

GIFTED CHILDREN HAVE RIGHTS TOO

by

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Gifted children are a small group of neglected youngsters in nearly every school system. They are highly intelligent individuals who may be encouraged by their parents and educators, but not adequately stimulated to use their natural abilities. The teachers ignore them to a certain degree and don't give them as much time since they usually are good students with excellent grades. They aren't rewarded for their great intelligence and eagerness for knowledge. They are often cast aside while slower children receive extra time and effort.

The characteristics of gifted children are present at a early age. Even as toddlers, they have an advanced vocabulary and learn to use their language easily. They have an ability to grasp the cause-effect relationship, which is the sense of how certain things work or happen and what the consequences are. Also, the pre-schoolers have long periods of deep concentration and continue their focus of thought long after other children tire. At the school age level, they continue to have a longer attention span and learn at a faster rate. They are more sensitive to others and to their surroundings than the average child and more determined to find answers to their questions.¹ One of the most important characteristics is their ability to retain what they learn without much drill.²

The majority of gifted children are superior in all academics. A few may be superior in only one field and still be fairly normal in all other areas. There are also the kids that are considered to be exceptionally creative in the arts

such as music, dance, theatre, or creative writing. Leadership ability is another field that children may exhibit talent.³

Parents usually are the first ones to notice their child's supreme intelligence, but may not be consciously aware of it then. They soon discover that their offspring is well ahead of normal development, but unless the child shows extreme ability, they probably won't relate this advanced behavior to being gifted or talented.

When these youngsters enter school, the teachers become aware of them by daily observations and by the high grades that they achieve. Giftedness may also be determined from results of achievement tests, I.Q. tests, and psychological tests.⁴ All of these tests can be given by the school or by a private source that the parents or school may refer to.

Gifted children have many problems that are created as a result of their high intelligence. Their peers often label them as "freaks" and are jealous of their extreme abilities. Their teachers ignore them either because they are not properly qualified to teach these youngsters or because they feel these children are capable of achieving by themselves.⁵ The gifted often become disciplinary problems in the classroom due to boredom and frustration. Sometimes they refuse to do the required school work or lose interest in their projects and never finish anything. Many become so bored that they drop out of school. In one study done in the Midwest, it found that gifted children drop out of school at a rate from three to five times greater than other students.⁶

Exceptional children have a greater tendency toward emotional problems due to this increased boredom, frustration, and from the enormous pressure placed on them by their parents, teachers, peers, and themselves. Their teachers and parents expect more from them as high achievers while their own natural drive increases the frustration. The peer pressure is extremely great because they appear different from normal children. A study done last year in Pennsylvania found that "more than half of the youngsters referred to a program for emotional disorders had I.Q.'s of more than 130, which is the beginning of the gifted range."⁷ This proves that often these children have more problems than the average children and get little help in coping with their numerous obstacles.

When these bright children's superior abilities are not fully stimulated, they often use it in undesirable, anti-social behavior. This may be exhibited by becoming gang leaders, drug dealers or other unlawful characters. They may turn into schrewd, efficient business people and many times are able to elude the law with their genius minds.⁸

It has been found that gifted females and gifted children from minority groups are overlooked more than other exceptional children.⁹ When it comes to occupations and education, society's old ideas that girls aren't as important as boys still exist. Society also feels that minority groups probably wouldn't do anything with their education if a proper one were given. These areas should have immediate attention and the legal backing to eliminate the injustices.

Parents of the gifted are reluctant to seek help for their brilliant offspring. They may have an idea that their child is especially bright, but society makes them feel guilty or conceited if they make any effort to encourage this child to the fullest. They forget that this child is handicapped in a sense and should have just as much right to a quality education as the slower child. The parents should express their feelings and confront the school with their opinions. They must be careful not to break the communication lines with the school and thus put more stress on the child. If the school refuses to test the child or to refer the child to a psychologist, the parents should seek the testing themselves. Perhaps, the parents will be able to convince the school officials that their child is gifted and should receive individual attention. Then the school should work along with the parents and aid them with the daily involvement in the education of their exceptional child. Because of this continued reluctance from parents, most gifted children are never discovered and properly developed.

