

The gifted child:

Last week I wrote about learning disabilities in children. Some children however lie at the other end of the intellectual continuum and are considered gifted. In his book *The Uncommon Child* psychologist Hal Robinson describes Michael as an extreme example of a gifted child. "Michael was 2 and a half years old. His parents described him as a youngster who begun speaking at 5 months and by six months had exhibited a vocabulary of more than 50 words. He started to read English when he was just over a year old." Apparently Michael, at 4 and a half was performing as well as a 12 year old on intelligence tests.

Clearly Michael is an example of an extremely gifted child. However gifted does not just apply to intelligence. People with exceptional specific talents, such as musical, artistic, mathematical, or spatial abilities, should be classed as gifted, along with those who have high IQ's. There are many kinds of exceptional ability, each of which may reflect unusual speed or efficiency with one or another type of mental function.

Gifted children show speedy and efficient processing on simple tasks and flexible use of strategies on more complex tasks. They learn quickly and transfer that learning broadly, and they have remarkably good problem-solving skills – they often leap directly to solution that requires a less gifted individual many intermediate steps to figure out. My older brother in our family always had exceptional mechanical ability and spatial awareness so much so that when any new item that required careful assembly was brought into the house he would have it built without ever looking at the instructions while, I, in a similar situation would take four times as long as I painstakingly tried to follow the instructions in order to get any idea of how to put the flat-back together.

Further than that, they also seem to know what they know and what they don't know, and they spend more time than average IQ children in planning how to solve some problem. So they do not give up as easily as you or I. Profoundly gifted children often have a powerful drive to immerse themselves in learning some new area or task.

There appear to be two types of gifted children. The NORMALLY GIFTED who have high IQ's but no extraordinary ability in any one area and the PROFOUNDLY GIFTED who have high IQ and/or a remarkable ability in one or more areas. The normally gifted child is someone who might get all A's in their exams and is a general all-rounder. The profoundly gifted may get A's and D's but is extraordinarily advanced in one or two subjects to a quite exceptional degree.

Many parents are concerned about placing their normally gifted child in a higher grade in school because of fears that the child will not be able to cope socially; others often assumed that rapid development in one area should be linked to rapid development in all areas.

Despite the popular myth that normally gifted children are often socially inept as in the 'Nutty Professor' or 'Walter Mitty' types. Research does not support this. Most research suggests that the normally gifted children have about the same risk of emotional problems as average children, which means that most gifted children are well adjusted and socially adept. Furthermore, good social development seems to be just as

likely for gifted children who have been accelerated through school as for those who stay in the same class and are provided with extra-curricular challenges.

However, the profoundly gifted child (who might be an absolute genius at mathematics and average at English) often struggles more than the all-round gifted child.

Sometimes the profoundly gifted child is fiercely independent and non-conforming and may have difficulties in social skills or friend-making.

In big cities in the United States there are special education programmes for such children. In Ireland there is the Irish Centre for Talented Youth as well as the Irish Association for Gifted Children which seek to highlight and respond to the needs of gifted children. You could check out their web-sites if you are curious.