



Signposts ALONG THE Way

SIGNS OF GIFTEDNESS

Defining giftedness

Trying to define giftedness is like trying to define other complex human characteristics such as intelligence, creativity, love, beauty or justice. How do we measure, develop and evaluate these elusive human traits? Current literature contains a multitude of synonyms for giftedness, including bright, talented, high IQ, advanced, prodigy, precocious, exceptional, superior, creative, rapid learner, brilliant, genius, and so on. The existence of so many descriptive terms, with so many different shades of meaning, demonstrates how elusive and wide-ranging the concept of giftedness really is.

General characteristics

Characteristics associated with giftedness become apparent early in life. Each child who is gifted has an individual profile of abilities, needs, intelligences and learning styles.

As a group, children who are gifted tend to:

- remember with little practice
- work quickly
- see abstract relationships, patterns, alternative views
- generate explanations, theories, ideas and solutions
- show curiosity and/or strong interests.

These children may also tend to:

- reveal unusual or unique responses

- be highly self-directed and independent
- be unusually perceptive of or sensitive to feelings and expectations of others
- seem intense in expression or feelings of justice and/or empathy
- demonstrate perfectionism
- seem out of synch with age-mates or prefer the company of adults.

Some of these general characteristics appear in all children, but are more prevalent in children who are gifted. For instance, many children demonstrate sensitivity and/or perfectionism, but in children who are gifted, these tendencies are more predominant and appear at a more extreme level.

Signs of giftedness

Children who are gifted may be different from other children in a number of ways. As parents, you need to be aware of these differences in order to help recognize and nurture the special gifts and talents your child has. Generally, the characteristics of children who are gifted can be categorized into three broad areas: advanced intellectual ability, abundant creativity, and heightened emotions and sensitivities. Some sample attributes in each of these categories are described below. You may see many of these attributes in your child; however, no child will demonstrate all of the characteristics described.

Advanced intellectual ability

This category of traits deals with academic skills that are typically emphasized in school, such as abilities in language arts, mathematics and science. It includes a range of skills and ways of thinking that may include the ability to learn and analyze new information quickly, and the use of logic and critical thinking. Children with advanced intellectual ability tend to be curious and constantly ask questions. They seek to understand the “why” of how things work. They may also demonstrate unusual memories, read voraciously and surprise you with their mature thinking.

Abundant creativity

Throughout history, a common characteristic of people who have made outstanding social, scientific and artistic contributions has been their creativity. Recent work by E. Paul Torrance and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has given us new tools and strategies for assessing and teaching creativity.

Children who are creatively gifted often look for the unusual and may take a different path to solving problems and completing assignments or projects at school. They may be more interested in questions and processes than in answers and solutions. Test taking can be a challenge to children who are creative because they tend to see many possibilities. They may be reluctant to identify a single right answer on tests designed with only one acceptable answer in mind.

Heightened emotions and sensitivities

Children who are gifted may feel things more deeply and react to situations more emotionally than other children. Empathic responses, such as offering friendship to certain peers and showing concern about world problems such as poverty and war, are examples of traits in this category.

Another sensitivity a child who is gifted may experience is intuition. This type of exceptional insight into situations and people may be useful in problem solving. These children often have hunches that turn out to be correct. They may demonstrate empathetic understanding well beyond what is expected of children their age.

Checklist of traits

The checklist on the following two pages is adapted from Joan Franklin Smutny’s *Stand Up for Your Gifted Child*. The sample traits in the checklist are clustered into the three broad categories: advanced intellectual ability, abundant creativity, and heightened emotions and sensitivities. Use the checklist to identify traits that your child usually or often demonstrates. You can use this information to gain a better understanding of your child’s giftedness. It may also provide valuable information to discuss with your child’s teachers.

Checklist of Traits Associated with Giftedness

Use this checklist to better understand your child's giftedness. Check any items that *usually* or *often* apply to your child.

- 1. Enjoys or prefers to work and play independently.
- 2. Can concentrate on two or three activities at once.
- 3. Prefers the company of older children and adults.
- 4. Reads books and magazines geared for older children and adults.
- 5. Shows interest in cause-and-effect relationships.
- 6. Learns quickly and applies knowledge easily.
- 7. Shows an unusual grasp of logic.
- 8. Has an advanced vocabulary for his or her age.
- 9. Enjoys making discoveries on his or her own and solving problems in his or her own way.
- 10. Likes to play with words.
- 11. Shows uneven development. (For example: A six year old who understands and can avidly explain the role of chlorophyll in the process of photosynthesis, but struggles with getting dressed every morning and tying his shoes.)
- 12. Loves math games, playing with number concepts and figuring out how to solve math problems in unique ways.
- 13. Wants to know the reasons for rules—and the reasons behind the reasons.
- 14. Discusses or elaborates on ideas in complex, unusual ways.
- 15. Sees many possible answers to questions or solutions to problems.
- 16. Is extremely curious, asks lots of questions, and questions the answers.
- 17. Shows leadership in organizing games and activities, and in resolving disputes.
- 18. Has a long attention span for things that he or she is interested in.
- 19. Becomes so involved that he or she is not aware of anything else.
- 20. Has many unusual hobbies or interests.
- 21. Has elaborate collections and is passionate about them.
- 22. Demonstrates a vivid imagination.
- 23. Invents games, toys and other devices.
- 24. Thinks of new ways to do things.
- 25. Likes to create by drawing, painting, writing, building, experimenting, storytelling or inventing.

