

Abstract: *Parenting can be both a joy and challenge, especially when parenting a precocious preschooler. Why are parents sometimes reluctant to discuss their children's early signs of giftedness? Fish offers insights into this intriguing phenomenon drawing from her work as a gifted educator and her own experiences as a parent. Practical suggestions for "breaking the silence" are suggested for parents and educators.*

Parenting a Precocious Preschooler: Breaking the Silence

By: Dr. Leigh Ann Fish

As a coordinator of gifted services for a school district, one of the most frequent conversations I have with parents is one of early identification, and it often begins with an apology: "I'm sorry," the conversation frequently goes, "but I think my child might be gifted." As we chat further, it quickly becomes clear that the suspicion was there years before, usually from a child's very early age. This does not come as a surprise to me because I know something they may not: Parents' observations about their children's cognitive development are typically accurate and should not be ignored. In fact, parents are the first and often best identifiers of early giftedness. Research has consistently supported findings that parents of highly gifted children recognize their precocity within the first few years of life (Silverman and Kearney, 1989; Gross, 1999) and that parents demonstrate greater success than teachers in identifying early giftedness (Gross, 1999; Ciha, et al., 1974). More recently, Oğurlu and Çetinkaya (2012), suggest that observations by parents about their children's abilities and behaviors provide necessary and sufficient information for gifted identification.

My experiences as a parent of two precocious girls have helped me relate to this phenomenon in a way that has informed my understanding as a gifted educator. I now understand what many other parents have meant by statements such as, "I just knew my child was different." I believe such statements are neither intended to be boastful nor said with superiority, but sometimes are the *only* words that parents can find to explain the great complexity of their child's development. Yet when these words are spoken, they too often come retroactively, as if in hindsight, and are whispered, shared only in rooms with gifted advocates or in the presence of those who value intellect.

Like many parents of gifted children, I too have confronted situations in which I have been reluctant to discuss my daughters' development with others. After my eldest daughter's fourth birthday, I took her to the local library for her first library card. The children's librarian kindly led us to very age-appropriate shelves of brightly colored picture books where my daughter announced, "No, thank you. These won't do. I'm into Egypt right now." She then regaled us, and anyone within earshot, with everything she knew on the topic of ancient Egypt.

On another, less humorous occasion, a mother openly stated at a play date that my 4-year-old's reading aloud was making her child "feel bad." I will admit I was not sure how to respond. While I am always supportive of my children's interests and, like most parents I know, quite proud of their accomplishments, there are times when I feel ill-prepared for how others react. Regrettably, I am sometimes at a loss for words when conversation and dialogue is needed most.

What is a precocious preschooler?

Linda Kreger Silverman (1992) reminds us that gifted children do not come with instruction manuals; consequently, providing for their nurture and care can pose an "exciting yet daunting challenge" (p. 1). As with most discussions of gifted children, definitions vary. For the purposes of this article, I call "precocious preschoolers" those children between the ages of two and six years who share several informal cognitive, social-emotional, and physical markers of giftedness that are frequently observed by caregivers and supported by gifted education literature. Rather than focusing on a single definition, I believe it is useful to identify what many precocious young children have in common. According to Silverman (1992), some of the earliest signs include

- unusual alertness in infancy
- less need for sleep in infancy
- high activity level
- long attention span
- smiling or recognizing caregivers early
- intense reactions to noise, pain, or frustration
- advanced progression through developmental milestones
- extraordinary memory
- enjoyment and speed of learning
- early and extensive language development
- fascination with books
- curiosity
- excellent sense of humor
- abstract reasoning and problem-solving skills
- vivid imagination
- sensitivity and compassion

Although characteristics and traits such as these may be shared by many young gifted children, these children also represent a range of abilities and interests, and they should not be considered as a homogeneous group (Gross, 1999; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985).

So, why the silence?

