

## What is giftedness?

When most people think about a gifted child, they think about a child who is achieving brilliantly in some way – the top-of-the-class child who wins the national maths competition for children three years older than him or herself or the annual award for best artwork by someone under 15 or some other such exceptional performance.

It's perfectly true that a gifted child is one who is at least potentially capable of exceptional performance in some area when what he or she can do is compared with what other children of the same age can do, and, of course, it's legitimate to want the gifted child to fulfil that potential.

But it's far from true that every gifted child does achieve highly in these obvious ways. In fact, research suggests that up to 50% of gifted children and adolescents may be *underachieving* at school. Many gifted children are never even recognised as such by their teachers and sometimes not even by their families.

That's because giftedness is not just about performance. It's a mistake to think of it only in that way. Performance, however brilliant, is essentially an outward manifestation of an *inner reality* – the distinctive way in which the gifted child or adolescent (or adult) perceives and responds to what he or she observes, experiences, discovers, is told or taught.

What makes the inner reality of a gifted child so different is the *intensity* with which he or she perceives experience, the lens through which he or she sees the world. Thus what makes another child happy can fill a gifted child with joy, what makes another child angry can make a gifted child shake with rage, what is seen by a gifted child as outrageously unjust may leave another child indifferent. And what takes most children many repetitions to master may be mastered by the gifted child virtually straightaway, while what utterly bores other children may hold the gifted child's attention with complete absorption for hours or even weeks.

As writer Stephanie Tolan succinctly put it, "The reality of giftedness remains a different experience of life." Michael Piechowski, a leading expert on this aspect of giftedness, perhaps summed it up best when he wrote in his book *Mellow Out – If Only I Could*":

Giftedness is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive.

Clearly all of this has huge implications, not only for how a child learns, but for how a child needs to be taught. A programme designed for children who need lots of practice with new skills and who accept the correctness and completeness of what they are taught is never going to meet the needs of a child who grasps concepts quickly, wants to explore further, and asks questions that go outside and beyond what the teacher has planned. Particularly not when that child has a vocabulary far in advance of classmates, will argue points of detail at length, has enthusiasms other children don't share, "turns off" when bored but when interested simply doesn't want to stop. Never mind the timetable!

Such intensity also has huge implications for how the gifted child relates to other children and to adults. It's hard for other children and indeed for many adults to comprehend the gifted child – to grasp what makes that child tick. It's equally hard for the gifted child to comprehend why other children don't "get" ideas that seem so obvious to him or her, aren't interested in things that he or she finds fascinating, don't share his or her distress when others suffer, and don't even want to play the same kinds of games, perhaps nowhere better expressed than by the small girl who came home from school in tears one day, having taken her doll to school in a desperate attempt to make friends with other girls. So what happened? "Mummy, all the other girls just wanted to play Barbie dolls and *I* wanted to play Queen of Sheba....".

To further complicate matters, gifted children are rarely gifted in every area of the curriculum, a fact that many adults find confusing. And they come in many different packages, from poor families every bit as often as from affluent families, and from every culture, and sometimes with disabilities that impede learning, facts that challenge many entrenched preconceptions.

Given this bundle of differences, it's hardly surprising to find that many gifted children do not achieve at school at anywhere near the level they're potentially capable of reaching. Nor is it surprising if they are not recognised as having that potential. Regular school programmes simply don't give them the *opportunity* to achieve at their true level of ability. More importantly, when school doesn't provide and teachers haven't been taught about giftedness, gifted children don't have adequate opportunity to grow as people – to build a positive self identity, to find friends, ultimately to find personal fulfilment and a satisfying adult life role.

But how different it can be once we do understand more about what giftedness is! For parents, the concept of intensity explains so much and supports them so powerfully in seeking to understand and help their gifted child – and may help to make sense of much in their own lives. Teachers who have come to appreciate the reality of all that intensity can offer to a child's feeling, thinking, and learning find the gifted children in their care opening like blossoms to the sun to teaching that embraces that understanding.

Together, we seek to share that knowledge and the insights it brings us.

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The intensity of perception and responses seen in gifted individuals was first described by a Polish psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski. He identified several different ways in which this intensity made itself evident, and called these "overexcitabilities", or, to be more accurate, this is how it was translated from Polish. You can find a very useful and informative short article about this at [www.stephanietolan.com](http://www.stephanietolan.com) – go to her Articles page and scroll down to "Dabrowski" – and while on that site, check out the other articles by this very much respected expert and writer on many facets of giftedness.