

香港資優教育學院
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

Article

A MOTHER'S STORY... LIVING WITH A GIFTED CHILD

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- Where does God live?
- How was God made?
- How big is the sun?
- What is at the end of infinity?
- Where did the first drop of water come from?
- What came first the egg or the chicken?

How do you answer these? Especially when your twelve to eighteen month old baby asks them and no answer you give satisfies her needs, and at times, you do not in fact know the answer!!

At 6 years of age my daughter was assessed by an Educational Psychologist (EP) as “gifted.” She was in the 98th to 99th percentile in English, reading, spelling, language and communication skills, writing and verbal reasoning. The EP that carried out the assessment concluded that she was operating in all these areas at the level of a 12 year old but socially and emotionally was operating at her chronological age level of 6 years. The diagnosis was a shock and extremely scary; I had no idea what the implications were and what the future held for us.

From birth I had known my daughter was different to other babies. At about 2 days old she gave me such a strange but knowing look (which she still gives me to this very day) and I just knew she was going to be a huge challenge to me and my parenting skills. What I was incredibly naive about was just how much she was going to challenge both me and my husband and the whole family. Having been an early year's teacher for most of my working life and having owned a children's day nursery for 10 years I would not have believed that my knowledge and experience was going to be stretched way beyond my capabilities.

Sophie walked at 10 months in fact she ran; she never crawled. She spoke at 14 months in sentences and like an adult. We never experienced baby language. Sophie was trying to read from about one year to eighteen months. For as long as I can remember she has been able to debate like an adult about very deep and difficult world issues. She has always been very opinionated and has very strong morals, ethics and values and is not afraid to share these. Sophie was, and is, a confident child and will have a go at most things although she is terrified of heights!!

From the moment she was born she has always seemed fascinated with the world, in fact you might even have called her nosey! She has always been extremely alert, enjoyed people, never slept and has an insatiable appetite for knowledge. She would ask question after question on a topic that she was fascinated with, going on and on until she was satisfied and the answers suitably answered her enquiry and then she would move onto the next topic and the process would start again. I was constantly exhausted to the extent I would hear myself saying to her “that is enough now” or “I can't answer that question” or “I do not know the answer to that” or “I need some quiet time now please” just to stop the constant questioning. Frustratingly this never put her off and she would go on to explain why she needed to know the answers!! When she became old enough

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to operate the Internet she would spend hours researching topics she found interesting for the answers she felt family and friends could not give her.

Sophie loved books and reading and from as early as one year old would sit and “pretend” to read a book. She would follow the pictures and make up the story based on what she could see and what she remembered from me reading the book to her. Consequently she would start to recognise “word shapes” and ask me to tell her what they said and then she would memorise them and thus she taught herself to read. By the time she went to nursery at 2 years old she could read proficiently and to herself. She knew all her letters phonetically and by name, consequently she had no trouble sounding her letters and word building. The reading scheme books at nursery did nothing for her; they were far too easy so we chose a book together for her to take to school to assist with her boredom levels while the other children in her class read their reading scheme books.

Sophie just kept striving ahead with her reading moving from one book to the next and one author to the next. I could hardly keep up. At about 3 years old we had read all the Narnia books, Dick King-Smith and Roald Dahl and she was beginning to read them herself. It became a real struggle to find appropriate books for her to read and for me to read to her. At this time I would often find her reading the dictionary and the encyclopedia in the bottom of a wardrobe!! She spent most of her preschool years with her head in a book or writing. She loved to copy me and pretend she was a teacher and carried a file of papers everywhere with her.

She became fascinated with words and what they meant and loved word patterns, rhymes and rhyming. She started to write her own stories and poetry using very complex words that she had become fascinated with and loved writing poetry due to her fascination with the challenge of making every line rhyme at the end. She is still fascinated with language and words and writes sophisticated lyrics to which she and her music teacher write the music arrangement and she then sings, performs and records her own material. Sophie is also a talented musician and by five could play violin, flute and keyboard.

Sophie was also a competent artist; if she wasn't reading or writing she was painting or drawing. When she wasn't being amused at nursery, Sophie and I were completing some sort of project at home. She would rise every day and her first sentence would be “what are we going to do today, mummy?” Before 5 years old she had completed many very adult and sophisticated pieces of artwork. I am a professional artist and even I was amazed at her level of maturity within her drawings.

