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RESEARCH CENTER on the GIFTED and TALENTED

NRC G/T

NRC/GT: The Parent Connection

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For the past seven years The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) has conducted theory-driven, practitioner-oriented research focusing on identification and programming for high ability students. Our mission guides us in designing studies that ultimately affect future policies and procedures in gifted and talented education. As resulting data become available, practitioners incorporate findings to ensure appropriate and challenging programs and services for students. They access our data in print, videotape, and electronic formats and make decisions about how to improve or extend practices.

In all phases of our research, practitioners play a central role. They serve as research liaisons in schools throughout the country, evaluate potential instruments and assessment tools, review drafts of monographs, and share our information with others. They often operate under the "Did you know?" approach to professional development. At meetings, conferences, workshops, or in corridors, practitioners spread the word about the NRC/GT. We appreciate all of these "town criers of NRC/GT research" because we want our findings to reach people who can make positive changes in schools.

Another role for practitioners evolved over time—sharing research findings with parents. We incorporated specific information for parents in monographs. For example, in *Reading With Young Children* (Jackson & Roller, 1993), a letter to practitioners invites them to share information with parents. In each self-contained section of the report, the authors respond to frequently asked questions about precocious readers, assessment strategies, and writing skills. Questions are posed, responses are provided to inform and guide practitioners and parents, and references and resources are added to support the statements. One frequently asked question is:

Will precocious readers continue to be exceptionally good readers?

Precocious readers almost always remain at least average in their reading ability and most stay well above average, even though their reading performance in fifth or sixth grade is much more likely to be within the range of their classmates' performance than it was in kindergarten. . . . Some investigators have claimed that precocious

readers remain superior in reading achievement throughout their elementary school years, relative to other children of comparable intelligence who were not early readers. . . . However, the meaning of these findings is hard to evaluate. Does an early start in reading in itself give a child a lasting advantage, or do other factors, such as persistence, interest in learning, or parental support, contribute both to the early emergence of reading and to continued good achievement? (p. 37)

Other documents focus on dual audiences—educators and parents. Practitioners' Guides on *What Educators and Parents Need to Know About Elementary School Programs in Gifted Education* and *What Educators and Parents Need to Know About Fostering Creativity* present specific information and research facts that can be reviewed in minutes. Complex quantitative and qualitative research findings are distilled into essential research facts:

What Educators and Parents Need to Know About Elementary School Programs in Gifted Education

Children in programs for the gifted obtain higher achievement scores than their gifted peers who are not in such programs.

Successful programs challenge students through high level content and pacing of the curriculum, while providing many opportunities for these students to make their own choices and to have control over their learning environment. (Delcourt, 1995)

Other times research-based information illustrates how to foster the talents of all children:

What Educators and Parents Need to Know About Fostering Creativity

Provide environments that stimulate and encourage creative ideas. Reward a broad range of creative behaviors.

Be a mentor to a child who displays interest in your particular domain or field of expertise.

Teach students creativity enhancement techniques (e.g., SCAMPER [acronym for **S**ubstitute, **C**hange, **A**dapt or **A**dopt, **M**agnify or **M**inify, **P**ut to other uses, **E**laborate, and **R**earrange], brainstorming, synectics, attribute listing) to use with their science fair projects, art activities, and writing assignments to design a more creative product.

Expose your child to various types of tasks and activities, emphasizing variety in music, family and/or field trips, TV viewing, reading material, hobbies, toys, etc. (Plucker, 1995)

Still other times, research-based documents serve as guides for parents of young children. In *Parenting the Very Young, Gifted Child,* Robinson (1993) discusses perfectionism.

