

How do I know if my child is gifted?

If your child is unhappy at school, persistently says school's boring, doesn't somehow seem to fit in, or perhaps seems reasonably happy but the classroom programme is only covering material you know she or he has already learned – perhaps self-taught – a long time ago, then you may well be asking yourself is this question.

But how can you as a “mere parent” know if your child is gifted? If the teachers at school don't think so or haven't noticed, then how can *you* claim to know better?

Let's start with some statistics. The Gifted Development Center in the US is one of the world's most experienced centres in assessing giftedness. Its number of cases runs into the thousands. And here's what they've found: 84% of the children brought for assessment by their parents are genuinely gifted. They concluded “Parents are excellent identifiers of giftedness in their children”. What's more, the evidence shows that parents' IQ scores are generally within 10 points of their children's IQ scores, and siblings within 5 to 10 points. Thus you're likely to have personal sight into what it feels like to think and react differently from most others around you.

So if you're starting to ask “Is my child gifted?”, the chances are high that you're right. In fact, you're more likely to be right than the teacher, simply because most teachers haven't had any specific training in this area and the regular classroom doesn't always provide an adequate opportunity for the gifted child to show how much further he or she can go. It doesn't mean teachers are necessarily closed to the idea of giftedness (though a few are): it really only means that they genuinely may not know what to look for.

All the same, you need to have some firm factual evidence to support you in approaching the school. Indeed, such evidence may well be welcomed by a teacher who knows she hasn't quite been able to “put a finger” on what exactly your child needs.

What evidence?

First of all, of course, if the classroom environment allows for it, your child may already be performing so far ahead of classmates that the school has already accepted that he or she is gifted and needs differentiated material. In that situation, your evidence, perhaps of interests pursued at home, may simply be needed to help shape specific aspects of your child's programme.

Formal assessment?

But when that's not the case and you need to convince the school, one avenue open to you is *formal assessment* by an educational psychologist whose list of professional services includes giftedness and/or twice-exceptionality. Such an assessment will include a test of your child's cognitive abilities – what used to be known as an “IQ test”. These tests are very reliable, and it can be said with surety that, while it's possible for various reasons for a child to perform *below* his or her true ability level on that particular day, it's virtually impossible for a child to perform *above* his or her true level. So if the result shows your child to be somewhere in the gifted range, they *are* in the gifted range. Unarguably, regardless of performance at school.

These tests measure intellectual and reasoning abilities which are very necessary for school learning, so they are certainly very relevant indeed. But it's also important to be aware that some areas of ability cannot be measured by this kind of test. Most significantly, they can't measure creativity, which is often a very important component in giftedness – certainly central for those gifted individuals who take knowledge or understanding in new or further directions.

They are also expensive because of the hours involved, not only in the testing itself, but in the subsequent time it takes to analyse the results and write a report on the findings, so this may not be an option for you. But the evidence you gather yourself can also be very significant, as suggested below.

Abilities vs qualities

Tests of cognitive abilities also can't measure *qualities* such as empathy for others, leadership, resoluteness, commitment to service to others, spirituality or even humour. Our Western world has tended to focus very heavily on measurable abilities as being the most significant statement we can make about a child at school. New Zealand Maori, like many indigenous peoples, place first emphasis instead on the qualities which define a person, and which shape how that person actually uses whatever abilities he or she has. In recent years, a number of leading thinkers in the gifted field have begun to see the wisdom of this approach. Evidence of this kind is also therefore very significant. You or if your situation permits the elders in your family group may notice and put forward such information.

Performance vs behaviour

If you've read "What *is* giftedness?" elsewhere on this page, this will doubtless have confirmed for you what you already know from experience – that giftedness shows itself, not just in a child's performance in measurable ways at school (test scores, exams, competitions, etc), but also in how the child *behaves*, in his or her characteristic reactions to all the major and minor events of daily life. In so many ways, these reactions are often inherently different from those of the non-gifted child, or far more intense.

Because of this, researchers in the field have been able to put together lists of the sorts of behaviours we see in gifted children. It's essential, of course, for such behaviour to be typical of the child, not just a rare one-off reaction.

The other crucial thing to remember is gifted children are a very diverse group – in a nutshell, their reactions range right across the spectrum but tend to be at the outer edge of the spectrum – one may be a perfectionist and another unconcerned about appearance, but the perfectionist will be intensely so and the careless one will be atrociously so! What this means is that no one gifted child will show *all* the characteristics in any list.

Bearing these two important points in mind, we've printed below one such list from an authoritative source.

A tip: If you're compiling evidence based on this list to present to school, it's absolutely extremely sensible to quote specific examples of the behaviour you're listing. This is much more convincing than your simply saying this is so!

But just before we get to our list, it might be useful to give you a couple of specific examples of the kinds of behaviour that might ring bells with your own experience. First, from James Alvino's list for younger children:

- Active – "I can't sit still, I'm thinking."
- Observant – "This centipede only has 99 legs."
- Curious – "I wanted to know what the garden looked like from the roof."
- Honest and committed to truth – "I don't want to upset you but there is no tooth fairy".

And from J.B. Teare, for older youngsters:

- Has a strong appreciation of the absurd.

- Has a more than normal interest in, and knowledge of, and on the news 'broadcasts. serious items in the newspapers.
- Has a devastating appreciation of the weaknesses of other people including those in positions of authority such as teachers.
- Makes comments of great perception and insight, sometimes out of context and in isolation.

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CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTEDNESS SCALE

Name of Child _____ Name of Parent _____

Date _____

Compared to other children your child's age, to what extent do these descriptors fit your child?

Characteristic Not True Uncertain True Very true

1. Reasons well (good thinker)
2. Learns rapidly
3. Has extensive vocabulary
4. Has an excellent memory
5. Has a long attention span*
6. Sensitive (feelings hurt easily)
7. Shows compassion
8. Perfectionistic
9. Intense
10. Morally sensitive
11. Has strong curiosity
12. Perseverant when interested*
13. Has high degree of energy
14. Prefers older companions/adults
15. Has a wide range of interests
16. Has a great sense of humor
17. Early or avid reader**
18. Concerned with justice, fairness
19. Judgment mature for age *at times*
20. Is a keen observer
21. Has a vivid imagination
22. Is highly creative
23. Tends to question authority
24. Shows ability with numbers
25. Good at jigsaw puzzles
26. Is an independent learner

**(Long attention span or perseverant if interested; Does the child stay with tasks for long periods of time?)*

*** (If the child is too young to read, is intensely interested in books) © Linda Silverman, 1993*

**Please give examples of those characteristics that best describe your child.
 (Use back of sheet.)**

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