

SIGNS OF GIFTEDNESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Louise Porter, PhD, MA(Hons.), MGiftedEd, DipEd, BA, BIntStuds

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(2nd ed.). Routledge.*

Giftedness means that children are achieving at least one-third ahead of age, in one or more developmental domains. This means that a three-year-old will be functioning more like a four-year old and a six-year-old like a typical eight-year-old – I repeat, in one developmental domain or more. (No one is gifted at everything.)

The orthodox definition is that three to five per cent of the population fall within the gifted category. Another way that this is expressed is that they have a percentile ranking of 97 to 99, which is to say that they achieve ‘as well as or better than 97 to 99 per cent of the population’. Because this sounds so extreme, I do not like to use percentile rankings when, in a city of a million people, there will be 50,000 gifted learners. Of course, these individuals will be of all ages and in various locations and will not necessarily be accessible or relevant to individual gifted children, whose statistical rarity can make them stand out, be isolated, and feel alone and abnormal.

When attempting to identify giftedness, while checklists such as the one given here appear to be straightforward, it is difficult to know how much of each characteristic a child has to display in order to qualify as being gifted: It can be difficult to judge what ‘learning *quickly*’ means, or what ‘most of the time’ or ‘often’ mean.

Second, checklists do not indicate how *many* of these characteristics children have to demonstrate in order for the judgment to be made that their development is advanced. The following checklist indicates that children can be gifted in a single domain, or across a range of skill areas. Even so, it is not certain how many qualities within each skill area children need to display.

Third, checklists can incorrectly imply that all gifted children are the same, when in fact they can display any combination of the attributes described.

Finally, checklists rely on children’s performances to identify giftedness, when many gifted children underachieve or do not conform behaviourally and therefore would not be identified by observation of their behaviour.

If after examining the following signs of giftedness, you remain unclear about a child’s abilities, I recommend an IQ test to clarify the child’s skills and needs. This will add to your picture of your child and allow you to advocate for their needs at school.

COGNITIVE (THINKING) SKILLS

Children who are intellectually gifted display many of the following features:

- early achievement of developmental milestones (at least one-third sooner)
- quick learning
- keen observation of the environment
- active in eliciting stimulation from the environment
- quick and accurate recall
- recall of skills and information introduced some time ago
- deeper knowledge than other children
- understanding of abstract concepts (e.g. death or time)

ACADEMIC GIFTEDNESS

Not every child who is intellectually advanced will be academically gifted, because there are more ways to be clever than in reading, writing and mathematics. Those children who are both intellectually *and* academically gifted might:

- read, write or use numbers in advanced ways
- show advanced preferences for books and films (unless sensitive to older themes).



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LEARNING STYLE

Many gifted children not only achieve more than average, they also approach tasks with a sophisticated style. However, their application to tasks is responsive to fatigue, discouragement (immediate or long term) and the degree of challenge. Nevertheless, when highly achieving, they display:

- alertness
- responsivity to novel stimuli
- speed and efficiency of information processing
- willingness to reflect when necessary in order to maintain accuracy
- openness to new ideas and experiences
- motivation and curiosity in a search for understandings
- wide-ranging interests
- an intense focus on or the ability to immerse themselves in an area of interest, in order to achieve a depth of understanding
- longer than usual concentration span on challenging topics of interest (but may 'flit' from one activity to another if activities are not challenging enough)
- early use of metacognitive skills to manage their own thinking processes internal locus of control
- independence at challenging, non-routine tasks
- willingness to take risks
- perseverance in the face of obstacles
- tolerance of ambiguity.



CREATIVE THINKING STYLE

Children who are intellectually *and* creatively gifted might display the following learning styles, applying these across domains or in a single domain in which they excel:

- imagination
- creative problem solving
- use of intuition (that is, allowing some of their thinking to occur at a preconscious level)
- fluency, which reflects an ability to employ a range or quantity of ideas
- flexibility, which refers both to the quality of ideas brought to bear on the problem and to skill at adapting their learning style to the task demands and goals
- being nonconforming and rejecting limits.



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AUDITORY-SEQUENTIAL STYLE

Children who learn by listening typically become competent at doing tasks sequentially, because words convey one idea at a time. These children are easily recognised as gifted because they conform to stereotypes about typical giftedness. They usually:

- learn sequentially: one idea at a time
- are analytical: are able to break problems down into their parts
- attend well to details
- learn well from verbal instructions
- are able to carry out instructions to do several things in succession
- think logically
- have good planning skills
- are organised
- are less impulsive than age-mates
- have a clear understanding of cause-and-effect
- use rehearsal to remember
- once in school, earn reasonably even grades across all subject areas.

