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Chapter One

How Do I Know If My Child's Gifted?

How do I know if my child is gifted? It's a question we hear time and time again during our workshops. As well, there are other questions that usually accompany it, among them: What is giftedness? Who are the gifted and how does the term apply to us who school at home? These are some of the questions we will attempt to answer in this chapter.

At the most basic level, the word "gifted" means that this person has the ability to think or do beyond the abilities of average people. More technical definitions tell us about specific abilities. Lists of distinguishing characteristics are also beneficial in identifying giftedness. Let's go over a few of these definitions and characteristics so that we can understand gifted people and who they are.

Everyday, we see people who understand things faster, learn easier, or perform certain tasks far better than others. We say that these people have a gift for something, like a gift for languages, or a gift for music. Their minds, or their bodies, or both just seem to function very well. So first, giftedness is a handy expression used to describe outstanding ability. If that person is outstanding in a specific area, we acknowledge that ability. We say that a musician is musically gifted or that a sculptor is artistically gifted. We call a person who learns easily and thinks well or differently, intellectually gifted. This book is primarily devoted to this latter group of people, although the characteristics and qualities of giftedness also apply to others of outstanding abilities.

According to Dr. Webb, in *Guiding the Gifted Child*, a gifted person is one who scores in the top two percent of a population on a special test called an intelligence test. (1) There are many tests which tell this information, each of them slightly different, but each test uses a number to denote intelligence, the Intelligence Quotient, or IQ. The IQ is nothing more than an attempt to measure the differences in thinking we have noticed. Tests, testing, and IQ will be discussed later in this book, so for now, let's cover more about types of giftedness.

Giftedness appears to be uneven. We can observe that some children are better in math or music than they are in, say, English or sports. As there seem to be many aspects of giftedness, some experts have grouped these gifts. In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, Howard Gardner advances the following as specific types of giftedness:

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Musical Intelligence
Logical-Mathematical Intelligence
Spatial Intelligence
Bodily-Kinesthetic Intelligence
Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Intelligences

He believes that there are other areas which could be listed here as types of giftedness, too, and in the future, we will probably see more types of giftedness being described in books about multiple intelligences. (2)

Traditionally, though, intellectual giftedness is the concept psychologists mean when they use the term "gifted." Although much of what we have to say is applicable to other gifts as well, this book concentrates primarily on intellectual giftedness.

When is intellectual giftedness obvious to parents? Actually, it isn't always obvious. When a first child is gifted, the parents often think that the child is normal and so the early signs go unnoticed. But, sooner or later, signs crop up. Parents may realize their child is "different," unusual, or outstanding long before he or she is of school age.

JB was a 9-month-old when he was given a developmental test by our pediatrician's nurse practitioner. He was sitting on my lap when she put a small alphabet block on the table in front of him. He picked it up. She then placed another down and he picked it up in his other hand. She put a third block on the table. He looked at it for a instant, and then immediately picked it up - in his mouth! She sat still, puzzled. I asked what was the matter, and she said she didn't know how to score that response, she'd never seen it before. (He was expected to either put one block down or try to put two blocks in one hand.) That was the first objective confirmation of our gut feeling that we were dealing with a "different" child. - Maggie

Do you have a "different" child? Do you have a 9-month-old who is talking; a 4-year-old who taught herself to read; an 8-year-old who grasps concepts so quickly it takes your breath away; a 12-year-old who can recite everything you'd possibly want to know about computers; or a 15-year-old who has written an incredible short novel? Here are some general attributes that indicate giftedness. Gifted students may exhibit many, but not all, of these characteristics which were gleaned from personal experience, *Guiding the Gifted Child* (3) and The Department of Education ERIC files on giftedness from the Internet. (4)

PRESCHOOL

- ★ Precocious sense of humor.
- ★ Develops faster than average (walking, talking, potty training, etc.).
- ★ Puts together puzzles quickly and completes more difficult puzzles than peers.
- ★ Catches on quickly to concepts.
- ★ Repeatedly asks observant, penetrating questions.
- ★ Can focus intensely for lengthy periods on activities of interest.
- ★ Early maturity (or possibly a very late bloomer!).
- ★ Precocious use of language (as in puns).
- ★ May need little sleep.
- ★ May show extreme emotional sensitivity.

