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Characteristics of Young Gifted Children

Note: A young child who has many of the following characteristics is likely to be gifted, but other children will show some of these characteristics, and a gifted child will not show all. Many of these characteristics also apply to older gifted children.

Advanced development

Developmentally, the young gifted child frequently reaches the 'milestones' such as walking and first speech earlier than average. They tend to have a more sophisticated vocabulary than their peers, may love to define words, usually love books and may be self-taught readers at preschool and kindergarten ages.

Early intellectual ability

Young gifted children often have a very good memory, and may be able and eager to learn simple maths, science and social studies concepts. They may develop an all-consuming interest in one particular topic - e.g. dinosaurs - and have an awe-inspiring understanding and knowledge about the subject, or seem interested in almost everything, sometimes moving rapidly from one topic to the other.

A thirst for knowledge

Many gifted children have a real thirst for knowledge, like the true scientist or philosopher who want to 'find out' about the world, just for the sake of it. Sometimes, there seems to be a strong drive to explore, learn about and master the environment. Often, contents of cupboards etc. need to be investigated, and toys and activities may be mastered at a rapid rate and discarded.

A very high level of activity

The young gifted child can be extremely active and frequently have a reduced need for sleep. Although still very exhausting for parents, unlike hyperactivity, it is activity with a purpose and a remarkably long concentration span may be shown when something is of particular interest.

Caution:

Due to their ability to see far more into what is for most a simple situation, and possibly due to their fear of failure, the young gifted child may hold back in a new situation, as if to check out all the implications. They may speak late, but then in complete sentences, possibly walk late, initially appear very shy in new social settings, and may require full details before offering help or answering questions.

Sensitivity

Some young gifted children can be very sensitive, general anger or criticism is taken personally; they suffer along with the starving children on TV, the injured animal, etc. and when overloaded with impressions, may become introverted and withdrawn.

Uneven development

Children may be gifted in a very narrow field, or may have "all round" high ability, but often there is a large discrepancy between their intellectual, physical and emotional development. Capable of abstract thought before being able to emotionally deal with these concepts, they may become overconcerned with death, the future, sex etc., Manual dexterity usually lags behind their intellectual expectations, resulting in frustration at the inability to complete envisaged tasks. Ten minutes after a near-adult conversation they may come whining about some small hurt, needing to be comforted like the four-year-old they really are!

The early ability to distinguish between reality and fantasy

This may lead to discussions on, and the acceptance of, the inevitability of death; the frequent need to analyze stories to see which parts "really could happen" and awkward questions about Santa and the tooth-fairy!

An early insight into social/moral issues

Some young gifted children have a well developed social conscience and may become very concerned about wars, pollution and other kinds of injustice and violence. They often see through adult hypocrisy and cover-up and may display fear and anger to discover that adults can be inconsistent and unreasonable.

Greater reasoning power and manipulation

Young gifted children tend to use their verbal ability rather than actions for communication. Generally, it is possible to reason with them from a very early age. At times, their verbal ability, combined with their greater reasoning powers and understanding of human relationships, may be put to use arguing with and trying to outsmart parents and teachers, and their abilities may lead them to discover the advantages of dishonest behaviour such as lying and stealing, at an early age. Although credit needs to be given for convincing, logical arguments, it is very important that normal discipline applies to the gifted child as it is a very insecure feeling for someone so young to realise they are able to manipulate adults.

Social skills

Most gifted children are also socially very able and get along well with others, frequently showing strong leadership abilities. However, even from an early age, they may see themselves as 'different'. Their more sophisticated vocabulary and advanced sense of humour is often not understood by other children and this may lead to feelings of inferiority and rejection. For this reason gifted children may associate more with older children and adults. It can be very important for some gifted children to find other

gifted children with whom to communicate. Although it is important for them to have someone who truly understands them, this may be difficult to achieve.

Individuality

Many gifted children may be seen as "weird" or unconventional, they may have great fantasy and creativity and develop their own, unique style of learning. It is important that these children are not constantly organised, but have a chance to do their "own thing"; a time for solitude, reflection, and creativity.

The importance of adults

Gifted children may not be interested in very structured activities or meeting other's standards, often preferring to develop their own projects. Despite this, adult guidance is very important - to help them determine in which situation it is necessary to conform and when it is O.K. to be "different", to put realistic limits on an often overambitious project, to lend a hand when manual dexterity doesn't meet mental visions and to avoid self-criticism becoming destructive. Help may be needed to set realistic standards.

Perfectionism

Often the gifted children set very high standards for themselves, getting frustrated and angry when they discover they may not have the manual dexterity to complete envisaged projects. Sometimes, knowing they are unable to complete the task to their own standards, they may refuse to do it at all.

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