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# Introduction

**P**arents are funny people. They bring kids into this world despite having virtually no training on what to do to make certain that their children will be happy, successful, and kind. Untold money is spent, and countless sleepless nights are endured, all in the hope that, at some distant time, our progeny will become independent and self-sufficient. Books abound on what mileposts kids should achieve by a certain age, and whether the benchmark involves height, weight, or learning the ABCs, parents are always on the lookout for indicators that their kids are growing. We are the custodians of our children's legacy, at least for a while, and we want to do all we can to set them on a fulfilling life trajectory.

This parenting situation becomes even more precarious when the child in question deviates in some significant ways from one who is developing on a typical timeline. For instance, if a child has a cognitive delay or a physical disability, expectations for “what will happen when” don't fit into the Dr. Spock playbook on child rearing. Modifications need to be made to fit the child's needs and abilities. The same is true when a child shows signs of precocious development—giftedness—and is capable of advanced thoughts or a deep understanding of the human condition at a very young age. Where does a parent turn when

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her son starts reading billboards from the back seat at age 2, or his daughter asks, at age 5, to have the TV channel changed because “the news is too sad tonight”?

There are lots of books and experts offering advice on navigating the parenting waters and raising kids like yours, be they average or veering off in one direction or other from the norm. And yes, this is one of those books, albeit one that is focused on gifted children. But here’s how I hope my book is different from the many others that exist on parenting strategies: I want to offer something more complete and complex than a set of tips and strategies that address an immediate issue or problem. I want to put into a larger context the many moving parts that constitute the lives of gifted children and the people who are raising them; I want to offer guidance in distinguishing whether certain traits and behaviors of gifted children have something to do with their advanced abilities or are mere expressions of their individuality; and I want to help parents of gifted children feel comfortable with the uncomfortable fact that some people just don’t care that their kids have advanced intellectual abilities. In essence, I want my book to provide as much solace as it does advice because, let’s be honest, parenting a gifted child in a world that neither fully accepts nor appreciates advanced abilities in kids can be an unkind and lonely task at times—for you, as well as for the gifted child who brought you to pick up this book in the first place.

In writing this book, I bring with me more than 40 years of experience as an educator, counselor, and dad of gifted children. This doesn’t mean I have all of the answers, but it *does* mean that I have enjoyed thousands of interactions with gifted kids and those who care about them that have informed my thoughts. In sharing some of these experiences with you through this book, I hope that together, as reader and author, we can forge paths that lead to some intriguing outcomes and insights.

Parents are funny people because they willingly take the greatest risk that an individual can take: shaping the lives of those who will eventually shape the lives of others. Let the journey begin. . . .

—Jim Delisle

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

**A**t a meeting with Jeff’s mom and several of his teachers, including me, I was amazed that the majority of the people sitting around the conference table were discussing the legitimacy of this boy’s giftedness. At 14 years old, Jeff already had quite a school history, which, truth be told, fizzled more than it sparkled. With an IQ of 145, but grades 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 organizational skills! You know, the ones he doesn’t have?”

I could tell that Jeff’s mom wanted to interrupt and offer a different perspective—the one that noticed Jeff could read a 350-page historical novel in 2 days; or that he started his school career at age 5 with panache, vigor, and an urge to learn; or that Jeff’s vocabulary and thinking processes were more advanced than that of most adults, including some of his teachers. Yet, she stayed mute. Why? She had expressed such realities before, only to be told that Jeff couldn’t possibly be gifted with such low grades.

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“Mrs. Rogers,” the school counselor concluded, “I believe it is in Jeff’s best interests to be moved out of the honors level classes. Perhaps he is too stressed by their rigor.”

“Or not?” I added, daring to ask a 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, disheveled, 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 teens who often 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 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 he can prove it by jumping through the artificial achievement hoops we place before him 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 have known your child from the start. Teachers, even the ones who work with our kids for several years, still see only a snapshot of students’ 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 report card filled with A’s is knowing, first and foremost, that your impressions are accurate.

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## Speaking of First Impressions . . .

My journey into the world of gifted children began in an odd place: an elementary classroom for children identified with behavioral disorders and/or learning disabilities. I was a freshly minted teacher with a Master's degree in special education, and, like all freshly minted teachers, I was going to rock the worlds of my students. They would love school, respect themselves and me, and their learning curves would always trend upward.