SCHOOL AGE

- ★ Often displays a highly developed sense of humor.
- ★ Continues to be curious about everything.
- ★ Many interests and hobbies - sometimes prefers to study one with intensity.
- ★ Is into collections.
- ★ Perfectionist.
- ★ Extremely competitive.
- ★ Very active imagination.
- ★ Different perspective on ideas, sees unusual connections and twists.
- ★ May be a lone worker.
- ★ Displays higher level thinking than peers.
- ★ Original thinker and doer, may be nonconformist.
- ★ May display leadership abilities.
- ★ May attempt to do math work in head.
- ★ Advanced vocabulary, used naturally. (Although they may not be able to pronounce words correctly they've never heard, but only read.)
- ★ May not do equally well in every subject.

Can your child be gifted if he or she only shows half of these characteristics? Yes, and it helps to remember that this is a list of attributes which are very commonly found in gifted children, but not in all gifted children. Certainly, most gifted children will not exhibit all of these attributes. In addition, some characteristics may be hidden and, because of a host of good reasons, may not appear until much later. (5)

While the characteristics in the list above all sound pretty good, there are also a few more difficult characteristics:

- ★ Perfectionism.
- ★ Supersensitivity, or heightened senses.
- ★ Very intense emotionalism.

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- ★ High energy levels.
- ★ Needs little sleep (~ 25% need little sleep while ~25% need more than normal). (6)
- ★ Persistence (or stubbornness).
- ★ May start too many projects and have trouble finishing them.
- ★ Dislike taking time for precision.
- ★ May enjoy learning a new skill more than using it.
- ★ May be impatient with details.
- ★ May be concerned with morals and existence very early.

More information on characteristics of the gifted is available. (7)

These characteristics may be the most long lasting and definitely are the most frustrating. A baby who is ready for play at 5 a.m., a preschooler who must have her books in the right order, or a youngster who refuses to try to do something even though she did it yesterday can drive a mom to distraction and yet be a perfectly normal gifted child. Some of the more negative characteristics can lead parents and teachers to erroneously conclude that a child is not gifted, but learning disabled, hyperactive, or rebellious. In Chapter Four, we'll go over these qualities and see how they relate to schooling.

If your child displays many of these attributes and you believe he's gifted, he probably is. To confirm your belief you may consider having him/ or her psychologically evaluated. Whether or not you have him evaluated is a personal decision. Many parents understand that giftedness can be confirmed through testing, but still question whether it is really necessary. Our answer? It depends! We recommend yes, if you're trying to gain access to certain programs or scholarships, although some of them allow parental recommendations in lieu of test scores. We recommend no, if you have no interest in pursuing those options. And what about the results of the test? Would you treat your child differently if she tested gifted, or not? Would your expectations then seem unrealistic? Would your perceptions of her abilities color the way she sees herself? These are big questions that deserve reflection and honest answers. For more decision-making information on testing, read on.

Testing: the Evaluation of Giftedness

The history of intelligence testing is fascinating. Joel Shurkin's book, *Terminator's Kids*, is well worth reading to understand the origins of the Stanford-Binet Human Intelligence Scale and the Stanford Achievement Tests. The book describes the tests, their usefulness, and their limitations. Decisions about testing are easier when you know more about the tests. (8)

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If you've decided that your child should be tested, ask yourself several questions to determine the appropriate test:

- ☐ Am I looking for an IQ test?
- ☐ Am I looking for an achievement test percentile?
- ☐ Am I looking for a developmental test?
- ☐ Am I looking for a behavioral evaluation?

It's important to know why you're testing in order to choose the most effective test. Often, psychologists will use a battery of tests to provide a broader picture of your child's abilities. Intelligence testing may not be the only test results you want to see. You may want to find out if your child has any learning disabilities, or if your child is adapting well to an emotional situation. [Note: School can be a very emotional place which can influence your child's testing.] You may question if little Sally is ready for reading, or regular school work. Evaluating for these different types of information requires different tests. There are several intelligence tests, each of which tests a bit differently, as well as tests which show achievement, development, and other information you may need. A carefully chosen combination of tests provides the most accurate picture of where your child is and what she is capable of doing. Fortunately, many psychologists use a battery of tests which can be included in an efficient and affordable package. An outside evaluation is also useful if you're dealing with a problem schooling situation or as a launching point to plan your homeschool year.

