

3 Characteristics of Gifted Children

The gifted children are not a homogeneous group, and every child possesses a unique blend of traits. However, when we look at gifted children as a group, we can see clusters of common characteristics. The last century has seen a significant shift in how theorists view giftedness in children and subsequently how practitioners should identify it. During the 20th century gifted children were solely identified by academic achievement i.e. those who scored within the top 1% on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale. But the last 30-40 years of research into gifted education has shown that performance based definitions of giftedness are insufficient.

Traditional approaches fail to identify three main groups of gifted children:

1. Children who have not managed to translate their above average ability into above average achievement for a variety of possible reasons.
2. Children whose above average ability is masked by a learning or physical disability, known generally as Twice Exceptional Children.
3. Traditional approaches only value academic intelligence and generalise performance, masking peaks and troughs due to specific abilities - alternative intelligences are not respected.

That why practitioners need to know characteristics of gifted children, what allows to them identification of a range of their special abilities and potential abilities. Many teachers are unwilling to recognize some children as 'gifted' because they believe it implies these children have more worth than others and they fear elitism. This common opinion arises from a basic misunderstanding about the purpose of gifted education. Unless developing of giftedness, society loses a great value. There are common myths and misconceptions concerning to giftedness. The best known of them are:

- We don't have any gifted children at our school.

Gifted children are present in every school. Children are not homogenous! In any school regardless of gender, ethnicity or socioeconomic class there will be stand out children.

Giftedness may vary from school to school and is not specific to one area of intelligence.

- We believe that every child has special abilities

Everyone has a personal strength, an area where they excel, but this is not the same as having a gift. Equally a personal weakness does not characterize a disability.

- Gifted children should excel in everything they do
Often a child's gift may be specific to one area, for example talented runners are not necessarily good at rugby, just as talented poets don't necessarily have good handwriting.

- Special programs for gifted children are elitist
As explained above catering for the gifted is a matter of need not worth.

- Gifted children will make it on their own without any extra help
Without support gifted children can fail due to a wide variety of factors including boredom.

The stereotype of the child who is gifted as a puny, bespectacled, shy, retiring type has not been confirmed in studies. In fact, children who are gifted tend to be physically superior, outgoing, and well-liked by their peers. Although most will not exhibit all the characteristics that follow, many will show evidence of several.

Common characteristics of gifted:

1. Children who are gifted usually have very long attention spans. They can remain absorbed in study much longer than most children. In fact, they may rebel against time limits that characterize most educational design.
2. Most seem to learn basic skills faster and with less practice.
3. Most possess a large vocabulary. Personal histories usually reveal that, as infants, they began to talk earlier and used complex sentences earlier than the average child.
4. They are extremely curious and continually question not only who, what, where, and when, but why and how at a very young age.
5. Their sense of humour favours puns and riddles.
6. They often exhibit moral and social concerns (e.g., foreign policy, economics, and environment) typical of much older individuals.
7. Their ideas are often considered to be "far out."
8. They usually show aptitude in one or more areas of artistic endeavour.
9. They have a need to work independently on some projects.

10. They prefer discovery and creative approaches to learning. Those who are reading oriented often demonstrate almost total recall of information learned through this medium.
11. Their leadership abilities tend to surface quite early. They will often dominate ideas and procedures in group projects.
12. At a very early age, many have demonstrated empathy for the handicapped and those less fortunate than them.

Children who fit into this group are more likely to:

- think quickly and accurately;
- work systematically;
- generate creative working solutions;
- work flexibly, processing unfamiliar information and applying knowledge, experience and insight into unfamiliar situations;
- communicate their thoughts and ideas well;
- be determined, diligent and interested in uncovering patterns;
- achieve, or show potential, in a wide range of contexts;
- be particularly creative;
- show great sensitivity or empathy;
- demonstrate particular physical dexterity or skill;
- make sound judgements;
- be outstanding leaders or team members;
- be fascinated by, or passionate about, a particular subject or aspect of the curriculum;
- and
- demonstrate high levels of attainment across a range of subjects or within a particular subject or aspect of work.

Gifted learners differ not only from standard population but also among themselves. The designations of the learner as ‘moderately’, ‘highly’ or ‘exceptionally’ gifted is not a matter of “labelling” the child. Rather it is a recognition that a group of gifted children can differ as much, or even more, among themselves as would a group of average ability children, and that different levels of ability require different types and levels of response. There are many different classifications of levels giftedness. Bellow some of them are presented. Gagné

(1998) regards children as gifted, if their ability levels are located in the top 15% of the population for their age. In terms of intellectual ability, this means IQ of 115 or above. In Table 1 levels of giftedness together with prevalence and programming options prepared by Feldhusen and Jarwan (2000) are introduced.

