

SIGNS OF GIFTEDNESS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

an extract from

Porter, L. (2005). *Gifted young children: A guide for teachers and parents*.
(2nd edn), Allen & Unwin, Sydney

When attempting to identify giftedness, while checklists such as the one given here appear to be straightforward, it is difficult to know how much of each characteristic a child has to display in order to qualify as being gifted: it can be difficult to judge what 'learning *quickly*' means, or what 'most of the time' or 'often' mean.

Second, checklists do not indicate how *many* of these characteristics children have to demonstrate in order for the judgment to be made that their development is advanced. The following checklist indicates that children can be gifted in a single domain, or across a range of skill areas. Even so, it is not certain how many qualities within each skill area children need to display.

Third, checklists can incorrectly imply that all gifted children are the same, when in fact they can display any combination of the attributes described.

Finally, checklists rely on children's performances to identify giftedness, when many gifted children underachieve or do not conform behaviourally and therefore would not be identified by observation of their behaviour.

If after examining the following signs of giftedness, you remain unclear about a child's abilities, I recommend an IQ test to clarify the child's skills and needs.

Cognitive (thinking) skills

Children who are intellectually gifted display many of the following features:

- early achievement of developmental milestones (at least one-third sooner)
- quick learning
- keen observation of the environment
- active in eliciting stimulation from the environment
- quick and accurate recall
- recall of skills and information introduced some time ago
- deeper knowledge than other children
- understanding of abstract concepts (e.g. death or time)

Academic giftedness

Children who are intellectually *and* academically gifted might:

- read, write or use numbers in advanced ways
- show advanced preferences for books and films (unless too sensitive to older themes)

Learning style

Many gifted children not only achieve more than average, they also approach tasks with a sophisticated style. However, their application to tasks is responsive to fatigue, discouragement (immediate or long term) and the degree of challenge. Nevertheless, when highly achieving, they display:

- alertness
- responsivity to novel stimuli
- speed and efficiency of information processing
- willingness to reflect when necessary in order to maintain accuracy
- openness to new ideas and experiences
- motivation and curiosity in a search for understandings
- wide-ranging interests
- an intense focus on or the ability to immerse themselves in an area of interest, in order to achieve a depth of understanding
- longer than usual concentration span on challenging topics of interest (but may 'flit' from one activity to another if activities are not challenging enough)
- early use of metacognitive skills to manage their own thinking processes
- internal locus of control
- independence at challenging, non-routine tasks
- willingness to take risks
- perseverance in the face of obstacles
- tolerance of ambiguity

Creative thinking style

Children who are intellectually *and* creatively gifted might display the following learning styles, applying these across domains or in a single domain in which they excel:

- imagination
- creative problem solving
- use of intuition (that is, allowing some of their thinking to occur at a preconscious level)
- fluency, which reflects an ability to employ a range or quantity of ideas
- flexibility, which refers both to the quality of ideas brought to bear on the problem and to skill at adapting their learning style to the task demands and goals
- being nonconforming and rejecting limits

Auditory-sequential style

Children who learn by listening and ordering ideas often:

- learn sequentially: one idea at a time
- are analytical: are able to break problems down into their parts
- attend well to details
- learn well from verbal instructions

- are able to carry out instructions to do several things in succession
- think logically
- have good planning skills
- are organised
- are less impulsive than age-mates
- have a clear understanding of cause-and-effect
- use rehearsal to remember
- once in school, earn reasonably even grades across all subject areas

Visual-holistic style

Children who learn by forming visual images of concepts may be later than others to excel, but nevertheless:

- learn concepts all at once (holistically)
- synthesise ideas: that is, put them together
- see the big picture and, correspondingly, may miss details
- learn intuitively
- have what can only be termed 'quirky' organisational systems
- learn instantly and so do not benefit from rehearsal or repetition
- once in school, obtain uneven grades across subject areas

Speech and language skills

Intellectually gifted children with advanced verbal skills often show:

- early comprehension
- advanced speech, in terms of vocabulary, grammar and clear articulation
- use of metaphors and analogies
- ability to make up songs or stories spontaneously
- ability to modify language for less mature children
- use of language for a real exchange of ideas and information at an early age
- a sophisticated sense of humour

Motor abilities

Many intellectually gifted children have fine motor skills that lag behind their intellectual level. On the other hand, those who are gifted in the motor domain can show a range of the following characteristics:

- early motor development, particularly in skills that are under cognitive control such as balance
- ability to locate themselves within the environment
- early awareness of left and right
- facility at putting together new or difficult puzzles
- ability to take apart and reassemble objects with unusual skill
- ability to make interesting shapes or patterns with objects
- advanced drawing or handwriting

- high levels of physical energy

Artistic expression

Although most young children may not yet have been exposed to the arts in any formal way and so may not be showing artistic talent, some display early signs of instinctive art skill, such as:

- superior visual memory
- engaging with an imaginary playmate in elaborate conversations and games
- assigning elaborate characters to dolls or teddies
- creating and performing in plays
- enjoyment of drama, role playing
- advanced skill at drawing, painting or other artistic modalities

Musical skills

Musical giftedness may be among the earliest to emerge – by the age of one year – although very young children’s motor ability can block their musical performance. Musically gifted children:

- are enthralled by musical sounds
- have a deep appreciation and understanding of music (with or without musical performance)
- are sensitive to musical structure – tonality, key, harmony and rhythm
- appreciate the expressive properties of music – timbre, loudness, articulation and phrasing
- have a strong musical memory that permits them to recall music and play it back later either by singing or through an instrument

Social skills

Intellectually and verbally advanced young children typically are also advanced in their social skills, showing some of the following characteristics:

- highly developed empathy for others
- less egocentricity: they can deduce the cause of others’ emotions
- advanced play interests
- early ability to play games with rules
- early ability to form close friendships
- seek out older children or adults for companionship
- withdraw to solitary play if intellectual peers are not available
- are often sought out by other children for their play ideas and sense of fairness
- leadership skills
- early development of moral reasoning and judgment
- early interest in social issues involving injustices

Emotional and behavioural characteristics

Some intellectually gifted children are emotionally gifted as well. These children might display:

- emotional sensitivity, intensity and responsiveness
- for some, early spiritual awareness
- early development of fears
- early development of self-concept and awareness of being different
- self-confidence in their strong domains
- perfectionism, in the sense of having high standards
- over-sensitivity to criticism
- frustration, which can lead to emotional or behavioural outbursts
- acceptance of responsibility usually given only to older children
- non-conformity