Young gifted children have frequently been described in individual case studies as perfectionistic, that is, self-critical, setting high standards for their own performance, and monitoring their attainment according to what others think. . . . What is good and necessary for ultimate high achievement—setting high but attainable goals for oneself—can be either a positive or negative force. A delight in mastering challenging tasks may well be the secret of success, and this quality in the very young is predictive of later high ability. . . . (p. 6)

Alvino (1995) fills a book with ideas: *Considerations and Strategies for Parenting the Gifted Child.* Topics include: Parenting Styles Make a Difference; The Enriched Environment; Nurturing Your Child's Creativity; Critical Thinking, Research, and Study Skills; Academics at Home: The Core Subjects; The Value of Play. To enhance the joy and challenge of parenting a gifted child, Alvino advises:

Remember to temper overbearing personality traits. Focus on the positive aspects of your child's behavior; don't place unfair burdens on your child just because he or she is gifted; allow for unstructured time and self-initiated play; and balance permissiveness with authority as a loving, caring adult.

Balance "being on task" activities with relaxation and lots of free time. Let your child's interests guide your involvement. Give appropriate praise that is specific, focuses on the desired behavior (not the child), and celebrates accomplishments for their own sake. Be a guide and matchmaker between your child's interests, talents, and the means and opportunities to explore them. (pp. 77-78)

From providing data on traits and behaviors of gifted children to developing guides for parents, our documents feature critical information to help children. Of course, parents are their children's first teachers and they exert a strong influence on their aspirations and future roles. Hine (1994; 1995) summarizes her research findings in English and Spanish: *Helping Your Child Find Success at School: A Guide for Hispanic Parents, Cómo Ayudar a su Hijo a Tener Éxito en la Escuela: Guía para Padres Hispanos.* Hine conducted a qualitative study of 10 Puerto Rican high school

students and their parents to ascertain: What factors in the family learning environments of gifted Puerto Rican high school students support high achievement? Major keys to open the doors to success at school included:

Key #3: Parents must make their children understand that they believe their children will be successful both in school and, later, in the workplace.

Parents of high achievers had high educational and occupational aspirations for their children. They let their children know they expected them to do well in school and to gain the knowledge and skills necessary for a good occupation. Parents stressed the importance of getting a good education to reach these goals. They often mentioned their own employment and personal aspirations which served as a role model for their children. (p. 12)

Key #8: Parents should become involved in their child's school and extracurricular activities. By encouraging a "social bond" with the school and the community, they will help him or her to grow in confidence and self-esteem.

All of these high achieving students were actively involved in both school and extracurricular activities, and their parents encouraged and supported this involvement. Being "involved" helped them develop a positive self image and a sense of commitment to school and community. (p. 20)

One traditional marker of success is to continue one's education beyond high school. Children may or may not be familiar with all the prerequisite tasks necessary for pursuing a college education, especially if they are first generation college attendees. They need advice about the realities and timing of the whole process, and they

and their parents can find it in a book by Wright and Olszewski-Kubilius (1993) entitled *Helping Gifted Children and Their Families Prepare for College: A Handbook Designed to Assist Economically Disadvantaged and First-Generation College Attendees*. Once the applications are secured from potential institutions matching the children's interests and skills, letters of recommendation are requested and completed, and transcripts are secured, it is time to brainstorm potential questions to college admissions representatives:

- What is the average class size for freshmen courses?
- Are most undergraduate courses taught by graduate students or faculty?
- Do you have to be accepted for admission before you are awarded financial aid?
- On the average, how much of the actual cost of attending the school does financial aid typically cover?
- What are some of the unique qualities about the college?
- What academic support services are offered to students?
- What student groups are available on campus? (p. 67)

Getting ready for college may be a long, arduous process that seems far away for some or too close for others. Students need to consider what talents, abilities, and interests they will bring to the college or university and pose questions to interviewers that present a clear picture of the organization and academic setting. Parents and children can read and review the book by Wright and Olszewski-Kubilius to gain a wealth of how-to information about pursuing college. The book was prepared as a service for parents and children and it has helped several young people realize their dreams.

