

Working with gifted children

by Megan Shaw

What is giftedness?

Giftedness can be broadly defined as having exceptional talent or skill in one or more developmental areas. For a child to be identified as being gifted a combination of developmental observations and an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test performed by a psychologist are usually needed. Generally, giftedness is defined by an IQ of 130 or above. Psychologists will also test the child in a range of activities across the child's development to determine the areas of the child's giftedness.

Giftedness is identified using:

1. Parents' observations
2. Teacher/carer observations
3. Checklists
4. IQ tests.

It is possible for children to show signs of giftedness from infancy; however this may not be recognised as giftedness until the child spends time in environments with other children their own age.

Some of the indicators of giftedness in children during infancy and early childhood include:

- reaching developmental milestones earlier than expected, such as walking at nine months or speaking in sentences by 12 months of age
- mastering new toys quickly and becoming easily bored
- learning to read before they start school
- being persistent in mastering tasks and rarely seeking help to do this
- relating well to adults, and preferring the company of adults and older children
- displaying emotional sensitivity and empathy
- recalling past events in detail
- having an extended concentration span
- being able to create stories, rhymes and jokes at an early age
- having unrealistically high expectations of themselves.

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 - 1.3, 1.5 and 3.1 - 3.7

OSHCQA Principles: 1.1, 1.2 2.2, 3.1, 4.1 - 4.4 and 5.1 - 5.4

QIAS Principles: 1.4, 2.1, 3.3 and 4.1 - 4.6

Challenges often experienced by gifted children

Because gifted children often master tasks quickly, they become bored with toys and activities faster than other children, which may lead to frustration. Child care professionals can tailor the program in areas in which a gifted child excels to minimise boredom or frustration.

Gifted children often have advanced social skills and they may find it difficult to interact with children their own age, preferring the company of adults or older children. This can be difficult in a child care setting where children are grouped according to age. Allowing gifted children to spend time with older children can assist them to develop friendships.

While a gifted child's social skills may be advanced, they can also experience very strong emotions. A gifted child may become upset if they are unable to perform tasks independently. They may also become distressed when other children do not display the empathy that the gifted child expects. It is important that child care professionals explain to the gifted child that others do not feel as strongly as they do or that they may not have yet developed feelings such as empathy.

Gifted children also often experience severe separation anxiety. Families frequently adapt their interactions to suit their child and provide experiences according to their child's needs and interests. In child care settings, however, the programs and experiences provided are often suited to a particular age range and an 'average' developmental level. For a gifted child this can make the child care environment unappealing, so having a child centred approach to programming and daily interactions is essential when working with gifted children.

All children develop faster in some areas than in others. However, there is often extra pressure placed on gifted children to achieve in all areas. This pressure sometimes comes from the child themselves, as they may be unable to understand why they are unable to perform some tasks. While their cognitive skills may develop at a high rate, for many gifted children their fine motor skills do not develop at the same pace. This leads to disappointment for the child when they can visualise the way a task should be completed, but are physically unable to do so.

As a gifted child moves through the primary school years, they may experience a higher level of social isolation. Gifted children may experience difficulty in social situations and as a result may experience bullying or exclusion. It is important for gifted children to have the opportunity to mix with children who share their strengths and interests. For example, allowing a child to join the chess club, school band or science club will allow them to challenge themselves while experiencing social groups and forming friendships.

Support for gifted children

It is important that child care professionals are responsive to the strengths, needs and interests of all children in their care. Working with a gifted child can be challenging for child care professionals as the interests and strengths of the child may be beyond their previous experience and current expertise. Professional Support Coordinators may be able to assist in developing care strategies for gifted children, provide training to the service to assist with assessments for the child and provide Inclusion Support Workers if required.

It is important to avoid sending the message to gifted children that they need to meet your expectations. Phrases such as "You must be pleased with yourself" or "You have worked really hard" are often enough to show the child you have noticed their efforts, without making an example of them in front of the other children, as this can be embarrassing for the child.