Table 1 Levels of giftedness according to Feldhusen and Jarwan (2000)

Levels of giftedness (IQ)	Prevalence	Programming Options
Mildly (115 – 129) (basically)	1:6 to 1:40	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enrichment in regular classroom • Modified curriculum • Curriculum compacting
Moderately (130 – 144)	1:40 to 1:1,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advanced work • Challenges within content • Some form of ability grouping • Mentorships • Single subject acceleration • Single grade skip or early entrance to school
Highly (145 – 159)	1:1,000 to 1:10,000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fast-paced content work in talent area • Ability grouping at least in talent area • Acceleration options • Challenging academic enrichments, e.g. Latin • Mentorships
Exceptionally (160 – 179)	1:10,000 to 1:1 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly individualised programs • High school / university level programs • Advanced placement • Radical acceleration (3+ carefully spaced grade skips)

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability grouping in specific talent areas • Specific counselling services
Profoundly (180+)	Fewer than 1:1 million	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radical acceleration • Early admission to university • Highly individualised programs • Special program searches • Special counselling services • Ability grouping in specific talent areas

Children who are **mildly intellectually gifted** appear in the population at a ratio of somewhere between *1 in 6 and 1 in 40* in the population. It follows that every class is likely to have at least a small group of such children. These individuals are not too far from the central (average) group of learners of their age for whom the ‘standard’ curriculum is designed and as long as the teacher modifies curriculum and teaching in response to these children’s learning characteristics, which include a faster pace of learning, a more retentive memory, a preference for complex and abstract questions and ideas - they should thrive in a regular classroom setting. All other things being equal, mildly gifted children tend to be popular with their classmates; they are bright enough to be admired but not so bright that they threaten other children’s self-image. Often they become class leaders

Children who are **moderately intellectually gifted** occur less frequently in a population, at a ratio of somewhere between 1 in 6 and 1 in 40. It means, that preschool or primary school teacher can expect to educate moderately intellectually gifted from the lower end of the range, every year or every two years. Secondary school teachers will encounter them rather more often. Children toward the top of the range with IQ of 140-145 appear rarely, they occur between 1 in 200 and 1 in 1000 in a population. Moderately gifted learners often consider the curriculum set for age-peers rather unrewarding. Children at the top end of the range often find it irrelevant; they may have to acquire the learning content of their grade years before. From the viewpoint of children’s learning characteristics, intellectually gifted learners are usually more emotionally mature than their age-peers. Moderate acceleration, in the form the subject acceleration in their main area of giftedness or a grade-skip, gives them access to

learners who, although older in chronological age, could be at similar academic and emotional developmental stages as intellectually gifted learners.

Influence learning characteristics, **highly gifted** learners clearly require significant curriculum modification and it is extremely difficult to provide such degrees of differentiation in the regular classroom. Today the inclusion of all gifted is preferred in the Czech Republic and is supported by government through special attitudes to these learners. But ability grouping in at least their areas of special ability of highly gifted individuals is virtually essential. Where this is not practicable, grade advancement or at least subject acceleration in the learners' area of special giftedness is strongly recommended. With children at this level of ability, and at levels above, it is very hard to attempt to provide an individually differentiated curriculum within the regular classroom and it needs enthusiastic and educated teachers in issues of giftedness. If the highly gifted learner stays with their classmates, he can get in the form of forced-choice dilemma. He can work on the advanced material which excites challenges and rewards him - but he has to do it on his own as the work is far beyond the capacities of even the brightest of his classmates. Alternatively he can work with his classmates on material which is accessible to them but which he probably passed through years before. It could be stressful for him to choose between companionship and intellectual stimulation.

Exceptionally and **profoundly** gifted learners are a tiny minority (look at Table 1). Therefore like many minorities, they are learners at risk. Indeed, they can be placed seriously at risk if the school requires them to move through the grades in lockstep progression with age-peers. These individuals most definitely require thoughtfully structured and carefully monitored individualised programs of acceleration.

Below are presented two very important findings of research concerning exceptionally and profoundly gifted learners conducted by L. Hollingworth and P. Janos in the United States. Already ninety years ago, L. Hollingworth conducted a longitudinal study of a group of exceptionally and profoundly gifted individuals, tracing their development from childhood through to adulthood. From her research with these and other groups of gifted children she came to describe the IQ range of 125-150 as *socially optimal intelligence* (Hollingworth, 1926). She found that children scoring within this range were well-balanced, self-confident and outgoing individuals who were able to win the confidence and friendship of age-peers. L. Hollingworth claimed, that above the level of IQ 160 the difference between the exceptionally

gifted child and his/ her age-mates is so great that it leads to special problems of development which are correlated with social isolation, and that these difficulties appear particularly acute between the ages of four and nine (Hollingworth, 1931). Even more recent studies confirm her findings.