Nurturing the talents, abilities, and interests of children is a continual

process that brings rewards at all ages. College entrance may be regarded as a tangible reward for hard work and high aspirations; others may view college entrance as a time of reflection on a question or comment their child made at a young age that indicated potential talent. In *Parents Nurturing Math-Talented Young Children* and *Teachers Nurturing Math Talented Young Children* (Waxman, Robinson, & Mukhopadhayay, 1996a, 1996b), the authors describe a two-year study of preschool and kindergarten children involved in biweekly Saturday Clubs designed to enrich their mathematics experiences. Some of the students were "deeply passionate about numbers, as is evident in their questions, in their tendency to ignore what the rest of the class is doing while they are absorbed with a problem of their own, and in their smiles of satisfaction when they make sense of something puzzling" (p. 1). The young, math-prone students came to the attention of the researchers through nominations by teachers and parents. Parents completed application forms, recording verbatim comments such as the following that reflected their child's mathematical view of the world:

At four years old, he could identify all the states of the US by shape alone and place them appropriately without outline clues.

Has recently shown interest in written music—how notes and rests divide a measure.

She and her father had a lengthy discussion on Avogadro's number, which is now called Avocado's number. She can tell time and write Roman numerals up to 20 easily.

Will multiply and divide using factors up to 10 and various combinations of numbers. All this is done in his head . . . the process is what interests him. (pp. 3-4)

The children's inquisitiveness about all things mathematical was bolstered over time through "playing with wonderful ideas." The soon to be released books by Waxman, Robinson, and Mukhopadhayay contain numerous ideas to spur mathematical thinking and doing. Teachers and parents will find these books a wonderful resource for schools and homes. They will revel in the character profiles of the young students involved in the Saturday Clubs known as Math Trek. JoAnne is just one example:

> JoAnne hated writing. The worst parts of first grade for her were all the requests to write. Her mom was puzzled by JoAnne's dislike of writing, for she loved to read and draw. Her favorite subject, however, was math. During one of the second year Math Trek sessions, the children were asked to make a drawing and write a story that would make sense of some simple equations. One equation was $0 - 3 = -3$. JoAnne loved

negative numbers and was intrigued by the challenge of coming up with a plausible story. She spent a long time drawing a picture and then wrote a comical story about a man who had to dig three levels underground in order to get to a certain pipe. (1996b, p. 73)

The talents, abilities, and interests of children are visible at all ages and we hope that our research finds its way into the hands of more and more parents. Thus, we call upon the many practitioners in our network and ask that they, once again, share our work with parents. Yes, go ahead, copy this article and give it to a parent. Help us build the parent connection!

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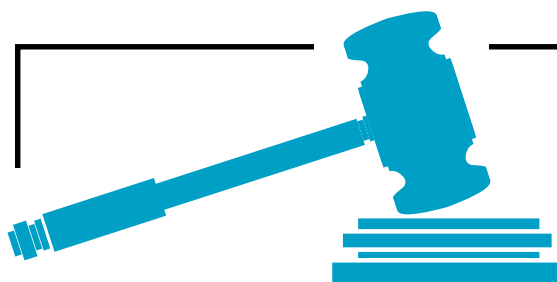
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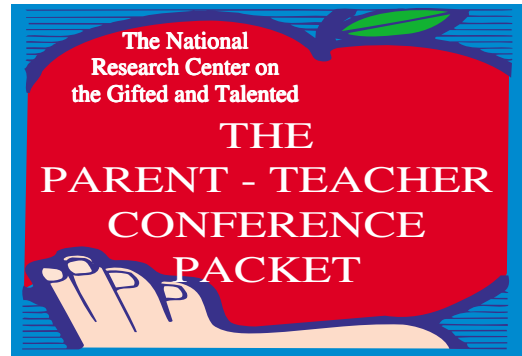
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A Parent's Guide to Helping Children:
Using Bibliotherapy at Home

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There were nights when it seemed impossible to get Tara into bed. It was hard to distinguish what set her off, but the outcome was always the same; getting out of bed, asking questions, wanting a glass of water, all until her mother was quite annoyed. Then, quite accidentally, Tara and her mom came up with a new bedtime routine. On those hard to get to bed nights, Tara was allowed to pick two books to be read to her. The second book was always *Goodnight Moon* by Margaret Brown. This was a book that had a calming effect for Tara and the routine of the story reading helped her get ready to go to sleep.