If we have known for decades that primary caregivers are potent identifiers of potential, then why aren't more parents consulted when developing educational goals for young children in preschool programs? Why aren't more parents comfortable having conversations about their children's precocious development? And when those conversations do occur, why the apology?

As a society, we Americans have a preoccupation with extremes and outliers. Child prodigies, the exceptionally and profoundly gifted, make headlines. News articles featuring the youngest members admitted to Mensa, the high IQ society, capture our attention and awe. But what of the young child who is simply precocious? Whether the child is moderately or highly gifted, there is nothing simple about it. Precocity in the very young should be a valid topic of discussion in parental and educational circles, yet too frequently those conversations are slow to occur or are absent altogether. Why do so many parents and educators remain silent about raising and nurturing precocious preschoolers? I suggest that reasons for the silence include (1) a lack of information and awareness about young children's development that correlates with later gifted identification and (2) attitudes of anti-intellectualism (unintentionally) aimed at those who demonstrate cognitive ability in the moderately to highly gifted range.

Lack of information

In my experience, few parents feel empowered with the information they need about early gifts and talents. Many of the popular child development resources that are readily available in books or on the Internet are inadequate for parenting a gifted preschool-aged child. Much of that information is based on models of typical development and provide disclaimers that “every child progresses at her own rate.” Such information, while a useful starting point, can lead to more questions than answers regarding the development of an infant or young child with gifted tendencies. For example, few address the asynchronous or uneven cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development that frequently occurs with gifted learners. The parent of a child who is already speaking in sentences by one year of age but who is not yet walking may find those popular go-to sources of little help. Similarly, I recall feeling frustrated and confused that my daughter did not seem to need as much sleep as her peers, thwarting our attempts to put her to bed early despite waking early in the morning. Most sources stressed the importance of 11 hours of sleep, yet my daughter expressed the feeling that she could not “shut off [her] brain” at bedtime. It wasn’t until I started connecting with parents of other precocious children that I was finally able to get the reassurance, advice, and suggestions that worked for our situation.

Where are parents to get developmental information then? As an educator, I had access to theory and research on child development ranging from time-honored seminal works to the latest academic studies, and still I had a difficult time finding information that would help me parent my child in an everyday, practical sense. Much of the academic literature on child development, as with the popular literature, did not address the topic with a gifted child in mind. Consequently, early childhood programs and educators may not be able to provide information on parenting children who fall outside the typical development ranges because they themselves lack expertise in working with gifted populations. Conversely, gifted services in schools, my own district included, are not likely to reach down to the preschool age group. In effect, there is an information and programming gap for the gifted preschool subgroup.

Anti-intellectual attitudes

Let’s be honest: it is not always welcomed in conversation to discuss your child’s intellectual tendencies. When parents are shut down by other parents, caregivers, or educators for sharing the accomplishments of their precocious children, they are less likely to engage in those conversations that might satisfy their own need for more information. Such silencing contributes to a general lack of awareness, and in some cases, denial of developmental differences. I recently chatted with a grandmother during a summer enrichment program for

preschoolers. She was a retired educator. After observing and interacting with her five-year-old granddaughter who showed signs of early giftedness, I inquired if the family might be considering gifted testing once she entered kindergarten. “Oh, no,” the grandmother replied. “She’s bright but I wouldn’t call her *gifted*.” I was inclined to disagree, but I let it go. I wondered why she was so reluctant to discuss it. There is a social stigma surrounding intellect, reified in part by a lack of information and programming at the early childhood level, that makes it difficult to discuss our young children’s intellectual development.

