

# Gifted Children in the Classroom



*Today, over 6 percent of the children in the U.S. public school system are classified as gifted and talented. As a result, there are more and more programs for these students, and some big questions for parents when it comes to a child's academic course. We all know that children can be gifted in different ways, and many children have exceptional abilities and needs which resist labeling. In the end, gifted programs are not right for every gifted child. To find an ideal school situation—where kids are successful and fulfilled both academically and socially—parents of gifted children sometimes have to expand their minds in ways they hadn't expected.*

## **How Should We Choose a School or Program?**

Psychologists and teachers agree that the best learning happens when a student's level of understanding matches the challenge of new material. It is common for intellectually gifted children to come into elementary school ready and able to learn, yet far ahead of most of their classmates. However, even the brightest 5-year-old needs to be actively involved and probably doesn't have the writing ability, social skills or emotional maturity needed to advance to an academically-appropriate grade level.

The challenge for both schools and parents, then, is to find a setting that is individualized so that students are able to move at their own rate, flexible enough to foster emotional development and social skills, and also one which emphasizes academic creativity. Gifted children not only learn faster, but differently; the "old ways" of teaching such as rote memorization simply do not make sense to these children.

There's no magical formula for finding what will work for you and your gifted child. Most public and private schools have gifted and talented education (sometimes referred to by the acronym GATE) programs in place which are intended to give children individual attention, generally starting in the 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Many schools promote acceleration for highly gifted students, either by grade level or individual subject matter, in an attempt to place children with their intellectual peers. Yet some gifted children don't do well with the negative stigma of "pull out" programs which remove them from the regular classroom; this isolation adds to their feelings of being "different."

You may want to consider the various private institutions across the country designed specifically for gifted and talented children, including residential schools. Some experts recommend home schooling. In any case, do your homework well before school starts: ask friends what choices they made for their gifted kids, research a variety of educational options (a good place to start can be Internet sites such as [www.kidsource.com](http://www.kidsource.com)), and when the time comes, inform teachers and school officials about advanced abilities and also behavioral concerns.

## **Why is My Gifted Child a Poor Student?**

There are many reasons gifted children fail to "live up to their potential" in school. A common complaint is that children are bored and inattentive, or "dumb themselves down" to fit in. Often younger gifted children get good grades, but also get used to doing the minimum since it takes little or no effort to keep up with their classmates. Under-achieving can catch up to bright students in middle school or high school, when the advanced material and demands of enlightened teachers just might take them by surprise. Parents can help by providing challenges outside of school to keep kids on their toes, intellectually. Try exploring different activities such as chess, math, nature or science clubs. But beware of over-scheduling and allow your child the freedom to make the final choices. Also, encourage creativity and curiosity—both you and your child should ask as many questions as you can, any time you can. Whenever possible, work with your child's teachers so that knowledge and skills gained at home can be brought into the classroom and shared with others.

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It's understandable that parents of highly intelligent children put a high priority on their child's academic development and achievements. However, too narrow a focus can leave a child's social and emotional development severely neglected. This can, ironically, cause a gifted child to suffer academically. Gifted children tend to be perfectionists who want to succeed immediately. But unless they learn how to deal with failure, they often develop a habit of quitting; many have severe test anxiety. Statistics show that gifted children report feelings of stress and/or depression twice as often as their peers, and people with a genius IQ are the most likely group to use drugs. The bottom line is that paying attention to a child's social skills and emotional understanding will actually help a child's studies; it's not a "distraction" as some parents seem to believe.

In addition, many learning disabilities among gifted children become more apparent as they get older. Gifted children are frequently diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)—or have undiagnosed ADHD indicators—which creates an impediment to learning, but does not ordinarily classify a child as "special needs." Children with Asperger's Syndrome are often also gifted, but unable to deal with the constraints of a regular classroom. The combination of labels means that nine times out of ten, a teacher is going to worry about stopping disruptive behavior rather than stimulating intellectual exploration. In these cases, parents often have to step in to make sure a child's abilities don't get overlooked or underestimated.

## What if the School's Not Doing Enough?

It's often a difficult thing for parents, knowing how much involvement in our child's education is enough and whether we've gone too far. The advice from most parents of gifted children is don't hold back: be proactive and stay informed. If you feel changes

need to be made, communicate first with your child's teachers. Get their insights and observations, then try to share your concerns without placing blame. Teachers are usually doing the best they can with limited resources, and can be your best ally when it comes to assessing and meeting your child's needs. So if possible, avoid alienating those closest to your child—they'll often be the ones who can help most.

Find out what gifted and talented programs and assessments your child's school has in place, and see if any teachers will push to get your child involved. Discuss other options such as acceleration, switching classes if appropriate, or allowing your child to follow an individualized study plan. If your child is in high school, ask if the school has a dual enrollment program with the local community college. And if you meet with resistance from within the school, you can always have an independent psychologist perform testing to "prove your case."

Unfortunately, however, there is no federal protection for gifted and talented students when it comes to screening and educational services. But most states do have mandates to serve gifted children, or legislation addressing the issue. Many school districts have also passed their own regulations, so different areas are able to provide different services. And gifted and talented programs can vary from school to school in the same district.

In the worst case scenario, you will find yourself up against a school district. If you must fight for your child's education, keep detailed records and research thoroughly. Make sure you know the laws and regulations in your state and school district regarding your rights, and also the steps involved in resolving disputes. And before you begin the battle, weigh what you may gain against the financial and emotional toll on yourself, and your child.