This is just one way for parents to incorporate bibliotherapy into the everyday interactions with children. Bibliotherapy is the use of literature that addresses problems or issues current in the lives of children. For some children like Tara, a favorite story, poem, or song can be a comfort in a trying time. Introducing a new story or book can be equally as helpful for children because it helps to clarify feelings and validate emotions. Making up their own stories or modifying a favorite also can get children to talk and think about issues at hand.

Definitions

Bibliotherapy as a technique has proven effective in both the classroom and in child therapy (Borders & Paisley, 1992; Lenkowsky, 1987). Through reading, or being read to, a story similar to their own lives, children are able to experience and deal with an issue objectively which can then be applied to their own problems/issues. The stories should show the child there is a way out, others have the same issues, you are not alone. Bibliotherapy sends the message to the child that it is acceptable to talk about this and together we can work out a solution. Hébert (1991) cautions that the simple act of reading a story is not bibliotherapy. Follow-up discussions must be incorporated in order to reinforce the issue at hand. Added outcomes of such discussion include fostering interpersonal relationships and problem solving skills. Discussions provide a forum for the child

to better understand what is being said in the story and to apply it to her/his situation. It is important to note that the ramifications of this technique are greater for high ability children because of their ability to empathize, which allows them to identify with the characters, to understand metaphor, and to become absorbed in the story with a meta-understanding of the issue.

Bibliotherapy is useful because it allows the child to step back from her/his problem and experience it from an objective viewpoint. It offers the child a safe avenue to investigate feelings. For an adult having to deal with a child in distress, it can also provide a nonthreatening way to broach a sensitive subject. Always remember, bibliotherapy is a conversation starter, not ender. It should be used to open up communication. Handing a book to a child in the hopes that she/he will understand your intention is not helpful. Connections need to be facilitated and open expression should be encouraged.

Who, What, When

Who should use bibliotherapy? Anyone who has contact with a child who is experiencing emotional turmoil or confronting a new issue that is confusing can use a technique like bibliotherapy. Counselors have used this technique quite successfully since the 1950s and 1960s. Lenkowsky (1987) points to its use as a planned therapy with three components: identification, catharsis, and insight. The use of bibliotherapy in the classroom seems to have its roots in the 1970s with the use of picture books with children (Jalongo, 1983). The popular trend in children's literature to include more emotionally laden and real-life subject matter has increased the use of bibliotherapy today. The quality of available literature is outstanding. There seems to be a greater awareness of real life issues and multicultural sensitivity among book authors and publishers. Not only are bibliotherapy approaches useful within the context of a classroom or therapy session, but more and more parents are finding it beneficial in helping their children deal with the stress of modern life. Taking the time to read a story with a child, if done in an empathetic, understanding atmosphere, can reinforce a positive sense of worth and increase the parent/child bond.

Schlichter and Burke (1994) point to two forms of bibliotherapy: developmental and clinical. Clinical bibliotherapy is employed by trained personnel, for use with children in therapy situations and is just one aspect of the treatment process that deals with deep problems. Developmental bibliotherapy is used to anticipate issues before they become a problem. For instance, reading a story about a child who is frightened about going to first grade with your kindergartner is developmentally

appropriate and can prove to be helpful in allaying some of their fears. This type of bibliotherapy is useful with children who are progressing through the normal stages of growing up and who may benefit from an exploration into issues relevant to their age or experiences, e.g., bedwetting, nightmares, or fights between friends. It is when the issue becomes problematic for the child and/or family that professional help is required. If you find yourself asking questions such as the following, then maybe you need to consult with a professional. "Is this an issue I feel comfortable dealing with alone? I have tried everything I know, now what do I do?" A therapist may ask you to become part of the therapy by recommending to you certain books to read at home, but this will be in addition to the work being done in the office. The most important thing to remember is that your child is getting the help with the issue before it becomes a major life trauma.

