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12 Things I Wish I Had Known About My Young Gifted Kids

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Even though my oldest just graduated high school this year, I still remember how confusing it was when my kids were young. One was a super early reader. The other wasn't, but was amazingly creative. But they also cried way more than other kids in their playgroups, and didn't always fit in socially. I knew my kids were different, but I couldn't put my finger on exactly how, or what was going on. Here's what I wish I had known at the time.

1. If you think your kid might be gifted, you're probably right.

I remember compulsively searching the internet to figure out if my preschoolers really were gifted or not. I didn't even know for sure what the word meant. Later I learned that even families of profoundly gifted kids second guess themselves. A friend shared this insight that helped it all make sense: if your extended family is full of quirky, bright individuals, your point of reference is shifted. You will also gravitate towards friends who are more similar to yourself. Hence, you may not fully appreciate how unusual your child is compared to typically developing children.

2. Chances are, if one kid is gifted, all your kids are gifted.

Whether it's nature or nurture, kids of the same parents living in the same environment share both – and barring trauma or other misfortune, are likely to have similar intellectual horsepower. That said, each kid may show it quite differently, with different personalities, temperaments, strengths, challenges, and interest areas. Some research suggests that second children are more likely to be [overlooked](#), by the way.

3. Stealth disabilities are common.

This is so important that it gets its own terminology: gifted kids with a disability, learning difference, or other neurodiversity are called “twice exceptional” or 2e for short. When a 2e kid is in a too-easy classroom, they may be able to compensate so thoroughly for a disability that it becomes nearly invisible. Sometimes they are working so hard to compensate, that they don't appear to be gifted either. Diagnosis in a 2e child is tricky and school evaluations rarely get it right. Misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis is common. The heaviest hitters are [vision processing disorders](#), [auditory processing disorders](#), [stealth dyslexia](#), dysgraphia, as well as plenty of others. In particular, be aware that ADHD has many lookalikes, and that anxiety is often a symptom of a larger problem. Wait and see is not

advised; if you have an inkling something may be going on, or a kid isn't tracking development like their sibling, take the time to [investigate](#) it. Developmental windows close, and early intervention is [more effective](#) in many cases.

4. Don't neglect physical movement.

It's so easy with a young, gifted kid, especially one who is an early and voracious reader, to spend more time sitting with books and games than running around on the playground. I regret not being just as intentional about physical development as I was about "book learning." The reality is that the human brain needs movement for many important aspects of child development - everything from vision development to vestibular balance to body awareness relies on large doses of gross motor movement in different environments throughout development.

5. Perfectionism isn't about being perfect.

It's really quite poorly named. Kids who struggle with perfectionism seldom hand in perfect work. Instead, they avoid doing the work. They procrastinate. They have trouble making decisions, because they aren't sure which is the right answer. They are impatient with others who aren't "doing it right." They melt down at the first sign of trouble. They are super sensitive to criticism. They are afraid to try. What's really going on? They are dodging any chance of making mistakes. Perfectionism is about avoiding risk. And long term, that risk avoidance can snowball and become an even bigger problem. Helping kids learn to take appropriate risks, tolerate frustration, and get up and try again is an important life goal, and it takes lots of practice. (See #11)

6. Smart kids don't have it easy.

Each kid has their own individual profile, of course, but the common patterns are clearly visible. Whether it's perfectionism, sensitivity, intensity, existential angst, imposter syndrome, multipotentiality, or more – there's a lot for gifted kids to manage that goes far beyond academics. People assume that gifted kids will be successful without help, and that gifted kids are overachievers in every area. But that is rarely true. The vast majority of gifted kids have uneven, [asynchronous](#) development, and have unique challenges in their [social-emotional development](#).

7. Gifted kids need each other, socially.

[Miraca Gross' research](#) is required reading here. Gifted kids have more sophisticated conceptions of friendship earlier than typically developing children, but may not have the practical social skills to go along with it. And all kids, typically developing or gifted, go through crucial social development stages that are all about "friends who are just like me." Without access to other similar peers, it's no wonder why some gifted kids' social development gets pretty bumpy.