The concept of gifted children is a fairly new objective in education, and many educators have been slow to accept programs for it. Some feel these high-achieving youngsters are the last ones that need extra help and use the funds in another needed area. Others feel mainstreaming all students is the most important factor and feel special programs for the gifted is contrary to this. Many schools have such strict

structured requirements that a program of accelerated curriculum for the gifted would not meet their rigid standards. They think students should take all courses offered at each level. Some schools see the need for the additional assistance, but don't have sufficient funds to start the program or to hire a qualified teacher. Perhaps if we had some legislation to provide for the gifted, more funds would be appropriated.

Many methods to provide the correct stimulus for these advanced children have been proposed. One such method is that the gifted kids should spend part of their time in school with other gifted children. They must get the feeling that they are not alone in the world. Also this animated group provides a portion of the extra stimulus that they need.¹⁰

One large, nearby school system has gone one step farther and has set up an ideal gifted program. They have taken one of their elementary buildings and use it entirely for the gifted. This gives students there the extra stimulus that each needs but also makes them feel more accepted with others like themselves.

Finding the gifted at an earlier age is one of the best ways to help them. I propose that schools do pre-kindergarten testing. This would easily find the advanced child and then more thorough psychological testing could be done for them to find the truly gifted. Then the school could provide additional aid with other forms of stimulation.

Some schools may use any or all of the kinds of acceleration as another method to help the exceptional ones. Sometimes

gifted children are discovered before normal school age, and then they may begin school at an earlier age. Educators feel if the child is gifted academically, they usually are gifted sociably and emotionally. Another method of acceleration is skipping grades. Some school officials feel this is a beneficial way to provide proper education for these youngsters because it gives the students the rapid advancement that they need to prevent boredom and frustration. Still others feel the only way is to keep the kids at the normal grade level and just provide more stimulus through individual advancement in any part or in all areas of education. Often, this is difficult for the teachers because they may have several students advancing at different rates in the same class. Educators that have worked with older gifted children feel that some of these kids should be allowed to take college courses before they graduate from high school. This is an extremely good way for pupils to advance in one chosen field and still get the rest of the classes that are not in their gifted area.¹¹

I feel that every school system which provides special aid to the slow learner should also give extra help to the gifted. Just think what fifteen minutes or an hour extra per day or even week would do to help the gifted! They learn and pick up ideas so quickly that little time would have to be spent on each while much more time is spent accordingly on each slow child.

I recommend that we mandate government to provide funds for the proper education of the gifted. After all, two to four per cent of our nations elementary and secondary school pupils are gifted.¹² The federal government provides six and one-half million dollars annually for the gifted while over two billion is provided for the education of the economically disadvantaged and six-hundred million for the education of the handicapped.¹³ I realize that getting any additional funds will be difficult due to the fact that education is of secondary interest to most of our nations population since only twenty-eight per cent of our households have school age children.¹⁴ It seems like such a waste that laws have to be made before people will accept any beneficial change and provide for such an important group of youngsters. I strongly agree with Gene Maeroff when he said;

"Being gifted in America can be a liability. And until the country wakes up to this fact and decides to do something about it, the minds'-- and futures'-- of many young people will continue to be squandered."¹⁵

- 1 Gene Maeroff, "Smart Kids Have Problems Too," Parents' Magazine, September 1978, p. 72.
- 2 Carol Teig Anker, Teaching Exceptional Children--A Special Career (New York: Julian Messner, 1978), p. 77.
- 3 U.S. Office of Education, "Definition of the Gifted," (Washington, D.C.: Sec. 902 of the current Gifted and Talented Childrens Act of 1978).
- 4 Paula Jackson, "Advance and Be Recognized," Star Magazine, 4 November 1979, p. 9.
- 5 Gene Maeroff, "The Unfavored Gifted Few," The New York Times Magazine, 21 August 1977, p. 172.
- 6 Maeroff, "The Unfavored Gifted Few," p. 173.
- 7 Maeroff, "Smart Kids Have Problems Too," p. 72.
- 8 "The Gifted Child," Newsweek, 23 October 1978, p.111.
- 9 Maeroff, "Smart Kids Have Problems Too," pp. 72-73.
- 10 "The Gifted Child," p. 112.
- 11 Anker, pp. 81-82.
- 12 Maeroff, "The Unfavored Gifted Few," p. 171.
- 13 Maeroff, "The Unfavored Gifted Few," p. 172.
- 14 According to D. H. Arnold, "Education--Now and the Future."
- 15 Maeroff, "Smart Kids Have Problems Too," p. 102.

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