“I’m confused,” the father of a recently identified six-year-old said. “What should I tell my daughter?”

That’s not an unusual question. As parents we want to be straightforward with our children about their giftedness, but we often get conflicting messages about what to say. Will our kids become self-centered elitists if we tell them they are gifted? Is praise helpful or harmful? Is it okay to use the word “gifted”?

Not much has changed since 1985 when the #1 gripe our brightest kids had was that no one explained what being gifted is all about. In 2016, more than 300 gifted teens from around the country were surveyed during self-advocacy workshops. Less than 25% said that their parents had talked with them about being gifted. In fact:

- 33% said no one has ever talked to them about what it means to be gifted.
- 43% said no one has ever talked to them about programming for gifted students in their school or district.
- 55% said no one has ever encouraged them to take charge of their own education.

While every student says he/she wants to have that conversation, parents still struggle with it. Often parents don’t know what to say because they don’t fully understand the concept of giftedness. Or, some falsely assume that their bright children can innately reflect on their abilities and develop insights into their own wants and needs. Or, in attempting to be egalitarian, parents tell themselves (and their children) that everyone is gifted in one way or another.

The bottom line is, no matter how difficult it might be, parents must talk to their children about their exceptionalities. The tough part is figuring out exactly what to say.

On the following pages, several experts on the lives of gifted children share nuggets of wisdom—for a total of 30 things that every parent and gifted child needs to know.
More Than an Engaging Lesson

By George Betts

On August 14, 1966, I thought I knew everything. I had graduated from college and was preparing to teach my first class. Wanting to catch the students’ attention, I walked into the room dressed as a historical figure and conducted the class in character. They were mesmerized. At the end of class, however, a student named Kathy asked if I had a minute to answer a question. I assumed it was about the assignment, but I was wrong. She said, “Mr. Betts, my stepdad beat up my mom last night. What should I do?” In that instant, I realized that I didn’t know everything. But I promised Kathy I’d seek answers and was able to provide her with help that day.

My life was never the same from that moment. Kathy and many other learners taught me that they needed more than just an engaging lesson. I’ve learned the importance of social-emotional development, although it has taken me until now to fully understand it—50 years of learning and living.

Here are five things so that parents and teachers can help our gifted students understand:

1. Giftedness lies within you, 365 days a year and not only the 180 days of the school year.
2. Do all you can to surround yourself with a positive, nourishing environment.
3. Find your group of true peers who will inspire, support, and encourage you.
4. Find your passion and engage in it. That process can grow into a passion for passions.
5. A nourishing environment, true peers, and engagement in your passion will help you develop a positive self-concept and true self-esteem.

Dr. George Betts is the President of the National Association for Gifted Children. He is a critically acclaimed speaker and consultant, Professor Emeritus at the University of Northern Colorado, the founder and former director of the Center for the Education and Study of the Gifted, Talented, and Creative, and the founder and former director of the Summer Enrichment Program.

“Dreams Deferred:” Culturally & Linguistically Diverse Students

By Joy Lawson Davis

In more than 30 years in gifted education, I’ve spent many hours researching and listening to gifted students from diverse backgrounds. These remarkable students have been some of the most incredible people I’ve ever known. Shared below are comments based on experience that identify the skills used to overcome the challenges they face as gifted individuals.

Focus on your dreams and not on the world’s negative perceptions of you. Many students of color face rejection and bias in schools and communities. Those who have overcome note that they focus on their dreams rather than focus on the negative messages they receive.

Surround yourself with people who support and understand your uniqueness. It’s important in every setting that gifted students have individuals around who understand them and provide support for their ideas and their vision of the future.

Prove the naysayers wrong. Whatever doubts the world may have of you, your community, or your cultural group, demonstrate in your actions and accomplishments that they are wrong. Use their negatives to build your courage and use that courage to propel you forward into the future.

Take risks venturing into the unknown with confidence. If you’re “the first” and sometimes “the only one” from your group to engage with others who are different from you, see it as an opportunity to take a risk into the unknown. Recognize that great possibilities to learn and grow that are uniquely yours exist in the “unknown.”

When others hesitate to accept your gifts for whatever reason, keep going. Being differently gifted is a challenge, but not one that has not been overcome by other great minds before you.

