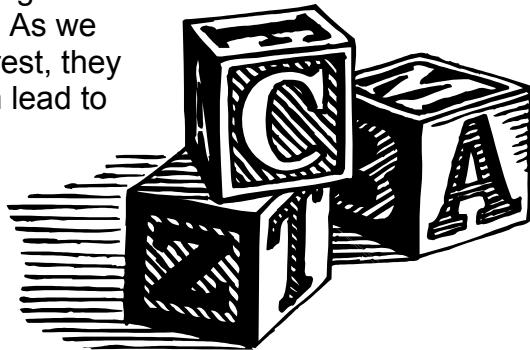


What Parents Need to Know About Recognizing and Encouraging Interests, Strengths, and Talents of Young Gifted Children

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As parents, we know that each stage of our children's development brings its special challenges and rewards. Whether they are preschoolers, or attend elementary, middle or high school, we want our children to find satisfying activities that will develop their potential to the fullest extent. As we help our children to find topics and projects of interest, they will exercise and enhance their strengths. This can lead to the development of talent and hopefully more productive lives as adults. Throughout this process, sometimes our children claim to have no interests, and at other times they are incredibly busy moving from one activity to another, making it difficult for us to keep track of their many preoccupations. What can we do to recognize and develop their interests, strengths, and talents over time? This guide includes some commonly asked questions by parents, along with responses and additional resources.



Very Young Gifted Children

What are some interests of very young children?

Young children are interested in many topics. Just listen to them talk and watch them play. A preschool child might gaze outside to watch a spider spin her web in the corner of the window frame; paint pictures of a favorite pet; or talk about the big tree that was just cut down across the street. They ask questions about why the spider covered the fly with string; how to paint a brown dog when red, blue, and yellow are the only colors in the paint set; and how to count the branches on a tree. These are examples of interests in nature, art, and mathematics.

Interests range in intensity and not every interest will develop into a career path. However, it is important to capitalize on children's interests by providing honest and satisfying answers to their questions and by allowing them to discover some of the answers themselves. Time and resources usually dictate your responses. For example,

if you do not have the time to explain all you know about spiders, your child could watch the spider's activities at least once a day for a week and report the findings each day, at a time you select. You could also take your child to the library to read about spiders in books such as Charlotte's Web (White, 1952). To learn more about art, it's great fun to experiment with mixing colors while trying to find the perfect shade of brown to represent the family's dog. A lesson in estimating the number of tiny branches on one limb could lead to an in-depth discussion of estimating other numbers such as pennies in a jar or flowers in a wallpaper pattern.

These early and numerous interests might simply end, giving the child more experience with a particular topic that can be used in the future, or they could lead to more commitment on the part of the child, representing a deeper area of interest. Your 3-year-old daughter may learn about different types of spiders from the books you both brought home from the library and soon give you a tour of the 27 spiders she has been observing in your garden. Your 4-year-old son might create a book of drawings and stories illustrating the adventures of his dog. These projects might lead to long-term interests in nature or in writing and illustrating that last for months or even years. When a child shows some commitment to a topic, it is often because he or she has a strength in an area related to the topic. For example, a child with an interest in cartooning has a strength in representing thoughts, actions, and three-dimensional concepts as two-dimensional concepts.

In addition to being curious about a particular topic, children who are precocious readers may acquire much more information about their interest area since they do not have to depend upon someone else to read to them. However, this independence may change if the vocabulary of some books becomes too difficult. Your child's interest may wane until you either find more appropriate reading material or someone willing to read and explain information about the selected topic. Some children obtain much of their knowledge about a topic from educational television. If you are concerned about your child's TV viewing habits, consult the reference below by Abelman (1992).

Regardless of the topic, children who are gifted usually ask a lot of questions. It can be exhausting to be the main resource for a curious preschool child. Try to find assistance from other sources such as a librarian who is familiar with children's reference books or an older child in the neighborhood who could read with your child and then discuss ideas from the reading selections.

Remember that children like to model the people around them. If they see that you and other family members like to read, have hobbies, or organize collections, they will be more likely to want to do the same. While you capitalize on your child's interests by talking about his or her favorite topics and providing appropriate resources, also keep in mind that your child should be having fun!

