The "Ifs" and "Buts" of Acceleration

By Dr. Christy McGee, Chair, Parent & Community Network

I was pondering the parent perspective of acceleration, and I realized that we are always hearing "ifs" and "buts" when discussing this topic. There are many "if" and "but" questions. I chose to focus this column on the following three:

- *If* my child is complaining of being bored in class, does that mean he or she needs to be accelerated?
- I know my child needs to be accelerated, *but* what will happen later on when my child wants to play sports and isn't physically as strong as the other children?
- *If* my child is accelerated, are there any social and emotional situations of which I should be aware?
- What should I do *if* my child seems to be significantly ahead of his or her peers?

Here is what I know. Gifted children need to be challenged. They need to use their critical thinking skills. Children with creative gifts need to be able to explore those gifts and apply them in their classroom work. They need to be able to delve into subject content more deeply. They need to use their talents to the fullest. They do not need to sit and wait for other children in the class to complete what they find to be an easy assignment. They do not need to have their learning constrained by artificial grade delineations. They do not need to face worksheet after worksheet or—even worse—do more of the same type of work because they finish early.

Let's look at those "if" and "but" questions. The answers here are certainly not definitive, but they are real situations that I have encountered over the years working with gifted children and parenting my own.

If my child is complaining of being bored in class, does that mean he or she needs to be accelerated?

Let me start off with what not to do. Please do not go to school and repeat what your child has said about being bored. Why would I say that? Perhaps it is because I made that mistake with my own child and spent the rest of the year trying to win back the teacher's trust. Think about what those words indicate to a teacher. In a roundabout way, I told the teacher she was not a doing a good job. I told her that she did not use productive strategies with my child. Thinking back on it, maybe that is exactly what I thought, but it was not productive for my child. I wanted the teacher to be aware that my kindergarten child did not need to be working on letter recognition and phonemes because she was already reading the Laura Ingalls Wilder series. I wanted her to realize that my child was quiet and patient and would never outwardly complain about sitting and waiting on other students; inside, however, she was so frustrated because all she really wanted to do was read, write stories, and work on her double-digit subtraction with regrouping.

What I needed to do was to sit down with the teacher and let my daughter demonstrate what she was capable of doing. I needed to quietly ask what I should do with her at home to support her learning. I needed to explain that my daughter could read, had advanced understandings of mathematical concepts, and request that we work as a team to fulfill her needs—but I didn't do any of those things. I made the insulting statement that my child was bored with the work she was doing in kindergarten.

Fortunately, my daughter, with all of her 5-year-old wisdom, resolved her own situation by insisting on reading a book off the shelf that she had never read before to her classmates at story time. The teacher was hesitant for fear my daughter would be embarrassed, but finally relented. It wasn't long after that incident that my daughter was moved to a second-grade reading group. Soon after that, my daughter was also moved to a first-grade math group. She benefitted from subject acceleration, and I learned a valuable lesson about working with teachers.

I know my child needs to be accelerated, *but* what will happen later on when my child wants to play sports and isn't physically as strong as the other children?

Physical prowess is a factor that can make grade-skipping an issue. In middle and high school, physical maturity can present a problem because many sports are indeed grade-based. Parents and students may ask themselves what is more important to them, playing sports or being academically challenged. The other side of this coin is that many high schools now offer advanced courses that are not age-specific thus allowing the student to maintain his or her grade classification for sports, yet

still be academically challenged. If the student is accelerated in just one or two subjects, then subject acceleration may be the appropriate strategy. It is certainly important for parents to carefully examine all aspects of their child's giftedness and then carefully choose the best path to take.

Not all physical activities in which a child could partake are affected by the possibility of acceleration. I placed my daughter in a dance class at age 3. I wanted her to have a chance to interact with other young children and begin to learn to follow directions. By the time she was 5, she decided that she loved to dance and wanted to add ballet to her dance schedule. She was placed in a class with 6- and 7-year-olds because the teacher felt that she followed directions well and would fit it. At first, she was very behind and was intimidated by the other children, but within 6 months she had caught up with her class. She was moved to a more advanced class of even older girls when she was 6 and, again, she caught up. She was determined to be as "good" as the other girls so she practiced at home until she could compete with them.

My daughter was also taking piano lessons. She loved to play and quickly learned how to read music. Her fine motor skills were exceptional. She began racing through the beginner books. Fortunately for us, her teacher didn't let her age hold her back. She was an avid music student. By the time she was 9, she was playing eight-hand pieces with three other adults. She thrived in the competition of playing with adults and continued to excel in her music studies.

If my child is accelerated, are there any social and emotional situations of which I should be aware?

Social and emotional issues are always a worry for parents and ones that are often generated by school personnel. The answer to this question is that it depends on the child. If the child is gregarious and able to make friends easily, then acceleration should not be a problem. The gifted child will appreciate being able to converse with older children who think on a more advanced level. Gifted children often have more sophisticated language, may be concerned with moral and ethical issues, and can read advanced materials to which their peers do not relate. For children who think and reason like their older peers, acceleration can be exactly what they need.

My son was caught in the middle of this particular issue. He was accelerated in second grade (students in the "advanced program" were still classified as second graders, but they followed the third-grade curriculum). Academically, he was excelling in the expectations of his grade level, but he was very sensitive and excitable (two characteristics that can be related to giftedness). School was not a safe place for him. His vocabulary and his ethical and moral sense were significantly beyond his peers. He still found the type of work he was doing (worksheets) irrelevant because they did not allow him to use his fairly high reasoning skills. So, even though he technically experienced acceleration, the curriculum and teaching strategies used did not motivate him. He spent a great deal of time daydreaming and, when he could, reading about animals. Children called him "McGeek" because of his sophisticated language and reasoning.

What Should I Do *if* My Child Seems to Be Significantly Ahead of His or Her Peers?

I recommend that parents become very familiar with the literature on giftedness. The National Association for Gifted Children does an outstanding job of presenting important and relevant topics on its website (http://www.nagc.org). Having a basic understanding of giftedness before seeking out assessment will help parents communicate with a psychologist or psychometrician about their child's strengths and weaknesses.

I also hope that parents will try to understand and support their gifted child. Sometimes it is difficult to understand a child whose intellect, creativity, or talent is extraordinary. My daughter was not only academically talented, she was also a gifted pianist and dancer. Her determined focus on her piano studies and her dance was sometimes overwhelming, and I worried that she was going to miss out on other areas of her life, but that was not the case. She had a wonderful group of friends from school and dance. She learned to balance her many interests well. My son was the complete opposite of my daughter: She blithely aced tests and completed all assignments without question; he aced tests, but he also daydreamed and brooded on complex topics for days at a time. He thought totally out of the box, and she thought totally within it. Both children are a joy, but they thoroughly support what we all know to be true—each child is an individual and must be supported as such. Acceleration may seem like a frightening concept, but when done appropriately, the gifted child can blossom. Do not be afraid—be prepared.

Author's Note

Christy D. McGee, Ed.D., is a faculty member at Bellarmine University in Louisville, KY. An active member of the National Association for Gifted Children, she currently serves as Chair of the Parent and Community Network.

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