(continued)

Checklist of Traits Associated with Giftedness (continued)

- 26. Enjoys singing, playing an instrument, dancing or moving rhythmically, or pantomime.
- 27. Responds to music and is able to compose songs or improvise tunes and rhythms.
- 28. Sees patterns and connections that others don't see, even among things that are apparently unrelated.
- 29. Argues or debates about logic of ideas, rules or actions.
- 30. Tends to rebel against what is routine or predictable.
- 31. Has a well-developed sense of humour.
- 32. Absorbs the speech patterns and vocabulary of different people, and imitates them in stories, music, skits, comedy routines or games.
- 33. Is very active and has trouble sitting still.
- 34. Likes to discuss abstract ideas such as God, love, justice and equality.
- 35. Expresses unusual sensitivity to what is seen, heard, touched, tasted and smelled.
- 36. Shows sensitivity to the feelings of others and empathy in response to other people's troubles.
- 37. Expresses concern about world problems, such as endangered animals, racism, pollution and poverty.
- 38. Shows a willingness to follow intuitive hunches even if they can't immediately be justified.
- 39. Demonstrates high energy, focus and intensity.
- 40. Is frustrated by own imperfection and imperfection in others.
- 41. Is extra sensitive to criticism.
- 42. Shows intuitive sensitivity to spiritual values and beliefs and ponders philosophical issues.

Adapted from *Stand Up for Your Gifted Child: How to Make the Most of Kids' Strengths at School and at Home* (pp. 21–23) by Joan Franklin Smutny © 2001. Used with permission from Free Spirit Publishing Inc., Minneapolis, MN; 1–866–703–7322; www.freespirit.com. All rights reserved.

This checklist reflects traits in the three broad categories:

- 1–10 advanced intellectual ability
- 11–34 creative traits
- 35–42 heightened emotional and sensitivity characteristics.

Completing this checklist may give you clues as to where your child shows the greatest strengths. Typically, children who are gifted do not show strengths in all three areas.

The two sides of giftedness

Giftedness can have two very different sides. At different times in your child's life, one side may be more evident than the other. Knowing what the not-so-positive side can be for your child will help you support him or her through those difficulties. Individual children will not demonstrate all of these sample behaviours, and those behaviours that do occur will not occur all the time or in all contexts.

Children who demonstrate only the not-so-positive side and seldom, if ever, demonstrate the positive characteristics, may have behavioural social difficulties, rather than giftedness.

Advanced intellectual achievement

Positives:

- easily grasps new ideas and concepts, and understands them more deeply than same-aged peers
- comes up with new ideas and concepts on his or her own, and applies them in creative and interesting ways
- easily memorizes facts, lists, dates and names
- enjoys playing challenging games and making elaborate plans

Not-so-positives:

- appears easily bored
- acts like a show-off or know-it-all
- wants to know the reason for everything, which may create problems getting along with others
- is impatient with slowness of others
- is critical or intolerant of views of others
- does inaccurate or sloppy work because his or her hands can not keep up with his or her thoughts

Verbal proficiency

Positives:

- talks early and pronounces words correctly from the start
- develops a large and advanced vocabulary, and uses complex sentence structures
- makes up elaborate stories
- enjoys memorizing and reciting poems and rhymes
- teaches himself or herself to read
- easily and spontaneously describes new experiences and explains ideas in complex and unusual ways

Not-so-positives:

- difficulty talking with and being understood by same-age peers
- uses words to manipulate others
- talks incessantly

Curiosity

Positives:

- asks a lot of questions—one after another
- wants to know about abstract ideas like love, relationships and the universe
- asks tough questions such as “Why are there wars?”
- enjoys trying and doing many new things

Not-so-positives:

- may irritate others with never-ending questions
- moves quickly from one activity and interest to another

Creativity

Positives:

- uses materials in new and unusual ways
- has lots of ideas to share
- adds new details and twists to stories, songs, movies and games
- responds to questions with a list of possible answers
- creates complicated play and games

