

Parenting **Gifted** Kids

Tips for Raising
Happy and
Successful
Children

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Introduction

The word “tip” has multiple meanings. If you work in the service industry, it means giving (or getting) some extra cash for services delivered well. A tip can also be an end point, a pinnacle, as in the “tip of one’s finger”. In a book such as this, the word tip would imply to most readers that some type of suggestion would follow – a helpful hint, if you will – on the road to better understanding of that person you live with called “a gifted child”.

That would be a good guess, but a wrong one. Here’s why: bookshops are filled with advice books for parents of kids, gifted and otherwise. What these books share in common is common sense statements such as “let your child live their own life, not yours” or “make it safe for your child to learn through his mistakes”. Although this advice isn’t bad, it is rather shallow. In fact, the tips in most books on parenting probably don’t teach new skills, as much as reinforce the importance of an old one: nurture your children’s independence and creativity so they will reach their “full potential”.

Since the existing books on parenting gifted kids answer the basics, I want this book to go in a different direction (I’ve never been big on reinventing the wheel, in my life or my writing). So, when I use the word tip here, I am not going to provide you with a specific, use-it-tonight suggestion. Instead, the tips I offer will have less to do with

actions and more to do with attitude. Case in point: in the previous paragraph, I end with an allusion to children “reaching their full potential”. That is a phrase you will not find in this book, or in any of my writing. Why not? Because the term itself, “full potential”, is so vague that it has no meaning or value. I have yet to see a child or adult stand up and proclaim publicly, “I am pleased to announce that I have reached my full potential. Thank you, and good night.” Sounds dumb, doesn’t it? We fill parenting books with platitudes about “potential” or “risk taking”, and then find that our words of solace or advice fall into our children’s deaf ear, the one they always point to us when they want to tune us out.

So, here’s what to expect in my book: ten statements that will cause you to re-examine the ways you perceive your child’s intelligence and challenges. Each statement will be elaborated upon for clarity and, wherever possible, an instance from the life of a real child or parent with whom I have worked will be included as evidence of the statement’s worth. An occasional, usable tip might surface, but my intent is that you will read this book, absorb its messages and then look at your gifted child through a different set of lenses than you had worn before. What you do with this information will be based on a sound understanding of the hassles, hurdles and happinesses that make up the life of every gifted child.

Also, don’t be surprised if, in reading my book, you get somewhat self-reflective. More often than not, gifted kids come from parents whose intellects are advanced, and reading about the ins-and-outs of childhood giftedness might dredge up memories you didn’t even know you had. If that happens ... enjoy the ride.

Best wishes to you in this learning adventure.

– Jim Delisle

Understand What Giftedness Is ... and What It Is Not

At a recent meeting with Jeff’s mum and several of his teachers, I was amazed that the majority of the people sitting around the conference table were discussing the legitimacy of this boy’s giftedness. At fourteen years old, Jeff already had quite a school history, which, truth be told, fizzled more than it sparkled. With an IQ of 145, but marks of D’s and F’s, Jeff was a walking frustration to most adults. The teachers’ conversation went something like this:

“You know, if Jeff was really gifted, he’d show it once in a while.”

“Yes, and his homework is never done ...”

“... And let’s not even talk about his organisational skills! You know, the ones he doesn’t have?”

I could tell that Jeff’s mum wanted to interrupt and offer a different perspective – the one that noticed Jeff could read a 350-page historical novel in two days; or that he started his

school career at age five with panache, vigour and an urge to learn; or that Jeff's vocabulary and thinking processes were more advanced than most adults, including some of his teachers. Yet, she stayed mute. Why? She had expressed such realities before, only to be told the educational equivalent of Jeff's need to "shape-up or ship out".

"Mrs Rogers," the school counsellor concluded, "I believe it is in Jeff's best interests to be moved out of honours level classes. Perhaps he is too stressed by their rigour."

"... Or not?" I added, daring to ask just a single question, "When does Jeff excel?"

