

Vulnerability of young gifted children

Early Childhood Education Conference
Melbourne, June 2006

How do you recognise giftedness? What do the children do?

There are behaviours that researchers have shown to be (a) consistent indicators of giftedness, (b) behaviours that might indicate giftedness (there is conflicting evidence or they are also observed in non-gifted children), and (c) behaviours for which there is no proven link with giftedness. There are also child characteristics and family characteristics that can mask giftedness.

Consistent indicators of giftedness

Note that not every characteristic needs to be evident for a child to be considered gifted – there will be individual clusters of these characteristics as well as individual expressions of them.

- *“Good” thinking*
e.g., reasoning, conceptual understanding, abstract thinking, problem solving, generalising from one situation to another, seeing relationships, hypothesising and testing theories, metacognition (thinking about one’s thinking);
- *Ease or speed of learning*
May learn from being told or shown just once; quicker to see mistakes as learning opportunities; may be engrossed in a topic and able to integrate large amounts of information;
- *Advanced verbal abilities*
Early or sophisticated expressive language development, e.g., single words before 12 months, sentences at 18 months (although some gifted children actually begin to talk later than usual then progress swiftly), sophisticated vocabulary and/or complex sentences; advanced receptive language – could be observed from 18 months;
- *Exceptional memory*
e.g., retains information after brief exposure; able to recall early life events in complete detail; more likely to be detected in a verbally gifted child than in a nonverbally gifted child;
- *Exceptional concentration or attention span*
A long attention span when interested; highly gifted may be able to concentrate on more than one thing at a time;
- *Perseverance or motivation*
e.g., greater goal-directedness and persistence to completion, an appetite for learning, a preference for challenge or complexity;

- *Wide ranging interests and knowledge*
Especially for highly gifted; interests may be intense and outside what's expected for young children (e.g., flags, space, life and death); wide general knowledge;
- *Preference for older companions*
Prefers older children or adults to age peers, which may reflect advanced language levels, preferences for complexity in play, mature views of friendship;
- *Keen observation*
An eye for detail, notes subtle changes;
- *Quantitative ability and interests*
Interest and skill in numbers – counting, addition, subtraction etc.; greater interest in time, mathematical and board games, calculators, computers, money, arithmetic workbooks;
- *Exceptional spatial ability*
Interest and skill in puzzles, mazes, construction, maps, diagrams; advanced sense of place;
- *Early use of symbolic representation*
e.g., early or sophisticated drawing or writing (depends on fine motor development).

Possible indicators of giftedness (mixed evidence, also seen in non-gifted)

- *Early development across domains*
Highly gifted children tend to sit, walk, talk and read early while others do not;
- *High energy level*
Reported by some studies and rejected by others; high mental energy may be more applicable than physical energy;
- *Precocious reading*
Early reading predicts school success but not necessarily giftedness – many gifted children learn to read before school entry with minimal or no instruction, but others do not (though they will probably learn quickly at school unless they have a specific learning difficulty). Some early readers (e.g., savants) have IQs below average. There is also mixed evidence of an early and avid interest in books as an indicator of giftedness – could be a result of home and environmental factors (e.g., TV, story reading);
- *Curiosity*
Reported for both gifted and non-gifted children (e.g. asking lots of questions) - could be also related to cultural and child-rearing factors;

- *Imagination or creativity*
More evidence in favour than not, although in some studies non-gifted children were rated more highly;
- *Temperament*
Gifted children have a wide range of temperaments, but some characteristics are more common in gifted children: perfectionism (concern with precision, especially in area of interest), sensitivity (feeling easily hurt, empathy), intensity, concern with moral or social issues;
- *Sense of humour*
Mixed evidence – could be affected by cultural factors;
- *Birth order*
Difficult to extract from family size and socio-economic status, but first-borns are over-represented in gifted samples – perhaps parents are more likely to seek evaluation of their first-borns and may not recognise giftedness expressed differently by later children.

Not related to giftedness (not related to IQ)

- *Motor development*
Gifted children are not necessarily advanced or slow in motor development; some have excellent fine motor skills and others do not.
- *Rote skills*
e.g., counting, reciting alphabet, knowledge of body parts, do not indicate giftedness unless applied in meaningful ways;
- *Social skills*
In gifted children there is a range of social competence, and even children who have a mature understanding of social situations will not necessarily behave maturely; may be perceived to have poor social skills if lacking intellectual peers with whom to interact; may also prefer solitary pursuits;
- *Emotional adjustment*
Maladjustment is more likely to be related to family circumstances or an inappropriate educational fit than to IQ;
- *Sleep problems*
Gifted children vary in sleep needs.

