



ILLUSTRATION BY JON PEARSON

# Why Don't Teachers and Parents See Eye to Eye about Gifted Children?

**E**ffective working partnerships between teachers and parents are essential. Even though the partners don't always see eye to eye, at least they ought to be talking about the same child! Why does it sometimes seem they are talking about two completely different children? Here are some of the practical, everyday reasons why this mismatch might occur.

## THE TWO SETTINGS

Home and school are two different worlds, with little resemblance to each other physically, psychologically, or in their casts of characters.

**Division of space.** At home, on average, there are at least as many rooms as people, give or take a few. You can opt for togetherness or solitude. (Well, parents may not always get to choose but children generally can.) You have probably taught your child to seek refuge in her room to de-escalate or to keep long-term projects intact. Even a well-planned classroom furnishes few private options and the level of stimulation can be high and unrelenting. There may be 25–30 students and a teacher in each other's presence all day in about 900 square feet. This is particularly hard for introverted/imaginative children whose inner tempos aren't a match for the teacher's expectations or who have their own intense agendas. In a program we ran for young children highly gifted in math, one youngster seemed always to be misbehaving. Eventually, we realized that he was complying ... with the previous activity. He needed to follow his inner clock. But in that program there were two adults to 15 children—a luxury.

**The number of balls in the air at once.** Many children are distracted in a room full of busy, noisy groups. Perhaps a couple of children are having a disagreement, and there are comings and goings of out-of-classroom activities. Your child may be in a pullout program that is high-energy. The teacher is distracted, too, trying to keep track and move things along. At home, even with a big family, the distractions are likely to be fewer.

**Expectations about adult attention.** Even if you're engaged with one child or a grown-up task, your children can count on your ear and your interest within minutes. How different is the usual classroom where the teacher may be leading an all-class discussion or going from group to group. Do the arithmetic. Given the routine demands of the day, at best there may be four hours of intensive teaching—240 minutes. Even if half the time were devoted to individual students and divided evenly among 25–30 children (it isn't—struggling students get more), each child's ration would be 4 or 5 minutes! Surely your child can count on more than 4 minutes of undivided parental attention every day!

**Spread of ability and maturity.** Siblings generally aren't the same age and aren't expected to behave as though they were. You make allowances for differences in maturity, including internal asynchronies: older children help younger ones and it's easy and, indeed, pleasurable to adapt to the abilities, skills, and interests of each child.

In the classroom, the usual expectation is that all the children will function at more or less the same level and pace. Slower ones are given extra help but often too little is expected of faster ones. Even at a very young age, gifted children try to avoid being different, even at considerable cost to their individuality and their developmental progress. Peer pressure intensifies as they grow older and generally doesn't abate until late high school. One of the virtues of accelerative educational options and self-contained programs for gifted students is that the norm to which students are trying to conform is a better fit for who they really are.

## GIFTED CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS

Along with mature thinking processes and rapid learning often come some personal characteristics that may appear quite different at home and at school.

**What it takes simply to keep up with your child.** It takes energy enough to teach a class of typically developing children, but children who are learning at a higher level and a faster pace require special strategies if teachers are not to be continually exhausted in keeping them challenged. Truly differentiated instruction is hard work—all the harder with students who complete projects and assignments at an unexpected pace. Even good-hearted teachers can succumb to irritation when an idea they have thoughtfully developed for your children takes maybe ten minutes to complete!

**Bored children do misbehave!** An under-challenged child has to do something to enliven a day that seems to move at the speed of molasses. Add to this the inevitable irritation that comes with repetition of “learning” what one seems always to have known: “Can’t we get on with this?” One of the brightest children we know was expelled from kindergarten for kicking a teacher in sheer frustration at such a situation. You can help by sharing with the teacher the stresses you hear about from your child at home—not criticisms but insights that may not be apparent when a child is acting up.

**“Special” versus “different.”** The unusual ideas and accomplishments of the child you cherish may constitute an extra challenge for a teacher. Perhaps your children simply use words other children don’t understand or repeat sophisticated jokes or puns that sail right over the heads of their classmates. Sometimes they have seen a disturbing feature on last night’s news and are obsessively worried about what’s going on in the economy or Darfur—situations their classmates may not even have heard of and certainly don’t see as personally relevant. A busy teacher may not appreciate the maturity underlying these distractions in the way you do.

**Asynchronies mask abilities.** The development of most gifted children is uneven, sometimes to the point that strengths remain hidden. For example, age-appropriate emotional regulation, social skills, fine motor skills, or shyness may mask higher-level thinking and imagination. For gifted children with distinct language, reading, math, or working memory deficits, their advancement in other areas may escape the teacher’s attention unless you describe what you see at home and share strategies you know that capitalize on your child’s strengths.

**“Sensitivity” versus vulnerability.** The proportion of gifted children who are constitutionally hypersensitive and over-reactive is open to question, but some clearly are. Accepting the sensitivity as part of “gifted behavior” to be coped with is very different from seeing it as an annoying defect to be eradicated.

**High standards versus perfectionism.** Students already at or above the top of the class may still be impatient with the quality of their work because they can conceptualize and aspire to truly high performance. In the context of the classroom, this may seem like overkill or neurotic perfectionism when “good enough” would earn an A. The healthier aspects of high aspirations may be more apparent at home, but be sure they come from your child and not from her trying to please you or the teacher.

**Creativity versus non-conformity.** Most creative ideas don’t

bear much fruit—one has to endure a healthy number of flops when taking out-of-the box risks. Creative attempts are often messy, and neatness and sharing may be of very low child priority at such moments. It takes a perceptive teacher to appreciate this process; otherwise, your child may be seen as off-task and disruptive. In fact, this may be the case. One bright preschooler, for example, loved to experiment with color mixing and turned everyone’s watercolors into various shades of brown before he was discovered. His parents felt that his teacher just didn’t understand him! If such disconnects are happening, it may be helpful to bring from home some of your child’s creative successes but also to help your child to develop boundaries at school that don’t interfere with others.

**Self-reliance and introversion versus isolation.** Many healthy, gifted children enjoy their own company and find all-day social interactions trying. In addition, many prefer solo activities to collaborative group projects because they do want things to turn out well, and they end up doing most of the group’s assignment without learning much themselves. This understandable behavior may seem maladjusted to a teacher—especially one who would appreciate the leadership and help a bright student can give.

**Friends versus soul mates.** When they can, most gifted youngsters gravitate toward friends of the same level of mental maturity, friends with whom they can share intimacies, puzzle through complex ideas and, in return, be understood. They yearn for loyal and stable friendships that often are beyond those their age mates can provide. Their teachers see them as popular because other children are attracted to them, but they may miss the superficiality of the relationships. In a program at the University of Washington (UW) that enrolls students ages 12–14 for a year of preparation before attending the UW, we typically heard from delighted new students that, for the first time in their lives, they had found “soul mates.” Parents may be much more tuned in than are teachers to their children’s essential loneliness.

## PARENT-TEACHER PARTNERSHIPS

Communication and collaboration are obviously the keys to building effective partnerships. Keep your eye on the common goal you share—raising a happy, resilient, productive student who learns with zest, invests effort and commitment, makes good friends, and contributes to the welfare of others. You each bring to the partnership not only special skills but special knowledge about your child. Remember to show your appreciation not only for the teacher’s contribution to your child’s development but the extra energy your child demands. Have sympathy for what that teacher goes through day after day in that blooming, buzzing classroom! ■



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