8. Don't rely on teachers to identify your child as gifted.

Very few teacher colleges even cover the topic of giftedness, or spend more than an hour or two on the topic. Teachers mean well, but they just don't have the training. This has hit home for me when I have done professional development sessions for teachers. After hearing about current research about gifted kids, including the latest neuroscience about the high IQ brain, and gifted kids' typical characteristics and struggles, teachers are shocked that no one has told them this before. Some even feel mightily guilty about past students that they misunderstood. The bottom line is that schools that rely on teachers

to refer kids for advanced services miss a lot of gifted kids. The research for students of color is even more distressing; teachers severely [under-refer](#) students of color for gifted programs, unless the teacher is of a similar race.

9. Enrichment and creativity is not a gifted program.

If all your school's gifted program promises is extra enrichment, a focus on creativity, or hands-on projects, that is worrisome. ALL students deserve an enriched environment at school, with fun projects, and the opportunity to develop creativity and critical thinking skills. Unfortunately, this approach is very common across the US, usually in the form of a pull-out or one-day-a-week program. This kind of program frankly gives gifted programs a bad name – it is highly questionable to select students based on high potential and/or high achievement and give them extra opportunities that other kids would also benefit from just as much. Unsurprisingly, [research](#) looking at the effectiveness of gifted programs nationwide fails to show significant impact in student achievement, probably because most gifted programs don't actually provide the systematically accelerated curriculum that would support higher achievement.

10. A full-time gifted classroom is worth its weight in gold.

I've seen families move across the state or even across the country to access such a classroom. Why is it so valuable? Academically, this model usually provides much-needed acceleration in math and reading, as well as more depth and complexity. A great program will also seamlessly support the special needs of 2e students, allowing them to access the higher level academics they are ready for. But the academic side is only part of the story. After all, you can supplement academics afterschool if you had to, but no matter how much you try, a parent can't conjure similarly gifted playmates to support your child's social development. A social environment where gifted kids don't feel like oddballs, where kids can trade tips on managing sensitivities or perfectionism, and where it's not taboo to shed a tear over a frustration in class – that is priceless.

11. The point is developing grit and growth mindset, not achievement.

Why do gifted kids need accelerated academics? It's not a [race to calculus](#) after all. It's also not because we're trying to create little Einsteins or send more kids to Harvard. The point is that the schoolwork needs to be hard enough for gifted kids to have to put forth real effort, so that they develop grit, growth mindset, persistence, perseverance, tolerance for mistakes, and a solid work ethic. Those life skills matter more than any single subject taught in K-12 schools. To build those skills with a gifted kid, we need to provide accelerated academics as well as additional depth and complexity, so that school is actually challenging. But don't overdo it. We don't want a pressure cooker. Just enough challenge to challenge to require effort. Persistence and perseverance is the real goal -- the advanced math is just a pleasant side benefit.

12. Gifted programs in public schools are not elitist. They are essential for social justice.

In the beginning I was conflicted. Were gifted programs good for society? What I've since learned has shattered my perceptions. First, not all gifted kids are affluent – in fact, in [raw numbers](#) there are many more poor gifted children than rich ones. Second, gifted kids have significant special needs – perfectionism, intensity, sensitivity, higher incidence of learning differences, misunderstood by teachers and peers – and those needs are rarely met in a typical classroom. Third, [accelerated academics](#) (not IQ) is one of the biggest predictors of long term success in a gifted kid, and that degree

of acceleration rarely happens without an intentional program. As [Dr. Joy Lawson Davis](#) so aptly puts it, “New efforts to bring equity to programs by dismantling them will hurt the very children that they are intended to help the most. Gifted children of color and from poverty need gifted education services.” We need high-quality gifted programs in every public school system, and equitable identification practices to match kids with programs, so that all gifted and 2e kids get the support they need, no matter their zip code. That is social justice.