Selection

For those parents who are looking for ways to use literature with their children, there are several sources for appropriate books for and about children. Some authors include bibliographies at the end of their works (see Hébert, 1991; Kerr, 1991; Silverman, 1993). One suggestion by Silverman is to consult a librarian who in addition to her/his own expertise, can point you to the resources like *Bookfinder 5: When Kids Need Books* (Spredemann-Dreyer, 1994). This work allows you to find books by subject, author, or title and includes items for children from 2-18 years. It is a helpful resource that is continually updated but just one example of many guides available to you. It is worth the trouble to explore the shelves of local libraries and bookstores; don't be timid about asking for help.

Using annotated bibliographies and suggestions by others is a good source for ideas on materials. The best way to select a story is to read the story. It may take time to find an appropriate book for use with your child. You want it to be closely related to the issue at hand, offer suggestions for coping strategies, and include a protagonist your child can relate to. Characters in stories are either humans or animals, ask yourself which will be more appropriate for your child? Can they make the leap from an animal character to their own life, or will they see such a book as babyish? The storyline and characters do not have to match your situation exactly, but be sure there is some commonality. There are many good stories available so don't compromise. Choosing a story that a child cannot relate to will negate your good intentions. Take your time, visit libraries and bookstores. Chances are you will find many more adults in the children's section than you anticipate!

There are also more formal criterion put forth by authors regarding the selection of books. Generally, selecting quality literature is of the utmost importance (Halsted, 1988). Choose books that are well written, clearly printed, and include artwork that is both relevant to the story and pleasing to the eye. Jalongo (1983) suggests there are three advantages for using literature: information, relevance, and acceptance. These three can also be used as critera to select materials. Ask yourself if the book or story a) promotes the exchange of information between adult and child, b) enables the child to make the connection to her/his life, and finally c) validates the child's feelings and responses to the crisis or issue at hand. Any book or story that incorporates any or all of these ideas would be appropriate to use within the context of bibliotherapy.

Taking Action

Jane's dog ran off his leash and was hit by a car. Her father did not know how to explain to Jane that it was an accident and that sometimes these things happen. She was inconsolable;

Riddles had been the family dog since Jane was a baby. A neighbor gave Jane a book called *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst. Jane and her mom read this book about a little boy whose cat died. She was able to relate to how the boy in the story felt and tried to name ten good things about Riddles. Jane came up with 14 things and she and her mom drew pictures about each one. Now, whenever she feels sad about Riddles, Jane reads the book she made. Ziegler (1992) suggests that allowing the child to write his/her own story will help the healing process.

This example shows how one family dealt with the death of their pet. The bibliotherapy exercise was just one way the family helped Jane deal with Riddles' death. There were many tearfilled nights and lackluster days. Eventually, Jane got over the death of her friend, as would be expected, and the book was just one thing that helped her on her way. Immediate results cannot be expected. In fact, with some resistant children, this method will seem to fail miserably. Time is the critical factor. For some children it will take time for them to incorporate the ideas or even want to deal with the issue. Talking about emotions may be difficult and the child may be resistant but with the help from a caring adult, she/he can learn to deal with issues and not ignore them. Not attending to an issue can often lead to more problems down the line. Giving your child the space to explore issues in an open and trusting environment will further validate her/his feelings both about her/himself and you.

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Resources

Barrett, J. D. (1989). *Willie's not the hugging kind.* **New York: HarperTrophy.**

When Willie's best friend tells him hugs are silly, Willie thinks hugs are silly, too. So no one in Willie's family hugs him anymore. But Willie knows deep down, in spite of what Jo-Jo thinks, that he is the hugging kind.

• • •

Baynton, M. (1988). *Jane and the dragon.* **Martinez, CA: Discovery Toys.**

Jane wants to be a knight but everyone laughs at her, saying that girls can't be knights. The court jester is the only person who takes Jane seriously. He lends her a small suit of armor—which turns out to be just what she needs.

• • •

Bradman, T., & Ross, T. (1990). *Michael.* **New York: Macmillan.**

Michael was quite simply the worst boy in school. He was always late, usually scruffy, and never did what he was told. His teachers had just about given up on him when one day they discovered that even the most hapless student can blossom.

• • •

Brown, M. (1989). *Goodnight moon.* **New York: HarperCollins.**

A little bunny says goodnight to each of the familiar things in his world.

