

GIFTED PROGRAMS, MAGNET AND CHARTER SCHOOLS

[Note: This is excerpted from *Testing For Kindergarten*. If you don't have your own copy of that book, what are you waiting for! Here's a sample of the kind of useful information it contains.]

The gifted child

I hope I'm not bursting your bubble, but chances are your child isn't a genius. He's probably not even gifted. Remember the bell curve we talked about earlier? Well, most of us (me, you, your kids included) fall somewhere in the middle. Don't cry. We can still live happy and productive lives.

To identify giftedness in children (and conversely, learning disabilities), a good educational psychologist will rely on more than just a test score. She will interview the parents to get a detailed picture of the child's history, ask them to complete questionnaires and checklists that would help identify giftedness, and talk to them in depth about why they think their child may be gifted. She will gather similar information from the child's preschool and other teachers. Using all of this information, along with her clinical judgment, she will be able to give a detailed assessment of a child's cognitive, academic, and social/emotional abilities.

The gifted child tends to have many of the following characteristics, although not necessarily all of them:

- Progresses rapidly through developmental milestones (e.g. instead of knowing 300 words at age 3, knows 1000),
- Learns quickly, easily and with great depth,
- Development may be uneven, excelling more in one area than another,
- Has high verbal abilities including an extensive vocabulary,
- Has a great storehouse of information and knowledge,
- May teach himself to read early,
- Prefers factual books to fiction or fairy tales,
- Highly curious, seeks information and knowledge for its own sake,

- Always asking how, why and what if,
- Highly observant with eye for detail,
- Has an excellent memory,
- Shows reasoning, logical thinking, and creativity in academics and play,
- Original thinker, combining information and ideas in unexpected ways,
- Loves to experiment and solve problems,
- Generates many ideas and solutions to problems,
- Unusual facility for numbers, calculates in her head,
- Readily grasps underlying principles and can make valid generalizations,
- Works independently and concentrates for long periods on things that interest him,
- Demonstrates leadership, initiative and perseverance,
- Good with numbers, puzzles, blocks,
- May collect things,
- Good sense of humor, loves riddles and verbal humor,
- Prefers older companions,
- May struggle with easy material while thriving on complexity,
- Emotionally sensitive,
- Highly energetic.

When my children were little, I was sure they were gifted until I learned more about kids who were the real deal. Let me introduce you to a few young brainiacs whom I don't know personally, but read about in newspapers that profiled them because they are so extraordinary. When we talk about genuinely gifted children, this is what we're talking about:

- At two, Georgia Brown, after seeing the musical, Beauty and the Beast, told her parents, "I didn't like Gaston (the villain). He was mean and arrogant."
- Before he was two, Jonathan Estrada was shaping all fifty states out of cheese slices and indicating where the state capital was with a bite mark (he made Utah and Rhode Island on the David Letterman Show).

- Chyrese Exline didn't utter a word until she was almost two. But when she did, she spoke perfectly and already knew her colors, letters and could read.
- Terry Tao mastered all elementary school math while still in kindergarten. At seven, he could discuss Boolean algebra, Abelian groups, and other advanced math concepts. Frankly, I don't even know what those are.

Terry's father, Dr. Billy Tao, an Australian pediatrician who raised three sons, all of whom were all profoundly gifted, talked about ordinary smarts versus extraordinary genius in a *Weekend Australian* article. "There is a difference between genius and people who are just bright. The genius will look at things, try things, do things, totally unexpectedly. It's higher order thinking. Genius is beyond talent. It's something very original, very hard to fathom." I would say that shaping cheese slices into states and biting out the capitals at age two qualifies, wouldn't you?

Being gifted isn't always a gift

So your future Harvard-bound child isn't technically gifted. It's not the end of the world. In fact, some would say it is a gift for a child *not* to be gifted. There is a downside, you know.

