

## Article

### PARENTING A GIFTED CHILD

By Dr Stephen Tommis, Executive Director, HKAGE

#### Being 'Gifted' isn't Always Easy

Add the label 'gifted' to a child and a whole range of preconceptions kick in to judge what that child is like. Some will see him or her as a 'little Einstein' and others as the product of pushy parents. Most will regard the gifted child as fortunate because they have been blessed with abilities above the norm and will not understand why there is a fuss about the way gifted children are educated and parented. When resources are scarce and the government places priority emphasis on so many categories of children, including those with Special Educational Needs (SEN), why should those who are gifted have more? Surely a gifted child will always do well whatever the level of provision and support?

Gifted children may get a poor deal because we live in a culture that can struggle to accept 'difference'. It is useful to think of this from the child's perspective. He or she has an intellect that is far more developmentally advanced than their social and emotional needs. Peer group mixing can be very difficult. Work in the classroom can be painstakingly slow for the gifted child but they must keep their head down because they might be seen to be arrogant and precocious. So bullying is not uncommon. A fast worker is often told to 'do more questions', more of the same, but repetition of the same concepts when these were grasped from the beginning is anathema to a brain that picks up ideas quickly. If teachers do not understand how a gifted child thinks and works, boredom sets in and all too often the child resorts to bad behaviour, for which they are punished. It is no wonder that a young gifted child can find their world very confusing at times. Add to this that many gifted children can also have a learning difficulty (dyslexia, dysgraphia, auditory retention problems etc) and the difficulties for a gifted child can increase. So, to reduce their perceived "differences", many gifted children feel pressure to conform to some sort of socially defined norm, to blend into the crowd and not stand out. Not surprisingly, many gifted children underachieve at school.

So, there can be pressure on both the child and the parents to cope with all the issues surrounding being gifted.

#### What does "Giftedness" Mean?

No two professionals will agree entirely on what giftedness means and parents searching for common areas of agreement can be forgiven for finding the search difficult.

- **"Gifted means Being Different"**

To understand highly gifted children it is essential to realise that, although they are children with the same basic needs as other children, they are also very different. If we just gloss over their differences we risk doing serious damage to these children, for the differences will not go away or be outgrown. They affect almost every aspect of these children's intellectual and emotional lives.

The microscope analogy, as used by American expert Linda Silverman can be a useful way of understanding high intelligence. *'If we say that all people look at the world through a lens, with some lenses cloudy or distorted, some clear, and some magnified, we might say that gifted individuals view the world through a microscope lens and the highly gifted view it through an electron microscope. They see ordinary things in very different ways and often see what others simply cannot see.'*

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This heightened perception can work in different ways for different children. For those with outgoing personalities there can be a degree of precociousness, even arrogance. Those who are less confident may acutely feel this sense of 'being different' and do all they can to reduce it to fit in with 'normality', thereby not fulfilling their potential and achieving at levels below their optimum. For some, grasping what others cannot see, or for whom understanding is less rapid, can lead to boredom, frustration and inappropriate behaviour. In all these case there are challenges for parents, teachers and the child who sees conforming to the norm as a major peer requirement.

- **Gifted means having Asynchronous Development**

Asynchronous development occurs in the gifted when advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This uneven development (asynchrony) increases with higher intellectual capacity. This means that gifted children develop cognitively at a much faster rate than they develop physically, emotionally and socially, posing some interesting problems. For example, conceptual ideas forged by nine-year-old minds may be difficult to reproduce on paper by hands with a motor skills age of five or six years. Quite often the quality of handwriting in a young gifted child lags behind the cognitive level at which the child is thinking. Nevertheless, our preoccupation with assessment of the written word means that this child may be labelled as having a special educational need – a misdiagnosis of the real needs of the gifted child!

Furthermore, advanced cognition often makes gifted children aware of information that they are not yet emotionally ready to handle, particularly over moral and ethical issues. They tend to experience all of life with greater intensity, rendering them emotionally complex and very vulnerable to dilemmas as they grow in awareness. There are no 'developmental norms' for gifted children and comparisons with children of the same age become meaningless; they have more advanced play interests and often are academically far ahead of their age peers. In most cases, the brighter the child, the greater will be the asynchrony and potential vulnerability.

### **So, what is Giftedness?**

There is much confusion in the minds of parents and the public at large about the nature of giftedness. Gifted children have well above average intelligence and the capacity to achieve at school. If we take the top 5% of an age-related ability range this means that for every 20 children there is likely to be one who might be regarded as gifted. This means that in a typical class in an average non-selective school there is likely to be no more than two gifted children and most probably only one.

