

Recognizing and Responding to Giftedness in Very Young Children

by Nancy Benson, Ph.D.

Bright, gifted, typical, or delayed—all children deserve interested and informed parents to guide and encourage their learning and achievements. Early recognition of unique developmental traits, interests, or talents can have significant and long-term impact. While labeling can make us uncomfortable, our most remarkable children especially benefit from observant and responsive parents.

Giftedness is more often overlooked than falsely identified in formal settings.

However, parents have been found to be reliable sources in identifying behaviors and attributes that are common in gifted children. Gifted children sometimes demonstrate behaviors at home that are not observed at school, and may fail to do well in screenings. Highly physical and energetic, some gifted children can be mislabeled as hyperactive. Teacher nominations sometimes confuse motivation, compliance, and confidence with high ability.

Early awareness and communication between parents and teachers can prevent

mismatched expectations or children forced to function at several grade levels below their ability. In addition, noticing early signs of giftedness can help parents and caregivers to appreciate and understand alternative meanings of common behaviors.

Much of the literature on gifted children focuses on the positive characteristics of the motivated and ignores the negative behavior of gifted children who are demotivated and underachieving. Not responding to the needs of gifted children can result in boredom, behavior issues, social isolation, or children who minimize their abilities.

WHAT IS GIFTEDNESS?

Definitions of giftedness range from advanced intellectual abilities to evidence of talent in art, music, or physi-

cal skills. Gifted children differ from bright children in the number of traits in which they excel and their intensity. While gifted children often achieve physical and verbal milestones early, these indicators are clues, not requirements. Most importantly, there are no developmental shortcuts. An extended crawling stage should precede early walking. Parents can influence brain development by providing essential security and abundant exposure to language, including reading aloud.

The most significant feature of gifted infants and toddlers is early movement and early speech. These increase the child's capacity to acquire and process information, and so foster learning and strengthen intelligence. Gifted infants and toddlers are very active and purposeful with their activity.

Early signs of giftedness in infants are preference for novelty—new toys and a change of scenery will alleviate fussiness and boredom. They recognize the important people in their lives early. First sounds, first words, and developmental milestones come earlier than typical. Gifted infants can easily learn many signs and use them to communicate their needs.

Even as infants, gifted children often need less sleep. Generally sensitive, they react strongly to noise, pain, and frustration.

Gifted toddlers may show intense interest in books, letters, and numbers. Highly curious, they typically develop a long attention span and an extraordinary memory. They can follow a sequence of several directions and demonstrate understanding of language and concepts. While they may speak late, their early utterances include complete sentences and complex thoughts. They use personal pronouns as early as 16 months old.

Gifted preschoolers continue to demonstrate verbal skills with an extensive vocabulary. In addition, they demonstrate abstract reasoning, negotiating skills, vivid imaginations, sensitivity, and compassion. A gifted preschooler can draw a person with two body parts nearly a year ahead of peers, and later draws a person with neck, hands, and clothes nearly two years in advance of typical age-mates. Other indicators are an excellent sense of humor, word play, and advanced social maturity, such as reminding others about rules.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Begin with knowledge and awareness of your child's capabilities. Expand your base of information and resources, learning more about developmental milestones, what to expect of your child at any age, and study giftedness. Observe, document, and date your child's



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vocabulary, early language, artwork, and physical accomplishments. Prepare to help your child navigate the challenges of being different.

MODEL PERSONAL AND SOCIAL SKILLS

Parents can help reduce the intensity of the gifted young child's personality and perceptions by modeling calming behaviors, for example, relaxing walks, warm baths, and soothing music. Parents coach for impulse control, patience, problem solving, and social skills. Children with perfectionist tendencies can be helped to solve their own problems and to allow themselves to learn from their efforts. Continue reading with your child, selecting for information, inspiration, and potential discussion.

INVEST IN BALANCED GROWTH

Gifted children often develop asynchronously—that is, unevenly between physical, emotional, social, and intellectual domains. Parents can help by fostering balance and roundedness in the child's development rather than early specialization or relentless expectations. Strive to appreciate, respect, and nurture all aspects of your child, including the challenging and non-gifted areas.

WORK WITHIN YOUR SCHOOL

Programs designed for gifted children vary within school districts and individual schools. Accelerated placement in specific content areas or small "pull-out" groups may be offered. When your child begins preschool, kindergarten, or the early elementary grades, offer the teacher insight about your child based on a portfolio of artwork, stories, photography, and anecdotal notes.

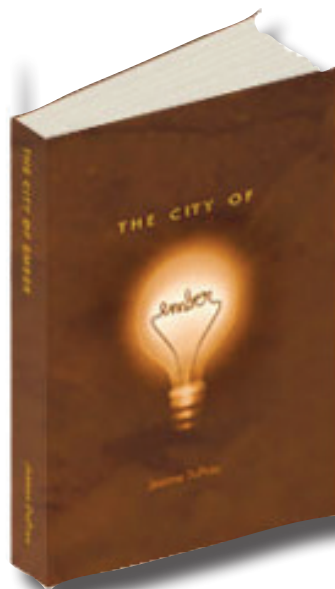
Be aware that teachers may find your interest overbearing and inappropriate at first, so invest in a long-term relationship of respect and diplomacy with your child's teachers and school. Volunteer and become a member of your child's teaching team and find other parents who share your interests.

SUPPLEMENT THE SCHOOL CURRICULUM

At home and in school settings, all children need and deserve secure relationships and appropriate challenges. Likewise, all children benefit from exposure and access to a variety of experiences, such as travel, museum trips, performances, and opportunities for in-depth exploration, play, and fun! These spark interests that can grow into talents when actively nurtured. Parents can help develop confidence and social acceptance by encouraging friendships, projects, and activities among their gifted children.

Nurturing your child's special gifts begins with an investment in knowledge and thoughtful responses and continues with diplomatic advocacy. As your child's first teacher, your early awareness and support is your child's bridge to a life-long love of learning and personal accomplishments.

Dr. Nancy Benson holds a master's degree and Ph.D. in education from CU-Boulder. She is the founder and owner of Treehouse Learning, an early education program located in the Louisville area. Her work with remarkable young children over the years has prompted awareness and formal study of giftedness. Nancy has two grown daughters, both courageous and accomplished young women. Comments and questions are welcome at nancy@treehouselearning.com or please call (303) 666-1950



Avery's
Avid-Reader Corner

Author: Jeanne DuPrau

Title: *The City of Ember*

Ages: 8–12 years old

ISBN: 978-0-375-82274-2 (0-375-82274-7)

Price: \$6.95 (Barnes and Noble)

Summary: The book *The City of Ember* tells how two young children, Lina Mayfleet and Doon Harrow, a messenger and a pipe laborer, have to work together to save the inhabitants of Ember, the city that they live in. Ember, an underground city, was only built to last two hundred years. The clock is ticking, their time is almost up and the generator has failed. Will these two kids be able to save the city of Ember?

Why I Liked This Book: The character portrayals were very vivid, and the story kept me guessing until the end.

Quick Fact: This book was also made into a movie and is available on DVD.

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