In a study of 282 geniuses, including Voltaire, Lincoln, Descartes, and Michelangelo, researchers Simonton and Song found that superior intelligence was linked to inferior physical health during youth. The philosopher Descartes, for example, was so sickly as a child that his parents let him sleep until noon. Later he said that those mornings were when he came up with his best ideas. Perhaps being sickly as a child helps build intellectual development, but who wants their child to suffer poor health?

Children with exceptionally high IQs are different from other kids and have trouble fitting in, often getting picked on. Children make fun of them, calling them "dweebs," "nerds," and "Herbs." We live in a society that values beauty and brawn over brains. The current trend, fueled by resource limitations, is to educate gifted students in regular classrooms, magnifying the social issues.

Finding the right school situation for a highly gifted child can be a nightmare. Consider a 5-year-old who reads like a 10-year-old, plays chess like a 15-year-old, has

mastered algebra, but shares her toys like a 3-year-old. Do you accelerate her a few grades? Put her in kindergarten but place her in higher-grade classes for reading and math? With the wrong placement, children like this may get bored and act out in class or give up altogether.

In this country there are as many school age kids with IQs above 145 as below 55. Yet our schools spend \$8 billion a year on remedial programs and \$800 million on gifted education. Savvy parents with bright but not technically gifted children manage to get their kids a slice of that \$800 million pie, while only 20% of kids evaluated as truly gifted find their way into them. Personally, I don't envy any parent of a highly gifted child trying to find the appropriate learning environment for him. It's as complicated as finding the right classroom for a learning disabled child. If your little one hasn't emerged as an Einstein by age four, it's okay. Even Einstein didn't even emerge as an Einstein by that age.

TAG programs vary but are always in demand

Since gifted programs are often the best public education alternatives in many cities, competition for them can be fierce. These programs vary widely from city to city. Let me give you the lay of the land and tell you how to go about finding what's available in your community, along with some tips on how to get your child in.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), every state requires that schools provide special education for students needing remedial help or labeled as learning disabled. That is not so for gifted students. Many states, but not all, require that gifted children be identified; some states, but not all, mandate that they be served. Where state law requires the creation of gifted programs, details such as what defines "giftedness" and how qualified students will be educated are left up to the local districts. States that don't mandate the creation of gifted programs may still have discretionary funds that can be used for that purpose. For this reason, there is a hodgepodge of offerings across the country, no agreed-upon definition of "giftedness," and often befuddling admissions criteria that leave many deserving children out in the cold.

Gifted programs are usually referred to as TAG (talented and gifted) or GATE (gifted and talented education) programs. With a limited number of public TAG

programs in each district, competition can be out of control. In 2007, 6,800 children applied for 1,600 spots in Chicago's gifted schools. At Hunter College Elementary, one of the oldest schools for gifted students, thousands of students took the entrance exam for 48 kindergarten spots last year. In Manhattan, applications to the city's gifted programs tripled in 2007. Lately, the competition for places has gotten even tougher for a number of reasons:

- **Economy.** With the economic downturn, families who would otherwise have sent their children to private schools are seeking the best options that public schools have to offer - TAG programs.
- **Better education.** Gifted programs have long served as a middle-class haven from overcrowded or underperforming schools.
- **Public focus on bottom 25%.** In the past, public school teachers used to teach to the needs of children in the 50th percentile. Ever since the No Child Left Behind Act, teachers are shifting their focus to the bottom 25th percentile. A University of Chicago study recently concluded that the Act pushes teachers to ignore high-ability students through its exclusive focus on bringing struggling students to minimum proficiency.

Types of Programs and Accommodations

Budget considerations have a lot to do with the depth and breadth of public gifted programs in any city. As districts face financial hard times, gifted programs, often seen as a luxury, are the first to be trimmed, gutted or cut out. Within a given district, there may be 1) magnet schools that serve only gifted children, 2) schools-within-a-school model where a separate gifted school operates inside a regular school's facility, 3) self-contained gifted classrooms within a regular school, 4) pull-out classes for qualified students taught by specially trained teachers (who often split their time among many schools in a district), 5) accelerated groupings within regular classrooms where the teacher offers alternative assignments, independent or group projects for higher-performing students, and 6) before or after school enrichment programs.