Allow all children enough time to complete their tasks and provide open ended experiences for children to explore in their own way.

Ensure the service has resources that meet the developmental levels of all children in care. It may be beneficial for the service to become a member of the local library to borrow resources such as atlases, encyclopaedias and



other reference material to extend children's knowledge in their individual areas of interest.

Excursions to the library can be organised to allow all children to have the opportunity to choose books to borrow. Assist the children to find the area of the library where books that will interest them are kept and allow them to borrow the books they choose. Gifted children may benefit from excursions to places such as museums, the zoo or other settings that may allow them to develop a deeper understanding of their topic of interest. Similarly, inviting guest speakers to the service can be beneficial and this may be more cost effective.

Clear, precise observations on all children are very important in ensuring a child centred program in any child care setting. Observations and records taken by a child care professional can be passed onto other professionals to assist with identification and ongoing support of giftedness. It is important to date all records and work samples to clearly show a child's development over time. Records and work samples can also be used to share information about the child's development with other professionals within and external to the service.

When children enter primary school they may be part of various clubs or classes relating to their area or areas of giftedness. If the outside school hours care service they attend is aware of these, child care professionals can incorporate these

into the service program. For example, if a child is entering a science competition, the outside school hours care service can provide space and time for the child to prepare for this. Maintaining open and effective communication between the service, child and family will help to ensure everyone is aware of the child's progress and current interests.

Collaboration with families

Often the first and most important observations in identifying a child's giftedness come from their family. They know their child better than anyone and can provide valuable information about their child's development. They can also share strategies and experiences they use to support their child at home.

It is quite common and natural for families to compare their child with other children. Some families may be concerned that their child may not be developing at the same rate as other children their age. Similarly, families of a gifted child may be worried that their child is developing at a faster rate than other children and they may also find it challenging to keep their child stimulated.

To develop a responsive program that meets the needs, strengths and interests of all children, it is important to promote open communication between the service, family and other professionals such as child psychologists who may be working with the child.

Some useful communication strategies include:

- having a communication book that can be shared between the service, family and other professionals to record information about conversations with the child, their current interests and evaluations of the strategies being used to support the child
- providing the family with the opportunity to comment on and contribute to planned experiences and evaluations of their child
- allowing reports from professionals working with the child to be shared with the service to assist with developing consistent strategies
- having regular meetings with the child's family to discuss their progress
- giving families the contact details for the Gifted and Talented Children Association in their state or territory.

Conclusion

Providing an effective program that meets the needs and interests of gifted children requires collaboration between everyone involved in the care and education of the child. Seeking support from Professional Support Coordinators, the Gifted and Talented Children's Association and joining libraries or clubs can also benefit services by providing extra training and resources to meet the needs and interests of all children ■

To access the contact details for your state/territory Professional Support Coordinator, visit the 'Links' page on NCAC's website or telephone a Child Care Adviser on 1300 136 554.

References and further reading

- Harrison, C. (1999). *Giftedness in Early Childhood*. Sydney: Gifted Education and Research, Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC).
- Porter, L. (2005). *Young Gifted Children: Meeting their needs*. ACT: Australian Early Childhood Association Inc.
- Porter, L. (1998). Giftedness in young children. *Every Child*, 4(2), 6 - 7.
- Porter, L. (2005). Coming to grips with giftedness. *Rattler*, 75, 26 - 29.

Useful website

- GERRIC: <http://gerric.arts.unsw.edu.au>

Website details for Gifted and Talented Children's Associations

- South Australia: www.gtcasa.asn.au
- Western Australia: www.gatcawa.org
- New South Wales: nswagtc.org.au
- Queensland: www.qagtc.org.au
- Victoria: www.vagtc.asn.au
- Northern Territory: www.ntaegt.org.au
- Tasmania: www.tasgifted.com
- Australian Capital Territory: www.actgifted.net.au