

Ask the Experts

“...it is sometimes easy to forget that gifted children—above all else—are children; and, as children, they should be allowed and encouraged to have fun, to be frivolous, and to make silly mistakes.”

Probably, most information you receive on the gifted child is general in nature, and it's up to you to decide “if the shoe fits.” It's probably also true that the general case often doesn't quite fit your specific need or situation. Therefore, we hope to help bridge the gap between textbook and reality. Each month we will feature a GCM Advisory Board member, or other guest “expert,” to answer your specific questions and offer sound, practical advice for better understanding and raising your gifted children. At the same time, we'll give you a brief personal and professional introduction to the expert who is addressing your special concern. So...

Meet James R. Delisle, PhD.

Dr. James R. Delisle is assistant professor of special education (gifted education) at Kent State University. Jim serves on the editorial advisory boards of the *Roeper Review* and the *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, as well as *Gifted Children Monthly*. His primary focus in writing includes counseling gifted youth and developing teaching strategies for the prevention of adolescent suicide. His recent book, *Gifted Children Speak Out*, includes a compilation of gifted children's impressions of growing up gifted; the book soon will be available in a Japanese language edition.

At a recent parent/teacher meeting in Ohio on “understanding gifted children,” these three concerns were voiced:

- “I just don't know if my son is being challenged in school—he always says he's bored. Will he grow up to hate learning?”
- “My daughter, Suzy, has a 140 I.Q., but I can't get her interested in anything but dinosaurs. How can I help?”
- “A (teaching) colleague of mine is always comparing her students to their older siblings. This seems especially difficult for the gifted kids to handle. What's the solution?”

J.D. > *This scenario is replayed weekly in dozens of towns across our land. In my role as session leader for many parent/teacher groups, I find recurring patterns of concern about gifted children's well-being. Whether in Michigan or Mississippi, Denver or Dover, the themes of these parent/teacher discussions about gifted children are frequently familiar.*

Common Misconceptions About Gifted Children and Their Education

The quest for an educational utopia. The most common misconception about education of gifted children is that they must be provided a “perfect” environment in which to flourish—a school day devoid of boredom and filled with continual challenges. To be sure, such an academic utopia would seem ideal, yet it would also be unrealistic—unrealistic in the sense that few of us exist in a milieu at home or work that does not involve some tedium. Thus, although a school day should involve the challenge and excitement that occurs through acquiring new knowledge, it may, out of necessity, also require some academic drill and repetition.

Memorizing multiplication tables is not fun, (but neither is preparing a monthly budget report for your supervisors at work); participating in a social studies lesson that involves listening to others read their texts is pretty dull (but so is the weekly staff meeting). Gifted children, as all children, need to learn that school and life are blends of excitement and boredom, innovation and repetition. The lack of a prototypic learning environment does not mean that all gifted children are languishing in America’s public schools. Indeed, many classroom settings provide an enriched and challenging environment that, though imperfect, still stimulates the student who understands that some aspects of education will be more inviting than others.

“A gifted program is the answer to all my child’s needs.” One of the most pervasive myths still existing about gifted child education is that once a gifted program is established, then all gifted children will have their educational needs met. Such a fallacy perpetuates the misconception that there is such a character as “the typical gifted child.” But, in fact, the same gifted program that is a most enabling environment for one youngster may be a most restrictive environment for another gifted child. Thus, parents’ questions should not stop when told, “Yes, our school has a gifted program.” Instead, they should probe further into the content and structure of the program itself.

Generally, a gifted program takes place for only a fraction of a school week, usually one day or less. How important, then, is the time spent by gifted children in “regular” education programs! Through discussions with school board members, teachers, and other parents of gifted students, much can be learned about the day-to-day happenings within a particular school building.

Discomfort with too-early specialization. As illustrated in an earlier example of Suzy, even young children can become enamored with a new topic—dinosaurs, computers, and science fiction seem especially popular today. Often, parents of these budding experts are ambivalent in their reactions to such specialization. But there’s nothing wrong with wanting to absorb as much information as possible about a new and valuable topic. Indeed, even if children spend every free minute scouring encyclopedias and libraries for more knowledge, is that not time well spent? Besides, in today’s world

of instant access to knowledge, children cannot help but be inundated with ideas and subjects within a wide spectrum of areas; actively and passively, they are being exposed to new subjects each day.

The inability to focus on one topic. Just as there are those gifted children whose focus of interest is narrow, there are others who want to explore all that life has to offer—and they want to explore it now, all at once.

For example, your child might take an interest in family ancestry. Being a responsive parent, you would bring your child to the library, check out sufficient resources, and travel home to begin some initial exploration. But, when you get home, you discover that the books are unnecessary, as somewhere between the library and the car, your child's interest has shifted to kayaking or organic farming—anything but family roots!

This lack of follow-through with an initial interest can be maddening; but at the same time, it might be a by-product of having high abilities and varied interests—both of which are traits of many gifted persons. Instead of setting up battle lines (“You’ll read those books and like it!” vs. “You can’t force me to learn!”), suggest a compromise.

Determine with your child what it was about genealogy that evoked the initial interest.

Plan an activity or two that explores this area, and examine it for a short period.

Then, decide whether “enough is enough” or if the topic does pique further interest.

Often, gifted youngsters just want to “skim the surface,” to examine casually (not at length) a particular topic.

Preoccupation with what will be. Parents of gifted children can become enrapt in their youngsters’ potential, so much so, that present events become worthwhile only when they prod on future challenges. This is an easy trap to fall into, as the purpose behind many gifted programs is to “prepare our future leaders.” With this as a societal mindset, it is sometimes easy to forget that **gifted children—above all else— are children; and, as children, they should be allowed and encouraged to have fun, to be frivolous, and to make silly mistakes.**

As is often stated, childhood is not preparation for life, it is life itself. In our increasingly complex world, the joys of childhood seem more short-lived than ever. Let us take time, then, to remind ourselves and to tell our children what a unique place and time childhood can be. Gifted, yes—but children, too.