

Do's and Don'ts for Motivating Your High-Ability Child

By Dr. Del Siegle and Dr. D. Betsy McCoach

At Parent Day during NAGC's 2016 Convention in Orlando, FL, scholars and parents Del Siegle and Betsy McCoach shared successful strategies and practices for motivating gifted children.

AVOID SABOTAGE

Be careful of—even inadvertently—sabotaging your children's perceptions about themselves, their peers, and their teachers.



Do

- Model a growth mindset.
- Let your child struggle a bit, but monitor to avoid total frustration.
- Present a united front with your partner.
- Show you value education and teachers.



Don't

- Use “est” words—best, brightest, prettiest, fastest.
- Swoop in, rescue, and provide unnecessary assistance—otherwise your child will never feel “challenge.”
- Let your children play parents against one another.
- Criticize teachers in front of your children.

UNDERSTAND CAUSE & EFFECT

Gifted children need to understand that they control their own destinies: They succeed because they have the skills and put forth effort, and that failures may be attributed to lack of effort.



Do

- Help your child analyze success or failures. Example: “*Did we study the right things?*” “*What was on the test that we didn't study?*”
- Counsel your child to reflect on difficult situations and discuss ways to change the environment to fit her needs or how she can adjust her behavior to the existing environment.
- Help your child break down projects and map out tasks. Through planning, children can visualize a task come to fruition.
- Model curiosity and creativity about the world around you.



Don't

- Allow him to blame others for his lack of success. Example: “*The teacher just doesn't like me.*”
- Intervene and solve problems for your child. Rather: Involve and engage her so she is part of the solution.
- Assume that because your child is gifted, he intuitively knows how to organize tasks or manage projects. Some students need help in this area.
- Ignore opportunities to demonstrate how to transform your child's curiosity into action. Rather: “*Let's look your question up on the Internet.*”

FIND MEANINGFULNESS

Even at a very young age, gifted and talented students need to find meaning in their lives.

Do

- Support your child in exploring what is personally interesting to him.
- Recognize that children's motivation is linked to what they view as useful. When they value or enjoy an activity, they are intrinsically motivated.
- Help your child see beyond the immediate activity to long-term outcomes.
- Share your child's interests with the teacher or school, and find ways to incorporate those interests into school projects.
- Find peers or other role models with whom your child can relate.

Don't

- Force your child to pursue interests that you like or feel she should pursue because "all the kids are doing it."
- Overly focus on external rewards systems as the way to motivate your child.
- Set goals for your child that you value, but have little or no meaning to him.
- Be afraid to let the teacher know what your child cares about and interests her.
- Foster an environment of unhealthy perfectionism. Rather: Find examples of famous role models who struggled but persevered to success.

DISCUSS GIFTS AND ABILITIES

It's important that high-ability children understand that they have gifts and talents...but it's up to them to put forth effort, persevere, and accept challenges to grow.

Do

- Help your child see that no one is born a Ph.D. or Nobel Peace Prize winner—it takes effort to succeed.
- Find challenging opportunities to improve skills and develop talents.
- Encourage your child to take risks; share struggles and successes.
- Document your child's growth and review periodically to build confidence.

Don't

- Devalue the importance of working hard and putting forth effort.
- Overlook the fact that your child needs to learn basic study skills such as outlining, note taking, and identifying main points—even though she has a good memory and fast processing skills.
- Equate or imply that giftedness is tied to perfect performance.
- Forget to sit down with your child to review examples of previous work to provide a visual marker of his growth—to build self-confidence and higher self-efficacy.

LISTEN AND SUPPORT INTERESTS

Gifted children want their voices to be heard.

Do

- Listen to what your child has on her mind.
- Be an active, empathetic listener. Example: "So it sounds like you are feeling x..." "What I hear you say is..."
- When providing compliments, they must be genuine, specific, and earned. Example: "I like the colors you chose here." Or, "You are providing good supporting sentences for your topic sentence in your opening paragraph."

Don't

- Solve her problems for her—give her the space and time to talk it out and problem-solve independently, but with support.
- Be distracted, dismissive, or interruptive when he is trying to share his feelings or point of view.
- Compliment your child in a general way ("good job") or for underperforming or for unchallenging tasks.

Authors' Note

Del Siegle, Ph.D., is director of the National Center for Research on Gifted Education, and D. Betsy McCoach, Ph.D., is professor and program coordinator of the Measurement, Evaluation and Assessment program, both at the University of Connecticut. Betsy and Del are married, life partners, and parents of two young gifted and talented children. They have authored numerous books and papers on a multitude of topics, including *Motivating Gifted Students: The Practical Strategies Series in Gifted Education*, and were recently co-editors of *Gifted Child Quarterly*.