• • •

Cohen, M. (1980). *First grade takes a test.* **New York: Greenwillow Books.**

The first grade is distressed by an intelligence test which fails to measure true aptitude.

• • •

Cole, B. (1986). *Princess smartypants.* **New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.**

Not wishing to marry any of her royal suitors, Princess Smartypants devises difficult tasks at which they all fail, until the multi-talented Prince Swashbuckle appears.

• • •

Hess, D. (1994). *Wilson sat alone.* **New York: Simon & Schuster.**

A little boy always does everything alone and never with his classmates, until a new girl comes to school.

• • •

Hill, E. S. (1991). *Evan's corner*. **New York: Viking.**

Needing a place to call his own, Evan is thrilled when his mother points out that their crowded apartment has eight corners, one for each family member.

• • •

Jahn-Clough, L. (1994). *Alicia has a bad day*. **Boston: Houghton Mifflin.**

When Alicia can't seem to cheer herself up, she tries going back to bed.

• • •

Martin, B., Jr., & Archambault, J. (1987). *Knots on a counting rope*. **New York: The Trumpet Club.**

A boy learns about strength by listening to his grandfather and his own inner voice.

• • •

Most, B. (1990). *The cow that went oink*. **San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace.**

A cow that oinks and a pig that moos are ridiculed by the other barnyard animals until each teaches the other a new sound.

• • •

Ross, T. (1989). *I want a cat*. **New York: Farrar Straus Giroux.**

Jessy must be the only girl in the world without a pet. And she wants a cat. Unfortunately, her parents think cats are crawly, creepy, yowly things. But Jessy isn't going to let that stand in her way, and she comes up with a wonderful plan.

• • •

Simon, N. (1991). *I am not a crybaby***. New York: Puffin Books.**

Children describe a variety of situations that make them want to cry, emphasizing that crying is a normal reaction.

• • •

Smith, L. (1991). *Glasses, who needs 'em*? **New York: Puffin Books.**

A boy is unhappy about having to wear glasses, until his doctor provides an imaginative list of well-adjusted eyeglass wearers.

• • •

Viorst, J. (1972). *Alexander and the terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day.* **New York: Aladdin Books.**

One day when everything goes wrong for him, Alexander is consoled by the thought that other people have bad days, too.

• • •

Viorst, J. (1971). *The tenth good thing about Barney*. **New York: Aladdin Books.**

In an attempt to overcome his grief, a boy tries to think of the ten best things about his dead cat.

• • •

Waber, B. (1972). *Ira sleeps over*. **Boston: Houghton Mifflin.**

Ira has to decide whether to bring his teddy bear with him when he sleeps over at Reggie's house. His dilemma is solved by a surprising revelation.

• • •

Willis, J., & Varley, S. (1986). *The monster bed*. **New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard Books.**

A little monster is afraid to go to bed because he thinks humans will get him while he is asleep.

• • •

Zolotow, C. (1972). *William's doll.* **New York: HarperTrophy.**

More than anything, Williams wants a doll. "Don't be a creep," says his brother. "Sissy, sissy," chants the boy next door. Then one day someone really understands his wish, and makes it easy for others to understand, too.

The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented Welcomes the Following New Collaborative School Districts:

Monroe Central School Corporation – Parker City, Indiana
Logan County Schools – Russellville, Kentucky
Carlsbad Municipal Schools – Carlsbad, New Mexico
Rush-Henrietta Central School District – Henrietta, New York
Pittsburgh Public Schools – Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania
Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District – Houston, Texas
Colegio Bolivar School District—Cali, Columbia

Parents, Research, and the School Curriculum

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Six years ago my wife and I went through the proverbial "trading of roles" in our home. She went back to work within a full-time teaching position and I reduced the number of theatrical workshops conducted at schools around the state. Our two sons, Matthew and Nathan, were entering kindergarten and second grade respectively, and as we factored the economic advantages of the situation with our beliefs on child rearing we agreed that there should still be a consistent presence of an adult in the daily routines of our children. Breakfasts together, making lunches, greeting them at the bus stop, and general communication with the school became my domain. Accompanying this realignment of roles was a discussion on how parents nurture children at the various stages of childhood. Meal preparation, transportation, grocery shopping, etcetera were not the issues here but rather, the question, "What kind of nurturing role can a parent assume when both children are in school from 8:30-3:30?"

