

Gifted Children

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To meet the needs of gifted and/or highly intelligent students, schools should include programs to help them master the important concepts and various content fields; develop skills and strategies that allow them to become more independent, creative, and self-sufficient learners; and develop a joy and enthusiasm for learning. Some may also benefit from being with similarly talented peers so they have a social group with which they are comfortable.

Specifically, programs and classes for gifted children should provide them with stimulation and challenge in their areas of strength and should encourage more creativity and originality.

Of course, these are the very same things that should be provided to all children. What distinguishes educational programs for gifted children is their accelerated pace of learning and the increased breadth and depth of topics covered.

However, both schools and parents often find it a challenge to provide the appropriate services and stimulation for gifted children. Teachers are faced with a diverse group of students and must meet the needs of all of them; thus, teachers may not have enough time to devote special efforts to the gifted students in their classes. Also, teachers may not be trained to stimulate the higher thinking and productivity levels of gifted children. Some teachers find the superb critical thinking and analytical skills of many gifted children to be an annoyance and a challenge they prefer not to face. The youngsters' verbal skills, large vocabulary, and ability and eagerness to question traditional facts and conclusions may be perceived as irritating and dominating by some teachers and fellow students. This can lead to social problems that require developing better social skills.

If possible, schools should hire teachers who are trained to work with gifted students in a variety of fields. Often, gifted students are brought together for several hours a day to allow them to work with other gifted students and with a mentor. Independent study, advanced special classes, and taking advantage of resources outside the school (such as college courses) are other possibilities. Some gifted students prefer to go to schools that specialize in the field in which they excel, such as a performing arts school, a math and science school, or a school that emphasizes sports.

If your school does not offer specific services for gifted children other than advanced courses, you may need to seek out extracurricular activities and situations for your

Interestingly, students who are gifted may face many of the same stresses as do teens with learning deficits. In fact, they experience more anxiety and depression than all other social groups of youngsters, while boys and girls with genius-level IQs are at extremely high risk of abusing drugs.

It's really not all that surprising. Intelligence is not as valued during adolescence as it is later in life, which can set these youngsters apart from their peers. Their social skills may be stunted, and not just because they're isolated: Extremely bright children sometimes expend so much energy cultivating their intellect, they neglect their "emotional intelligence." Then there's the practical matter of being out of the social loop much of the time; youngsters who are gifted spend an average of thirteen hours a week honing their talent. Other children who are gifted may have such advanced social skills that they relate better to adults than to their peers.

Parallels between gifted students and those who are learning disabled don't end there. Their potential, as measured by intelligence tests, doesn't always lead to school success, much to their parents' dismay. One reason may be that these youngsters are bored, their curiosity and imaginations untapped; or, desperate to fit in, they may deliberately sabotage their academic success. They'll act dumb, pretend to be stumped by teachers' questions in class and so forth.

If that describes your youngster, you have a right to be concerned. There are a number of ways parents can help a child who is gifted, both at home and at school, such as:

Demand that advanced placement classes be made available in high school, to keep gifted boys and girls stimulated intellectually and to let them get a jump on racking up college-level credits.

Investigate after-school or weekend enrichment programs, either at your child's school or perhaps at a local community college.

Find him a mentoring or tutoring program, in which he assists and befriends younger students who need help with their schoolwork.

Stock your bookshelves at home with reading material that will both challenge and entertain him.

Request that the school district test your child for giftedness. Although children who are gifted do not have protection under federal law as do students with learning disabilities, most states have some form of legislation to serve gifted youngsters. If a school district refuses to assess a child presumed to be gifted, or parents are dissatisfied with the academic program for their son or daughter, they may have their case heard by an impartial hearing officer, in much the same way that parents of learning-disabled children can challenge decisions made regarding an IEP (*individualized education plan*).

As proud as you are of your child's giftedness, never lose sight of the fact that teens need to have friends and to feel reasonably accepted by their peers. At the same time, encourage her love of learning. Remind her that with the start of college, she'll be entering a world where being smart isn't equated with being a dweeb—it's considered cool!