

Special Needs of Gifted Children



If you're the parent of a gifted child, then you probably feel very proud of your child and his academic accomplishments -- and rightfully so! Gifted children have so much to offer, and a great deal of potential. Teachers often regard them favorably, and parents beam with pride as they watch their child excel in many different academic subjects.

To an outsider, it would seem that nothing is difficult for gifted children. After all, these overachievers breeze through assignments and easily grasp concepts that confound their

classmates. What could be hard for the gifted? The truth is, though, gifted children have their own unique set of needs, and since most people don't fully realize or acknowledge these needs, gifted children can often struggle in nonacademic areas. Ironically, since so many people view these children as natural achievers, it can be even more difficult for them to receive the special assistance they need in areas not directly related to academic performance. There are five specific special needs common to children who are identified as gifted:

1. Interpersonal Relationships with Peers

It is not uncommon for gifted children to find it difficult to relate to others. They are intelligent enough to recognize that they are different than most children, and therefore, they often view themselves as separate somehow. This can make interpersonal relationships challenging. As a parent, it's important to realize the truth in your child's observation and relate to it. Denying that he is different from his classmates will only confuse your child, thus making the situation worse. Instead, talk to your child about the differences amongst all people. Teach your child to celebrate these differences and to be proud of his individuality. It is often easier for these children to relate to adults than their peers. Teach your gifted child that he can learn from his peers. He can teach them his academic interests and learn about sports or art from them.

2. Attention

Gifted children often have trouble paying attention in class and are sometimes misdiagnosed with ADD or ADHD. Although it's possible for a gifted child to have these disorders, careful diagnostic measures must be taken since gifted children who are under-challenged in school often mimic the same symptoms as a child with an attention-deficit problem. When gifted children aren't provided with engaging, challenging material, they naturally become bored and look for other things to occupy their minds or simply daydream to pass the time. These are not behaviors that should be punished, but rather a sign that your gifted child requires advanced learning opportunities to stimulate her cognitive abilities. If your child is exhibiting signs of ADD or ADHD but is consistently scoring high on classroom assessments or standardized tests, then she may just be in need of an enrichment program or advanced placement. Talk to your child as well as her teacher to gain a better understanding of the situation. If you suspect that your child is bored with the existing curriculum, then advocate on her behalf for a more challenging academic experience to meet her special needs.

3. Motivation

Gifted children can also display a lack of motivation for some of the same reasons that they exhibit attention problems. When children aren't challenged, then they can't grow. As a result, they become bored and fidgety. If this boredom becomes part of their daily routine, then children will simply give up hope that school will ever provide them with an avenue for exploring curiosities or trying new things. When this hope no longer exists, children lose the motivation to participate in classroom activities and may lose the desire to attend school at all. If your gifted child begins to show signs of disinterest when it comes to school, then you need to take action to ensure he is provided with a more engaging, challenging curriculum. Talk to the special needs director at your child's school to find out what programs and options are available to you.

4. Performance Anxiety

Gifted children quickly become used to excelling in school. They respond to the praise of their parents and teachers, and sometimes begin over-identifying with their performance. Combine this with an emotional intelligence deficit, and you have a recipe for performance anxiety. Children who strongly identify with their performance will inevitably fear failure and as a result, avoid taking risks and shy away from any activity they perceive as too challenging. They may avoid difficult assignments or tasks for fear of disappointing their teachers or parents. Of course, such avoidance behaviors will eventually inhibit your gifted child's growth and deprive her of necessary learning experiences and life skills such as persistence and resilience. In addition, children who equate their performance with their self-worth often become perfectionists and struggle to perform to their own ideal standard, often setting bars for themselves that are too high and becoming angry, upset, or even depressed when they fail to meet their own expectations. Instead of seeing mistakes as learning experiences, these children view academic failures as very personal. Any perceived sense of failure has the potential to damage these children's self-esteems. Thus, it's important that parents talk to their gifted children about the important difference between a person's performance and their value as a human being. Avoid being overly critical of your child's scores on assignments and tests, and help children realize that everyone makes mistakes, even gifted individuals. When your gifted child does make a mistake -- as she inevitably will -- be sure to help her embrace the learning experience that the mistake offers.

5. Verbal Communication

Verbal communication can also be a special needs area for many gifted students. Specialists theorize that the spoken word can be difficult for these children because they have the added task of translating the complex ideas in their heads into language that others can understand. This process can lead to abnormal hesitation when speaking, stuttering, and frustration on the part of the child and sometimes those around him as well. To help your gifted child develop good verbal communication skills, encourage him to think through what he's going to say before he says it. Demonstrate the process for him, and let him know that it's perfectly normal to pause before answering a question. Realize that despite your efforts, verbal communication may not ever be one of your child's strengths. Instead of focusing on this weak area, celebrate all of your child's natural talents, and provide him with plenty of ways to express himself nonverbally. Gifted children commonly love to write, for instance, and many of them are artistically talented as well. Be sure to provide necessary materials such as journals, paper, and art supplies, so that your child has every opportunity to explore other avenues of communication.

As you strive to help meet the special needs of your gifted child, realize that you're not alone. There are people who can help you provide the resources and support your child needs. Start with your child's school. Talk to his teacher, the special needs coordinator, and the administrator to discover special programs that may be available for your gifted child. You may also find a support group for gifted children and their parents in your community. If not, consider joining an online community such as Hoagies' Gifted Education Page or a gifted student group like Davidson Institute for Talent Development. Such support groups can help you find additional resources and discuss your child's special needs with other parents who truly understand your plight and can help.

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