

Connecting for high potential

Your Tear and Share Guide

NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

This month’s topic: “What do we need to know about children who have already mastered pre-school or kindergarten skills prior to entering the classroom?”

A TEACHER VIEW

Rush! Rush! Rush! It seems that parents today spend an awful lot of time pushing their kids to succeed. Even though I know they want what’s best for their sons and daughters, it feels like adults have forgotten about the magic of childhood and the importance of imaginative play. That’s part of the reason why I think the socialization provided in pre-school and kindergarten classrooms is so vital in today’s busy world – there will be time enough to learn all of the facts and figures later on. Still, there are times when I wonder about the students whose parents are concerned about boredom, how do I respond without pushing a child too far?

A PARENT VIEW

It’s as though my son came into this world asking questions. Not mindlessly, not to distract, but because he genuinely wants to find out about so many different things. The amazing part is that he remembers what he learns. Often it takes only a brief moment to explain something to him and then it’s as though he never forgets. Now that he’s starting school, I hope the teacher will help him stay eager to learn, as well as give him some structure and some legitimate challenge. I want him to understand that to master something, he needs to work hard. I also want him to discover that working hard can be very satisfying.

Both excerpts express thoughtful and child-centered concerns about young students. However, the two statements represent surprisingly distinct viewpoints. If neither parent nor teacher recognize and acknowledge their concerns, each could easily feel bewildered, misunderstood, and frustrated.

The early years are particularly important because they are a child’s first experience with formal schooling. These years also represent especially challenging times for teachers and parents because there is a tremendous range of abilities within children of the same chronological age. Not only is there extreme variation in the rate at which children learn and mature in their first five years, there can also be conspicuously uneven development within a child. How can both teacher and parent explore ways to help advanced young students stay enthusiastic and ready to learn in the classroom and at home?

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For more resources online, visit www.nagc.org.



1. What are reasonable expectations?

- Develop a balanced frame of reference. Resources like *Yardsticks: Children in the Classroom, Ages 4-14* by Chip Wood can guide discussions with parents about the development of a “typical” preschooler or kindergartener. For a picture of gifted behaviors, read the ERIC article “Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom” (www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=160). Although at this age of rapid growth many students will not fit into a single mold, these resources will help you better understand and identify gifts and talents in collaboration with parents.

- Parents know their young child’s habits, interests, personalities, growth and developmental history. Based on these measures, have you carefully considered your hopes and priorities for your child at school?
- Can you clearly list the 3 most important ways you would gauge a positive outcome for the school year?
- Your district may not have GT options until 3rd grade or later, yet many gifted children do require accommodations as soon as they enter school. Be prepared: Ask your school for printed information about their policy.

2. Collect snapshots again and again:

- Psychologist Lev Vygotsky noted that to ensure continued growth, instruction should challenge students to work slightly above their comfort level rather than at (or below) the actual level of current performance. Finding an optimal match between child and challenge, also known as the zone of proximal development, is crucial. Most teachers already have many of the tools and information they need to make this happen. What’s often missing is a purposeful connection with families. Be proactive. When parents understand the concept of optimal match, it shapes the type of information they share with you and informs decisions about how they can extend and support school learning at home.

- Remember, this is a time of rapid and uneven growth for young children. The making of an optimal match for a gifted child does not necessarily indicate a need for increased challenges in all subject areas or an end to your task. Continual monitoring is the key to success.

- Pay careful attention to how your child responds to school. After weeks of increasingly sad comments about his day, one 5-year-old excitedly ran into the house reporting, “I liked school today. I had to figure stuff out. The work was just right.” His mother emailed the teacher who noted that she had given him an out-of-level math unit that day.

- Don’t avoid talking to the teacher because you worry you may be perceived as “pushy.” Before scheduling an appointment, take time to list concrete examples of how your child learns, and the different activities s/he is mastering.

- For more ideas, look through: “Appropriate Expectations for the Gifted Child” and “Pushy Parents ... Bad Rap or Necessary Role?” by A. DeVries: www.giftedpsychologypress.com/author_articles.html

- The heading “Nurturing Early Abilities” within the Parent section of NAGC’s website addresses uneven development: www.nagc.org

3. Create a balanced and growth-friendly environment:

- How can your classroom environment better engage young gifted learners? Experts agree that the following differentiation strategies will help to support continued growth:

- Interest centers that offer materials at varying levels of sophistication (including above grade-level)

- Anchoring activities to provide meaningful learning experiences for students working at different speeds

- Flexible grouping of students by strength areas and/or interests

- For more information about differentiated instruction, visit www.nagc.org.

- You’ll also find ideas to guide your journey with young gifted students in *Differentiating for the Young Child: Teaching Strategies Across the Content Areas (K-3)*, (J. F. Smutny and S.E. von Fremd, Corwin Press, 2004).

- Susan Baum, editor of *Nurturing the Gifts and Talents of Primary Grade Students* (1998, Creative Learning Press) says, “Learning opportunities at home and school should be like a trampoline that is stretched tight enough so a child can bounce as high as he can safely bounce. Don’t think of learning as a swing that must be pushed, nor a rigid, confining playpen that doesn’t allow movement and exploration.

- If your child is happy in school but you are concerned about the lack of challenge, help him or her find and pursue areas of interest. Taking time to learn about a subject in depth can be a rewarding outlet with many benefits. When absorbed in the mastery of an interesting topic, a child has opportunities to discover the value of persistence and effort. For suggestions, look at the book *Child’s Play: Enriching Your Child’s Interests, from Rocket Science to Rock Climbing* (M. Cardoza, Citadel Press, 2003).

4. Keep the child at the heart of it all.

“We can best help children learn, not by deciding what we think they should learn and thinking of ingenious ways to teach it to them, but by making the world, as far as we can, accessible to them, paying serious attention to what they do, answering their questions – if they have any – and helping them explore the things they are most interested in.” John Holt