



Sharing the Passion Working with a Gifted Child on the Learning Frontier

Not really gifted



If you fit the gifted profile, you probably feel your unique abilities are more than gift. Our reality is not easily described to others, much in the same way it may not be possible to truly describe the concept of colour to someone born blind.

The non-gifted world defines the gifted by how our knowledge base differs from the average person, as if a gifted child is a regular child with a better memory and wider exposure to the world. There is an implied assumption that eventually everyone might catch up.

Before DNA was discovered, we classed plants and animals according to whether they were visually similar. No basis existed for determining core differences. Animals moved, plants stayed in place. This isn't very different from how gifted children are selected today. Differences are measured by tests of how much they know, rather than how differently or why they may do things.

Our inner differences are only beginning to be explored as living brain function is studied.

At the gifted core are some behaviours which psychologist

Kazimierz Dabrowski defined as overexcitabilities or overstimulabilities. The world often refers to these individuals as passionate.

This central part of being gifted is viewed with suspicion in the regular world, Passion is assumed to burn brightly but soon die. Passion is emotion out of control, colourful, transient, and not reliable. For the gifted population, much of our life is spent analysing if our passion is a gift or a burden.

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Different on the inside

Within the gifted population, several concepts show up often.

- ◆ Most young gifted children are passionate about: justice, right and wrong, rules (for or against), and their own personal organisation system. (adults may see a dis-organisation system.)
- ◆ Gifted people seem to be able to use wider areas of their brain, or different pathways to connect ideas or retrieve information. Some are very good at using spatial, or non linear areas of their brains.
- ◆ Memory may be much stronger in gifted individuals and there is some evidence that memories may endure longer.



- ◆ Gifted individuals frequently multi task ideas. This often works like a computer running hundreds of tasks in background windows, with the results surfacing when the task is complete (but no sign of the processing window which has now stopped running)
- ◆ Many seem to zone out when concentrating. Their concentration is so complete time is processed differently. When they are in the zone what seems like minutes to them, may be hours to the rest of us. They may be using brain waves others use for deep meditation, almost hypnosis.

- ◆ While working in these zones there may be physical differences in the chemistry of their bodies. More blood may go to the brain when they are thinking, dropping their body temperature, or burning more energy. Chemical levels may also rise, reinforcing the feeling of well being that working at these concentration levels brings.
- ◆ Gifted individuals are often aware of other people who are also gifted. Young children will know who is like them, and also avoid those who don't understand. This can create social difficulties for children which may be misunderstood by the adults who work with them.

Giftedness is Asynchronous Development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally. The Columbus Group 1991



Encouraging passion, not performance

Recently there have been many studies of eminence appearing in the gifted literature. While studies of eminence are problematic as they are culturally and politically, sometimes economically based, information is emerging which is worth examining, especially where schools assume that gifted students should be high achieving all rounders.

Barbara Kerr author of *Smart Girls, Gifted Women* uses as the thesis of her book the suggestion that most gifted girls are too well adjusted for their own good. She feels that many gifted girls do not achieve their own goals because their resourcefulness and eagerness to please causes them to compromise their own dreams many times in the course of their development. Kerr's work with girls is also true of many gifted boys.

Gifted students who have sacrificed pursuit of their passion for social acceptance and mark recognition, may step back near high school graduation, searching for something which will give their lives individual meaning, which will help them enrich their world in a fulfilling way.

In Kerr's studies of eminent women she found they commonly were socially isolated as teens. Eminent women ...were frequently sharp tempered and sharp tongued, stubborn in their pursuits and fierce in the defense of their own ideas ...perhaps the way to identify the girls most likely to achieve their dreams is not to look for the straight A high achiever...but to seek out the troubled, brilliant girl, who makes A's only in the subjects about which she cares deeply, and who struggles with a number of frightening and painful issues. (Brynilds Fire: Talent, Courage and Betrayal in the Lives of At Risk Girls, Barbara Kerr and Sharon Kurpius, Proceedings of the 12th world Conference of the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, Seattle, 1997)

Why encourage passion? Passion drives individuals to pursue information voraciously, consuming everything ever made for a particular interest. In the pursuit of the interest of the moment (or a lifetime), one learns at the upper levels of ability, pushing personal development, (and driving the adults around gifted children crazy with the need to provide support). In the process individual methods of learning, of comparing, of remembering, of sharing, are explored. Unique links to community, to researchers, or to the world at large may be discovered. Adult support is crucial to a gifted child involved in this process. Adult support tells the child that even if they are the only one doing this bizarre thing, someone else cares, which gives their activity validity in a world where they may feel disenfranchised. Passion fuels self exploration and acquisition and comparison of knowledge at levels much deeper than is possible any other way.

What if they lose interest? Adults shouldn't focus on how long the child will continue to pursue the current passion. Researcher Abraham Tannenbaum points out that outstanding accomplishment requires motivation, a secure self-concept, the capacity to stay on task, and the willingness to sacrifice short term satisfactions for the sake of long term accomplishment. (Tannenbaum A.J, 1983,p 88, *Gifted Children: Psychological and educational perspectives*. New York. Macmillan). Gifted children cannot routinely explore these areas in normal school curriculum. They must choose and pursue an individual passion to experience their upper levels of personal accomplishment. Each attempt to explore a concept or field wholeheartedly will develop skills that will help when the next passion strikes. Support must be offered to allow the child to follow the passion, encouraging them to develop the skills to follow their interest as far as they wish to go.

