

The Twelve Most Important Issues for Parents of Gifted Children

By James T. Webb, Janet L. Gore, Edward R. Amend, and Arlene R. DeVries

Our combined experience, as well as published data (e.g., Piirto, 2004; Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel, & Hansen, 2004) has convinced us that parents are without a doubt the most important factor in the long-term outcome of gifted children. Parenting an intellectually curious, high-spirited, often strong-willed child, can be quite challenging at times, as most parents of these children know. Support from others, as well as general guidelines for parenting, can be helpful.

But why are parents so important? First, they have the longest history and the most interactions: they guide a child's development from infant to toddler to preschool years, then from elementary school to the pre-teen and teen years, all the while caring deeply about their child. Parents are with their children many more years than teachers, and they are simply more influential over time in shaping their children's attitudes, values, motivation, and behaviors in critically important areas of life, such as learning and relationships with others. Parents know their children better than individuals who have occasional or one-year contact. Most importantly, parents have a strong emotional investment in their children; they care deeply about the education and well being of their children.

What, then, are the most important issues that parents of gifted children need to know about? Where can they go for information and guidance on these issues?

TWELVE IMPORTANT ISSUES FOR PARENTS

Twelve issues are particularly frequent and common concerns for parents of gifted children (Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries, 2007). These topics come from our interactions with literally thousands of families with gifted children, as well as from consultation with other professionals. Not surprisingly, each one contains numerous sub-topics or issues, and the relative importance of the issues will vary for each family. Interested readers can learn more about each of these topics in *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children* (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007), but the following list is a synopsis.

CHARACTERISTICS

There are many academic and emotional traits that describe gifted children, and these characteristics make them uniquely different from other children. For example, most gifted children speak early and use a vocabulary that seems advanced for their age, saying, "I'm just annoyed," rather than, "I'm mad." They demonstrate a rather amazing memory, often recalling things they saw or did months before; they often learn to read early and can tell others about what they read. Their emotions are strong; they display both great intensity and sensitivity, becoming upset over a perceived slight or injustice, but are also sensitive to the feelings of others. They notice when a parent is having a bad day and may comment on it—or offer help or empathy. These obvious and remarkable traits are often the first things parents and others notice about a child, making them aware that the child is unusual. Parents will also notice the depth of thinking and questioning. The sheer number of questions will often try one's patience.

Of these traits, the ones that probably have the biggest day-to-day impact on a gifted child and his or her family, however, are the child's emotional traits—the intensity and sensitivity that are sometimes referred to as "overexcitabilities." For example, while most children will be upset by a perceived injustice, a gifted child will be upset to a greater degree. While many children are sensitive to hurt feelings, a gifted child may be upset longer, and again, to a greater degree. Understanding these common traits of gifted children will help parents better understand, support, and guide their children.

ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT

Many gifted children show uneven, or asynchronous, development. That is, the child may be quite advanced in one area, such as math or language, but not so advanced or even somewhat "behind" in another area. Commonly, the child's judgment will lag behind the child's intellect. A child may know a lot about dinosaurs, maybe even as much as some experts, but may not know how to voice her opinions in a respectful or tactful way that others can accept. Being "out of sync," not only with others but also within one's own abilities, can cause difficulties for the child in many life situations. It may be difficult to find friends, to let teachers know the work is too easy, or to understand why it's easy to do math but not be as skilled in other subjects.

COMMUNICATION

Communication is a fundamental component of all relationships. Because gifted children often have such intense and sensitive feelings, parents may need to be particularly aware and gentle when discussing feelings and behaviors. Avoiding behaviors that inhibit communication, such as giving commands, using sarcasm, interrupting, or denying the child's feelings, will enhance communication. Sometimes, parents criticize the very characteristics and behaviors that are key to being gifted, such as "excessive talking, being too inquisitive, too intense, too sensitive, or too creative." Criticizing a child for asking too many questions is to tell him he is not acceptable the way he is; he needs to change. Instead, parents should try to answer the child's questions and guide him so that he is able to find answers on his own. Parents find it easier when they create an atmosphere of open communication by being always ready to listen and setting aside special one-on-one times with the child, five minutes a day, or an entire day or weekend. Parents can also monitor their own intense feelings and try to model positive communication techniques.