The IQ test is never a measure of the value of a child, but is rather an attempt to quantify the child's intellectual abilities.

The top two percent of a population means about 125 to 130 IQ, depending upon the tests used. The normal tests given are the WISC (Revised or III) or the Stanford-Binet (IV or LM). The parentheses show the most common versions of these tests. Though the two versions of each are essentially the same type of test, they're scored very differently and will measure different things. For example, the WISC tests and the Stanford-Binet IV were developed to measure the middle part of the population, which means they cannot discriminate between the moderately gifted and the extremely gifted. To do this, the Stanford-Binet LM is recommended. (9) You may find this test helpful if your child scores well on one of the other measures of intelligence, in the top one percent, for example, or has two or more subtest scores (as in the WISC) of > 16. (10) Some other tests which can measure intelligence are the Cognitive Abilities Test, the Mensa IQ test, and the Otis-Lenin Test.

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A child may score very differently on different tests. For example, a WISC score may be significantly lower than a Stanford-Binet, not only because they are different tests, but also because they don't use the same scale. In addition, some tests are administered in a written format while others are verbal. Your child may have a problem in one of these formats which has nothing to do with intelligence but which may seriously affect his score (and his schooling, by the way). It's very important to remember that these tests are merely tools we can use to provide the best assessment possible for our children.

An achievement test is different from an intelligence test. It measures learned knowledge or academic skills, whereas the intelligence test attempts to measure thinking skills like analysis, divergent thinking, or understanding of concepts. The kind of achievement test a psychologist administers will be slightly different from the Stanford Achievement test, Iowa Basic Skills Tests, or the Metropolitan Achievement test we are used to seeing. When a child scores at a sixth grade reading level on a Woodcock Johnson or a Wide Range Achievement Test, you can be sure that he is actually reading on that level. A child who scores at the 99 percentile on an achievement test yet scores in the average range on an intelligence test should probably be retested with another type of IQ test.

When Joseph took the Stanford-Binet, he had just gotten healthy from a severe cold and just did not "take" to the tester. When he's uncomfortable, Joe will clam up (for him, a very unusual thing as he's a talker!) and because the S-B is a verbally administered test, the implications for the accuracy of his score are obvious. Fortunately, he scored well enough for our purposes, i.e., to skip a grade. I didn't know then what I know now: that I should have asked for a reevaluation. - Kathleen

How can you make sure that the testing is reasonably accurate and a good experience? First, become familiar with the test. Then, have the child tested under the best of circumstances.

PREPARING THE CHILD FOR TESTING

- ▶ Explain the testing procedure
 - ▶ Plan for a good night's sleep
 - ▶ Eat a nutritious meal before testing
 - ▶ The student should be comfortable with the tester and the test site
 - ▶ The test should be a reasonable length for the child's attention span
 - ▶ Encourage them to do their best, but don't overly stress performance
 - ▶ Never test all day!
 - ▶ Don't put off testing - test when you can use the results
 - ▶ Teach them the "rules of doing mazes"
-

Test day: The tests, the way they are administered, and the environmental conditions during testing will have an impact on your child's score.

Some tests rely upon the idea that your child already knows how to do mazes, codes, etc. A young child may not have had the rules explained to him. For example, your child may not know they are not to touch the lines of a maze at all. One of our children didn't maximize his score because his drawings were proportionally the same, not actual size. He was told to "draw it exactly like the picture."

