

Acceleration

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Whenever Jean Piaget visited this country and described his stages of intellectual development he was always asked what he called the "American Question." Why, he was repeatedly asked, do we have to *wait* for our child to develop concrete operations (the new mental abilities that emerge around the age of 5 to 7 and that enable young children to engage in the kind of reasoning required by formal instruction)? Why can't we teach them these operations earlier? Piaget replied that many animals go through the early stages more rapidly than do infants, but they never go as far. In effect, achieving a certain level of intelligence early may preclude moving on to higher levels. With respect to intelligence, an early start can mean a lower finish.

Researchers, however, were reluctant to leave it at that. They undertook a whole series of investigations to determine whether a child's progress through the Piagetian stages could be accelerated by training. By and large the results were negative. In general, the effects of training vary with the child's developmental level. Although training has some positive effects at all age levels, older children make more progress with considerably less training than younger children. Most children who are living in a "normal expectable environment" receive sufficient stimulation to realize their intellectual potential.

Although this conception of intellectual development is generally accepted among researchers, it is still not fully appreciated by many parents and educators. Among the many arguments for early intellectual stimulation are those that come from research on intellectually gifted youngsters. On the surface, the research with these children seems to contradict the above conclusions about the effects of training on development. This is true because a number of studies have demonstrated that the acceleration of intellectually gifted is beneficial. Young people who have been academically accelerated are intellectually challenged, complete high school and college early, and in many cases go on to successful careers. Doesn't this contradict the developmental position that growth can't be accelerated? And, from my own standpoint, doesn't this fly in the face of all that I have written about the stressful effects of hurrying?

Not really. In fact, acceleration is really the wrong word here. If it were correct we would have to say that a child who was retained was "decelerated." When an intellectually gifted child is promoted one or several grades, what has been accelerated? Surely not the child's level of intellectual development - that, after all, is the reason for his or her promotion! What has been accelerated is the child's progress through the school curriculum. But this can be looked at a different way, not so much as acceleration as *tailoring*. What promotion does for intellectually gifted children is to make a better fit between the child's level of intellectual development and the curriculum.

Sound familiar? Promotion of intellectually gifted children is another way of attaining the goal we have been arguing for at the early childhood level, namely, developmentally appropriate curriculum. Promotion of intellectually gifted children is simply another way of attempting to

match the curriculum to the child's abilities, not to accelerate those abilities. Accordingly, the promotion of intellectually gifted children in no way contradicts the accepted view of the limits of training on development, nor the negative effects of hurrying. Indeed, the positive effects of promoting intellectually gifted children provide additional evidence for the benefits of developmentally appropriate curricula.

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