on your child's school experience.

It helps to know something about the realities of teaching in today's classrooms. Many teachers are not adequately prepared to meet the diverse learning needs of students whose learning abilities span several years. A fifth-grade teacher may have some kids who can barely read at all and others who read and comprehend at an eighth-grade level or higher. There has been intense political pressure for schools to concentrate their efforts on teaching kids who cannot meet grade-level standards. Most teachers have never been required to take coursework in gifted education. It is no wonder that some teachers assume that kids who do great work and get high grades do not need any special attention.

It is also very important to keep in mind that teachers enter this profession because they like kids, are caregivers, and sincerely want to help the children in their classrooms. We have never met a teacher who woke up in the morning and said, "Today I am going to make Robert's life miserable." If that is the outcome, it is unintentional!

Unfortunately, those they see struggling the most to learn are those who are at the opposite end of the intellectual spectrum. They may not realize that the gifted students are also struggling to learn—to learn something *new* because they may have already mastered much of the grade-level curriculum. If the teacher has not had any university coursework in gifted education, has not

parented a gifted child, or did not participate in a gifted program herself, then it is very likely that she may not understand the social, emotional, and academic needs of your child. Be kind and patient, but do your best to help her understand that your child learns and feels differently than others, and therefore, may need some interventions and instructional modifications.

Educating gifted kids is a team effort. As the parent of a gifted child, you are responsible for his learning outside of the classroom and for communicating with your child's teachers. Contact community resources, investigate extended learning opportunities available through colleges and universities, and find other ways to show your child that learning is not limited to school.

Please, make every attempt to never disparage your child's teacher in front of your child. Doing so can invite numerous issues. This can make some underachievement problems much worse.

How can you advocate for your child appropriately and effectively? The following techniques have shown to be very effective:

1. **First and foremost, support your school and its teachers.** Know that your school's educators work tirelessly (and usually at minimal pay) to teach and support their students. Education is a calling. Teachers and school administrators are personally invested in helping all children learn. Know that there is very little federal funding or federal mandates, little or no state funding or state mandates, and no requirements in most states for teachers to have had special training in gifted education prior to teaching. Everything your school is doing to support gifted and talented students comes from their vested interest in supporting your child. Anything you can do to support (and refrain from the perception of opposing) their efforts will pay dividends for your child's school experience.
2. **During any conference with teachers, be careful of what you say and how you say it.** Don't immediately describe all the things your child can do at home that exceed grade-level expectations. Try not to use any language that states or implies that your child is better, more important, or more deserving than other children. Understand that gifted kids are no more special than any other kids. All kids are special. Gifted kids simply have different learning needs than their grade-level peers, and therefore may be experiencing serious frustrations with curriculum designed for age-appropriate learners. Those frustrations deserve attention.
3. **Never ask teachers to give your gifted child more work!** Would you like your boss to give you more work to take home just because you always finish ahead of everyone else? Instead, ask for opportunities for your child to work at home on activities that are personally interesting and challenging.
4. **When approaching your child's teacher with a request, also acknowledge some positive messages.** Tell the teacher about activities your child has enjoyed. Offer to help by volunteering in the classroom or working at home on materials to assist the teacher. Convey the message that you are willing to work as a partner in your child's education in whatever capacity the teacher feels is most useful.
5. **Get a copy of your school district's mission statement.** This document, which has been approved by the governing school board, describes the goals set for all children in your school and/or district. Schools' mission statements typically include promises such as, "All students will actualize their learning to their highest potential" or "All students will experience a challenging learning environment." Your advocacy efforts should center on the promises made for all students in your district. Do not ask for special treatment for your child, nor infer that the teacher should spend a lot of extra time on your child's behalf. Simply expect that your child will receive the benefits all children in the school are promised.

Emerging assessment practices expect educators to provide evidence that *all* students are making progress in their learning. This is a good thing for our gifted kids.

6. **Understand that gifted students are as far removed from "average" in ability, and possibly in performance, as students who qualify for other special education services.** Your advocacy should be based on the expectation of equal treatment for all atypical learners. Since students who are struggling to learn receive differentiated content, expectations, pacing, teaching methods, and assessment options, then it is reasonable to expect that exceptionally capable students should be equally eligible for such differentiation opportunities. Framing your requests in this way is more palatable to some educators who may have little understanding of the needs of gifted students.
7. **Familiarize yourself with the latest research on grouping practices.** Read *The Cluster Grouping Handbook: A Schoolwide Model.* Become an advocate for cluster grouping in your school.
8. **Unless you feel you have no alternative, don't request specific teachers by name.** Instead, request teachers who:
   - Understand, respect, and enjoy teaching gifted students
   - Strongly support inclusion
   - Do not use whole-group instruction all the time
   - Encourage a student-centered approach to learning
   - Participate in professional development
   - Are sensitive to students' social and emotional needs
   - Compact curriculum and differentiate instruction
   - Use flexible learning groups in their classrooms
   - Integrate basic skills and higher-order thinking skills
   - Use assessments to determine students' learning needs
9. **Join and support the efforts of your local and state advocacy groups.** Work with other parents and educators who are looking to support and improve education for gifted children. When advocating for gifted education in your area, do so with the goal of improving services for all gifted students.

Chapter Summary

In an article written for the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado, which she directs, Dr. Linda Silverman offers parents comfort and reassurance. We will end with her wise words[1]:

> "Gifted children are expensive and time-consuming. They usually need less sleep than you do, ask more questions than you can answer, want 100 percent of your attention 24 hours a day, are obsessive about their hobbies, may be un-stimulated by the regular school curriculum, react intensely to everything, endlessly long for a best friend who understands them completely, hold perfectionistic standards for themselves and you, and many keep their bedrooms in a condition you can never show company. They may want to know the meaning of life when other children only want to know how to tie their shoes. In order to be the perfect parent, you need unlimited funds, unlimited patience, an encyclopedic mind, and someone to sleep for you.
>
> "If you find yourself exhausted, remember that someday your daughter the doctor or your son the artist will have you to thank. No matter what schools you put them in, it is their home life that largely determines what they do with their lives. Trust your intuitive judgment about their needs; no one knows them better than you do."

[1]Used with permission from Linda Silverman, Ph.D.

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Mile Marker series for parents of gifted students. National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) (nagc.org).

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