Nevertheless I was exhausted most of the time. Every day was a challenge and totally draining. Sophie had to be kept amused 24/7 or she would take it upon herself to find something challenging to amuse herself, which would normally mean she would “misbehave.” She didn't see this as misbehaving. She saw it as learning and finding out about the world around her so it was extremely hard to discipline her. She could never understand what she had done wrong or why I would get annoyed with her. When she attempted things that were inappropriate for her age they often went “pear shaped” and even then she would say “but its ok mummy I knew what I was doing, I am safe and I will just try again!” to give you a couple of examples...she ran away from school at 6 years old and was missing for 1hour 45 minutes; the police were looking for her and the mainline times were stopped in the town we lived in!!! She would climb out of windows in order to achieve her aim

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or goal!! She stuffed paper tissue up her nose to see what happened and we ended up at emergency with her sinuses being flushed out!! To this very day you cannot reason with her that she is too young to attempt certain things.

In between her reading, writing, art and sessions at nursery she would like to watch the news and documentaries on the television. She was (and still is) fascinated with reality and social and political issues around the world. She would watch these news stories obsessively again until she was satisfied with the solutions and or conclusions after which she would want to debate these topics with anyone who would listen and talk with her and once again the questioning would start again. There were times when I had to not only restrict her viewing time but also censor what it was she watched.

People would comment that Sophie was the way she was because she was an only child and had spent more time with adults and older children than with her peers. I have never agreed with this. Yes, Sophie spent time with adults due to our life style but she also spent many hours with children in nursery, friends and her cousins. Actually she had a very balanced home and social life. Our lifestyle may have contributed and heightened the way Sophie's personality developed but some of it is most definitely genetic; she was born with a large proportion of it. Sophie is Sophie!!

Due to my husbands job we travelled extensively and lived in the USA until Sophie was 6 years old. Sophie has been lucky to have experienced many cultures, countries and continents, which I am sure, have contributed to shaping her and have played a large part in developing her personality in those first and formative years. But as her mother I know that Sophie has always been different and far in advance of her years and her peers and this was thankfully confirmed by the EP's assessment when she turned 6 years old.

Although the results of the assessment on the one hand were a shock on the other it was not. In my heart I knew but due the fact that nobody was listening and "pooh-poohed" my instincts I had hidden and squashed my feelings until she commenced school and she became bored, misunderstood and bullied. Her teacher and the head of her school would often describe her as arrogant, rude, conceited and too outspoken and opinionated. She became labelled a rude disobedient little girl. Instead of school being a place we both enjoyed going to it became a place we both dreaded. Sophie hated primary school. Because she was different and clever she was ostracised by her peers and bullied by both the children and the teachers including the head teacher. She had very few friends at school and was very much a loner. The school had never seen a child like Sophie before and did not know how to deal with her. They did not believe she was clever even after reading the EP's report they merely thought she was "a very naughty and disobedient little girl." I spent more time in the school than out of it and consequently eventually I was ostracised by the teaching staff with them making me feel very unwelcome in the school. What made it even more difficult was that I am a qualified teacher and they knew I knew the system and my rights and that went against me too. Even the head teacher and the school itself intimidated me.

Sophie would say she was happier being a loner, as she didn't have to deal with the bullies. She also explained to me that I was trying to encourage her to be friends with children that didn't understand her and they had nothing in common. I realised I had the problem regarding her being a loner not her. I stopped worrying about it. We attended the NAGC Explorers Clubs for 6 years

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and they were a life line to both of us. She now has an excellent group of friends and is very happy and well liked.

Sophie cried every single morning at primary school because she didn't want to go to school. She wouldn't get dressed and misbehaved every morning. She would hide in order to not have to go to school and at 5 years old she ran away from school. She was missing for 45 minutes, the police were called and eventually she was found wandering around the local town centre looking for me. It was very distressing and stressful and a memory I will never be able to forget. Sophie also suffered nightmares about the situation at school.

Sophie would say her primary years were unhappy, miserable and sad and she really doesn't like to talk about them. She has blocked them out as a way of dealing with the misery although she is angry with the head teacher for not sorting out the problem and dealing with the bullies. She was also angry with me for not being able to make it better. She felt very misunderstood. She preferred to be at home in a safe and comfortable environment surrounded by people who understood her and she trusted.

