

# Precocious Kids Bring Intensity to Parenting

by Paula Prober

**Meet** Jake. He's 6 years old. He just finished reading "Charlotte's Web" and is inconsolable. His sadness over Charlotte's death is enormous. He wants to know everything he can about mortality, spiders, pigs, and friendships. He has the awareness of a person at least twice his age and can win a debate with older children in under 10 minutes. Jake is a worrier. Global warming, family finances, orphans in Romania, and his loose tooth consume him. He loves to sing, play soccer, and collect soil samples. In his latest plans, he aspires to a career that combines archaeology, fire fighting, and poetry reading.

Then there's Deanna. She's 13. Deanna always looks like she's balancing an elephant on her head. The elephant holds the pressures she places on herself as well as the expectations of family, teachers, and peers. The critic that lives in Deanna's brain is ruthless. Nothing is ever quite right. Even though she is an accomplished pianist and scholar, she often feels despair and loneliness. While she can easily support a friend in need, her own intensity is often misunderstood. Recently, Deanna's passion for learning has been buried under a desire to fit in with peers and look good. Career goals have been put on hold.

Raising a precocious child can be exhausting, exhilarating, rewarding, and frightening all at once. From the start, you may wonder why this child did not come with detailed instructions. You could use the manual, "101 Ways to Remain Calm When Your Kid is Smarter Than You," for instance. Even though precocious children, like Jake and Deanna, are complex and varied, there are certain social/emotional issues they have in common.

- **Uneven Development.** Often gifted children have abilities that are uneven. Intellectual level may be advanced while motor skills are average. He may be highly skilled in reading and average in math. This unevenness may create intense frustration especially if expectations are unreasonable; for example, Jake has several ideas about the greenhouse effect. He wants to write about them. His fine motor coordination is typical of that of a 6-year-old. He fears his hand will never catch up with his mind. Feelings of powerless result and Jake cries in pain.
- **Intense Sensitivity.** Precocious children often have emotional and moral sensitivity to match their intellectual level. Sensitivities may be hidden or denied as a way to cope with the world but they are there. Deanna acts cool around peers yet she feels hypocritical as she tries to blend with the crowd. Appalled by the harassment and violence at her school, she feels hopeless about the future. She is not soothed or distracted by football games or designer clothes.
- **Perfectionism.** Perfectionism in these children is complicated in that it has two tracks. On one track, there exists an intrinsic perfectionism that is part of the child's nature. For example, Jake has an appreciation for beauty in artwork. He used to try to draw his own pictures but gave up quickly when he realized he could not match the exquisite detail he so admired. On another track, perfectionism is learned. Deanna's parents often respond with excessive enthusiasm to her accomplishments. They also are perfectionists themselves.

Deanna believes she is worthless if she is not achieving. If she makes a mistake, her identity is threatened.

There are other social/emotional issues precocious children face. These include the challenges of peer relationships, finding appropriate schooling, and cultural norms. Jake relates quite well to adults but is considered bossy by peers. Friends don't share his interests or understand his humor. They frequently exclude him from team games and birthday parties. Deanna skipped a grade in school and still finds the curriculum unchallenging. Many teachers are unsure of how to meet her needs. Being African-American and female, Deanna also battles stereotyping and sexism.

So, besides acquiring enormous amounts of energy, unusual resourcefulness, a law degree, and a sense of humor, what other ways can you, as a parent, help your precocious child?

- Increase your understanding of giftedness so that you can explain to your child the reasons for his inner and outer conflicts
- Actively listen to your child and find other sensitive adults to take over when you need a break. You don't need to answer all of her questions. Simply guide her to a variety of resources.
- Find a balance between supporting your child in his pursuit of a particular passion and encouraging him to try new activities where he is less competent.
- Allow for friends to be different ages depending on interests, abilities, and sensitivities.
- Remember that intensity is part of your child's nature. Find and discuss the benefits of intensity.
- Get involved at your child's school. Be assertive, positive, and relentless.
- Be aware of any over-reactions to your child's achievements. Give your child a clear message that she is loved for who she is and not what she does.
- Supply each member of the family with a journal to be used for expression of feelings and for acquiring insight.
- Include your child in decision making. Brainstorm and role play solutions to problems.
- If you are a perfectionist, plan how you can start trying activities that are difficult. Talk about your failures with your child.
- Be sure to take time to care for your own needs. If you are exhausted, your child will know it and will feel responsible. Make a list of things that nourish you and do something each week. If you are depressed, anxious, or angry, look for connections to your own childhood. Often your child will reflect what is unresolved from your past. Join a support group or find a skillful counselor.

Precocious children like Jake and Deanna live in interior worlds that are complex, intricate, and fragile. When you understand their particular needs, then you can write your own manual, "A Parent's Guide to Life in the Fast Lane."

Paula Prober, M.S., a licensed counselor and consultant in private practice in Eugene, specializes in work with gifted individuals, and also counsels adults healing from childhood trauma. She's the author of "Ten Tips for Women Who Want to Change the World Without Losing Their Friends, Shirts, or Minds." Her website is [www.psychevolution.com](http://www.psychevolution.com).

Original publication date: 09/23/1996 – The Register Guard, Eugene, Oregon