To facilitate and support your young child's interests:

- * Provide your child with opportunities to find out about a variety of topics;
- * Be a role model for acquiring interests by reading about many topics and discussing these ideas with your child;
- * Show your child that there are a variety of sources of information about any particular topic; these might include a storyteller at a community center, pictures from an art museum on your local library's internet system, a program about ants on television, or a neighbor who is a musician;
- * Help young children to enjoy learning about a topic; this will allow them to be better prepared for and more relaxed about future learning.

Should I broaden my preschool child's interests?

Just like everyone else, children gravitate to the activities in which they perform the best. Even when they can do these activities quite well, they should be encouraged to switch to other tasks so they can be well rounded. In fact, it's very easy for an adult to allow a child to do the same types of activities again and again, knowing that the child will be engaged and quiet. Although a gifted child can have a long attention span, a parent might find that even a 2- or 3-year-old is spending too much time in front of the computer screen or playing with blocks.

Can a young child ever have too much time playing with blocks? Blocks are great because they develop many skills such as those needed to plan and to build. They are perfect for preschoolers because they are tangible; they can be held and moved and knocked down to build some more. For children, they are a wonderful material for testing ideas and creating stories, especially if the child is a spatial thinker. On the other hand, a child should also experience thinking with other types of materials and should be invited to draw, paint, listen to music, read, play charades, or sculpt. A wide range of games and activities helps children to be more balanced in their thinking as they prepare to encounter more abstract material in their primary years of school.

How do I know that my young child has a talent?

When people hear the word "talent," they often think of an artistic area of expression such as drawing or playing a musical instrument. We also refer to people as being talented athletes or talented in science. Most experts agree that talent refers to some natural ability based on an area of strength. Many experts also believe that both the child's personality and the types of opportunities available in the environment over a period of time play a large role in the development of a talent (Bloom, 1985; Sosniak, 1997). Let's take a look at a 1-year-old who walks steadily, but who also taps his toe along with complicated rhythms and moves his arms and shoulders appropriately to the beat. This child shows signs of early musical talent because children at this age do not usually have such synchronized body movements. He also reproduces tunes he has heard from the radio or movies and recognizes different instruments when they are playing, easily mimicking the sounds these instruments make. How will this talent manifest itself? It is too soon to come to any conclusions concerning this 1-year-old, but

the chance to play simple instruments, to dance, and to listen to many different types of music should be encouraged.

In another example, a 5-year-old who is interested in teaching herself how to tell time and who figures out quite quickly that a digital clock with the readout of 14:45 is really 15 minutes before 3:00 p.m., shows early talent in mathematics. In this case, she understands that there are 24 hours in a day, knows how to tell time, easily adds numbers, and can accept the fact that there are at least two types of clocks (digital and analog). These are all advanced skills for a 5-year-old.

A very young child can be talented in several areas or may have a striking talent in just one area such as advanced mathematical or musical ability. If you are uncertain about whether a skill is advanced for your child's age, you could consult a reference about child development, ask your pediatrician, or seek advice from teachers and other professionals in your community.

When you are providing additional activities related to your child's area of talent, a balance should be maintained across many areas of thinking. The following are examples of activities your preschool child could experience to practice skills in several talent areas:

- * Counting and looking for patterns in different types of toys (mathematical ability);
- * Planting seeds and monitoring their growth or classifying objects based on size, shape, color and weight (scientific thinking);
- * Taking turns while playing charades or a board game (social skills);
- * Supplying directions for making something or providing a new ending to a story (verbal ability);
- * Building with legos, blocks, or other materials (spatial skills);
- * Listening to different types of music and recognizing changes in tempo (musical ability).

To facilitate and support your young child's talents:

- * Be patient with your young child when you see potential talent; in most people who have been recognized for their talent, the skills and personality to pursue that area have developed over a long period of time;
- * Be aware that young children who show initial strength in an area such as mathematics, music, or art, might not be interested in practicing the skills related to this area; help them to enjoy the topic first and the talent may develop later;
- * Recognize that children who show precocity in an area should receive attention in that area in order to further the development of their skills and should also be engaged in a variety of other activities.

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