

Gifted Kids Need Understanding, Guidance

by Paula Prober

“My 6-year-old son isn’t normal. At home he’s reading “Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary” and beating his older brother at chess, but at school, they say he’s hyperactive and can’t do simple addition. At home he talks endlessly about the existence of black holes and shows enormous empathy for people in distress, but at school he’s withdrawn and says the kids tease him because he forgets to tie his shoes. It’s been a year since his gerbil died and he still grieves and asks me about the meaning of life and death. What’s wrong with him?”

What’s “wrong” with him may be that he’s gifted. And giftedness is complex, hard to define, and controversial. These children can be misunderstood and misdiagnosed. They may be advanced in some areas and not in others. They may appear to be socially immature when, in fact, they’re upset that their peers don’t play by the rules or that the other 6-year-olds don’t care about animal rights.

The more gifted they are, the greater the differences from peers. Parents often are frustrated and isolated because of the widespread belief that precocious kids are easy to raise.

They aren’t. Imagine the 7-year-old child who has an insatiable appetite to learn everything yesterday, who can’t make a decision because she thinks of too many possible options, who sobs in frustration at not being able to draw like Van Gogh, who challenges the ethics of your decision to eat meat, who can find 8 logical reasons why staying up past 10 p.m. enhances her self-esteem, who remembers every promise you ever broke, who is particularly sensitive to smells, sounds, clothing texture, colors, criticism, your moods, change, and the 5 o’clock news.

When most children feel sad, mad, or happy, these kids are in despair, raging, or ecstatic. At an early age, they are often aware of injustice in worlds well beyond the family, and they feel helpless to affect change.

Loneliness is very real for these children. If their intelligence threatens those around them and if their love of ideas and passion for learning isn’t shared, it can result in a great sense of loss, especially if the child begins to hide his abilities. At an early age, precocious youngsters can be highly critical of themselves and others. This may be a sign of low self-esteem or it may reflect the child’s inner need for precision, balance, beauty, and harmony—a type of positive perfectionism. The child who lines up his shoes in the closet, alphabetizes his books, cries at a magnificent sunset, or is enraged by racism may be demonstrating this trait.

In certain ways, then, precocious kids are more vulnerable than others are. In an unstable home, their sensitivities can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and even suicide. Their intellect can mask fear, despair, and the pressure they place on themselves to save the family. Even in a counseling setting, these children may be misunderstood because they can analyze a situation and articulate a problem so well that the counselor misses the deeper issues.

How might we better meet the needs of these youngsters? If we understood and valued giftedness, how would our society benefit?

- Listen to and acknowledge your child's feelings and brainstorm a list of healthy ways to express emotion. Be honest about your level of comfort with her expressiveness.
- Give him plenty of warning before a transition and provide periodic reminders. These children can get absorbed in an activity or connected to a person and can find change difficult.
- If she's easily overstimulated, you may need to leave an event early. Allow time for her to observe a new situation before having to participate.
- Reduce or eliminate his exposure to the newspaper, radio, and TV news.
- Allow your son to play with girls and dolls if this is his choice. Don't be afraid to show him your affection.
- Brainstorm solutions to problems together.
- Nourish yourself and your partnership and you'll be modeling self-respect.
- When you find yourself overreacting repeatedly to your child's behaviors, take the time to examine yourself. You might just be exhausted or your child may be triggering an unresolved issue from your past. The best thing you can do for her is to heal the wounds from your own childhood.
- Read Sally Walker's "The Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids."

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