For children who are highly gifted (145+), but whose school districts don't offer an appropriate program, schools may use 1) independent projects, 2) on-line replacement

curriculums (with remote access to teacher) that children can do independently in the back of the classroom, 3) multiple age ability groupings, 4) entire grade skipping, or 5) specific class grade skipping.

Some cities have private TAG schools, such as Ricks Center for Gifted Children in Denver, Colorado and The Rocky Mountain School in Boulder, Colorado. Other programs, like Hunter College Elementary, are affiliated with teachers colleges versus public school districts. In cities with multiple programs, some are more coveted than others. In New York City, for example, The Lab School and The Anderson Program (public) and Hunter College Elementary (college affiliated) are considered the crème de la crème of gifted programs. These have higher minimum cut-off scores than the less-coveted gifted programs – to be considered, children must score in the 97th or 98th percentile (moderately gifted) versus 90th percentile (high average) for the city's other TAG programs. The Davidson Academy in Reno, Nevada, one of the country's top public gifted programs requires IQ scores of 145 (highly gifted) or above to be considered for admission.

If after testing in the top 2-3% and a thorough assessment, an educational psychologist pronounces your child intellectually gifted, you are going to have to work very hard to find an appropriately challenging program to meet his needs. With many TAG programs opening up to serve a wider range of intelligence, fewer programs exist to educate children with extremely high academic ability. I would suggest that you talk to the psychologist who tested your child or find an expert in gifted children who can map out a course of learning and recommend local programs that might work for someone with his intellectual profile. Two web sites that offer extremely helpful advice to parents facing this challenge are www.davidsongifted.org and www.hoagiesgifted.org. An excellent book on understanding profound giftedness is Gifted Children: Myths and Realities, by Ellen Winner (who is married to Dr. Howard Gardner, by the way).

Qualifications for Giftedness Vary

The research is solid that children scoring in the 97th and above percentile and those scoring in the 3% and below percentile need specially trained teachers. That said, programs with cut-offs at the 97th and above percentile are becoming fewer and farther

between. Offering what some see as an elite education to children who already have the advantage of a high IQ doesn't sit well politically in some circles.

Many people feel that testing children for admissions to gifted programs is unfair given the evidence that intelligence tests are biased against children from disadvantaged homes who have not had the same life experiences and preschool education as children from middle-class and affluent families. To equalize access, districts are casting a wider net by expanding their definition of giftedness or giving more credit to bright children from diverse or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Here are some ways they are going about it:

- Hernando County, Florida – students with an IQ of 120 (high average) qualify for gifted status if they come from a low socioeconomic level or if English isn't their first language.
- Denver, Colorado – to qualify for gifted status, educators consider a student's test scores along with teacher assessments and nominations. They get extra points if English is their second language or if they receive federal meal benefits. Conceivably, a student scoring in the 75% percentile (average) on an IQ test could be considered for a gifted program.
- Raleigh, North Carolina – offers gifted and talented magnet schools, but that doesn't mean the students are *academically* gifted. Here schools are “seeking to find the gifts and talents of every student.”
- Districts are offering magnet programs for creatively gifted children in areas of music, art, and performance (such as the Special Music School in New York City) in addition to programs for the intellectually gifted.
- Districts are broadening their definition of “gifted,” to include lower scoring students who can be characterized as “bright,” “high-achieving,” “high ability,” or “talented” and considering factors besides test scores for admission. Some districts have abandoned the gifted label altogether because they find it condemning to children who are left out.

What does this mean for you?

With so many gifted programs expanding their criteria for entry, your child may qualify for a TAG or enrichment program (or whatever your district calls it) even if he doesn't score in the top 2-3% on his IQ test. These tend to offer the highest quality curriculums within districts and are worth exploring.

