

Hidden Gifts: What To Know So Your Child Isn't Overlooked

School's in session – and although most of their parents don't realize it, millions of early elementary age kids are being screened, tested, and sorted in an attempt to find those who need gifted education support services to flourish.

While it may seem that gifted kids should be able to do well in any setting, parents, researchers, and specialists who advocate for this sometimes overlooked group point out that many of our brightest child minds become bored, frustrated, and tuned out - both socially and academically - without placement in a gifted program that allows them to move through the curriculum at their own pace and connect with “mental mates” who may hold similar interests.

While many schools do an excellent job of finding these kids using screening methods like teacher recommendations and group IQ testing, parents shouldn't be entirely dependent on the schools when it comes to identification. Keep in mind that many teacher training programs require little, if any, course work in giftedness, so some teachers and school administrators may not have all the information they need to recognize gifted children. There are also gifted kids who are not particularly high achievers in the classroom or who don't do well on group tests. These kids may have problems with attention, have poor organizational skills, or simply not mesh with the teaching style in the classroom, and therefore may be overlooked when it comes to selection of gifted program candidates.

These types of scenarios are not unusual. In fact, some estimate that the majority of gifted children in the schools are never identified. That may not be a tragedy for some, but it very well could be for others who truly need special programming and support to get through school successfully.

I recall one boy he tested privately at the request of his mother who was concerned because her son was getting poor grades, having conflicts with the teacher, and becoming more and more disinterested in school. He was having social conflicts too, being teased and picked on by other students who liked to see his overreactions when they provoked him. It had gotten to the point where home schooling was being considered since it was getting harder to even get him out the door to go to school, which he considered torture. The school had never tested her son for giftedness. Whatever screening process was in place had missed him. Possibly because he didn't fit the high-achieving, cooperative, wunderkind image that some teachers look for when making recommendations for gifted screening. Yet it turned out that his IQ measured in the 160's - in the exceptionally gifted range.

This boy's problems at school are not unusual for unidentified gifted kids. Had he been properly tested and placed in an alternative program, many of his academic and social problems might have been avoided. At the very least, the boy's parents and teachers would have had a better understanding of his problems and been able to collaborate from a more informed perspective to come up with solutions.

Because schools can sometimes look over gifted kids who may need special programming, your insights as a parent are important. The more knowledge you have, the better position you'll be in to collaborate with the school to help assure that your child's potential and learning needs are not overlooked.

SO HOW DO YOU TELL IF YOUR CHILD IS GIFTED?

As you've probably guessed, without proper assessment, which involves a professionally administered IQ test, there is no easy answer. There are no universally accepted traits that you can look for and no definitive signs that will tell you for sure whether your child is gifted. However, many gifted children share some common characteristics, and knowing these is a good place to start.

Language Skills

While most children are able to form recognizable sentences and understand complex language by about two years of age, gifted children often reach these milestones earlier. As they approach school age, other language skills may appear advanced or sophisticated.

Learning Abilities

All children (all people really, big and small) have an inborn desire to learn about the world around them - to seek out new experiences, figure out the relationship between themselves and their surroundings, to discover, and to learn. What distinguishes gifted children from others is the apparent natural ease and joy with which they go about doing this. Their brains appear to be mental sponges, effortlessly absorbing and incorporating new information and ideas.

Emotional and Behavioral Traits

Gifted children are often more emotionally intense than others. They can also be more sensitive to others' feelings and circumstances and may display a great deal of empathy in situations where others their age appear indifferent.

Motor Skills

Gifted children may also be advanced in skills involving balance, coordination, and movement and in some purposeful fine-motor activities such as assembling small objects (e.g., legos, transforming toys, blocks) or putting puzzles together.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOUR CHILD HAS BEEN OVERLOOKED

So what should you do if your child has shown many of the above traits, and you feel that he has been overlooked by the school's gifted screening process? While you don't want to be perceived as overly protective or pushy, you also want to make sure that those making the decisions have all the information they need to truly understand your child.

Start by talking with your child's teacher and sharing your thoughts. Parents and teachers are a child's most important allies and they need to keep each other informed and up to date. Each sees the child from a different perspective and each has a particular insight

into a child's learning needs. As a parent, you've watched your child's development since birth. You've seen him at home, at play, with friends, and with family. You're in a good position to truly understand his specific interests, temperament, unique gifts, strengths, and limitations. The teacher, on the other hand, has had an opportunity to evaluate your child's learning style, academic skills, and social and cognitive development in comparison to a large number of other children of the same age. It doesn't take long for most experienced teachers to develop an intuitive sense of their students' strengths and needs - to evaluate how quickly they learn, the type of instruction they respond to best, and their attitudes toward school. The teacher may also help you to better understand the district's gifted education program and how it is different than what your child is already receiving.

Together, you should be able to get a more complete, objective view than either of you had on your own. Maybe you'll come to realize that your child would be better off in a general education program since his learning style would not mesh with the type of curriculum being used in the district's gifted program. On the other hand, in light of the extra information you have given her the teacher may recommend to the district administrator in charge of gifted placement that your child be tested further, maybe with an individually administered IQ test.

If you've already talked with the teacher and you still feel that your child's needs are not being met, then consider following up on your request with an administrator. Find out through conversations with other parents, or by a phone call to the district office, who is in charge of the gifted program selection process at your child's school. Then write a politely worded letter stating your concerns. Also consider sending a copy to the district's coordinator of gifted education, the school principal, and the teacher.

Now all you need to do is allow those involved to respond and let the district's screening process take over. Districts generally want to work with parents and will follow up on most reasonable requests.

Editor's Note: David Palmer's Book, *Parents' Guide to IQ Testing and Gifted Education: All You Need to Know to Make the Right Decisions for Your Child* (2006) is available online and through Barnes and Noble and other fine booksellers.

SIDE BAR MATERIAL: Remember, IQ tests are best seen as predictors of academic achievement. An IQ score only tells us how a certain child has performed on a certain test at a certain time, and says little about that child's true potential. Children can be gifted in many ways that are not measured on an IQ test.