And then I met Matt. From day one, he was obstinate and angry. His mom (his dad was absent) had moved him to yet another town and yet another school—three schools in 6 years, in fact. He came into my classroom with a scowl, plopped himself down at a desk apart from any of his classmates, and leafed through the assignments I had prepared carefully for him. The ones that met Matt's approval—the challenging or creative ones—were done swiftly and accurately, but any assignment that Matt found unworthy was promptly bunched into a ball and thrown to my desk—a paper projectile on which Matt had scribbled one word in red crayon: “irrelevant.”

My ideals stayed in place for a while as I worked with Matt, convinced that at some point he would acquiesce to my teaching prowess and complete the work I found to be important for him. That never happened. Day after day, and then month after month, his “irrelevant” paper bombs exploded onto my desk. No amount of praise, punishment, or ignoring changed this situation. This freshly minted teacher was at his wit's end, his bag of instructional tricks as empty as a politician's promise.

And then something unexpected happened: Matt got sprayed by a skunk before school one morning and entered our building with a scent that could neither be ignored nor appreciated. Yet for the first time, Matt's demeanor changed. He was smiling and talkative, sharing

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how this smelly incident took place in his backyard, where he was checking on the sugar maple trees he had tapped to gather their sap and, with great time and effort, turn that sap into maple syrup. Having exhausted all other reasonable options, I cautiously made a suggestion to Matt: What if I changed his curriculum so that every school subject dealt with some aspect of maple sugar farming? Math could involve measurement and making change. Science could include lessons on how to make his product pure enough to sell at our one local grocery store (a community mentor helped with this), and social studies could involve a photo essay, complete with a script, on how to transform sap into syrup.

Matt took my bait, and from that day forward I never received another “irrelevant” wad of paper on my desk.

During that school year and the next, I saw something I didn't know was possible: a special education student on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) who also possessed tremendous academic and intellectual abilities. I needed to learn more, so I left my teaching position to begin a Ph.D. program focused on gifted children. To this day, I thank Matt—and that skunk—for altering my career focus permanently.

At the onset of my doctoral studies, I was fortunate to encounter two women whose views on giftedness mirrored my own nascent observation: that giftedness is not *something you do*, but rather *someone you are*. The best way to describe this distinction is to introduce you to both of these pioneers in the field of gifted education.

The first, Leta S. Hollingworth, is a woman I met only through her work. 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 coffee shop in overstuffed chairs with worn upholstery—I, taking notes, and Leta, just talking. A school psychologist by trade, Hollingworth taught a course at Columbia University in 1916 on the psychology of children with limited intellectual capacity. Using the newly developed 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:

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 groundbreaking 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 as a lifelong phenomenon that may or may not express itself in high achievement. Hollingworth’s 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 unrecognized 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 college level. The idea that such children exist at all is even laughed to scorn by teachers and principals who have a quarter of a century of “experience” behind them. These children have no way of making themselves known. They become known only to those educators who “believe in” mental tests. (p. 320)

Hollingworth was wise enough to understand that there is a distinction between two terms that we currently—and erroneously—consider synonyms: *talent* and *giftedness*. To her, to me, and I hope to you,

the distinction between these two terms is a necessary and important one. Here's how I see them:

- *Talent* invokes the idea of demonstrable skills in a specific domain, like math or soccer or dance. High academic achievers exhibit many of their talents through the curriculum that is offered to them, and we often identify children with these attributes for inclusion in gifted programs.
- *Giftedness* is an innate ability to both detect and comprehend the world in complex ways that differ significantly from age-expected norms. High academic achievement may or may not be present, but a lack of academic success does not “disqualify” one from being seen as gifted.

As you will read throughout this book, the definition and identification of giftedness are continuing conundrums with virtually no consensus, even among noted professionals who have spent their careers investigating the gifted population. Still, if we return to the groundbreaking work of Hollingworth, and the profound respect she held for children who were either talented, gifted, or both, we see that her wisdom transcends time.

Other important elements for parents to consider include the issues Hollingworth associated with gifted children in the social and emotional realms. Among these areas of concerns, Hollingworth (1942) pointed out the following:

- *Play and friendship*, as gifted children prefer complicated games instead of frivolous, unstructured games.
- *Negativity toward authority figures*, as gifted children often try to correct adults whom they know are wrong about something, yet are reprimanded for doing so because it is seen as disrespectful. The result? Animosity toward these adults from the gifted child.
- *Using their intellects to take advantage of others*, which Hollingworth labels as “benign chicanery,” in which gifted children cajole others to do their bidding for tasks they find distasteful. (Think Tom Sawyer and the whitewashed fence incident.)