Tips for Getting Your Child Into a TAG Program

- **Do your research.** Gifted programs vary so much from city-to-city and district-to-district that it is incumbent upon you to dig deeply and identify the best programs for which your child may qualify. Researching programs isn't easy. Public TAG programs are constantly being revamped, rules for admissions may change and administrators with the right answers can be hard to find.
- **Use on-line resources.** By googling gifted and talented programs in your city, you should get a list of the choices available. Or, visit the National Association for Gifted and Talented Children's web site (www.nagc.org) where you will find a list of state associations for gifted programs. Someone at your state association should be able to direct you to your local options. Another excellent resource is the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado. You can visit their website at www.gifteddevelopment.com.
- **Start early.** The application process for the most selective schools usually starts in September, a year before your child would enter a program. Most schools have limited open house and tour dates and you want to sign up for these and get them on your calendar. Call the school and find out how to apply and any application deadlines that you need to meet. Make sure your child meets the birthday cut-off.
- **Talk to parents, teachers, guidance counselors.** Talk to other parents in your community who may have had experience with local TAG programs, along with teachers at your child's preschool. If you call the school for which you are zoned and ask to speak to the guidance counselor, she should be able to give you information about gifted programs for which your child might be eligible. Be a little careful here, however, because sometimes school officials aren't as helpful as

they could be, concerned about losing children, which means losing public funding, and especially losing children who do well on tests and have involved parents.

- **Check your district's website.** Your school district's website should also have a section for gifted programs. Explore it to see what is available, the requirements for application and criteria for acceptance. If a test is mandated, the website should tell you which test and how to sign up. Often there are application deadlines, so check this out as soon as possible.
- **Consider applying outside your zone.** TAG programs are usually magnet schools, and these tend to allow application outside your zone. Applying outside your zone will give you more options to consider. Check your local rules.
- **The application process will vary.** Most academic TAG programs use IQ and readiness tests for qualification. The list of instruments relied upon is extensive but the intellectual skills these tests appraise are similar – linguistic and logical/mathematical – the same abilities we have been talking about. Most schools will only consider children making their cut-off score. In some districts, the score alone is enough to guarantee a place. In others, the child may be invited for interviews and further evaluation. Parents and pre-school teachers may also be asked to complete questionnaires about the child's interests, developmental history, and qualities of giftedness, which will be considered in the admissions decision.
- **Don't be modest.** If you are asked to complete a parent questionnaire giving examples of your child's abstract reasoning and analytical abilities, interests, talents, curiosity, self-motivation, persistence, verbal skills, memory, and self-direction, don't be modest. Include stories that will bring your child to life on paper. If your application asks for a parent statement, explain anything special your child brings to the school (i.e. diversity), why he is a good fit for that particular program, and why you, as parents, would be assets to the school (i.e. volunteering, fundraising). With some schools that won't make a bit of difference, but with others, it will.
- **Tell your child what to expect.** If the school requires follow-up testing or a school visit, ask someone at the school to tell you exactly what will happen. Let your child know what to expect so he won't be surprised. You probably won't be told what

will happen inside the testing room since that's usually a big secret. However, they should let you know generally what the visit will be like, how long it will last, and the kinds of things your child will be doing.

- **Set your child up for a good visit.** If your child has trouble separating from you, let your husband or babysitter take him. Bring something to read or do with him while you are waiting. Let him know that he is going to visit a school you are considering for him, but reassure him that he won't be going there for a long time (otherwise, he'll worry about having to leave his beloved preschool now). Tell your child to listen to the teacher and do what she says, have fun and consider if he might like to go to this school in the future. Try not to show any stress. It's out of your hands now. You can't control what your four-years-old does behind closed doors.