Dr. Joy Lawson Davis is an educator, practitioner, scholar, and author. She is an Associate Professor and Chair of the Dept. of Teacher Education at Virginia Union University, and a sought out expert in addressing the needs of diverse gifted learners, culturally responsive instruction, and family engagement. She is serving a second term on NAGC’s Board of Directors.
expert advice

From a Teacher, Confidante & Dad

By Jim Delisle

In my 39 years working with gifted kids, I’ve learned a few things from them—as a teacher, a confidante, and a dad. Gifted children certainly share the very human needs for safety, belonging, and purpose that everyone requires, but their advanced intellects lead them to want some other life elements as well. Elements like these:

1. They want people to know that they are more than the sum of their abilities. Yes, gifted students are smart, but they are also deep, enriched with emotions and insights that often far surpass their chronological ages. Acknowledge your children’s minds and also their hearts.

2. Stop paying interest on a bill you don’t owe. When your gifted children’s intense emotions come fully alive, don’t squelch them by asking, “Why do you always get so worked up about things?” Instead, acknowledge that “It’s not easy to be as sensitive as you are, is it?” Embrace their intensities as assets to be treasured, not liabilities to be eliminated.

3. They can be good at something you don’t want to do. Encourage your gifted children to explore their passions, not yours. And when they tell you that they want to be a writer when they grow up, don’t say, “You’ll never make any money at that.” Instead, ask why that career interests them so much.

4. Teach your kids to advocate for themselves. If something isn’t working at school, your gifted kids need to consider what they can do to address the situation. If your children use the right words and approach, most teachers will listen.

5. Remember: you never outgrow your giftedness. Gifted kids grow up to become gifted adults, perhaps as you did. With your gifted children, embrace this reality with gusto and joy.

Dr. Jim Delisle has taught gifted children and those who work on their behalf for more than 38 years. Jim retired from Kent State University recently after 25 years of service as a professor of special education. The author of more than 250 articles and 19 books, Jim’s work has been translated into multiple languages and has been featured in both professional journals and in popular media.

From a Counselor’s Perspective

By Jean Peterson

In several of my research studies of gifted youth, hidden distress emerged as a common concern. Whether it was bully targets, GLBTQ adolescents, troubled teens self-medicating with illegal drugs, high achievers meeting a nemesis, or children and teens struggling with depression, many told neither parents nor teachers of their sadness, anxiety, or fear. Many said they needed to “figure it out” themselves. Some worried that their distress would disappoint, alarm, or be toxic for those adults. Some feared conflict. They protected their well-honed public image.

With these findings in mind, I offer the following:

Gifted kids must learn to ask for help—for social, emotional, and academic concerns. They can “teach” their parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, and directors about their stressors, doubts, and limitations.

Being able to talk about social and emotional life is likely to benefit future relationships in the workplace, in marriage/partnership, in parenting, and with peers. Having opportunities in school to meet with intellectual peers to discuss “growing up” helps develop expressive language.

Through struggle, gifted kids develop resilience and gain confidence in their ability to persevere. Struggle can be discouraging, of course. Yet it may lead to greater self-awareness, altruism, compassion, and vision. Knowing that struggle has a purpose may be helpful during crises.

Achievement level is not a guarantee of success in college and in adulthood. Yet many adults try to predict the future based on how gifted kids are during the school years. When circumstances change and development continues, motivation can also change.

Process (the doing) is as important as product (what is produced)—perhaps even more important. Being able to appreciate and enjoy “the trip” without being preoccupied with “destination” (and evaluation) may contribute to life satisfaction, good morale, and less perfectionism.

Dr. Jean Peterson, Professor Emerita, directed school counselor preparation at Purdue University after her earlier career as a classroom and gifted education teacher. She has worked clinically with gifted families for 30 years and has focused on research on the social-emotional development of high-ability students, underachievement, bullying, negative life experiences, and affective curriculum.

(Continues on p. 22)
Five “Commandments” for the Gifted

As I look back on my life, my husband’s life, and the lives of our three gifted children, I’m aware of five lessons that are likely to predict a gifted child’s ability to succeed, both personally and professionally.

