
Recognizing Giftedness

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.

Gifted Development Center

What is Giftedness?

Traditionally, giftedness has been equated with achievement, but from this perspective many truly gifted children are over-looked: young gifted children, gifted children with learning disabilities, underachievers, culturally diverse gifted, gifted girls, the creatively gifted, and children who are talented in non-academic areas. Achievement in school or in adult life is the result of the *nurturing* of one's abilities; it tells as much about children's environment as it does about their talents. The concept of achievement is adult-centered; it places the emphasis on performance, mirroring the values of an industrial society.

In contrast, I define giftedness as *advanced development in one or more areas*. This perspective is internal, child-centered, and based upon differential rates of maturation. Advanced development is the opposite of delayed development. We recognize that some children develop more slowly than others, but we have difficulty acknowledging that there are some children who develop more rapidly than others. Both exceptionalities need early identification, assessment and intervention in order to maximize these children's potential. The more the child's abilities vary from the norm, the greater the need for special provisions.

Advanced development is more complex than just a difference in rate of learning. Thinking of giftedness only in terms of learning rate presumes that everyone is on the same learning path, and that the gifted child just gets "there" faster. In fact, advanced development brings with it qualitative differences in learning style, perceptual organization, emotional responses, social relations, moral concerns, and goals of development. There are equally significant ramifications of delayed development. Developmental differences affect all aspects of a child's life; these differences must be understood if we are to meet the needs of atypical children.

In early childhood, giftedness can be observed as progression through certain developmental milestones at a more rapid rate than other children. On intelligence tests, the gifted perform mental operations at the level of children older than themselves. If they have talents in specific areas, they demonstrate mastery of skills beyond their age-mates'. If they are highly creative, they come up with unusual ideas at home and at school—ideas that reveal more intricate thought processes than their peers'. Children can also be more advanced socially, emotionally, empathically, morally or spiritually.

Why Should We Try to Recognize Giftedness in Early Childhood?

When you recognize the characteristics of giftedness early in life, you are alerted to your child's need for enhanced stimulation and support. This information enables you to plan effectively for his or her optimal development. Equally important, it helps you realize that some of the problems you encounter in child rearing are due to the nature of the child rather than to your inadequacies as parents. Many parents fear they must be doing something wrong if their children have colic, don't sleep, or are highly active. These problems may be related to the children's highly organized, unusually responsive nervous systems, which make them extra-sensitive to pollutants, allergens, and tensions in their environment.

Many of the gifted children in our studies had colic in infancy and some degree of "hyperactive" behavior as toddlers. Sometimes these children were described as "unmanageable" by their parents. In most cases, these children also had a history of allergies—particularly food allergies. The most common allergies were to milk, wheat, sugar, corn and glutes. If your child exhibits these symptoms, it would be wise to consult an allergist. Many difficult children have settled down considerably when certain foods were removed from their diets.

As early as one month, advanced infants may follow moving objects with their eyes, smile, or make certain sounds other than crying. At two months, they may search for sounds with their eyes, begin to lift their head and chest, move vigorously, anticipate feedings upon seeing a nipple, and begin cooing or chuckling. Some infants evidence extremely precocious behavior. Several gifted children have been known to smile on cue at two days old. One of the children we studied held his head up and pulled his chest up on his arms almost from birth. He waved "hello" at two months.

The clearest sign of accelerated development is in the area of language. Gifted children tend to speak earlier, use more complex sentence structure, develop a larger vocabulary, show an early interest in books and written words, and express themselves better than other children. In our first study at the Center we found one child who said his first word, "hi," at 4 months of age. Five others spoke before their tenth month. One mother said that her daughter wanted to be read to constantly from the time she "sat up." Another described her child as sitting for two to three hours listening to books at the age of eighteen months.