Charter and Magnet Schools

In most cities, parents have options to enroll their children in charter and magnet schools in addition to their local public school. **Charter schools** are created by private groups of people (companies, parents, teachers, community groups or non-profit organizations) who submit and get approved a charter to run their own school. They receive public money (except for their facilities) and offer unique learning environments. They are small and operate for a limited period of time, usually 3 to 5 years, after which their charter can be renewed if they meet their goals. Because they are managed separately from the district, they are freer to innovate, try different instructional practices, lengthen the school day or school year, dismiss underperforming teachers and experiment with merit pay. Charter schools tend not to have competitive admissions criteria, but they are often in demand so they will have lotteries or first-come, first-served policies.

Magnet schools are public schools offering specialized and theme-based curriculums, such as programs that focus on leadership, writing, international studies, language, creative arts, and museums for example. They may offer a particular teaching method such as Montessori or one based on Howard Gardner Multiple Intelligence theory, or they may serve children with special talents. TAG schools are almost always magnet programs. One magnet school in Wake County, North Carolina, offers a gifted program that is based on the belief that "every child has gifts and talents to nurture."

There is no test for entry and they offer classes that would spark the passions of many kids such as Kitchen Chemistry, New Wings to Rocket Boosters, Theater Games, and Architectural Design.

About one-third of magnet schools have competitive entry requirements. These may take the form of intelligence, creativity, or learning style tests, an interview or audition. Other magnet schools use lotteries, first-come, first served applications, or percentage set-asides (a certain percentage of the students must come from the neighborhood) for admissions.

Tips for Getting Your Child Into a Magnet or Charter School

- **Do your research.** Magnet and charter programs vary from city to city and district to district. Do a google search of “magnet or charter schools in (your city)” and most of the programs in your area will come up. Since these schools are part of public school districts, a search of your local school district’s website will also have information on magnet and charter schools to consider. Two good sources for more information are www.magnet.edu and www.uscharterschools.org.
- **Start in September, a year before your child will enroll.** Most schools have limited spaces for open house and tour dates and you want to sign up for these and get them on your calendar. Call the schools that interest you and find out how to apply and any application deadlines that you will need to meet. Make sure your child meets the birthday cut-off.
- **Learn how they make admissions decisions** – Lottery? First-come, first-served? Percentage set-asides? Waiting lists? If you have additional children, do they offer a sibling preference?
- **For magnet schools, learn about admissions criteria.** If your child has to test, audition or interview, make arrangements for that. Ask how the school evaluates applicants and makes admissions decisions.
- **Talk to people in the know.** Your nursery school director, teachers and parents in your neighborhood may be able to give you first-hand information about local magnet and charter schools.

- **Consider the fit.** Think about your own child and how she learns best. A school can sound great on paper but may not be a great fit for your child.
- **Consider diversity.** Most magnet and charter schools are committed to making their program available to all races and income levels. What is the demographic and socio-economic makeup of the school you're considering?
- **Who do you know?** If you happen to know someone personally who works at the school where you're trying to get your child admitted, ask them if they can help. It is not unheard-of for administrators to pull strings to get their friend's children admitted to their schools. I know you're shocked to hear this. I was once considering an in-demand public high school for Schuyler. The registrar told me, "Sorry, the application deadline has passed" and she wasn't willing to take our application. Just then, I saw a friend who (to my surprise) was a guidance counselor there. She took me aside and said, "No problem. If you want Schuyler to go here, she's in. I'll take care of it."

Have a "safety" public school

This is enormously important whether you are trying for a TAG program, magnet, charter or private school. You never know what's going to happen as you go through the admissions process. In every city, there are excellent public schools that would work for your child, if only for one year while you come up with a better option. In some cases you must live in the zone to get in, other districts have lotteries to determine who can apply, and others will consider variances, allowing you to apply outside your zone. As you explore gifted, magnet and charter programs, identify a public school that your child absolutely can attend. Many will require that you apply by a certain date to be guaranteed a place and you don't want to miss that opportunity should your other school options fall through.