

Gifted Education: What I Wished I Knew Sooner!

By Carolyn Kottmeyer



I started learning about gifted education by accident of birth: my first daughter's birth. As with most things she's taught me, I had no idea I was learning at first. Over the years, I've learned a great deal about gifted education; and there are a few things that I wished I'd learned much earlier...

1. Giftedness comes in different levels.

Not all gifted kids are the same. My first learning experience in education was with our elementary school principal, as my daughter was enrolled for first grade. The principal explained that "Gifted is like a light switch – it's either on or off." I can't put it any other way: she was wrong.

Some children are moderately gifted, and need a little more depth and breadth than the regular curriculum offers. These are the kids who usually thrive in the typical gifted pull-out program, spending a few hours a week with their same-age gifted peers doing fun extension work.

Other gifted kids are more than "just plain gifted." These children used to be identified as highly, exceptionally, or profoundly gifted; but the latest versions of IQ tests aren't designed to differentiate levels of giftedness. The high ability of these kids may be obvious – reading Charlotte's Web in Kindergarten with understanding and delight, or doing algebra in elementary school. It may also be less obvious. These kids might sit quietly, never learning in the "age-grade" classroom, but not making a fuss about it. Or worse, they may not sit quietly, making a fuss, and becoming a discipline or behavior problem without anyone noticing their gifts. These more highly gifted children are far rarer than moderately gifted children, and a teacher may never encounter one in 30 years of teaching.

Even among the most highly gifted children, there are differences. One child might be a prodigious writer or artist; another might excel in mathematics, mastering calculus before he enters puberty; while a third might prefer to learn all she can about the sciences and search for the cure for cancer. Gifted children may not find a social fit among their age-peers, and not all gifted children will get along with each other. It's important that we allow them to spend time among their academic peers, and help them to find those true friends they seek.

Along with different levels of giftedness, there are different educational options for gifted children. **A Nation Deceived** (<http://www.nationdeceived.org/>), a report detailing years of research, shows that our gifted children need an appropriate education, and that there are many different ways to provide the accelerated education that can meet their needs.

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2. Most teachers and administrators are not experts in gifted education.

It's not their fault, but it's true. Most teachers and administrators (as well as counselors, psychologists, and doctors) have no formal education in giftedness. If they're lucky, in four years of pre-service education there might have been a single chapter in a special education course that mentioned gifted children. More likely, according to an informal survey by Jim Delisle, Professor of Education at Kent State University in Ohio, teachers' pre-service education in the U.S. didn't include even a mention of gifted children.

What does this mean for teachers who encounter a gifted or exceptionally gifted child? It means they must do their own research and reading to learn how to serve the child appropriately. Thanks to the Internet, that's not as hard as it sounds. There are support groups for teachers of the gifted, and plenty of research and resources on gifted education. The Internet even offers professional development programs for teachers.

What does this mean for parents who encounter a teacher who just "doesn't get" their gifted child? It means that we parents have the opportunity to work together with the teacher to both grow and learn along the way – keeping in mind that it's a fine line to walk between "helpful partner" and "pushy parent." It's a path we can, and must, learn to walk, with practice and with help from the Internet. There we can find support groups for parents of the gifted as well as research and other resources.

3. Gifted children can also be learning disabled.

Many people assume that gifted and learning disabled are opposite ends of the same scale. Teachers may assume that a child, identified as gifted but struggling in school, is simply lazy or unmotivated. At the same time, they may assume that a child identified as learning disabled cannot possibly be gifted. I wish I'd known sooner that neither of these assumptions is true. A child can be both gifted and learning disabled, a combination also known as "dually identified," "twice exceptional," or "2e."

Some estimates put the number of gifted and learning disabled children at up to 10 percent of all gifted children, similar to the percentage of learning disabled children in the general population. Once a child is identified with a single learning disability (LD), the odds that she has additional LDs are much greater.

Imagine being a gifted child with amazing strengths in some areas, while at the same time struggling with basic learning skills that everyone assumes should come easily to a bright child. It can't be easy to live in that body. To some parents' surprise, they discover, as they investigate their child's dual exceptionality, that they too were gifted/LD children.

Common disabilities that effect learning among gifted children include Asperger Syndrome and AD/HD. Gifted children can also have disabilities affecting visual or auditory processing, dyslexia

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affecting their reading and spelling skills, sensory processing disorder, and nonverbal learning disorder, among other LDs.

Disabilities are often overlooked at first because of gifted children's ability to compensate for their own weaknesses. Many gifted dyslexics aren't discovered until third or fourth grade, when the reading requirements of school surpass the child's ability to memorize and work around reading difficulties. AD/HD and other executive function disabilities might not show up until middle or high school, when the organizational demands of school surpass the gifted child's ability to hide her difficulties.

Conversely, if the disability is severe enough to be noticed in the lower grades, it's the child's giftedness that might be overlooked. The fact that a child with AD/HD cannot sit still will be noticed long before his ability to learn much higher-level material may be discovered. The gifted and Asperger's child may look out of place socially from the earliest grades, overshadowing his advanced academic abilities.

4. Gifted education doesn't have to be elitist or expensive.

In our egalitarian society, we want all children to have an equal opportunity to a good education, but that doesn't mean that all kids learn at the same pace and at the same academic level. Many people believe that identifying certain children as gifted is a bad thing, that it creates a class structure between the "haves" and the "have-nots." Further, they feel that if the gifted education program is something that all children can benefit from, but is offered only to those identified as gifted, then the program is, indeed, elitist.

Gifted children come from all income levels, and all ethnic backgrounds. If we believe that gifted education divides children along socio-economic boundaries, then we're doing gifted identification wrong.

Many of our gifted children today find themselves in public schools stretched to the breaking point, especially in the time of No Child Left Behind. How can these schools ethically allocate money to the education of gifted children, who are already able to pass the annual high-stakes achievement tests? When we ask this, we are asking the wrong question. Instead, we should ask: How can we ethically ignore the appropriate education of an entire subset of the student population, the gifted children?

Gifted education that consists of museum visits, robotic equipment, puzzles, and games is not truly gifted education. It may entertain the gifted kids to the point where the promise of the "fun" gifted program for a few hours each week can get them to sit quietly the rest of the week. But that "fun" enrichment program isn't necessarily appropriate. It's not meeting the educational needs of most gifted children. They need to learn at their own level, and their own pace and depth, just like all other children.

This can happen in the regular classroom. Some subjects lend themselves to more in-depth study; and many kids, not just the gifted child, would benefit from greater depth and enrichment. Social studies is an example. With this subject it's likely that a few kids, including the gifted child, would love to do their own research and present their findings to the class.

Other subjects don't lend themselves as easily to enrichment, like spelling. Once a child has mastered spelling of most three letter words, it's time to advance. Adding c-a-t, r-a-t, and b-a-t when the child can already spell d-i-f-f-i-c-u-l-t and t-a-s-k doesn't help – it's time to accelerate the curriculum. Basic arithmetic, too, is difficult to enrich. Once a child can add numbers without carrying, it's time to learn about carrying. Once she can multiply 3-digit numbers, it's time to move forward – learning to multiply 4-digit and 5-digit numbers is a trivial enrichment.

While there are classes elsewhere in the building at the gifted child's current education level, there is always a no-cost option for that child. It might take a little coordination on the part of the teachers, but isn't a child's education worth a little scheduling effort? Once a child passes the level of courses in her school or district, there are free or nearly free distance education options available, with just a little teacher supervision.

These are four things I wish I understood back when I first journeyed into gifted education. I share them with you in the hopes that you do not have to reinvent the journey that has taken me 10 years to travel!

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