We had moved into the area and lived where we did specifically to enable Sophie to go to this primary school as we had been advised that it was the "best school in the area" and I really felt I had completed a thorough investigation when looking for this school. Looking back I regret not having the courage to tackle the system and remove my daughter from primary school and either home school her or change her primary school. It was difficult to know what to do for the best as we lived in a small rural hamlet and I could have "jumped out of the frying pan into the fire." Due to the location we lived in there were very few options open to me locally. So what I did was join the Parent Teachers Association, help with reading in the classroom, be a helper on every school trip, in fact join in everything I could and be in the school in a positive manner as often as physically possible in order to observe what was happening and make as many constructive suggestions as possible. I even took a part time job at the school working with a special needs child as his learning support assistant.

As her primary years came to an end I became increasingly aware that I could not let this roll over into secondary school and decided to take the bull by the horns and take her out of catchment area for secondary level. Sophie had stressed to me time and time again she did not want to attend the catchment secondary school with all the bullies. I viewed all three out of catchment schools and choose the one that had the least positive reputation. It had an emphasis on art music and drama, had an excellent special needs department where they understood and had a knowledge and understanding of high ability and they gave each student responsibility for their learning from an early age. Also it was a large school and I felt she might blend in better; she would be less conspicuous. This school has been a blessing to us; secondary education for Sophie has been a joy, she loves school and has achieved in all areas of the curriculum and socially and emotionally.

Sophie is a very responsible, mature and stable teenager. She is now in her first year of 6th form having achieved 11 GCSE's at grades A and B June 2005. She is studying English Literature, Drama & Theatre Studies, Psychology and Sociology at A level and loves school. I never have to get her up in the morning and just this academic year she decided she wanted to get the public bus to school at 7.30am and home again at 4.30pm. She thrives on responsibility. She is still very concerned about the world and watches the news and documentaries with passion, compassion

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and empathy. She still debates well on very difficult and adult subjects, e.g. world poverty, racism, religion, terrorism. She has extremely strong views on all these subjects and worries about what is happening in the world. Sometimes she cannot sleep at night for worrying!! She still asks question after question on a subject that either interests her or one that she has concerns over but the difference now is she understands difficult concepts and I can reason with her. She achieved an A grade at GCSE in English Literature. She still loves reading, writing and poetry and has recorded three contemporary songs written and composed by her. Her predicted grades at A level are A's and B's. You can see that her early traits have not gone away; as she has just got older and bigger they have been nurtured and positively developed for use in her future career!!

Sophie has grown in to a wonderful woman and I am very proud of her but it has been challenging and hard work on our journey together. We still have a long way to go; she is only 16 and we all sometimes forget that because she still operates far beyond her chronological age although I think the gap may not be as wide as it was when she was a little girl. We do not refer to her as gifted in fact we haven't referred to it for many years, she is just Sophie. Sophie doesn't think of herself as "gifted" she never has. What we perceive as gifted is of course normal to Sophie; she doesn't know any different or any other way. Sophie does not want to be different she just wants to be accepted for who she is. She doesn't want to stand out, she wants to be considered average and normal, whatever normal is. As a family we do not refer to her high ability ever, we praise her achievements just as you would any other child of any level of ability and then we move on to the next situation.

So you see even for someone like I, with all my training and experience in many areas of education, having a gifted child was one of the most difficult and daunting experiences I have ever had to endure. Looking at a gifted diagnosis from every angle and aspect unless you have experienced it you cannot imagine the stress it puts on the whole family. Most people imagine having a clever child must be easy and a privilege; why would having a gifted child cause so much anguish. Friends would say, "What is the problem, she's so clever" but unless you have first hand experience you cannot possibly understand the difficulties and issues that come with having a gifted child – they are definitely a mixed blessing.

Just to conclude the story.....Sophie turns 18 this summer (2007) and has passed 11 GCSE's at Grade A and B and has just taken 4 A Levels and we await the results; she passed her driving test a few weeks ago. She is working part time as a waitress and bar maid to earn money to go on her Gap Year to Thailand, Australia and New Zealand and then wants to apply for a place at Liverpool Institute of Performing Arts to study Music and Theatre Studies. She is still a challenge but nevertheless has grown into a beautiful woman that I am very proud of and all I hope is that she enjoys life, obtains a job that gives her a good living, travels as much as she can and wants and is happy.

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