

So who are “gifted” young children, anyway?

Let’s say you have 15-24 happy, squirmy, bubbly kindergartners, 1st, or 2nd graders assembled in your classroom. It’s easy to view these children as being very much alike – after all, they are close in age, have had the same developmental time frame, are generally healthy, and anxious to learn if they can attend and keep on task. It’s only over time and by getting to know them that their individual differences begin to become apparent – their widely different background experiences, their different developmental levels in spite of their similar age, their individual interests and motivation for learning, and much more. In fact, the more we get to know the children we teach, we realize that they are really more different from each other than they are the same.

As professional educators, we also realize that, if we are going to be effective in helping our students as learners, we must understand and respond appropriately to their individual differences, whatever the curricular goals and learning outcomes we are committed to directing.

In terms of individual differences, it is not unlikely – indeed, probably quite likely – that one or more of the youngsters in your classroom may be considerably more advanced in their cognitive development compared to the other children. Some or all of these children may be so advanced that, in educational terms, they are considered *exceptionally able* or *gifted*.

Some exceptionally able children will manifest their rapid development through precocious performance, such as early reading with little or no instruction, strong math ability or intuition, uncanny science interest and knowledge, remarkable musical ability, etc. Other cognitively

gifted children may not at first show focused ability in specific areas, but rather show their abilities in more generalized ways, such as strong creativity, having long attention span, being able to concentrate for lengthy periods of time, asking many questions, and so forth. And still others may be slow in manifesting any of these behaviors as young children but will “blossom” later.

Teachers and parents can nurture the development and learning of young gifted children by 1) learning how to recognize these children and their developing abilities, 2) knowing ways to promote their development, and 3) taking an active role in supporting their appropriate learning growth over the school years.

How important is support and nurturance for exceptionally able or gifted children? Psychological and educational research has repeatedly shown a link between early promise and eventual high achievement. The bridge between promise and achievement involves wise teacher and parent support. Research has also shown that under-challenging and/or redundant learning situations and curricula lead gifted children to undershoot their learning potential, at best, or, at worst, actually develop inappropriate attitudes and behaviors that make it difficult or impossible for these children to fully achieve according to their potential.

So, knowledgeable and prudent teachers and parents are essential elements in the growth and development of gifted children. The key is being informed and being willing to actively help these children thrive as early as possible in their school careers.

Resources:

Horowitz, F. D. (1992). A developmental view on the early identification of the gifted. In P. S. Klein & A. J. Tannenbaum, *To be young and gifted*, pp. 73-93. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corp.

Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom. ERIC Digest. (<http://www.ericdigests.org/2001-2/gifted.html>)



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