In Hong Kong the EDB definition of giftedness relies heavily on Gardner's concept of multiple intelligences whereby it is recognized that intelligence has more than one facet. Generally gifted children have exceptional achievement or potential in one or more of the following domains:

1. a high level of measured intelligence
2. specific academic aptitude in a subject area or areas
3. creative thinking
4. superior talent in visual and performing arts
5. natural leadership of peers
6. psychomotor ability - outstanding performance or ingenuity in athletics, mechanical skills or other areas requiring gross or fine motor coordination

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Gifted children may have outstanding performance in one or several domains. It is a misconception that gifted children have to be gifted across the board though it is quite common to find two or more domains connected. For example, a child who is a gifted musician is also often a very competent mathematician.

In England, the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) identifies *gifted* learners as those who have particular abilities in one or more curriculum subjects and talented learners as those who have particular abilities in the creative arts (such as music, art & design, drama, dance) and PE. Giftedness and achievement do not always go hand in hand. There is a difference between ability and achievement, so a gifted child may have the capacity to achieve at a high level but there may be considerations such as a physical learning need (such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia), or problems with motor skill development, or simply the perceived desire to 'dumb-down' that prohibit the realisation of a child's true potential.

Schools are encouraged to identify a given percentage of pupils in each age group and place them on a gifted and talented register. **The identification process should not rely on IQ or Standardised Assessment Test (SAT) scores alone, but contain a portfolio of evidence from different sources including teacher and parent nomination.**

**Identification systems that rely on IQ tests alone are in danger of missing large cohorts of gifted children with abilities in areas not measured by conventional IQ tests. Moreover, not all IQ tests are valid for all ages and all types of gifted children. A lot of damage can be done to both the child's and parents' expectations of their abilities from wrong and misleading diagnoses.** It is important, therefore, that any assessment is done by a qualified Educational Psychologist who is well versed in gifted issues.

### **How many Children may be Gifted?**

The answer to this question depends on the definition of giftedness used. In those countries that use the "cut-off" method, say the top 10% of any age group, the figures are relatively easy to compute. In England it is estimated that there are about 800,000 children in this category. In Hong Kong the comparable territory-wide figure is in the region of 90,000 school-aged children. This means that in a non-selective school with 1400 pupils on role there are likely to be about 140 who are gifted.

### **Why is it Important to know if your Child is Gifted?**

All children, whether gifted, bright, average or below average, deserve the chance to lead a happy and satisfying life. Gifted children have a great thirst for knowledge and it is vital that this need is recognised as early as possible so that parents and teachers can give them plenty of opportunities to develop their talents. A good school will try to identify very able pupils and to meet their expectations and needs. The school will have developed an agreed policy on how their most able pupils are managed.

Within the school's management structure there should be a dedicated teacher, sometimes known as the gifted and talented coordinator or Lead Teacher, to oversee the implementation of the school's policy on gifted and talented children. This is the person who should be driving the gifted agenda and encouraging best practice amongst all teachers.

It is very easy to destroy the self-confidence of any child and this is particularly so when they are talented, gifted and able. Their experiences with their teachers, their peers and their parents are

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critical, and it is always important to look for the indicators which suggest that a difficult, unhappy or bored child has hidden talent.

### **Is a Gifted child an Advantaged Child?**

Most people think of gifted children as advantaged children who receive lots of press coverage and attention and who are well supported. This may be true for the precocious musician, the potential chess grandmaster or the exceptional athlete. But these are the 'exotic' cases which form only a tiny minority of gifted children. Many, many more remain unrecognised and unsupported. They are the children who, despite their capacity for unrestricted learning and creative thought, frequently fail to be recognised and given the challenge that they need.

- Gifted children are not recognised when they deliberately respond to peer pressures by conforming to expectations, avoiding standing out from the crowd or avoiding bullying, instead of following their own aspirations. Though children may see themselves as different, they find it easier to keep quiet about it.
- When their real needs remain unrecognised they become to the teacher no more than the theoretical average child – and are challenged accordingly.
- The gifted child may become invisible to avoid being squashed and constantly put down, rather than revealing potential in class when to do so might be seen as a threat (unless the teacher is extremely understanding and aware), be discouraged for always knowing the answer, or be viewed as disruptive for perceiving inconsistencies or questioning the purpose of an activity. Talents may then become hidden – hidden, that is, not from choice but as a response to the messages of disapproval received from society.

It is a truism that what you expect is what you get. There is something of a self-fulfilling prophecy in expectancy, and when this is low, the gifted child will almost certainly under perform and conform to what is required.

The challenge of the gifted child is that of creating learning opportunities appropriate to their ability and age while at the same time keeping them emotionally and socially within their peer structure. For this to be done successfully parents and teachers need to work in partnership.