What if a child claims to have no passions of their own? Get that child involved with someone whose drive for their passion acts as an example to others around them. Viewing others pursuing a passion lends it legitimacy, and allows a child to consider getting lost in a field themselves. Children whose horizons are limited to social norms, may feel their strong desires to examine a field are not acceptable, especially if other children are not involved in that seemingly adult only interest.

The adult role Adults must remember that they do not need to pursue the passion with the child. Supporting does not mean doing everything with. Often support is strongest when a parent chooses to stay out of the way. The parents of a future Nobel chemist bought their son a derelict bus and parked it at the end of the garden as a laboratory, when it became apparent at age ten or so, that he might accidentally blow up their kitchen. The parents of a world renowned spider expert were not happy with their son's choice of pet and restricted him to a single specimen, but that single specimen was enough to encourage a life long fascination, fueled as much by people who wished to avoid, as well as study, large spiders. Adults supporting passionate gifted children have to think outside the box. Age limitations may restrict a child's access to needed expertise or material. Sports and the Arts are fields which encourage participation, adults involved with gifted children need to supply similar support for other fields.

Areas adults can help

Contacts: magazines, field trips, tickets to film nights or lecture series, memberships in associations, meetings with specialists, appropriate information (safety etc.) Instructors to teach skills needed for advancement.

Guidance: help lay out a process for exploring a passion, model perseverance, suggest new problems to explore, help get around roadblocks.

Support: validation that the passion is real, perhaps admirable, access to a community which supports the same passion, recognition of the level of achievement accomplished. Value a child's asynchronistic development and help them to recognize non conformity has value. Support and encourage the child to make commitments to paths which may not be recognized by non specialists. The ability to commit to a choice will be essential for a child with wide horizons facing their future. Positive experience with commitment must be fostered.

Avoid: setting a child up to perform their passion, pushing the child beyond the limits they set, insisting a child continue with something when they want to change. Don't expect the child to perform as an expert in their field for anyone.



Communities of practice teach and they motivate. They do each of these tasks separately, and together, in many ways. Frequently it is possible to see teaching and motivating activity in the rituals a community of practice creates for the entire community and in the rites of passage the community creates for marking increasing competence. (obvious examples exist in art, music and sport communities). Examining these activities can provide ways to support a child's passion.

Practice Photography

- Rituals for the Community**
Regular association meetings
Members shows
Awards night
Competitions
Publication of work

- Rites of passage marking increasing competence**
Praise from peers for work, criticism of work
Praise from community, inclusion in show
Award for excellence
Placing in competition final
Payment, inclusion in peer edited publication

Practice _____

Rituals for the Community

Rites of passage marking increasing competence

Practice _____

Rituals for the Community

Rites of passage marking increasing competence

Practice _____

Rituals for the Community

Rites of passage marking increasing competence



Learning to persevere: The tools a child will need to follow a passion

Defining a passion A passion is an interest that a gifted child pursues single mindedly. If the passion is pursued in a particular way, so that performance of it becomes distinctly above average it may become a talent. (Read François Gagné for the differences between giftedness and talent). The joy of a passion is that it does not need to meet any outside criteria of merit, but can be followed for self interest alone. Fortunately at high levels, even the most obscure specialities may become careers.

Assessing skill levels/finding tools Passions can be followed at many levels. Asynchrony of development, may cause gifted children to need help bridging levels as they pursue their passion. They may need a master teacher or coach to analyse their ability and to help them to proceed the way master teachers develop musicians or artists. Reading material may reach university or trade levels quickly and a child may need help to overcome jargon or technical language. Materials or tools may be out of reach of children anxious to press forward. Adults need to observe carefully and assist where requested, keeping an eye out for barriers and safety hazards and helping to work around them.

Tracking accomplishment Children following their passion don't usually analyse their path. As these children are already asynchronous, with abilities well outside expected norms, they may not have a sense of accomplishment unless their pursuits are tracked. Often as perfectionists they may view themselves as lacking in the skills or knowledge they need to go further, rather than feeling success at how far they have come. Adults need to help them determine how success is measured by others who share their passions and help them celebrate their achievement of those levels. Badges of accomplishment motivate every community, improving self-concept by recognizing levels of achievement. Recognition and understanding of their level of accomplishment to date also encourages a child to look towards long term as well as short term goals.

What is it this week? Young gifted children don't seem to have difficulty finding things to be passionate about but by the time they are adolescents, many may not be willing to admit their interests anymore. Adolescents may choose passions which may dismay their parents or teachers, their pursuits may be driven by social issues. If a child is investing time finding and standing up for passions, but not pursuing more information or persevering with interests, an adult may need to help a child narrow their focus, or offer support to help develop the skills to reach the next level. Adults must be careful not to force continuation of an extinct passion.