We've had several less than ideal testing situations JB's first IQ test was done while attending a public kindergarten. Amazingly, they chose to test him on the day of the big Valentine's Party. I'm sure this 5-year-old was paying close attention to the test while imagining what he was missing out on in the way of food and games! When JB was seven, we met with a school psychologist after he'd finished testing JB, and discovered he had a very thick accent. As he went over the scores with us, he mentioned that the only place JB didn't perform in the superior range was in a timed section with patterns. Knowing JB and his ability with patterns, we were surprised. Upon questioning JB later, we learned he never understood that this particular part of the test was timed. He had decided to go slowly to make sure he got them all correct. (He did get them right, but only finished part of them.) Without any prompting from us, he said the tester was difficult to understand.

- Maggie

Obviously, test conditions play an important factor in the accuracy of test results. While there may be no perfect settings, you can do much to minimize poor conditions by being aware of different factors.

How do I interpret the results? The psychologist will help you on this and there are several books which can also explain the tests. Feel free to ask any question you can think of about the tests while you are in the debrief with the psychologist.

EXCELLENT QUESTIONS TO ASK:

- ⇒ What's the range of IQ tested by this test?
- ⇒ Does my child score at the top of the testing range for the entire test or for any of the subtests? If so, on how many of the subtests has my child scored at or near the top? Which ones were they?

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- ⇒ What percentile is this score?
- ⇒ What is my child's mental age?
- ⇒ Were there any problem areas? What are they? (This is important for planning. A problem area for a gifted child may be indicated by an average score in a subtest.)

These questions will help you get a handle on the test results and allow you to start planning for your year.

OK, now you have a score. Is your child gifted or not? We are back to the question of the definition of gifted. According to the IQ score, it's about 130 and above. For the purposes of a school or program, there are other things to take into account before the child is considered qualified. Of course, for the purposes of homeschool, we can give our children the education of a gifted child without worrying about qualification.

What do public schools use to determine giftedness? Each state, or even each school district, has its own parameters. Often, as part of the nominating procedure (the process of asking parents and/or teachers and/or psychologists who they think belongs in the gifted program) they will ask parents to fill out a form. This form has questions on it pertaining to the types of characteristics referred to earlier. If a parent observes enough of these behaviors, they believe there's a good indication the child should be tested for giftedness. What about special programs? Entry into any program is dependent upon whom the program is designed to serve. Some use a set IQ of anywhere from 120 to 145, while others use a matrix of different factors to choose their students.

Because an achievement test will only correctly identify perhaps half of gifted students, some school districts use a score of 90 percentile on a standardized achievement test as an entry qualification into their programs. Johns Hopkins' Talent Search is open to seventh and eighth graders who have scored in the 97th, 98th, or 99th percentile in the mathematics (M), verbal (V), or composite score categories of their most recent or next-most-recent standardized aptitude or achievement tests. (More on Johns Hopkins and other Talent Search programs later.) A student who scores well on an achievement test in several areas is considered to be academically gifted, even though he may have a lower score on another subtest.

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Clearly, there is no one universal definitive score or test for the gifted, just generally accepted scores within certain ranges. And even within the gifted population there's a hierarchy. The IQ scale typically looks like this:

130+ gifted (about 2 in 100 persons).

140+ highly gifted or high-end gifted (about 1 in 260 persons).

150+ (about 1 in 2,330 persons.)

160+ profoundly gifted (about 1 in 31,560 persons). (11)

Finally, the gifted child is one with the characteristic of being able to think well, or differently than the norm, and the intelligence tests are merely attempts to measure those differences. How well the tests succeed is the subject of much discussion among the experts, so just remember that tests are limited, testers are human, and your child is more than a test score.

Daniel was six when he was tested for learning disabilities and intelligence as well as a host of other things in an attempt to figure out what his problem was in school. The teacher had a number of bad things to say about Daniel, not the least of which was that he was hyperactive. Well, the testing was totally negative, except for the intelligence part. He scored near the top of the test and so we found ourselves being told that Daniel's only problem was that he was highly gifted. Daniel listened to the explanation and then, taking his thumb out of his mouth, said "Well, I guess that means I'm OK after all, Mommy." - Kathleen

For more information on giftedness, testing, and characteristics of gifted children and adults, check out the resources listed, especially those on the Internet. (12-14)

Resources & Notes

1) Webb, Dr. James, Betty Meckstroth, Stephanie Tolan (1982). *Guiding the Gifted Child*, page five.

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