Not-so-positives:

- escapes into fantasy
- appears to have trouble separating what's real from what's not
- goes off in own direction rather than following instructions
- spends a lot of time daydreaming or thinking, which may be perceived as wasting time
- makes up elaborate excuses or finds loopholes to evade responsibility for own behaviours

High energy

Positives:

- stays active
- eager to try new things
- can do more than one thing at a time

Not-so-positives:

- needs constant stimulation
- moves around a lot
- appears restless in mind and body
- gets easily frustrated and may act out
- has difficulty paying attention
- has difficulty falling asleep or may appear to hardly ever fall asleep

Intensity

Positives:

- sets goals and works to achieve them
- collects things
- goes further than most children would to pursue an interest, solve a problem, find the answer to a question, or reach a goal
- is very observant
- is very persistent

Not-so-positives:

- seems stubborn
- demonstrates tunnel vision
- seems to ignore family and school responsibilities
- has limited attention span for things that don't interest him or her
- is frustrated when his or her fine motor skills don't match his or her intellectual skills

Logical thinker

Positives:

- enjoys counting, weighing, measuring and categorizing objects
- loves maps, globes, charts, calendars and clocks
- prefers his or her environment to be organized and orderly
- gives logical, reasonable explanations for events and occurrences
- comes up with powerful, persuasive arguments for almost anything
- wants to know reason for rules

Not-so-positives:

- can talk people into almost anything
- can manipulate others
- needs help with social skills
- demands constant explanations for everything
- complains loudly if he or she perceives something as unfair or illogical

Sensitivity

Positives:

- demonstrates at an early age an understanding and awareness of other people's feelings, thoughts and experiences
- picks up on other people's emotions and is aware of problems that others don't notice
- has strong emotional connections to animals
- asks questions about pain, suffering and violence
- responds emotionally to photographs, art and music
- shares feelings and ideas through one or more of the arts

Not-so-positives:

- takes things personally
- worries about things that are too much for him or her to handle
- can become fearful, anxious, sad, even depressed
- has trouble handling criticism or rejection
- can be upset by other people's strong emotions
- cries or excites easily
- is overselective about food and clothing choices

Sense of humour

Positives:

- makes up riddles and jokes with double meaning
- makes up puns and enjoys all kinds of wordplay

Not-so-positives:

- plays the class clown
- can be disruptive
- gets frustrated when others don't "get it"
- irritates or bothers others with use of puns and pranks
- does not understand or seem to appreciate the humour of other children

Asynchronous development

Asynchronous development can be a characteristic of giftedness. Asynchrony is uneven development in the rates of intellectual, emotional and physical development. This can mean that children who are gifted may be significantly out of developmental step with their same-age peers. Children with asynchronous development:

- may be more complex and intense than same-aged peers
- may feel out of synch with other children their age and within learning and recreational activities designed for their age group
- appear to be different ages in different situations, which could result in internal turmoil and external adjustment difficulties.

These tendencies increase with the child's degree of giftedness, and can make children vulnerable. To quote one researcher: "To have the intelligence of an adult and emotions of a child combined in a child's body is to encounter certain difficulties."

Children who experience asynchronous development will need a sensitive and flexible approach to parenting and teaching in order for them to develop to their full potential. The greatest need of these children is an environment where it is safe to be different.

Do children who are bright have different needs than children who are gifted?

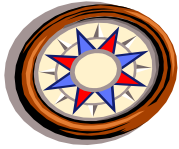
There is a difference between being bright and being gifted, and it has to do with the degree of a child's ability and talent. Consider the profile illustrated on the following chart.

The child who is bright tends to ...	The child who is gifted tends to ...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • know the answers • be interested • pay attention • work hard • answer questions • enjoy same-age peers • learn easily • listen well • readily take in information • seek clear, fast solution • like to finish a project • be self-satisfied • be insightful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ask the questions • be extremely curious • get involved physically and mentally • earn high grades and test scores without apparent effort • question the answers • prefer adults or older children • already knows the answers • show strong feelings and opinions • process information and apply it more broadly, with greater complexity, or in unique ways • explore problems in depth • enjoy the process more than the end product • be highly critical of self (perfectionist) • be extraordinarily intuitive

Adapted from Janet Szabos Robbins, "The Gifted and Talented" (Silver Spring, MD: Maryland Council for Gifted and Talented, Inc.).

Children who are bright tend to enjoy and do well in school. These students will often be high achieving and crave challenge, advanced pace and in-depth exploration of the curriculum. Children who are gifted often have exceptional needs beyond what the regular classroom programming offers, and require special accommodations and learning opportunities in order to reach their full potential. These students often face special challenges due to the different way they look at the world, and because their needs are so different educationally from their peers.