P. Janos conducted two studies which commenced in the 1980s and they have made valuable contributions to what is known about the social and emotional development of exceptionally and profoundly gifted learners. The findings of this research show how these young people can most effectively be educated. P. Janos compared the socio-affective development of 32 children aged 6-9 with IQs in excess of 164, with that of 49 mildly and moderately gifted age-peers of moderately superior intellectual ability (Janos, 1983). Although the exceptionally gifted were generally rated higher in terms of their academic performance, they were more isolated than their age peers, had greater problems of social development and, in the case of a substantial minority, seemed to lack the motivation to develop their intellectual giftedness. P. Janos emphasised, however, that the social isolation experienced by these children was not the clinical isolation of emotional disturbance, but was caused by the absence of a suitable peer group with whom to relate. There are virtually no points of common experience and common interest between a 6-year-old with a mental age of 6 and a 6-year-old with a mental age of 12. L. Hollingworth would have agreed with Janos's conclusion. She herself emphasised that when exceptionally gifted children who have been rejected by age-peers are removed from the inappropriate grade-placement, and are permitted to work and play with intellectual peers, the loneliness and social isolation disappear and the child is accepted as a valued classmate and friend (Hollingworth, 1942).

It is important to be aware that the borders of these levels of giftedness are not 'cut-off points'. It is clear that probably there should not be considerable differences in the way teachers respond to children of IQ 129 - the upper end of the mildly gifted range - and IQ 130 - the lower end of the moderately gifted range. However, there should be significant differences in the way how teachers should respond to the child of IQ 120 (1 in 10 in the population) and the child of IQ 140 (1 in 200).

Radical acceleration is very suitable for these learners because they are extremely bright and, almost without exception, very emotionally mature - although this maturity may not be immediately obvious if they are lonely and miserable at school. Radical acceleration refers to

any sequence of accelerative procedures which results in a learners graduating from high school three or more years earlier than usual. A single three-year grade skip is not recommended. A more practical procedure is a series of three grade advancements each separated by a period of consolidation; however there is various forms of acceleration procedures that can be used.

It is important to recognise that many able children underachieve. Their potential is masked by factors such as frustration, low self-esteem, lack of challenge, and low teacher/parent expectations. To enable these children to fulfil their potential, it is vital to create a climate where every child has the opportunity to excel.

It is needed to say that a common mistake of teachers is that sometimes they are not able to differentiate between the bright and gifted learners. And even some teachers prefer bright children to gifted children because of they do not require individual attitude and different instructional strategies. In Table 2 main characteristics of bright and gifted learners created by National Association for Gifted Children are introduced.

Table 2. Characteristics of bright and gifted learners (according to National Association for Gifted Children)

<i>Bright learner</i>	<i>Gifted learner</i>
<i>Knows the answers</i>	<i>Asks the questions</i>
<i>Is interested</i>	<i>Is highly curious</i>
<i>Is attentive</i>	<i>Is mentally and physically involved</i>
<i>Has good ideas</i>	<i>Has wild, silly ideas</i>
<i>Works hard</i>	<i>Plays around, yet performs well in tests</i>
<i>Answers the questions</i>	<i>Discusses in detail, elaborates</i>
<i>Works in "top groups"</i>	<i>Level of ability "beyond the top groups"</i>
<i>Listens with interest</i>	<i>Shows strong feelings and opinions</i>
<i>Learns with ease</i>	<i>Already knows</i>
<i>Takes six to eight repetitions for mastery</i>	<i>Takes one or two repetitions for mastery</i>
<i>Understands ideas</i>	<i>Constructs abstractions</i>
<i>Enjoys peers</i>	<i>Prefers adults</i>
<i>Grasps the meaning</i>	<i>Draws inferences</i>
<i>Completes assignments</i>	<i>Initiates projects</i>
<i>Is receptive</i>	<i>Is intense</i>
<i>Copies accurately</i>	<i>Creates a new design</i>

<i>Enjoys school</i>	<i>Enjoys learning</i>
<i>Absorbs information</i>	<i>Manipulates information</i>
<i>Is technically adept</i>	<i>Is an inventor rather than technician</i>
<i>Is good at memorising</i>	<i>Is good at guessing</i>
<i>Enjoys straight forward sequential presentation</i>	<i>Thrives on complexity</i>
<i>Is alert</i>	<i>Is keenly observant</i>
<i>Is pleased with own learning</i>	<i>Is highly self-critical</i>

Training questions and tasks:

- 1. Do you know common myths and misconceptions concerning to giftedness, say at least six the most known.*
- 2. What levels of giftedness according to Feldhusen and Jarwan do you know?*
- 3. For what levels of giftedness is an individually differentiated curriculum appropriate?*