A child's initial entry into school causes a parent to ask him or herself, "What is it I wish my child to become?" While the child's daily absence out of the home often implies, "The school will generally do a good job of respecting your child's individuality while preparing him or her for a meaningful and productive future." Like most parents we had a general idea of what ought to occur in the academic portion of our sons' lives. As parents, we were hesitant to leave the development of this vision completely to the school. Perhaps this was because we were both teachers and realized the demands of curricular modifications upon a teacher's time; but actually it was because we, as parents, had exciting visions for our children and felt it was our moral obligation to reach for those visions. The school was viewed as a valuable resource in the process.

Admittedly, as a father, I questioned the significance of my contributions to nurturing which lay beyond the domestic aspects of the process. Aware that fatherly pride can evolve to a "fast track" parenting style, I was content to witness, via a journal, my children's interests and foster them during various episodes of directed playfulness. During one such episode I discovered Matthew's (our younger son) interest in the concept of numbers. At age three he had demonstrated that a set of 14 porch balustrades always equaled 14 regardless of how many different ways they were divided. *"See Dad? They all make 14 Dad. 3+3+4+4 makes 14 Dad. So does 7+7 Dad. 1+1+1+1+10, See Dad? See? They do."*

His interest grew and so in the June before his entry into kindergarten we contacted the school, a rural, K-8 program with 104 students. There was one teacher per grade which disallowed a choice of teaching styles within any particular grade level. How do parents advocate on their child's behalf given the "home court advantage" of a singular classroom style? Our solution was to resort to our vision that said "foster the interests and strengths of our children," as interests seemed to be part of what makes learning enjoyable and strengths figured into the development of potential. We approached the school psychologist and the kindergarten teacher to draw attention to some learning behaviors and inquire about having Matthew tested. Earlier experiences with our oldest son had made us aware that social skills were stressed in the curriculum and that continued development of our younger son's interest in numbers might not be facilitated at a pace or style he enjoyed. Fall came and following through on our initial request for testing seemed the typical thing to ask. The school complied and the results raised the potentially overwhelming litany of questions:

- *What does an IQ score represent? What does it predict?*
- *In a perfect school experience should there be a spread between aptitude and performance?*
- *What do 3.5 standard deviations mean?*
- *Why are the subtests useful?*

Parents who are teachers can experience great cognitive dissonance when their comprehension of test results is not reflected appropriately in classroom practices. This was our situation and it became apparent that information was needed to present an informed opinion about our requests and to suggest a specific plan of instruction.

It was at this point that I made a telephone call to The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) and discovered a veritable treasure trove of information in the form of user-friendly parenting packets, Practitioners' Guides, resource lists, advocacy associations, bibliographies, guidelines, and Research Monographs for making our decisions. In short, the availability of relevant information allowed us to reexamine the academic lives of our children and our roles as parents. It validated our observations, inspired our plans, and produced anger and anxiety; particularly with regards to our older son whose aversive responses to school had been looked at in a different light up until this point. Subsequently, Nathan was tested and the results revealed a shocking misinterpretation by parents and teachers of a child who was an aural learner and socially insightful well beyond his years, and whose requests for learning how to borrow and carry in arithmetic had been thwarted for 18 months. Nathan's daily emotional breakdowns were not a function of me failing in my new parental role after all, but an unarticulated realization that he was bored and did not fit into the behavioral norms of a large second grade classroom that had its share of student behavior problems. Nathan was nearly 8 years old, yet his younger brother's strengths were being tracked since the age of 3. The importance of having timely access to appropriate information was made clearer still in a personal way.

The situations of our two sons are representative of the formative and reactive ends of the spectrum with which information from the NRC/GT can be utilized. Information on curriculum compacting and acceleration provided by the NRC/GT has had, and continues to have, an extremely formative influence on our

younger son's school experience. That is to say the information was available for use as a planning tool before the school year was too far underway. In contrast, our older son benefited from information about grade-skipping and socialization issues that allowed him to "escape" a situation that did not have the wherewithal at the time to accommodate his needs.