The single issue specialist Difficulties with these children include encouraging them to use skills for purposes outside their passion and fuelling their need for deeper experiences and information. Adults supporting specialists need to advocate almost constantly for ways the passion can be included in other projects (creative writing, art ,math) they need to help their child find links and advocate to use them, and they also need to advocate with professionals involved in the child's interest in order to include the child in higher level activities as these become necessary.

The dilettante Lacking necessary tools or master teachers to continue with an interest, or the recognition and understanding of what levels they have achieved, many children switch out of passions at the point where there is a change in expertise level. Repeated blocking of progress at the same level with each new interest causes many children to assume their pursuit may be pointless or too difficult. These children need to see others who are pursuing passions and learn how to continue on before they resign themselves to taking the path of least resistance. They may also need a better understanding of their own abilities and support for taking that risky step to the next level. At risk of losing self confidence in their abilities to proceed and without experience of pursuing long term goals, they may have difficulty choosing an adult path. On the other hand, they may just have pursued a passion as far as they wanted in this area. Adults who work with them need to have clear lines of communication, and offer support if it is requested, before the experimenter turns away from all deeper involvement with passionate pursuits.

Perseverance Dr Mel Levine (author of *The Myth of Laziness*, and *Misunderstood Minds*) tells parents of children with learning differences that success is like a vitamin. You learn best when you love what you are learning and when your attempts are praised. Gifted children, who learn outside the regular system, may never have praise for doing something new, as they may practice it many years before it is expected. In addition, if gifted children only experience knowledge acquisition designed for regular learners, they will never know what it is to struggle, to persevere. Knowledge may become equated with perfect scores and their first true failure as a young adult may be terrifying. For gifted children to continue to benefit from following their passion they must themselves recognize their success and obtain recognition from a community they wish to be part of. They must also learn to commit to a choice and keep going past barriers. Their wide ranging abilities allow them to drop and pick up another interest when they might otherwise push through if they persevere.

Finding contacts/joining a community Contacts are often a stumbling block for children whose access to expertise is limited. Depending on the age of the child, local clubs may offer contact with specialists, or access to professionals. The materials developed by Professor Lauren Sosniak (pages 3 and 4) are designed to help analyze and define Communities of Practice which like sporting, artistic and music communities, will help welcome a child into a shared interest. An adult's supportive role doesn't end when a contact is found. The adult needs to help the child meet the criteria to join the community fully, to be welcomed to participate in the communities rituals and recognized as a practitioner, regardless of their chronological age. Model the format used by dance and music communities which foster the growth of young practitioners.

Building self esteem and self efficacy Entire books are written about gifted children and these two issues. It is essential that gifted children have access to true peers in order to develop self esteem. Peers can be any age, but must function at the same level or above the child. If peers share the passion, the esteem of the individual can rise along with their level of accomplishment. If the child is pursuing a exceptionally isolated passion, self esteem will rise only if the community of practise for that passion interacts with the child. The child will usually dismiss praise from non practitioners. Self efficacy, the capacity to produce the effect of one's choosing, requires a strong sense of self esteem, a sense of ownership of the passion, and initial assistance from adult supporters, who assist the child to analyse and self advocate. As with other issues concerning gifted children, the adult role should be to help the child understand their own needs, and be able to express them in order to achieve needed support .

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These pages were written by Lesley Ansell-Shepherd © 2003



Resources

Gifted Children's Association of B.C. A registered non profit organisation dedicated to increasing awareness and understanding of what it means to be gifted.

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V5Y 3W2
Call toll free 1-877-707-6111 (in Victoria 656-0365)
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Books mentioned in this article:

All Kinds of Minds, Dr. Mel Levine, 2002, Simon and Shuster
Creativity, Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, Harper Collins
Exceptionally Gifted Children, Miraca Gross, 1993, Routledge press, London
Gifted Children: Psychological and educational perspectives. A.J. Tannenbaum, 1983, New York. Macmillan
Smart Girls, Gifted Women, Barbara Kerr, 1985, Columbus Ohio, Ohio Psychology
Smart Girls Two, Barbara Kerr, 1994 Columbus Ohio, Ohio Psychology
The Myth of Laziness, Dr. Mel Levine, 2003, Simon and Shuster
Towards a Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent, F. Gagné, 1991 pp 65-80, *Handbook of Gifted Education*, Colangelo and Davis eds., Allyn and Bacon, Boston

Web pages:

All kinds of minds Dr. Mel Levine's site for learning differences with information on supporting children's successes <http://www.allkindsofminds.org>

Douance un site français pour les enfants surdoué <http://www.douance.org>

Eric clearing house on Disabilities and Gifted Education run by the Council for Exceptional Children
<http://eric.org/gifted/gt-diges.htm>

Gifted Children's Association of B.C. Information on the B.C. organization, their local meetings and activities
<http://www.gcabc.ca>

Gifted Canada, Canadian information and resources for gifted <http://www3.telus.net/giftedcanada>

Gifted Development Centre Linda Silverman's site <http://www.gifteddevelopment.com>

Hoagies gifted page, major American source of info on all aspects of gifted children <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org>

Realm an online community of young Canadian entrepreneurs <http://www.realm.net>