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How To Identify a Gifted Student

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As a straight-A student in high school, I was suddenly failing world history. I earned one of the highest grades on our first test, but I refused to do the busy work and my low grades reflected my diminishing effort. I even ended up with a few detentions, which was new to me. My parents were called in for a conference with my teacher.

When my parents came home from the conference, they told me I was no longer in world history. Instead, I was enrolled in AP World History. While my teacher noted that I was a class distraction, she realized I was not being challenged enough. She noticed that all my other classes were honors or AP, and she thought I might thrive in a more difficult history class. AP World History ended up being one of my favorite classes and prepared me well for university courses. My experience is not unique, but it illustrates the fact that a student’s behavior in one class may not tell the whole story.

The occurrence of a gifted student acting out is common and can be seen in students of all ages and grade levels. After being told by a teacher that her 12-year-old daughter had outbursts in class, didn’t play well with others and was “hyper focused” on books, [Amanda Lane took her daughter to a pediatrician](#) who put her on ADHD medication. Not convinced her daughter had ADHD and concerned about the adverse side effects of the medication, Lane found a pediatrician who specialized in behavioral issues. After a series of interviews and tests, the physician said that her daughter was gifted — essentially bored in class, which explained her behavior issues.



Many gifted children are being misdiagnosed and given medication for disorders they don’t have. According to a March 2013 article in *Psychology Today*, Dr. Marianne Kuzujanakis, a pediatrician and a director of Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) says, “Highly gifted children are a particular diagnostic challenge ... when pediatric diagnoses are carelessly applied, gifted children are frequently mislabeled with ADHD, autistic, depressive, or bipolar disorders.”

Dr. Kuzujanakis explains that many gifted children are never identified as gifted and waste much of their day in unsuitable classrooms and may behave in unacceptable ways. “Teachers and physicians also receive minimal instruction on the identification and [management](#) of gifted children and the fact that they seem to be wired differently and have developmental trajectories that differ from the norm,” explains Dr. Kuzujanakis.

Today, it’s even more important that teachers know how to identify and nurture [gifted students](#) because 32 percent of teachers say that advanced students are a low priority in their schools, according to a survey conducted by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). In fact, only 10 percent of teachers report that advanced students are likely to be taught with curriculum and instruction specially designed for their abilities.

In addition, the NAGC survey found that 73 percent of teachers believe that their brightest students are bored and under-challenged and are not given the opportunity to thrive. Further, 77 percent note that because their focus is helping underachieving students to reach proficiency, the needs of advanced students take a back seat.

Identifying a gifted student is not an exact science. It requires a teacher to have the education and [train in gifted education](#) to be able to recognize certain behavioral traits — both positive and negative — that signal a particular student is gifted or has the potential to be a high achiever.

According to [Teachers First](#), gifted students share some common characteristics that an astute, skilled teacher can identify to make sure the student’s individual needs are met to ensure academic success and personal development.

Given the need to identify gifted students, here are some general behavioral traits that children exhibit that can help teachers pinpoint a gifted student:

- Curious and motivated
- Asks many questions
- Has a good memory
- Quickly retains information
- Masters reading skills early
- Demonstrates strong math skills
- Thinks independently
- Expresses unique, original opinions
- Possesses higher level thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation) and problem-solving skills
- Has a strong sense of justice and likes to debate current issues and real-life problems

At the same time, gifted students may also possess the following traits that can negatively affect their learning if their needs are not met:

- Easily goes off task or off topic
- Impatient when not called upon in class
- Gets bored easily
- Resists repetitive work
- Takes on too much work
- Doesn’t work well in groups
- Critical of others and themselves

Indeed, it’s important to consider whether or not a student has any of the above behavioral traits to determine giftedness. Considering the many positive and negative traits, it can be difficult to pinpoint a gifted student.

“Giftedness is not always seen as a socially positive and valued trait,” says Dr. Kuzujanakis. “Many gifted kids are bullied, others underachieve to hide their abilities, and some experience anxiety and depression with increased risk for self-harm. As many as 20 percent may drop out of school,” she adds. Making sure to approach a student in a way that is non-threatening is key.

Teachers have the challenge of recognizing the signs that may indicate a gifted student and planning a course of action to ensure that student is nurtured along a path that creates a stimulating environment for learning and personal growth. While identifying a gifted and talented student is tricky and definitely more of an art than a science, the benefits of successful assessment and support are priceless. I know firsthand the power of a teacher that was up to the challenge, and I’m forever grateful that she recognized my potential, instead of punishing me for my bad behavior.



If you are interested in learning more about developing the specialized knowledge and skills needed to recognize gifted students, check out the [USC Rossier Gifted Education Certificate](#).