CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN – AN EXPLANATION

Summary
The listed characteristics of gifted and talented children can sometimes be confusing. This fact sheet gives more information about where the list comes from, its use and why these characteristics are present in children with high learning potential.

Introduction
The characteristics of gifted and talented children have been observed over many years. This kind of child stands out as different from the norm and the list of characteristics is one way of understanding how these children are different and what makes them so.

Research
The Characteristics of Giftedness Scale was originally developed in 1973 by Dr Linda Silverman after 10 years of teaching and counselling experience with gifted and talented children. The descriptors were selected to meet the following specific criteria:

(a) representative of the majority of children tested;
(b) applicable to a wide age range;
(c) applicable to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds;
(d) gender fair;
(e) easily observed in the home environment;
(f) brief and clearly worded for ease of interpretation by parents.

The characteristics of giftedness endorsed by the parents were compiled as part of a study carried out on 241 exceptionally gifted children. The children ranged in age from 2.5 to 12.5 years. The sample consisted of 112 girls and 129 boys. Over 80% of the sample was reported to fit 20 of the 25 characteristics.

The following characteristics were endorsed by 90% of the parents of this group of exceptionally gifted children:

- Learns rapidly
- Extensive vocabulary
- Excellent memory
- Reasons well
- Strong curiosity
- Mature for age
- Good sense of humour
- Keen observation
- Compassion for others
- Vivid imagination
- Long attention span
- Ability with numbers
- Concern with justice, fairness
- Sensitivity
- Wide range of interests
The following characteristics were endorsed by 80% of the parents:

- Ability with puzzles
- High energy level
- Perfectionism
- Perseverance in interests
- Questions authority
- Avid reader
- Prefers older companions

Explanations

Learns Rapidly:

Gifted and talented children are able to learn rapidly and easily make connections, often jumping ahead of others. They often want to move on quickly and do not enjoy repetition.

Extensive Vocabulary:

The majority of gifted and talented children begin talking early (before 12 months old) and progress quickly through the stages. They can use complex sentence structures and are naturally able to understand difficult words and use them in the correct context. Some gifted and talented children are more interested in numbers than words or have a particular learning difficulty such as dyslexia and do not excel in this area.

There are also a small percentage of gifted children who are gifted late talkers. These children are able to follow complex conversations and respond accordingly (although still non verbally). These children actually have an excellent understanding of language; but are not verbally expressive until much later than their peers. For further information on this topic, please refer to the NAGC fact sheet P65 Late Speech and Gifted Children.

Excellent Memory:

Many gifted and talented children have excellent memories. They are able to remember facts after being told only once or twice. They can remember the way to places they have been to only a few times. Some gifted and talented children have very good detailed memories about things that happened when they were young. They may not have such a good memory for instructions they are given as their minds can get distracted before they carry them out! For guidance on this topic, please refer to the fact sheets P71 Working Memory- Tapping Potential and P72 Helping to Organise your Disorganised Child.

Reasons Well:

Gifted and talented children are able to reason well in discussions and choices. Although their decisions and viewpoint may not always agree with those around them, there is often a logical thought process leading to them. A disagreement with a gifted child can often leave the parent feeling as though they have been cross examined by a talented lawyer!
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Strong Curiosity (asking questions):

As gifted and talented children have an inbuilt capacity to learn quickly and a good memory, they want to know as much as they can about many things. This means they ask many questions about things around them or related to one another. Some children ask lots questions because they want attention and they have found that this is a good way of getting (mainly) positive attention.

Mature for Age:

Their developed thinking skills and perception means that gifted and talented children often seem mature for their age. However, there are also times when gifted children behave very immaturity. This is very common and further advice on this topic can be found in the fact sheet P56 Asynchronous Development.

Good Sense of Humour:

Gifted and talented children often have a well-developed sense of humour for their age. They are able to see irony in things and sometimes have a quirky view of things. They may develop the use of sarcasm and witty banter far earlier than their peers and this can sometimes lead to difficulties with friendships. Although adults will be able to appreciate and understand a gifted child’s highly developed sense of humour, other children might not get the joke at all.

Keen Observation:

Gifted and talented children often pick up a lot of information from the world around them and their excellent memory means that much of this information is stored, leading to great observation ability.

Compassion for Others:

Many gifted and talented children have great compassion for other people and are very perceptive to other people’s feelings. This can cause them to become upset at times when confronted with suffering.

Vivid Imagination:

Whilst most young children are imaginative, many gifted and talented children have a vivid imagination, having pretend friends and creating characters for cuddly toys, although their imagination may be limited to a particular area of interest. They can invent complex, imaginative games that other children of the same age find difficult to follow.

Long Attention Span:

Gifted and talented children are generally able to concentrate on areas of interest for long periods of time. They may have difficulty concentrating fully on something they find tedious and may look as if they are not paying attention (daydreaming or fidgeting); although if asked they can often repeat what is being said. Because their mind is working quickly they may seem to flit from one subject to another, although these may be logically connected in their thought process. As gifted and talented children learn quickly, they do not need repetition and this can cause them to become frustrated when asked to do more of the same.
Ability with Numbers:

Gifted and talented children often have ability with numbers well beyond their age group. They can find it easy to grasp the abstract ideas in mathematics and can relate knowledge to new situations. For further advice on challenging a gifted young mathematician, NAGC has produced 2 fact sheets on Gifted in Mathematics Primary School Level and Gifted in Mathematics Secondary School Level. However, it should be noted that some gifted and talented children are more interested in words and language or artistic pursuits than numbers and hence do not excel in this mathematics. Indeed, some gifted and talented children may have a particular learning difficulty with maths and may require additional support to gain confidence in the subject. Without the correct support in maths, there is the possibility that such children can develop a fear or hatred for the subject. This could hamper their chances and restrict their opportunities in their future career choices.

