

Characteristics of giftedness

by Suzanne Day

Over the past years, parents of gifted children have chosen home schooling as a valid option for their children. Many home schooling parents are wondering if their child might be gifted, and some need to discover that behind the learning difficulties there might be giftedness. We hope that you will benefit from this introductory article.

The Gifted Developmental Center, directed by Linda Kreger Silverman from Denver, Colorado is the most recognized research centre of its type in the USA. They have successfully used a list of descriptors for nearly 19 years. The following is a summary of the most important traits of third and fourth graders: rapid learning, extensive vocabulary, good memory, good problem solving, thrive on challenge, long attention span, vivid imagination, sensitivity, curiosity, perfectionism, preference for older companions, excellent sense of humour, ability to sight read, interests in books, maturity, and perseverance. Giftedness is not a straight-A average. Many gifted children and adults are hiding, trying to remain unnoticed because of the fear of being rejected, or misunderstood. Giftedness is mainly a superior ability for abstract reasoning. Humans think in two ways: verbal conceptualization (with the sounds of words) and non-verbal conceptualization (in pictures). The child who reasons easily with words would be called an auditory-sequential learner. He or she is often identified as a left-brain thinker. The left brain, or dominant hemisphere, is responsible for temporal, sequential and analytic functions. This child would be strong at reasoning abstractly with words. For example, if asked how a fork and a knife are similar, he would easily answer that they are silverware or utensils, in comparison to a child less capable in this ability who would describe each one as a separate entity. On the other hand, the child who manipulates and constructs complicated Lego structures would have a strong ability to abstract in space without the use of words. This child would be described as a visual-spatial learner. He is a right brain thinker, using the right hemisphere which specializes with spatial, holistic, and synthetic functions. He is thinking with the picture of concepts or ideas. We all use both brain hemispheres, but not with equal facility. Ideally we need both abilities to be an efficient learner. Highly gifted children appear to have unusual facility in integrating sequential and spatial functions, but most seem to naturally favour one or the other mode of learning. Students with stronger discrepancies between these two areas witness learning difficulties, and/or underachievement. Too often, as educators, we concentrate on

the disability and forget the talents. The child may be gifted in math, but struggle in reading or writing. This is often the profile of a visual-spatial learner, which is typical of children I evaluate and for this reason I would like to further discuss this type of giftedness.

The visual-spatial learner perceives the interrelatedness of the parts of any situation. He has an ability with puzzles and mazes, has a keen visual memory, exceptional ability in geometry and science, and has a highly developed intuition but may not be able to tell you how he came to the conclusion. This process is many times faster than verbal conceptualization which occurs at about the same speed as speech. In spite of their strengths as visual-spatial thinkers some are underachieving and may present potential weaknesses such as: difficulty with phonics and spelling, poor performance on timed tests, illegible laboured handwriting, may act first and think later, and/or may seem "spacey" and inattentive. The higher the child's I.Q. the more likely are both visual-spatial abilities and introversion to be present: the child needs extra thinking time before entering into tasks and often needs time to observe others. Introverts gain their energy from themselves and find people very draining. They need their regular time of privacy. The spatial learning style is not well suited to school tasks. They get easily bored with rote memorization, drill, routine, and practice which is more designed for sequential learners. Once they understand the basic concept they are ready to go on to something new. Usually a visual-spatial learner is good at sequencing but does not like it. However, if the child has several sequential weaknesses he may present behaviour problems. These children do not have a back-up system: they seem to be more volatile because their reactions are not mediated by a clear understanding of consequences. These children will do better in a home schooling context but the parents would benefit from clear guidance to address the weaknesses which are often linked to sensory integration problems and/ or eye or ear dominance, subjects that we cannot cover in this short article. These gifted children learn best when they deal with whole systems, abstract relationships, major concepts, and problem solving. They learn best through inductive or discovery techniques, these being the use of manipulatives and unit study approaches. Visual-spatial students should be encouraged to arrive at answers in their own ways, rather than be required to follow a step-by-step approach. Home schooling, which offers increased flexibility, is particularly suited for the gifted learner since many gifted students are uneven in their abilities.

In order to clearly identify giftedness, a professional needs to assess the Intellectual Quotient or I.Q. . However, parents are often good judges of their child's tendencies and they should follow their common sense if they cannot afford a professional assessment. Testing and evaluations of subject area competencies can be useful in planning an

educational program and assessing its outcomes. The Canadian Achievement Test can be a good tool to start. However, research data shows that home schoolers on average score in the eightieth percentile, which means that the gifted child would have to be tested at one year or two years higher and still perform in the eightieth percentile to receive an accurate reading of the data.

Gifted individuals will have tendency to rely heavily on their intellectual strengths and sometimes be more vulnerable to self-sufficiency. God instructs us to primarily seek wisdom and wait humbly with our heart and our spirit for the guidance of His Holy Spirit. Jesus never did anything without seeking His Father's advice. God has a perfect plan for our lives. As home schooling parents of gifted children, when you feel inadequate, remember: God gave you this child and He gave you to him. Make sure that you are registered in His school, He has a great Guidance Counsellor!

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