Gross (1999) describes how parents of highly gifted children are often accused of “hothousing”—that is, pushing their children to learn more quickly than their cognitive age or interest guides them. “Hothouse” parents is a label frequently given to those who schedule an excessive number of enrichment opportunities or who seek out the “best” programs for their children. We know that early experiences matter for all children—early stimulation and interaction are vital for the optimal development for all children in all domains. Clark (2007) aptly points out that during the first four years of life, patterns are formed that affect a child’s personality development and ability to maximize future learning potential. She suggests that early learning opportunities play a significant role in either facilitating or inhibiting the development of inherited intellectual ability. Recognizing the significance of early learning experiences and seeking out those that promote optimal development can create added pressure for the already stressed and sleep-deprived parents of young children. Where is the line between wanting to create optimal experiences for your child and being accused of parental hothousing? Why are some parents and educators quick to raise eyebrows and rush to judgment? Attitudes toward precocity, giftedness, and talent differ according to the domain being referenced. In many Western nations, superior athletic talent is not only tolerated but encouraged. Intellectual precocity is not typically viewed with such favor. As Gross (1999) points out, no one accuses a parent of a child who is an early walker or early talker of hothousing their child’s development.

I vividly remember the time my daughter, who had recently turned three, rushed to me in tears during an enrichment class because the instructor had refused to let her write her own name on her work, either not believing she was capable of writing or not believing that a toddler could be trusted with permanent marker. While some may have jumped to the conclusion that I was showing off my daughter’s ability to write her name, in reality I was trying to optimize the experience to match her cognitive and fine motor development. Smutny (1995) found, “Parents who are not afraid to affirm and support their young child’s gifts once they identify or even suspect them can make a significant difference in actualizing the potential of that child” (p. 14).

How can we find the courage to speak up on behalf of our young children and to encourage affirmation and dialogue rather than silence?

Suggestions for parents

Trust yourself. One of the most critical things that parents can do is to trust in their own observations of their child's development. As research has shown, parents are a reliable source of information and intuition about their children's abilities and needs. Along the same lines, parents should listen to their children, taking cues regarding their strengths and needs from those interactions rather than from sole reliance upon guidelines that represent typical development patterns.

Talk to others. Parents can reach out and talk with other parents to avoid feeling isolation or frustration with children's unique challenges as well as to share and celebrate children's unique accomplishments. Parents who communicate with other families can share ideas and solutions for difficult moments in a child's development and learn lessons from each other's mistakes or triumphs (Smutny, 1995). In many cases, parents can band together to create their own resources where few or none exist. Making contact with others who share similar concerns can also serve as a source for friendship among the gifted children in those families. One way to connect with other families and to stay current on information pertaining to giftedness is to join a local, state, or national advocacy group for gifted children.

Suggestions for educators

Listen to parents. Just as parents have a moral obligation to advocate on their children's behalf, educators have a professional imperative to listen to, respect, and respond to parents' observations, questions, and concerns. The National Association for Gifted Children's position statement on early childhood suggests that early childhood educators and families should have the mutual goals of developing "children's capacity and passion for learning to the fullest potential" (NAGC, n.d.). Additionally, it calls for creation of "rich and engaging learning environments" in homes, schools, and communities. Thus, there is a need for early childhood programs to provide responsive learning environments for all learners. While there are many programs are rich in experiences, use varied materials, and respond to children's unique abilities, needs, and interests, sadly, others do not.

Engage in professional development. Issues such as asynchrony can make identifying and meeting the needs of young gifted learners particularly difficult, especially if educators lack formal training in acceleration and differentiation. Early childhood educators need to be informed about identification and needs of early gifted learners, including those from underrepresented populations. Conversely, gifted educators need to be informed about early childhood

development. Cross-pollination of knowledge between these two groups can lead to greater awareness and information sharing that build stronger educational services for all children. Additionally, participating in gifted advocacy groups can be a valuable method for disseminating information and encouraging collaboration between stakeholders.

Cultivating intellect must begin in infancy, and certainly by the time a child enters preschool, let alone by kindergarten. Breaking the silence on precocious preschoolers is important because in so doing, both parents and educators alike can learn valuable lessons. Instead of beginning conversations with an apology, parents need to feel comfortable having conversations with each other and with their children's teachers—a child's optimal development may hinge upon it.

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