MOTIVATION

Gifted children are usually curious and motivated about many things, and have many interests; however their enthusiasm for learning may falter for a variety of reasons. Physical, medical, emotional issues, or problems at home such as frequent power struggles can dampen a child's motivation. Some children underachieve to fit in with age-level peers, to get attention, or because the assigned tasks don't seem relevant to them. Parents can encourage children by commenting on their successes, setting appropriate goals, emphasizing the process rather than the final product, and by giving children ownership in the task. By focusing on their interests and strengths, you can help them transfer those skills to other areas.

DISCIPLINE

Gifted children, like all children, need limits, but parents should allow choices within those limits. (You must wear shoes to play outside, but you may choose which ones to wear). The goal is to help the child learn to make appropriate choices in the future, thus developing self-discipline. House rules must be consistent, enforceable, and allow logical consequences. Expectations should be made clear, conveying a trust that the child will act appropriately. Parents might ask themselves, "How effective is this discipline in the long run? Is it working? What is the effect on the child's self esteem? How will it affect my personal relationship with my child?"

STRESS AND PERFECTIONISM

Gifted children vary in their ability to handle excessive stress and perfectionism. Their intensity and asynchrony means they are often out of step within themselves and with age peers. This may lead to feelings of alienation and internal stress. Children can develop resiliency through practicing various techniques such as physical and mental relaxation, use of humor, keeping a daily journal or diary, and setting appropriate priorities. Many gifted children set unusually high standards for themselves leading to a quest for perfectionism. Parents can help children expect progress, not perfection, and can point out that it takes practice to master new skills, whether it's riding a bike or keyboarding.

IDEALISM, UNHAPPINESS, AND DEPRESSION

Idealism, unhappiness, and depression are all too common occurrences among gifted children. The idealism can lead to cynicism and spark feelings of existential isolation and aloneness when others don't seem to share the same thoughts or feelings. Because these children may not have developed their "emotional intelligence" and because they believe since they are bright they

Suggested Readings for Parents

BOOKS

Delisle, J.R. (2006). *Parenting gifted kids: Tips for raising happy and successful children.* Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Isaacson, K. L. J. (2002). *Raisin' brains: Surviving my smart family.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Kerr, B. (1997). *Smart girls, revised edition: A new psychology of girls, women and giftedness.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Kerr, B., & Cohn, S. (2001). *Smart boys: Talent, manhood & the search for meaning.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Rogers, K. B. (2001). *Re-forming gifted education: How parents and teachers can match the program to the child.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Ruf, D.L. (2005). *Losing our minds: Gifted children left behind.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Strip, C. A., & Hirsch, G. (2001). *Helping gifted children soar: A practical guide for parents and teachers.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Walker, S. (2000). *The survival guide for parents of gifted kids: How to understand, live with, and stick up for your gifted child* (rev. ed.). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

Webb, J.T., Gore, J.L., Amend, E.R., & DeVries, A.R. (2007). *A parent's guide to gifted children.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

INTERNET RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

sengifted.org

Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted is a nonprofit organization committed to fostering the affective development of gifted youth. Find articles on social and emotional development, as well as information about grant programs, staff training opportunities, and other services. There is also information about SENG's annual conference which is for parents as well as for counseling, health care, and educational professionals.

ditd.org

The Davidson Institute for Talent Development provides information for parents and educators on highly and profoundly gifted children as well as information about the state of education for gifted children across the nation. Find information about exceptionally bright youngsters, resources, and services provided by the Institute.

nagc.org

The National Association for Gifted produces relevant journals and provides general information, as well as legislative updates and links to divisions within NAGC that can provide information about research, current trends, and social-emotional needs. Its annual conference, generally in November, has special sessions that are relevant.

hoagiesgifted.org

Perhaps the most comprehensive web resource for parents on gifted children can be found at Hoagies' Gifted Education Page which has information, reflections, stories, professional resources, connections to other parents, recommended books, and much more.

tagfam.org

Families of the Talented and Gifted serves as an online support community for talented and gifted individuals and their families. The TAG site offers booklists, mailing lists, and information about gifted and talented children and their needs.

gtworld.org/gtspeclist.html

This is a moderated e-mail discussion list for families with twice-exceptional children.

roeperreview.org

The Roeper Review, a journal on gifted education, is recognized as a source for the most current research in the field. Visit the journal on its website to view article abstracts and back issues or to subscribe to the journal.

PRINTED JOURNAL RESOURCES FOR PARENTS

Gifted Child Today published by Prufrock Press, P.O. Box 8813 Waco, TX 76714-8813.

Gifted Education Communicator sponsored by the California Association for the Gifted but written for national distribution; 11130 Sun Center Drive, Suite 100, Rancho Cordova, CA 95670.