Gifted education has the potential to significantly improve learning experiences for many students in regular stream classrooms. Many instructional strategies that have been developed for students who are gifted are now incorporated into regular education programming and are improving the quality of learning opportunities for all children. Samples of these cross-over strategies include project work, self-directed learning, literature-based studies, issue-based inquiries, and providing meaningful choice for students.



Strategies for nurturing giftedness

- *Feed your child's hungry mind.* Make lots of books and magazines available. Find family-friendly Web sites to surf together. Talk and talk and talk with your child.
- *Be a learner yourself.* Show by example that learning is something that people can and should do every day of their lives, not just when they are in school.
- *When your child asks a question that you can not answer, say so.* By admitting you do not know everything, you are setting a good example. Then try to find the answer together by going to the library, searching the Internet, making phone calls and asking experts on the subject.
- *Encourage and support your child's creativity.* Provide him or her with art materials and other creative playthings, such as Lego, games and costumes. Expose your child to many types of cultural events in your community.
- *Learn more about giftedness, multiple intelligences and emotional intelligences.* See the bibliography on pages 105–108 for titles on giftedness. Check out books by Howard Gardner, Thomas Armstrong or Daniel Goleman to read about different theories of intelligences. Contact the Alberta Associations of Bright Children (AABC) to see if there is a local chapter in your area.
- *When you and your child disagree, take time to hear your child out and consider his or her point-of-view.* Keep an open mind, but stand your ground when you are right, even if your child tries to “out-logic” you.
- *Maintain your sense of humour.* When things get difficult try to see the lighter side.
- *Allow children to leave some projects unfinished.* For some children, the process is more important than the product.
- *Let your child follow his or her passion.* Some children's intensity may lead to immersion in a passion to the exclusion of all else.
- *Don't block your child's learning.* Other people may advise you not to teach your children things they aren't expected to learn until they are older. “Don't push her to read now. She'll have time to do that in Grade 1.” But parents of a child who is gifted might be thinking, “Push her? Not likely. She's the one pulling *me* along, and sometimes I can hardly keep up!”

A teenage boy who did everything he could to learn to read when he was a preschooler offers this advice: “Don't try to stop a kid from learning just to make them normal.”

- *Consider your child's need to just be.* Even the advanced reader, or the child who tends to be intensely focused, may also want and need time to play, do nothing, and be silly. If they want to act their age—let them!

Early identification

Research suggests that parents are the best identifiers of young children who are gifted.

Young children who are gifted often exhibit precocious development; they learn quickly, have superior memories and vocabularies, exhibit curiosity, energy and sensitivity. These children may talk, walk and read at much earlier ages than their peers. (Absence of early speech or reading does not mean a child is not gifted. Einstein did not talk until three years of age!) A young child who is gifted is able to acquire a large store of information about the world through advanced mobility, speech and reading. The child has access to an “information bank” different from his or her peers, and this may have a lasting effect on values, attitudes, interests.

Teachers of young students who exhibit these characteristics are frequently surprised at the depth of understanding, the vocabulary and conversation of these students. It is easy to conclude that parents have coached this precocious development. In fact, typically these children drive the process, asking questions, seeking experiences, and often leading parents to questions where they should “hold the line” on this precocious development. Teachers may not be aware that the child is often the one who is pushing, not the parent.

Research suggests that the more highly gifted the child is, the greater the social pressure to moderate achievements. This is particularly true for young girls who are gifted.

Broadening the understanding of giftedness

There are elements of both mystery and scientific measurement involved in understanding the concept of giftedness. Like the little boy who mused, “Mom, I looked at all the books and watched a TV special and asked my teacher and I still can’t figure out where God lives,” we do not have all the answers.

Giftedness can only be inferred from observation, testing, and the perceptions and intuitions of others. These indirect measures approximate what we call intelligence or gifted behaviours and characteristics. From all of this, researchers have produced and developed more direct measures—intelligence tests, creativity tests, achievement tests, behavioural checklists and interest inventories—that are our best general indicators of giftedness. These measures and observable behaviours give us a window to a child’s potential ability to learn new things and solve problems. However, behavioural science has no thermometer that precisely measures how much intelligence, creativity and giftedness an individual possesses.

Traditionally, giftedness has been equated with high IQ scores. Over the last fifty years, increased interest and research in multiple intelligences, talent development and the connection between emotion and learning has broadened what we know and think about giftedness. We are shifting to a more fluid, multidimensional and process-orientated concept of giftedness.

A core belief that transcends all the multiple definitions is that in order for most children to develop and express their giftedness and talent to its full potential, they will need special intervention and opportunities at home and at school. As parents, you want to ensure that your children have these necessary interventions at home, at school and in the community, as they make their way on their journey through life.