



## Allowing flowers to bloom

Auckland-based educational psychologist Judy Selvaraj considers the challenges of parenting gifted children.

My thoughts on gifted children, their behaviours and how parents can successfully encourage their development, emerge from my work in assessing gifted children from three years of age and observing how they interact with their peers, adults and parents.

Giftedness is a term used by many practitioners, parents and teachers to explain a raft of creative characteristics that can occur in any area of development. Some definitions explicitly refer to a child being gifted. Others include a gifted visual spatial learner who is twice exceptional (and who has gifted sequential difficulties), and a gifted learner who may be an auditory sequential learner. An apt (and less academic) perspective is my analogy of an unidentified gifted child being a 'closed flower' that is begging to be opened, and one which has every petal within that flower bearing its own uniqueness.

Essentially, the characteristics and behaviours of gifted children are so diverse that they are easily identifiable *because* of their diversity. In meeting and interacting with gifted children and their parents (who have noticed something 'different' about their child), I have recognised the importance of listening, noting and exploring the behaviours and learning characteristics, and reminding myself to remain diverse in my own thinking. Additionally, there is a range of debated research that equally compares and 'mixes up' those who are gifted and those who are bright (and who require accelerated learning programmes). I regard the two as separate groups, although there are many similar characteristics in both bright and gifted children. Whilst gifted children should have programmes to develop their giftedness, they may or may not be 'bright' in terms of the selection criteria for accelerated programmes. On the other hand, keeping some gifted children in their age-appropriate class – e.g. one which has a chronological age of seven – is asking for trouble. It is not only torture for the child, but for the teacher and those around.

To add to the mix, gifted children can have hidden learning disabilities that remain undiscovered as they compensate for them in the early years. As the same time, without proper challenges they become bored and unruly. As the years go by they may find it harder and harder as schoolwork becomes more challenging. Gifted children may play and interact socially with other children their age, yet feel isolated and misunderstood as they have adult preferences in music, clothing and food. Often they can be shunned and even abused verbally or physically by others. Additionally, researchers are beginning to address the higher incidences of ADHD and spelling/handwriting disabilities in the gifted population.

We should consider that leading figures such as Einstein, Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, F.W. Woolworth and Walt Disney have been extensively referred to as being gifted, yet they variously could not speak, did poorly at school and were told they were 'too stupid' to learn. Louis Pasteur, for example, was rated as mediocre in chemistry, while Winston Churchill failed the equivalent of Year 7 and later wrote: 'I was, on the whole, considerably discouraged by my school days. It was not pleasant to feel oneself so completely outclassed and left behind at the beginning of the race.'

But we do know that gifted children read widely, quickly and intensely and have large vocabularies. They interpret nonverbal cues and can draw inferences that other children need to have spelled out for them. They take less for granted, seeking the 'hows' and 'whys'. Their interests are wildly eclectic and intensely focused. They are boundlessly energetic, which can lead to a misdiagnosis of hyperactivity, and they respond and relate well to parents, teacher and adults – often preferring the company of older children and adults to that of their peers. They love to learn new things, are willing to examine the unusual and are highly inquisitive.

The parenting of gifted children can be challenging and in my view it can be compared to taking a long roller coaster ride with many deviations. A parent who tries to rationalise his/her gifted child's behaviours is moving in a direction that is tantamount to learning a second language, without the training that is needed. Parenting takes on a new level: gifted children take great pleasure in intellectual activity and so question the parents about anything and everything. They have well-developed powers of abstraction, conceptualisation and synthesis which mean that parents have to be on their toes. They display a questioning attitude and seek information all the time. They are quick to work out inconsistencies and question their parents' rationale. They quickly perceive similarities, differences and anomalies, and often attack complicated material by separating it into components and analysing it systematically.

Wherever possible, try to answer the questions put by your gifted children and work with them to search the books that you own, or look at Google. You should also encourage them to become self-sufficient at using their own research tools, including websites. A good way of encouraging and structuring the debates that gifted children frequently engage in, is to plan family evenings (e.g. Mondays from 5.30 to 7.30) where family members take it in turn to cook the dinner (it might just be sandwiches or simple hamburgers) and where the family decide on a topic of interest and go around the circle discussing it. This gives a gifted child the opportunity to contribute to a structured intellectual debate.

Because of the creative characteristics that gifted children possess, they are often set apart from their age mates. As a consequence, parents need to organise social and holiday activities so that their gifted child is adequately stimulated, otherwise the holiday can crumble into a pile of stress. When planning for the Easter holidays this year, remember to organise activities that are structured exclusively for your gifted child, otherwise a raft of boredom and challenging behaviours can emerge.