

EXPECTATIONS, PARENTING, AND SCHOOLING FOR YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN

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Young children in general are very complex. They are amazing in the tasks, abilities and areas that they develop in the first five to eight years of their life; some researchers estimate upwards of 80% of all of their deep knowledge is constructed at that time. Having a young child who is also cognitively gifted gives added dimension to that complexity. Although there are many issues that arise during this period of development, probably one of the most difficult to understand and address as a parent and teacher is the difference between aspects of a child's development that are age-appropriate and those that are developmentally advanced. Let me give you an example. A teacher was watching two young gifted children playing with a ball and the children began to loudly discuss, "Whose ball is it?" "It's mine!" "No, it's mine!" Knowing that the boys would understand, the teacher talked with them briefly about sharing and cooperation. "It's when you want us to let each other play," responded the boys. The teacher, thinking all was settled, turned instead to see one boy hit the other and yell, "But that ball is mine!" When you know that a cognitively gifted child can have social knowledge (knowledge of the rules and the ability to repeat them) but not social competence (actions that match), then you understand the dilemma. In fact, this is not at all uncommon. Gifted children's social knowledge is developmentally advanced but their social competence is age-appropriate for four-year-olds. This phenomenon occurs across physical and cognitive areas as well.

How do we address this issue with young gifted children? Should we expect that because they can intelligently articulate the "rules" that they will enact them at the same level? No, we shouldn't. We need to maintain reasonable expectations that take into account both dimensions of the young child's development. One of my dearest friends in early childhood education continually reminds me that we cannot see the world through the eyes of young children; they construct their view of the world in a way that makes sense to them. In some cases, that vision of the world is flawed, in part because of age,

experiential knowledge, and exposure. Adults, parents and teachers must provide the bridge to understanding, because although sometimes we don't feel as if we are as intelligent as our gifted child, we do have age, experience, and exposure.

At the risk of challenging some assumptions, I do want to comment on the need to distinguish a child's accomplishments from parent and teacher accomplishments. We are rightfully proud of the efforts, work, and expertise that our children can demonstrate. But, sometimes adults have difficulty distinguishing the accomplishments of their children or students from their own development and accomplishments as adults, making it very difficult for young gifted children to make mistakes, take a risk, or tell an adult that they are unsure of themselves. Young gifted children are often sensitive enough to understand, without being able to articulate, that their "mistakes" become our mistakes. For example, the parent who praises only the A and doesn't praise the effort behind a solid B that was actually the harder accomplishment, or the parent who constantly parades the child's accomplishments in front of others, can make a young child think that he is only worthy of his parent's attention when he is successful, gets all A's and does something to brag about. Children need to live in a psychologically and physically healthy environment that permits age-appropriate experimentation, choices, time for play, and time for "mistakes." We call that learning. Sharing your adult pathway to life-long learning, your mistakes, and your adult accomplishments gives children the understanding that real learning is a balance of successes and not so successful experiences. It can help a young child to understand that she is loved for herself, not just for her accomplishments.

Jim Gallagher once said that all you have to do is watch them and young gifted children will tell you through their actions what they need to be doing. By and large, he was correct. As a parent or educator, when you are trying to make sound educational decisions for a young gifted child, I think there is only one real question, "In what ways will this benefit the child?" Parents are very knowledgeable about their young gifted children, however they are not always knowledgeable about educational alternatives.

Teachers are knowledgeable about schools and classrooms, but they do not know your child and, sometimes, they don't know much about giftedness. In order to make sound educational decisions on behalf of your child at an early age, you need both groups in the room. Informed decisions that benefit the child are made based on patterns of evidence collected over time. Evidence may include standardized tests, parental observations at the school, opportunities for the child to visit the new classroom, or information collected in any manner of other ways. Using that information wisely is based on looking at the age-appropriate aspects of the child's development and the developmentally advanced areas; it is that delicate balance that should be considered when thinking about schooling decisions. Another decision is who will be keeping track of the early decisions made on behalf of a gifted child? Early entrance, for example, may be an option, but when the child arrives in middle school and is one or two years younger than his classmates, who accounts for that? Who ensures that the child is still getting the support they need? A long-term view is needed when we make early educational decisions on behalf of a young gifted child. Early formal schooling is not necessary to the development of giftedness or potential. Creating a literacy rich environment, time for play, informal field trips, hands-on experiences, and sound parenting, are often more useful to the development of a young gifted child than placement in a school setting.

The good news is that young gifted children are truly amazing, funny, and able to see things that we do not! Their questions are magnificent, their understandings complex, and their potential is great. Our ability to guide and nurture those gifts requires life-long learning on our part – but what a terrific adventure!