Lesson #1: Know Thyself. Gifted students need to figure out how far their capabilities extend, what they are good at, and which areas are not their strengths. We can help them identify how they learn best, what personal learning characteristics they have, and what their own learning goals might be. Understanding themselves as learners will make them less likely to question whether or not they are “really gifted.”

Lesson #2: Know Thy Institutions. By 3rd grade, gifted students can begin to identify potential hurdles that might hinder their learning. They need answers to questions like, “How can my learning goals be clearly communicated to adults at school and home?” “What is the real ‘problem’ I present when I ask for a different way to do things?” “What are creative solutions I can use most effectively to achieve my learning goals?” We can help them develop appropriate negotiating skills that will allow them to circumvent the “school game.”

Lesson #3: Know Thy Peers. Gifted students often say they don’t like working in small groups, even when group members are friends. We can help them realize that working as a team is important sometimes and it’s best to figure out what they can gain from the group assignment. When they can’t find a good reason for working with a group, it is time to negotiate with the teacher about working on their own. And, if negotiation doesn’t work, they can reframe the group experience into improving their own collaborative skills. This time, should they be the group “historian,” the “worker bee,” or “the manager?”

Lesson #4: Know Thy Community. It’s also important that gifted students identify community-related projects and service initiatives that allow them to work with all ages and ability levels. This helps develop clearer communication skills, see the strengths in others, and learn to be a follower at times. Likewise, they can seek out national and international competitions that allow them to develop their very specific talents and passions beyond what school provides.

Lesson #5: Know Thy Education Pathway. Before middle school, gifted students can begin to determine if they need to shorten the number of years they spend in K–12 before moving on to postsecondary work. Some will want or need to stay for the full 13 years for a variety of reasons: friendships, significant teachers and mentors, or existing options that let them pursue their interests in alternative ways. Others who need to get deeply into their talent areas earlier, must let their teachers know they need to bypass what they already know and find ways to compact out of curriculum standards they have already mastered.

As basketball coach, John Wooden, once said, “Success comes from knowing that you did your best to become the best that you are capable of becoming.” In short, these five commandments help gifted students figure out what they are capable of becoming—not what others say they need, but in figuring that out on their own!

Dr. Karen B. Rogers is Professor Emerita of Gifted Studies at the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota. She is currently working on two Javits grants for gifted disadvantaged children. Research interests include, arts education, cognitive processing, parenting, creativity, gifted program development, practices, and evaluation, and twice-exceptional education.
Foster An Ongoing, Honest, Factual Dialogue

By Deb Douglas

Talking with our kids about their giftedness isn’t a one-and-done deal. We must consider it an ongoing, honest, factual dialogue about all the possibilities and problems that being a gifted individual entails. From the perspective of a mother, teacher, gifted coordinator, and long-time advocate, I’d like to add my own five items that I believe our children need to know:

1. **Being gifted is not what you do, but who you are.** It’s not how well you do in school, what you become someday, or what you can contribute to society, but rather it’s a unique set of characteristics you will have for your entire life.

2. **Remember that while you may be better at some things than others your age, that doesn’t mean you’re better than they are.**

3. **There are many ways to be gifted, and gifted people are not all alike.** Each one has a combination of exceptional abilities—intellectual, academic, creative, artistic, athletic, or leadership—a mixture that is different for every gifted person.

4. **Being gifted means you may have different educational needs than some of your classmates.** Every brain needs to be challenged in order to grow and you can help your teachers and parents know when the challenge feels right, when it’s too tough, and when it’s too easy. Remember, you have definite strengths but you also have underdeveloped areas that may need some work.

5. **Being gifted is a good thing.** It doesn’t mean your life will always be easy, but it’s part of what makes you uniquely wonderful.

We empower our children to follow their dreams when we help them reflect on their individual gifts, understand their rights and responsibilities, connect with others who can provide support, and explore the wonderful, wide world of opportunities.

Deb Douglas is the president of GT Carpe Diem, a consultancy that specializes in teaching self-advocacy skills to gifted children. She previously served as gifted education coordinator for the Manitowoc (WI) Public School District for almost 20 years, and as a 9-year board member of Wisconsin Association for Talented and Gifted, including two years as President from 2011–2013.

**Endnotes**

(From p. 2)