We have also seen several cases of silent gifted children. In these children, language development is atypical. They are unusually quiet after the babbling stage, but manage to communicate all of their needs nonverbally. They may have older siblings or mothers so tuned in to them that they have no need to talk to get what they want. They appear to understand everything and will follow lengthy sets of directions, indicating high receptive language ability. The moment of truth arrives when they decide to speak and come out with full sentences—often complex ones—as their first utterance. One parent reported that her child's first "word" was "Charlie, would you please pass the salt?" Some gifted children did not begin to speak until the age of four (one such case was Einstein), but these late speakers most often begin oral communication with fully formed sentences.

Gifted children usually have extraordinary memories. In our study, excellent memory was the most prevalent sign of giftedness reported. Advanced toddlers may be able to repeat songs or television commercials well before two years of age. These children can frequently "read" a story which has been read to them several times because they remember the words on each page. I saw an 18-month-old do this with a 60-page beginning reader. She was able to recognize several written words at 11 months.

Avid interest in reading prior to school age is one of the signs of giftedness. Almost half of the children in our study learned to read before they were five, and one-fourth before their fourth birthday. Many of these children reportedly "taught themselves to read." Thirty percent of the group wrote their first word by the time they were four years old. Five children were reported to have written their first word at two-and-a-half.

Unbounded curiosity is still another sign of giftedness. Parents often remark about the quality of children's questions, describing them as "very complex" and "probing." A one-year-old gifted child made the discovery that everything had a name and dragged her mother all over the house for hours, pointing to every object and saying, "Whatsat?" Some children pull things apart to find out how they operate. Others ask endless questions. Still others have difficulty going to sleep at night for fear that they will "miss something" while they sleep.

Developmentally advanced children learn things very rapidly and are often able to generalize their learning to new situations. They are amazing problem-solvers. They show evidences of abstract thinking at a very young age.

Creativity and giftedness appear to strongly correlated in early childhood. Precocious children have highly active imaginations and are likely to invent imaginary companions. This is a sign of creativity and should not be a cause of alarm to parents. When an eleven-year-old with an IQ of 187 was asked if he had ever had imaginary companions, he replied, "I still do. I have nine of them." Many gifted children have imaginary playmates in childhood, whether they have "real" friends or not.

Another clear sign of giftedness is exceptional aptitude for mathematical reasoning. We have cases on record of four- and five-year-olds solving square-root problems on calculators, inventing abstract algebraic formulations (e.g., $(N \times N) - 1 = (N + 1) \times (N - 1)$), adding four-digit numbers mentally, writing simple computer programs, or using calculations in their everyday lives. In a study of young gifted children conducted in Seattle, the parent of a five-year-old boy was asked if her child recognized and named two-digit numbers. The mother responded, "Yes, he only starts losing track when numbers get into the ten thousands" (Robinson, Roedell, & Jackson, 1979, p. 149). Since most preschool children are still learning how to count, these feats speak for themselves.

difficulty to capture the full range of their abilities. So the younger the child, the better the chances that his or her knowledge will not outstrip the limits of the test. Second, gifted girls get perfectionistic at around 8 years old and often refuse to answer any items they are not absolutely sure they will get right. They won't guess. By testing girls early, we can find out their true capabilities before they go into hiding (which girls have a tendency to do).

Older children who exhibit these characteristics should also be assessed; however, their scores will probably not be as high as they would have been during preschool. Children who had chronic ear infections or are highly creative may be "late bloomers," doing progressively better in school and on tests as they get older. Second-born children often hide their abilities, so if your first child is identified as gifted, bring your second child for testing as a matter of course.

Recognizing giftedness is as important as recognizing handicaps. It enables you to be a more effective parent. Armed with test results, you can gain a more appropriate education for your child. This information provides a solid foundation upon which you can nurture your child's special abilities and help develop his or her full potential.

For additional information on the assessment of gifted children, contact the GIFTED DEVELOPMENT CENTER at (303) 837-TEST.

REFERENCE

- Robinson, H. B., Roedell, W. C., & Jackson, N. E. (1979). Early identification and intervention. In A. H. Passow (Ed.), *The gifted and the talented: Their education and development* (pp. 138-154). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Linda Silverman, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and Director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado.