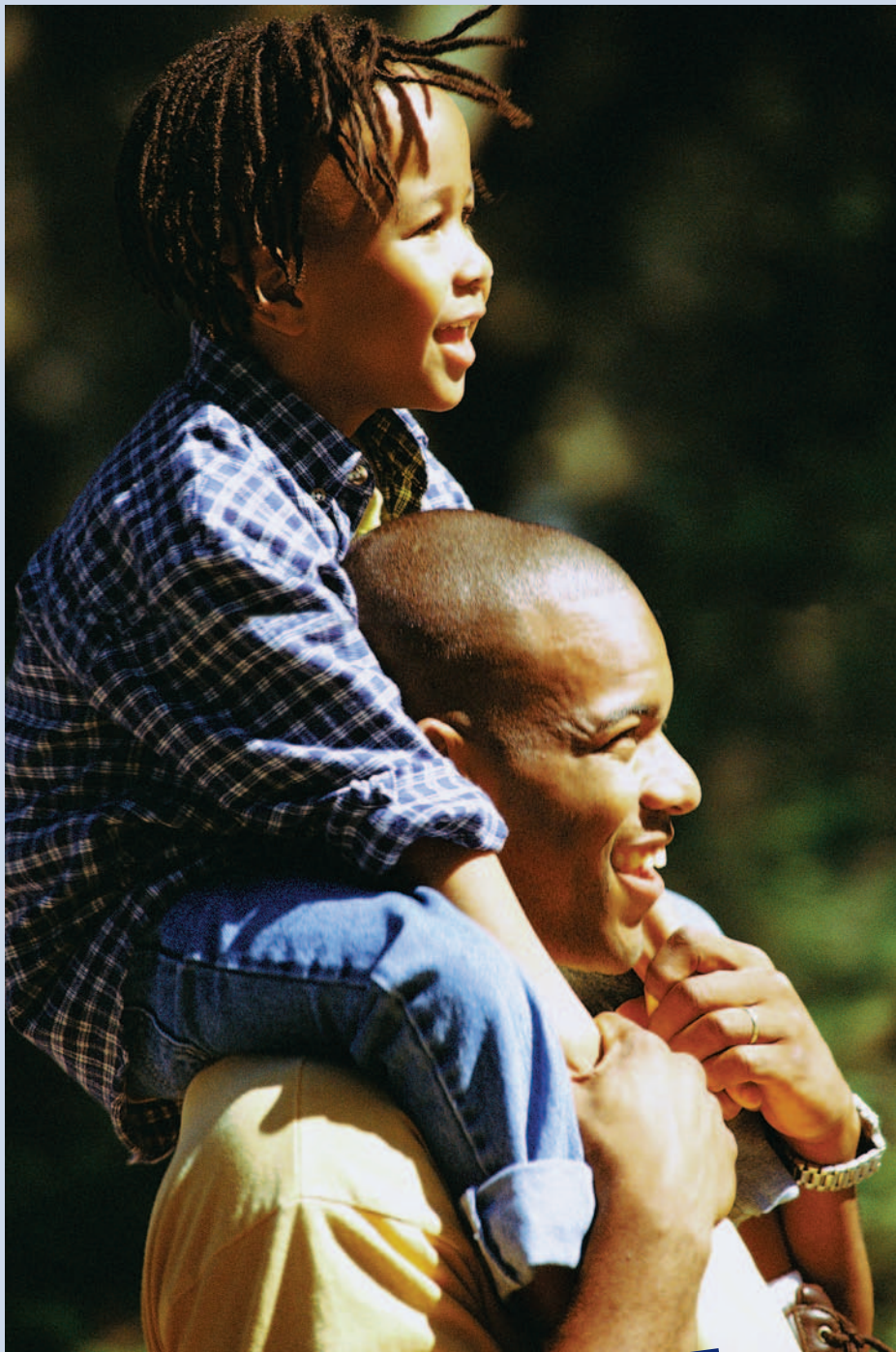


PARENTING YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN

how to discover and develop their talents at home



by Joan Franklin Smutny

“My son has been studying acting (mostly Shakespeare) since he was 4 years old. Once when he was 5 or 6, he memorized an entire script (90 pages) — everyone’s parts — by the second time he heard it. He has been acting and auditioning for films and commercials regularly and has done national commercials for McDonald’s.”

“We first noticed Elizabeth was unusual at age 2 when, upon hearing Copeland’s Rodeo in an ad on TV, she identified the title and composer. The ad was the second time she had heard the piece. Elizabeth (age 6) does fifth-grade reading. She writes great poetry and creates her own experiments and math problems.”


“My daughter is in first grade, but goes to a second-grade class for math. The teacher was discussing the commutative property of addition with the class — that $3+5$ is the same as $5+3$. She then asked about subtraction: Was $5-3$ the same as $3-5$? They decided that it was not. The other students all said $3-5$ was impossible, but Emily said it was possible and that it was ‘under zero.’ She said the answer was ‘2 under zero.’ She had invented negative numbers all by herself.”

Parents are usually the first to notice the unusual qualities of their gifted young children. Sometimes, though, they may doubt themselves because they lack exposure to other children or because a relative,

teacher, counselor, or school psychologist discounts their observations. Once their young children begin attending school, parents frequently find themselves caught between the unhappiness of their bored or frustrated children and a school system that may not recognize the needs of gifted students, or one that lacks the funds and personnel to sustain an educational alternative for them.

Despite the disbelief or incredulity they may encounter, parents need to trust their observations and instincts. They are the child's most accurate judge and are in a unique position to observe and document their son or daughter's special talents. The close relationship between parents and children can provide some unique insight into the strengths and abilities of their young ones.

IDENTIFYING YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN

 One way for parents to begin identifying their young gifted children (age 4 through 8) is to become aware of common characteristics they can observe at home. Below is a list that many parents find useful:

- expresses curiosity about many things,
- asks thoughtful questions,
- has an extensive vocabulary and uses complex sentence structure,
- is able to express him/herself well,
- solves problems in unique ways,
- has a good memory,
- exhibits unusual talent in art, music, or drama,
- exhibits an especially original imagination,
- uses previously learned data in new contexts,
- is well able to order things in logical sequences,
- discusses and elaborates on ideas,
- is a fast learner,
- works independently and uses initiative,
- exhibits wit and humor,
- has a sustained attention span or is willing to persist on challenging tasks,
- is very observant,
- shows talent in making up and telling stories,
- is interested in reading.

This list is only an outline of what might emerge in parents' daily interactions with their children. The expression of talent depends a great deal on the home

environment — what the family does, the cultural and economic background, and the resources available to the family. Therefore, it is best to focus on behaviors rather than specific skills or products.


Even in populations that are relatively homogeneous, giftedness still expresses itself uniquely in each individual child. Some may begin speaking and reading early; others may not. Einstein is an example of a highly gifted child who did not begin speaking until age 4 and did not begin reading until age 7. I recently met a parent who claimed that her young son was not gifted because he lacked the ability to read or write, yet he possessed an extraordinary artistic talent. One day, he surprised her by meticulously labeling a series of dinosaurs he had drawn. Focusing on reading and writing, this mother initially failed to see her son's gifts or recognize that, in some children, it takes time for skills to catch up with talent.

Parents, therefore, need not apply rigid academic criteria to their young children, but can begin observing their strengths and abilities in the little comments they make, their observations about something they saw on television or overheard in a conversation between adults, the questions they pose, and their responses to the thoughts and feelings of others. I have always encouraged parents to look for talent in a wide range of contexts, including the most casual comment or question. Even a simple gesture in a very young person can speak volumes.

Some parents have benefited from documenting their young child's behavior. Documentation is particularly useful when children attend a school where the curriculum does not challenge or stimulate their growth and development. A portfolio of a child's work, as well as anecdotes written by parents who observed some unusual flash of insight or knowledge in their child in the course of a day, can become a useful source of information for teachers who may not realize what the child can do. In addition, a portfolio can be fortifying for a child who has lost interest in school and is beginning to doubt his or her worth. A number of gifted children stop applying themselves when the challenge is insuffi-

cient to inspire them. Then, when they experience penalties for what appears as laziness or indifference, they begin to doubt their abilities and retreat from the keen interest they once felt for learning. A record of young children's accomplishments can go far in resurrecting their self-esteem, particularly when parents bring the portfolio to school as evidence of their child's talents and abilities.

BECOME A RESOURCE FOR YOUNG GIFTED CHILDREN AT HOME

 Children need to know that regardless of their school experience they will be able to learn and grow in a home environment that is nurturing and stimulating. This environment is vital for students who find themselves with few opportunities in school to explore their interests and talents. Few adults really understand how imprisoning the regular curriculum feels to young gifted children.

Constraining them within certain parameters of a subject or topic is really no different than forcing babies who are ready to walk to keep crawling until they reach a certain age. When parents actively support the special talents that make their children such hungry and innovative learners, they bring fresh air and inspiration to their stifled spirits and give them the freedom they need to grow and develop naturally.

Parents can integrate critical and creative thinking into all sorts of situations and activities in the course of the day once they become more aware of the *process* and how to apply it to different contexts. The emphasis should be less on what resources parents can find in the home and more on *how* they use what they have. Parenting is a creative art. It involves improvising with materials at hand, using opportunities that arise unexpectedly, and encouraging young children to participate in problem solving and to develop their own interests and creative projects.

Parents can do much to develop the creative potential of their young gifted children and keep their love of learning alive and free. I know many talented children who, despite their frustration and/or boredom in school, still manage to preserve their inner creative resources

because their parents support them unconditionally. Parents can inspire their children's creative imagination by exploring ideas freely with them, posing questions, valuing their individuality in all its expressions, and making them feel safe about taking risks. Below are examples of some creative-thinking processes that provide a useful guide for activities and conversations. They come from the work of pioneer researcher E. Paul Torrance.

Fluency: The child produces many ideas (through brainstorming or free association).

Flexibility: The child thinks of alternatives to the conventional way of looking at things.

Originality: The child innovates and invents within a specific context.

Elaboration: The child extends his or her creative ideas in order to apply them (which involves testing, experimenting, analyzing, synthesizing).

These processes do not occur in isolation, of course, and parents need not concern themselves with these definitions other than as a basic guide. These processes open up a whole range of creative possibilities that can occur at the spur of the moment. When a mother notices her young gifted girl thumbing through a book of paintings, for example, she could:

- ask her to write about what she sees from the point of view of a tree, an animal, or whatever else might be in the picture;
- ask her to describe what has just happened in the painting or what will happen after it;
- put a piece of paper next to the picture and draw an extension from where the painting finishes;
- discuss the strokes used in the painting (e.g., are they large, sweeping ones or many tiny ones as in Impressionism?) and use similar strokes in a painting of her own.

Visual images are excellent catalysts for either storytelling, creative writing, or other related art projects. Children enjoy looking at photographs or magazines and talking about what they see. Some gifted children will automatically begin invent-

ing stories. Parents can buy scrapbooks or notebooks and make a "book" with their children by cutting out photos and creating a story to accompany them. This project can be especially fun when the focus is a book about the *children*. Old pictures of their babyhood and earlier years, places they have traveled to or things they have done, magazine pictures,



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sketches, as well as imaginary storylines will delight young gifted children. If they are too young to write or write only haltingly, parents can have the children dictate to them. Integrating media (visual images with storytelling and/or writing) stimulates creative ideas in both parents and children and does not require expensive supplies.

BOOK ACTIVITIES WITH GIFTED CHILDREN

Here are a few examples of activities parents and children can do together with books:

- A mother reads her daughter two books about animals in a tropical forest. After reading them, the child is asked to draw the characters in both books and the two begin discussing what they learned from the two different stories. The mother keeps posing questions: How might the characters from both books get along with each other? Where in the forest will they live? What other things might happen to them in their homes? What adventures might they have?

There are all sorts of variations to combining books. For example, children could discuss, draw, or write about characters in two books. Suppose the characters from these two books got together. What might happen? How might the stories in each book change? How might the characters change?

- Parents also can combine fiction and nonfiction. Once they become aware of their children's interests, they can use books on a particular subject from a variety of disciplines. For example, a girl who wants to learn about whales might enjoy combining a science book about their natural life, another one about a fictional whale, and then perhaps watch a video about them. They may like to write a series of poems, dictate stories of their own, or possibly create a map charting the migration routes of whales.
- An important dimension to creative thinking is the ability to think of alternatives. Books offer a ready resource for this. For example, parents can talk to their gifted young children about point of view. What if you were another character in the story? How would you tell the story? What would you change in the story? Children can dramatize their own alternate endings, discuss, paint, and/or write them.
- Other activities children enjoy include changing endings to books, adding episodes of their own, creating sequels to particular books they love, and/or changing settings (e.g., place Little Red Riding Hood in the city).

These are only a few possibilities. Parents will find themselves using a variety of resources — from books to art to costumes to backyard imaginary games to walks in the park to common chores

like baking or shopping — and will find in them many ways to involve their children in critical and creative thinking.

USING COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Parents can easily extend this creative work with their young gifted children by incorporating resources in their community. Museums, aquariums, plays, musicals, dance concerts, library events, and community centers that hold classes for children can expand their exposure to and involvement in subjects that interest them. Wherever possible, parents should try to prepare their children for these outings by reading books with them and/or discussing what they will see. These experiences can then become catalysts for projects children do on their own (drawings, paintings, creative writing, etc.).

When parents take their children outside for further enrichment, they need to help them think about what they are seeing, hearing, or feeling. I know a number of parents who make it a habit to

ask their children what they are noticing — what baffles, inspires, intrigues, confuses them — and to discuss any new knowledge they gain in the course of their adventure together. Experiences outside the home should extend from the activities and/or discussions parents and children engage in at home. A young gifted daughter, for example, may suddenly discover an interest in astronomy. Her parents could share books with her on the neighboring planets, take her on a visit to a local observatory, watch a video on space travel, and perhaps encourage her to write and illustrate some science fiction stories. A young boy who enjoys nature would benefit from nature walks, a summer ecology program, trips to aquariums, zoos, natural history museums, books, and nature videos.

A HAVEN AT HOME

I know a mother who made every walk in the woods with her young daughter something to cherish and think about. She often identified favorite

wild flowers, the names of plants, birds, and other creatures. The young girl developed a vivid perception of the natural world around her and an understanding of the life cycles and living habits of plants and animals in the woods. She would often pretend she was a woodland creature and wrote and illustrated little stories about her experiences. Later on when she found herself in a classroom where her creative energy and ideas had no place, she relied on the inner resources she developed through the time spent with her mother which sustained her throughout the school year. 🌿

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