The 10 most commonly asked questions about highly gifted children

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1. Who are the highly gifted?

Highly gifted or exceptionally gifted children include:

- Those who score extremely high on individually administered IQ tests (generally in the 148+ range, Stanford-Binet L-M scores; or in the 140+ range on the WISC-R or Stanford-Binet Fourth Edition;
- Child prodigies in areas such as music, mathematics, or chess;
- Children with extremely highly developed talents in unusual areas;
- Profoundly intellectually gifted children above 170 IQ

2. How many highly gifted children are there?

No one really knows. Although many researchers have made estimates, and test norms indicate the statistically rare incidence of children in this population, the actual numbers of such children may well be greater than the statistical norms imply. Webb, Meckstroth, and Tolan (1982) state that one child in about 2,000 has an IQ above 150 on the Stanford-Binet Form L-M; one child in a half-million has an IQ above 170. Hollingworth (1942) estimated one child in a million has an IQ above 180. But Robinson's research (1981) suggests that there may actually be more than six times as many children above 164 IQ than statistics would predict. Lewis Terman (1925), who designed the original Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, discovered many more children testing above 170 IQ than predicted; Dunlap (1967) discovered the same thing in his clinical work as a school psychologist in the Midwest. In several areas of the United States, including Los Angeles, northern New England, Alaska, Ohio, and Colorado, Many more children have been discovered in this IQ range than should statistically be there. We don't know how many highly gifted children exist in the population, but apparently there are more-possibly six to ten times as many more-than previously thought.

3. How do I know if I have a highly gifted child?

Exceptionally gifted children demonstrate extremely advanced development in a number of areas. However, they may or may not demonstrate this ability by achieving at a high level in school. Individual testing, coupled with observation and case study of the child, is the best way to determine the type and extent of giftedness involved.

4. What tests are most likely to identify the highly intellectually gifted child?

The Stanford-Binet Form L-M (the "old Binet") is still the best single tool available to measure the full extent of giftedness in the very highest ranges, in children under thirteen years of age. The Stanford-Binet Form L-M has a higher ceiling than any of the other tests currently on the market, and gives more opportunity than either the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-R) or the 1986 Stanford-Binet Fourth Edition (SB:FE) "for gifted children to display their fluency, imagination, unusual or advanced concepts, and complex linguistic usage" (Vernon, 1987, p. 256). It is not uncommon for

a child to score in the 138-145 range on the WISC-R, for example, and later score above 160 on the Stanford-Binet Form L-M. When three or more subtest scores on the WISC-R, the K-ABC, or the SB:FE are at or near the ceiling of the test, the child should be retested with the Stanford-Binet Form L-M (Silverman & Kearney, 1989).

For children aged twelve and older, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT's) can provide an early measure of mathematical and verbal precocity. Highly gifted children in the seventh grade will often score above 430 on the verbal section or above 500 on the math section of this test. Children with extremely advanced abilities may score above 630 on the verbal section or above 700 in math. Special summer classes are available in many areas for students who score in this range, and local schools may be able to arrange appropriate acceleration within the regular school program.

5. If my child has been identified as gifted, isn't that enough? Why is it important to know whether or not she is highly gifted?

The child of 160 IQ is as different from the child of 130 IQ as that child is from the child of average ability. The kind of educational program developed for the highly gifted child of 160, 170, or 180 IQ often differs markedly from appropriate programs for most gifted children, but usually these programs are designed for the moderately gifted. An exceptionally gifted child may have difficulty finding appropriate challenges even in the gifted class, because of the need to move at a much faster pace, the ability to process material in greater depth, and the increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity typical of this population. Secondly, there is evidence to suggest that the social/emotional development of highly gifted children differs somewhat as well (Hollingworth, 1942; Roedell, 1984). They often exhibit an emotional intensity greater than that of many children. They are such abstract issues as freedom, justice, or war, but they may not be ready to deal with the emotional impact of such issues. Children in this range of development in early childhood-they will discuss Einstein's theory of relativity with you one minute, but kick a younger sibling in the shins the next! This can be confusing for child and parent alike. Yet such discrepancies represent perfectly normal development for the extremely gifted child, and should be accepted as such. Leta Hollingworth, a pioneer in the study of highly gifted children, described the issue this way:

It is especially to be noted that many of these problems are functions of immaturity. To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties. It follows that (after babyhood) the younger the child, the greater the difficulties, and that adjustment becomes easier with every additional year of age. The ages between four and nine are probably the most likely to be beset with the problems mentioned...(Hollingworth, 1942, p. 282-283)

Obtaining an accurate assessment of the child's ability can help parents and schools to better understand the intellectual and social/emotional needs of the child as development progresses.

6. Will the school know what to do with a highly gifted child?
Not necessarily. Surprising, as it may seem, extremely gifted children have been the least-studied children within the entire gifted population (Feldman, 1979). Very few articles and even fewer books have addressed the special needs of this population, so it is no surprise that even teachers of the gifted may not be familiar with the unique issues and problems these children face. Even if a school system has a gifted program, it is entirely possible that they have had no experience with a child who has been identified as highly gifted. When that is the case, parents will need to work very closely and cooperatively with the school, providing information about the highly gifted, helping to develop the child's program, and supporting the child and teacher emotionally as well as in other ways.

7. What effect does a highly gifted child have on the rest of the family?
Highly gifted children are often more intense, more demanding, and more expensive to raise than other children! They may need more challenging academic courses at an earlier age. Highly gifted children almost always accelerate their schooling in some manner before graduation from college. If the acceleration occurs over several grade levels, the child may leave home earlier than expected, resulting in an "early empty nest syndrome" (Silverman & Kearney, 1989). Parents often feel frustrated when they cannot provide enough educational stimulation for these children, who always seem to want "more, more, more". And they may feel other siblings are not getting equal attention. In addition, it has been our observation that a fair number of highly gifted children do not seem to need much sleep-in fact, they routinely need less sleep than their parents, even as infants and toddlers! Families of the highly gifted may struggle with certain issues such as schooling and sleep, but these families are also greatly enriched by the unexpected joys such a child brings to the family unit.

8. If one child in the family is highly gifted, is it possible that the other children are gifted also?
Yes. Recent research indicated that in many cases siblings are within ten IQ points of each other (Silverman, 1987, November). If one child is highly gifted, it is quite possible that the other children are gifted, too. In many circumstances, it is beneficial for families to have all of the children evaluated.

9. Are the parents of highly gifted children also gifted?
In many cases, yes. When parents first have their children assessed for giftedness, they usually begin to read and learn about the characteristics of gifted and highly gifted children. Then they may recognize those characteristics in themselves, often for the first time. Most adults did not attend schools which had gifted programs when they were young. Even those schools that provided programs often did not discuss with the children or their families the reasons for placement of the results of tests. Thus, many gifted adults today have long had a nagging sense that they were "different" or didn't fit in a school, but did not know the reason why. Often the first time they begin to face these issues themselves is when a child is identified as gifted. Then it comes as a "double whammy"--while they are trying to deal with the very real issues relating to a

child's giftedness, they are also trying to come to terms with their own giftedness, often for the first time.

10. Does gifted go away?
No. Highly gifted children grow up to become highly gifted adults. However, on the way to adulthood, giftedness may appear to "hide out". For many complex reasons, exceptionally gifted children are not always high achievers. In schools where achievement, high academic performance, task commitment, or concrete products are a major factor in identification for gifted programs, these children may not even be identified as gifted, despite extremely high IQ scores and evidence of marked early and advanced development (Brown, 1984).

Gifted girls may let their abilities go "underground" during junior high school (Silverman, 1986, p.69), and may adapt to their environments in other ways so that they will not appear gifted. Highly gifted girls need special encouragement and role models in order to understand and appreciate their own giftedness, to actualize their own potential as gifted women, and to balance the dual roles of gifted achiever and gifted nurturer (Kerr, 1985; Piechowski, 1988; Silverman * Kearney, 1989), should they choose both a career and family life.

Finally, highly gifted children may be affected by the ceiling effects of the tests they are given. For an extremely gifted child older than ten or eleven, even the Stanford-Binet Form L-M may not be able to completely measure his ability. On many tests, the older the child is when the test is administered, the less "room" there is on the test itself to demonstrate advanced ability; thus, an older child's score may not reflect the full extent of his giftedness.

Giftedness doesn't go away; only the contexts change throughout the lifespan. The issues of "general conduct" that Leta Hollingworth outlined more than fifty years ago follow highly gifted children right into adulthood.

Of all the special problems of general conduct which the most intelligent children face, I will mention five, which beset them in early years and may lead to habits subversive of fine leadership: (1) to find enough hard and interesting work at school; (2) to suffer fools gladly; (3) to keep from becoming negativistic toward authority; (4) to keep from becoming hermits; (5) to avoid the formation of habits of extreme chicanery (Hollingworth, 1942, p. 299)

Instead of learning to find enough hard and interesting work at school, the highly gifted adult must learn to find enough challenge in her daily tasks and in her life's work. She must learn to weigh the importance of issues, and to understand the limitations of others (and of herself) in the process. She must come to terms with the external authorities of adulthood-the supervisor at work, the tax laws, the mortgage payment-as well as the growing inner authority of her own conscience to find ways to use her abilities to advance society, rather than merely sustain it.

Intellectual giftedness doesn't go away. Instead, it influences development from infancy to old age. If you need further assistance in understanding the needs of highly gifted child, finding a support network of other parents and educators working with this population, or in understanding your own giftedness, please contact The Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children, P.O. Box 464, South Casco, Maine, 04077 (Telephone: 207-655-3767).

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Originally published in "Understanding our Gifted".