Understanding Our Gifted, published by Open Space Communications, P.O. Box 18268, Boulder, Colo

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"should" be able to handle difficult situations, it is often necessary for adults in their lives to intervene. Children can learn optimism and resiliency at a young age as they struggle and succeed at appropriately challenging tasks. However, if they feel helpless and despondent, a referral to a mental health professional is necessary. Parents can encourage children to share their feelings by using an emotional temperature reading. "How was your day today on a scale of 1-10?" "A three?" "Tell me about it."

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Relating to peers is frequently an issue for most gifted children because their interests and behaviors tend to be different from those of age mates. They require different peers to meet various intellectual, emotional, or athletic needs. The key is to find one "soul mate" with whom they can interact rather than many superficial friends or acquaintances. Children who understand themselves, know their interests and strengths, and can reach out to others like themselves are more likely to feel connected to others and less likely to succumb to peer pressure.

SIBLING RELATIONSHIPS

In families of gifted children, sibling relationships can be intense. Sibling rivalry often develops when children compete for attention, recognition, or power. Wise parents address these issues by spending special time with each child, avoiding comparisons, refusing to take sides in arguments, and teaching children appropriate problem solving. Fair means treating each child uniquely based on his or her individual needs rather than giving identical items or resources to all the children. Just because one child needs braces on her teeth, are you going to put braces on each child's teeth regardless of the need? Equal treatment is not necessarily fair or appropriate. Families who work together encourage sibling cooperation.

VALUES, TRADITIONS, AND UNIQUENESS

Gifted children, particularly those who are more creative, often challenge traditions and values. When children choose to break family or societal traditions, parents can help them understand the cost-benefit ratio of their actions. It is also important to explore the expressed and unexpressed values in the family and to notice when some traditions may inadvertently inhibit effective family functioning. It is equally important to understand how traditions offer connectivity, comfort, and support for gifted children and their families. All family members can participate in identifying traditions, examining which ones they wish to keep, and which ones they want to discard in favor of creating new traditions.

COMPLEXITIES TO MODERN PARENTING

There are many complexities to modern parenting; the pace of life, both at work and at home, and the consequent pressures upon parents are greater than in previous generations. With easy access to the Internet and television, our bright, intense, sensitive, children are now exposed on a daily basis to images and events that are very disturbing; the barrage of information is overwhelming. In addition, the many opportunities and activities available to children make it important for parents to establish family priorities. When parenting styles differ, or when single parent families or stepfamilies are the case, communication and encouragement become even more vital. Parents are role models in demonstrating the ways they fulfill their own emotional, intellectual, physical, and spiritual needs.

FINDING A GOOD EDUCATIONAL FIT

It is necessary for the healthy development of your child that a good educational fit be found, yet gifted children may not easily find it. Unfortunately, changes in funding and educational philosophies often limit services for gifted students. Parents can learn about their child's abilities and personality and then explore educational options. Ask questions of other parents, teachers, and school administrators; learn about various kinds of programs that are helpful for gifted children, and compare them with what is available locally. Parents who are equipped with information about the many education options for gifted children can advocate for better programs in their local schools. They are especially effective when they join with other parents of gifted children and garner support from local or state advocacy organizations. If your child is suffering emotionally after repeated efforts to alter the curriculum, it may be time to choose a different educational setting.

WHERE PARENTS CAN GET MORE INFORMATION

Parents of gifted children often find their experience is a lonely one filled with questions. There are many books and articles on the Internet that can provide much information, and some of our favorites are listed on page 23. These websites of various organizations and groups can be resources. However, meeting and sharing face-to-face with other parents of gifted children is often the best way to help parents feel less alone and more confident about their ability to support their child's academic and social-emotional needs. There is at least one program that does that—the SENG Model (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted) of guided discussion groups for parents of gifted children. These groups, limited to fifteen to twenty individuals, meet once a week for 90 minutes to discuss one topic each week, and the groups are facilitated by two trained leaders (DeVries & Webb, 2007). The overarching goal of the SENG Model parent support groups is to help parents support their children's emotional growth along with their academic growth. We hope that more people will become trained in how to establish and facilitate such support groups so that parents can gain more information, develop effective parenting techniques, and support their gifted children in positive ways.■

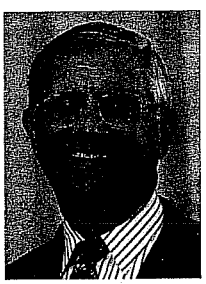
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Piirto, J. (2004). *Understanding creativity.* Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

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