Concern with Justice and Fairness:

Gifted and talented children often appear to be overly concerned with justice and fairness. They understand the need for rules and they often hear the rule and adhere to it. They can get very upset when others are not sticking to the rules. This can sometimes become a problem during play times at school as other children may in fact enjoy breaking rules and pushing boundaries away from the restrictions of the classroom. Gifted children may require pastoral support to understand that not everyone shares their diligent observance of rules and that sometimes during play, it is ok to bend the rules as long as nobody gets hurt (both emotionally and physically).

Sensitivity:

Many gifted and talented children are emotionally sensitive, causing them to become angry through frustration, upset over ‘silly’ things or overly scared. Some gifted and talented children are also sensitive to loud noises, have a heightened sense of smell, taste or touch which can cause them distress. More information on this topic can be found in the fact sheet P74 Hypersensitivity (Dabrowski’s Overexcitabilities).

Wide Range of Interests:

Many gifted and talented children are interested in a variety of subjects, they soak up information and their knowledge and understanding of the world is exceptional from an early age. There are often passions about certain subjects that the child will follow, some temporary that they will learn about deeply for a short period and others that they will follow throughout life. The fact sheet P25 Ways to Demonstrate Learning is a useful guide about how to present their interests and passions in a variety of interesting ways.

Ability with Puzzles:

Gifted and talented children are normally very good at problem solving. This shows itself from a young age with the ability to complete jigsaw puzzles beyond those recommended for their age. Often they need less prompting than other children and are able to work independently on puzzles that interest them, be they word-based, number-based or logic-based.
High Energy Level:

Some gifted and talented children have a high energy level from a very young age. This can impact upon sleep patterns from birth. As toddlers, these children can be difficult to handle and are constantly on the go. Children with high energy levels need a lot of physical exercise and may learn better outdoors or after exercise. Having high energy can mean that a child fidgets and finds it difficult to sit still, expect when they are fully engaged. This characteristic shows itself more when the child becomes agitated or excited.

Perfectionist:

Some gifted and talented children have a tendency towards perfectionism, and for some this can mean they have a fear of failure resulting in them not wanting to try new things if they think their performance may fall short of perfection. Gifted and talented children can be very self-critical or become emotional if things don’t go well in their eyes (even if others feel they did what was expected of them). For more information on this topic, please refer to the fact sheet P50 Perfectionism in Gifted Children: Overcoming the Fear of Failure.

Passionate about Interests:

Whilst gifted and talented children may not always appear to be paying close attention, there are often very passionate in their chosen areas of interest. This can cause problems in school as they can become upset when an adult tries to get them to move on from their preferred tasks. This kind of intensity can be difficult for others to cope with but there are obvious advantages for the child as they get older and are able to focus.

Questions Authority:

Many gifted and talented children question authority and feel it is their right to do so because they may know better. Unfortunately, their manner can sometimes seem arrogant to figures of authority. For them, respect is not gained merely by being an adult, it needs to be earned. Adults can earn respect by listening to the child and acting fairly. It may take time for a gifted child to respect an adult; but at the same time, it is important for parents to reinforce the importance of following instructions set out by teachers as a persistent failure to do so will result in disciplinary measures.

Avid Reader:

Many gifted and talented children learn to read easily (some very early) and enjoy different kinds of books to entertain them (imaginative fiction) and extend their learning (topic and non-fiction books). Many enjoy poetry because of the play with words and sounds and the different ways of making sense of the world. Gifted and talented children often progress very quickly from picture books and devour all kinds of reading material. Some gifted and talented children learn to read easily but enjoy a more limited range of material, for example only reading non-fiction for learning about particular topics. Some gifted and talented children may have a learning difficulty that prevents them from reading easily, such as dyslexia. NAGC has produced several fact sheets to help parents to further stretch gifted readers.
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Prefers Older Companions:

Many, but by no means all, gifted and talented children have difficulty finding friends within their age group. Many prefer the company of older children and adults to bounce their ideas off and play with. This is because they are ahead of their peer group in many ways and find those of the same age do not interest them. The peer group often find it difficult to join in with the gifted and talented child’s complex games and may not understand their advanced language. Fact sheet P54 Friendships and Gifted Children provides useful advice on how to support your child to develop friendships.

Finally…

Nobody said it was easy to parent a gifted child. But in fully understanding their characteristics (which can often come across as ‘quirks’ or ‘oddities’ to others), parents are in a far better position to support, educate and nurture their gifted child. NAGC strives towards raising awareness of what makes these very special children ‘tick’, so that parents/carers and educators are able to provide them with the right level of support as well as challenging and enriching experiences.

Further Information Books can be ordered from our website shop: www.nagcbritain.org.uk/shop.php

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<tr>
<th>Book Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>P09 Needs of Gifted Children</td>
<td>NAGC Fact Sheet. Gifted children often need more support than others at home and in the classroom, but this does not necessarily mean that they need more structured activities. Sometimes it means they need more freedom and a little more guidance instead. The general needs of gifted children are explored in this fact sheet.</td>
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<td><a href="http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/What_is_Gifted/characgt.htm">www.gifteddevelopment.com/What_is_Gifted/characgt.htm</a></td>
<td>The Gifted Development Center website, giving information about the development of the above set of characteristics.</td>
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<tr>
<td>A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Children edited by James T. Webb</td>
<td>Written by four authors with decades of experience with gifted children and their families, this book covers issues such as peer relations, sibling issues, motivation and underachievement and discipline issues.</td>
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