VISUAL-CONCEPTUAL STYLE

Children who learn by forming visual images of concepts may be later than others to excel, and are often accused of being capable 'When he tries'... 'When she puts in effort'... 'When he wants to' and so on. Their giftedness is overlooked because they are less capable at sequences and verbal skills than those with an auditory-sequential style. Nevertheless they are efficient learners once 'the penny drops': that is, once they understand a concept. They typically:

- learn concepts all at once (holistically)
- synthesise ideas: that is, put them together
- see the big picture and, correspondingly, may miss details
- learn intuitively
- have what can only be termed 'quirky' organisational systems
- learn instantly and so do not benefit from rehearsal or repetition
- once in school, obtain uneven grades across subject areas.

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE SKILLS

Intellectually gifted children with advanced verbal skills are the most obvious to observers. However, advanced speech has social repercussions in that age mates do not understand them and therefore they can become socially isolated, which can cause educators to think of them as having social delays and therefore of not being 'ready' for school. They often show:

- early comprehension
- advanced speech, in terms of vocabulary, grammar and clear articulation
- use of metaphors and analogies
- ability to make up songs or stories spontaneously
- ability to modify language for less mature children
- use of language for a real exchange of ideas and information at an early age
- pleasure at playing with words, rhymes and rhythms
- a sophisticated sense of humour (because humour is about detecting the unexpected).



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MOTOR ABILITIES

Many intellectually gifted children have fine motor skills that lag behind their intellectual level. Their hand cannot keep up with the speed of their thoughts, which can be frustrating for them and cause them to avoid these tasks. On the other hand, those who are gifted in the motor domain can show a range of the following characteristics:

- early motor development, particularly in skills that are under cognitive control such as balance
- ability to locate themselves within the environment
- early awareness of left and right
- facility at putting together new or difficult puzzles
- ability to take apart and reassemble objects with unusual skill
- ability to make interesting shapes or patterns with objects
- (for some) advanced drawing or handwriting
- high levels of physical energy.



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ARTISTIC EXPRESSION

Although most young children may not yet have been exposed to the arts in any formal way and so may not be showing artistic talent, some display early signs of instinctive art skill, such as:

- exceptional visual memory
- engaging with an imaginary playmate in elaborate conversations and games
- assigning elaborate characters to dolls or teddies
- creating and performing in plays
- enjoyment of drama, role playing
- advanced skill at drawing, painting or other artistic modalities.

MUSICAL SKILLS

Musical giftedness may be among the earliest to emerge – by the age of one year – although very young children’s motor ability can block their musical performance.

Musically gifted children:

- are enthralled by musical sounds
- have a deep appreciation and understanding of music (with or without musical performance skills)
- are sensitive to musical structure – tonality, key, harmony and rhythm
- appreciate the expressive properties of music – timbre, loudness, articulation and phrasing
- have a strong musical memory that permits them to recall music and play it back later either by singing or through an instrument.



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SOCIAL SKILLS

Intellectually and verbally advanced young children typically are also advanced in their social skills, although their play mates might not share their interests or be able to engage in their sophisticated play. In reverse, gifted learners can find agemates' interests shallow and uninteresting, in which case they will seek adult companionship, which is not always available or appropriate, and can be misinterpreted as a lack of social skills when, instead, the children lack social *peers*. Their advanced sense of justice can cause them to react with hurt to being bullied, a response that is gratifying to the instigators and, therefore, encourages further victimisation.

Those who are socially gifted display some of the following characteristics:

- highly developed empathy for others
- less egocentricity: they can deduce the cause of others' emotions
- advanced play interests
- early ability to play games with rules
- early ability to form close friendships
- seek out older children or adults for companionship
- withdraw to solitary play if intellectual peers are not available
- are often sought out by other children for their play ideas and sense of fairness
- leadership skills
- early development of moral reasoning and judgment
- early interest in social issues involving injustices.



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EMOTIONAL AND BEHAVIOURAL CHARACTERISTICS

The majority of intellectually gifted children are emotionally gifted as well. Their emotional development does not reach the level of their mental age (or IQ) because they have not had that much life experience yet, but their emotional and social awareness and problem-solving skills will cause their emotional development to be ahead their actual (or chronological) age. These children might display:

- emotional sensitivity, intensity and responsiveness
- for some, early spiritual awareness
- early development of fears
- early development of self-concept and awareness of being different
- self-confidence in their strong domains
- perfectionism, in the sense of having high standards
- over-sensitivity to criticism
- frustration, which can lead to emotional or behavioural outbursts
- acceptance of responsibility usually given only to older children
- non-conformity.



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Our deepest fear
is not that we are inadequate.

Our deepest fear is that
we are powerful beyond measure.

It is our light, not our darkness
that most frightens us.

We ask ourselves:
'Who am I to be brilliant,
gorgeous, talented and fabulous?'

Actually, who are you not to be?...

Your playing small
does not serve the world.

There is nothing enlightened
about shrinking so that other people
won't feel insecure around you...

We were born to make manifest
the glory ... that is within us...

And as we let our own light shine,
we unconsciously give other people
permission to do the same.

Williamson, M. (1997). *A return to love:
Reflections on the principles of a course in miracles.*
Thorsons