Child characteristics that can mask giftedness

- *Problematic behaviour*
Behaviours seen as problematic could be indicators of giftedness (e.g., disruptiveness or lack of participation could reflect a dislike of repetition after rapid learning; stubbornness could indicate persistence; lack of co-operation could reflect nonconformity; refusal to try something new could

result from perfectionism; questioning of authority might occur because of irritation with arbitrary/illogical rules);

- *Introversion*
The proportion of introversion in gifted sample is twice as high as in non-gifted samples (higher still for highly gifted); teachers tend to underestimate shy and hesitant children (“sideliners”) and overestimate “plungers”.
- *Uneven development*
Common for gifted children to be more advanced in one area than another – excelling in all areas is a myth; fine motor development commonly lags behind;
- *Learning difficulties*
When a child is both intellectually gifted and has learning difficulties, the two conditions can mask each other so that the child appears average and receives help for neither condition;
- *Physical or sensory disability*
Can mask intellectual potential; adults may fixate on disability and fail to recognise strengths;
- *Hiding ability*
To gain peer acceptance, to meet teacher expectations, or to avoid failure or perceived adult demands for perfection.

Family characteristics that can mask giftedness

- *Economic disadvantage and/or ethnic minority*
There are gifted children in these communities though found less often than in families with more educational and financial resources; potential may be hidden without experiences to reveal it; giftedness is more readily recognised in some ethnic minorities than in others;
- *Minority language or bilingualism*
Proficiency in home language may be much greater than in the language of the educational setting;
- *Cultural customs*
e.g., customs regarding adult-child and child-child relationships, such as modesty, drawing attention to self; type and pace of language/questions; approaches to thinking (visual and holistic versus the verbal and analytical style of schools); motivation;
- *Gifted siblings*
If one child in family has been identified as gifted, siblings may not be recognised if different in skills and interests.

These characteristics and masking factors have been compiled from many separate research studies. Louise Porter's book "Gifted Young Children" details some of these. If you have a need for references beyond those, you can email me: kerry.hodge@speced.sed.mq.edu.au

Recommended reading

- Barbour, N. B. (1992). Early childhood gifted education: A collaborative perspective. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 15, 145–162.
- Freeman, J. (2001). *Gifted children grown up*. London: David Fulton.
- Gross, M. U. M. (2003). *Exceptionally gifted children* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Harrison, C. (2003). *Giftedness in early childhood* (3rd ed.). Sydney: GERRIC. (A very comprehensive book for parents and teachers).
- Harrison, C. (2004). Giftedness in early childhood: The search for complexity and connection. *Roeper Review*, 26, 78-84.
- Hodge, K., & Kemp, C. (2000). Exploring the nature of giftedness in preschool children. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 24, 46-73.
- Hodge, K., & Kemp, C. (2002). The role of an invitational curriculum in the identification of giftedness in young children. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 27(1), 33-38.
- Knight, B. A. & Bailey, S. (Eds) (1997) *Parents as Lifelong Teachers of the Gifted*. Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow Education.
- Lee, L. (1999). Teachers' conceptions of gifted and talented young children. *High Ability Studies*, 10(2), 183-196.
- Lee, L. (2000). Teachers' conceptions of giftedness – What does it mean for young boys and girls? *Australasian Journal of Gifted Education*, 9(2), 24 – 32.
- Mares, L. (1991) *Young Gifted Children*. Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow Education. (includes advice on developing the personal characteristics that should assist the realisation of the child's potential.)
- Mares, L., & Byles, J. (1994). *One step ahead: Early admission of, and school provisions for, gifted infants*. Melbourne: Hawker-Brownlow Education.
- Perry, S. (1991). *Playing smart. A parent's guide to enriching offbeat learning activities for Ages 4-14*. Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow Education.
- Porter, L. (1997). *Young gifted children. Meeting their needs*, Research in Practice Series, Vol. 4, No. 1. Canberra: Early Childhood Australia.

Porter, L. (2005). *Gifted young children: A guide for teachers and parents* (2nd ed.). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Roedell, W. C., (1986). Socioemotional vulnerabilities of young gifted children. In J. R. Whitmore (Ed.), *Intellectual giftedness in young children: Recognition and development* (pp. 17-29). New York: The Haworth Press.

Saunders, J., & Espeland, P. (1991). *Bringing out the best*. Melbourne: Hawker Brownlow Education. (Includes the issue of deciding when to start school)

Useful contacts in Victoria

For parents

<http://mc2.vicnet.net.au/home/gifres/web/vicservparents.html>

For parents and teachers

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