This came as a jolt to many of Jeff's teachers. They had come to see this young man as lazy, dishevelled and obstinate, yet the few times Jeff did shine were when he was allowed to do projects of personal interest, or open-ended assignments with multiple right answers or no right answers at all. He loved logic puzzles, and finished them quickly. He contributed to debates about politics or ecology or justice with a sense of sophistication and insight seldom observed in overzealous young teens who often only boast opinions without regard for the facts. In my mind, there was no doubting Jeff's giftedness. He simply chose not to display it in school activities that required him to do little more than regurgitate facts he had already learned years before. Jeff's teachers may have been disappointed in him, but the reverse was also true: Jeff was disappointed in them.

Perhaps this scenario is familiar to you, as Jeff may be a prototype for your own gifted sons or daughters who play by their own rules, not the school's. Or, you may be a parent who is sitting back thinking, "I guess I'm lucky that my child has always prized achievement." Whatever the case may be, know this: Giftedness should not, indeed, *must* not be linked to achievement in order to be a legitimate entity. Calling Jeff (or anyone) gifted only when they can prove it by jumping through the artificial achievement hoops we place before them is equivalent to saying that a disease can

only exist if its symptoms are obvious and visible.

As a parent, you may believe this already, as you have an asset that most schoolteachers do not: you knew your child from the start. Teachers, even the ones who work with our kids for several years, still see only a snapshot of their full selves; a place-in-time moment that may or may not be an accurate depiction of the fullness of the child's being. It is your long-range opinion that matters most, and the key to getting others to see the giftedness in your child as being an inherent quality rather than a school report filled with A's is knowing, first and foremost, that your impressions are accurate.

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Speaking of First Impressions . . .

When I entered the realm of gifted child education in 1978, I was a doctoral student seeking answers. I didn't realise how lucky I was to become, for within a year, I met two women whose views on giftedness are the most profound and legitimate our field has ever produced. Both of them gave me answers to the issue of giftedness that have stayed with me to this day. You need to know about them, too.

The first is a woman I met only through her work, Leta S. Hollingworth. Hollingworth died in 1939, yet her work spoke to me in such a way that whenever I opened one of her books, I felt like we were sitting in a cafe in overstuffed chairs with bad upholstery; me taking notes, and Leta just talking. A school psychologist by trade, Hollingworth was teaching a course at Columbia University in 1916 on the psychology of "mentally deficient children" (her phrase). Using the newly minted Stanford-Binet IQ test, Hollingworth wanted her students to see a contrast between children who scored at

the lower limits of the test and one child who scored much higher. She arranged to test an 8-year-old boy called Child E, “who exhausted the scale without being fully measured by it, achieving an IQ of *at least 187*” (Hollingworth, 1942, p. xii). From this moment on, Hollingworth was hooked, as she wrote:

I had tested thousands of incompetent persons, a majority of them children ... this thoroughgoing experience of the negative aspects of intelligence rendered the performance of E even more impressive to me than it would otherwise have been. I perceived the clear and flawless working of his mind against a contrasting background of thousands of dull and foolish minds. It was an unforgettable observation. (p. xii)

Hollingworth did ground-breaking work in establishing the field of giftedness as a legitimate entity. In addition to being a psychologist and author, she also taught highly gifted children in a program she developed for the New York City public school system. In every regard, she came to see giftedness as a quality that can be measured at a young age, and that this quality, this giftedness, is a lifelong phenomenon that may or may not show itself in high achievement. A passage from her book, *Children Above 180 IQ, Stanford-Binet*, published posthumously in 1942, contains many passages that, sadly, are as true today as they were then:

This element in our juvenile population, so significant and so rarely found, passes unrecognised at present through the public schools. We have not even commenced to evolve an education suitable for a child who at 9 or 10 years of age is able to think on a [tertiary] level. The idea that such children exist at all is even laughed to scorn by teachers and princi-