

Precocious Kids Pose Unexpected Challenges

by Paula Prober

Parents often have many questions about how to raise exceptionally bright children. Some of the standard parenting techniques don't work with these kids. And if you have one child who is precocious and one who's not, what then?

First, a few basics:

Gifted children are often challenging because they can be more intense, sensitive, perceptive, and persistent than other kids. They experience life as if they're looking through a microscope. They see, feel, hear, smell, taste, and know things others miss.

Learning comes quickly when they're interested, and levels of curiosity are often enormous. Parents may think they're supposed to have it easy with a child who is so bright. At least that's the common belief, but in fact, the opposite is often true.

When kids don't fit into our society's version of what's normal, they suffer, unless they're athletes. The depth and sensitivity required to understand these children is frequently unavailable to parents, so both the adults and youngsters can end up feeling anxious, frustrated, and lonely. Add to this equation a child who is not gifted. Parents report conflict, competition, and stress in the family.

Depending on the situation, both children may experience anger, depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem.

If the gifted child receives preferential treatment, or if there's an overemphasis on achievement, he may feel despair and decide to "dumb down." He may also feel obligated to care for siblings or feel guilty for being precocious.

The solution here is obvious in theory and yet difficult to put into practice:

- Love each of your children for who they are as individuals and not for what they can accomplish. This will help both youngsters. Gifted children will feel less pressure to perform and will not be dependent on achievement for their self-esteem.
- Notice the qualities your children have that you admire. Tell them how you appreciate their kindness, generosity, responsibility, and integrity. And mean it. Your kids not only hear what you say, but also sense your unspoken messages and beliefs.
- Examine your values relating to achievement, performance, and intelligence. Even though you may say that compassion is more important than "A's" on a report card, or that you value effort over winning, you must believe it or your children won't.

One way to determine if you're sending healthy messages to your kids is to notice to what degree you pressure yourself to achieve. How self-critical are you? What do you tell yourself when you

make a mistake? What messages did your parents give you about intelligence? How did your own experiences with siblings affect you?

If your answers to these questions do not please you, then consider doing some introspective work. Pick a process that feels compatible with your needs and interests, such as writing, counseling, classes, support groups, or reading.

Taking the time to analyze your deep-seated values and beliefs—and to change them if necessary—will make all the difference.

Many parents choose to do the difficult work of self-examination once they see how their own unresolved issues from the past are affecting their children. It is not selfish to do your own inner work. When you are a parent, it is selfish *not* to do it.

There are other less complex but useful techniques that can help; for example:

- Plan an evening where all family members chart their strengths and weaknesses. Talk about how it feels to be similar in some areas and different in others.
- Make a list of roles each person in the family plays, such as organizer, peacekeeper, word finder, chef. This makes it easier to see how everyone is contributing.
- Spend time alone with each child. Even if your children are teenagers and act like you're the enemy, they really do secretly want your attention and approval.
- Develop a better understanding of giftedness and encourage accomplishment simply for the personal satisfaction it can bring. Avoid overreactions and comparisons.

Your home is the best place to teach respect for differences and to learn self-acceptance. All children—gifted or not—need this. Granted, it's not an easy assignment but no other job matters more.

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