If parents and teachers of high achieving children would recognize research as a form of history in that it represents prior events and outcomes and that it has a predictive nature, they could experience a tremendous sense of empowerment and accomplishment in their work. Teachers and parents want to be known for doing a job well. In my new parenting role, I was particularly anxious about performance, especially the nurturing issue. The saving grace was information and the way it could be used within the curriculum by convincing classroom teachers to accept its practical value with respect to traditional classroom practices and my sons' educational growth.

A major lesson learned was that timely access to relevant and accurate information is crucial to the education of young children who learn differently. Information is more effective when used early within a planning process that sets goals for the future instead of one that reacts to current classroom practices. I found as a parent that planning for the future created an alignment of teacher and parental concerns that was not easily duplicated when information was simply provided in response to an immediate curricular concern. One step towards accessing information is to make copies available of the NRC/GT Practitioners' Guides via school information/bulletin boards, the pre-K screening process, parent packets, and school handbooks.

A second lesson was that information empowers its possessor. My wife and I

had gone the next step and were pursuing the recommended readings on compacting, socialization, acceleration, and identification. We became consumers of books and articles on the subject of giftedness. Initial readings were *Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers* (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), *The Academic Acceleration of Gifted Children* (Southern & Jones, 1991), and *Curriculum Compacting* (Reis, Burns, & Renzulli, 1991). The NRC/GT provided a certain amount of source credibility to our programming requests. We found that research-based information, the use of specific vocabulary, and an understanding of defensible practices in the field added parity in the school-parent relationship, especially when administrators were involved or major modifications were being proposed.

A third lesson was to use information with the teacher in an informing and a supportive way. Teachers are major direct service providers to children and influencing the educational experiences of my sons was not to be accomplished with a parental emotional wish list fraught with anxiety, but with concise, well defined, appropriately placed, factual information. If the NRC/GT could present hard data in a user friendly format, I as a parent could do the same.

And fourth, we watched in amazement how the consistent use of information over time creates geometric effects upon its intended purposes. Information on curriculum compacting given to the first grade teacher was used with our younger son, resulting in his mastery of the fifth grade mathematics curriculum without gaps in his knowledge. In second grade, he participated in the fifth grade math class, qualified to take high school algebra, and expressed an interest in taking "real" literature and science with his brother who was to be in sixth

grade. What unfolded in June of that year was a 12 person Pupil Personnel Planning Team meeting that resulted in the Assistant Superintendent overruling the Director of Special Services' "no" vote on subject advancement. I believe this outcome was due, in part, to the articulated perspectives of the middle school teachers who had read much of the NRC/GT literature, observed its effect on our son's primary years, and were supportive of the proposal. The availability of research had changed attitudes and classroom practices among the staff which paved the way for Matthew's particular needs and other children's as well. Informed teachers can be fearless advocates despite central office policy.

Our youngest son entered sixth grade in the Fall of 1996, although he has completed the 6-8 curriculum and high school courses of algebra, geometry, algebra II, and chemistry. He loves school and the options he has now, one of which is to use the time made available from curriculum compacting to reduce his schedule and manage a fish farm breeding project at the high school.

In retrospect, the process my wife and I went through appears so very simple because an informed viewpoint clarifies a plan of action. It is not simple, however, because the process of becoming an informed parent or a teacher about high achieving students is fraught with sources offering good intentions, ineffectual empathy, misinformation, and little direction. Thus, two caveats in the "age of information" are: as a consumer of information you must determine the kind of information you need and actively seek it from a reliable source. And, two, do not presume the application of information in the classroom to be as easy as access to that information. To these ends contact with The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented was a step in the right direction.

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Cluster Grouping Coast to Coast

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Cluster grouping is an administrative procedure in which identified gifted students at a grade level are assigned to one classroom with a teacher who has special training in how to teach gifted students. The other students in their assigned class are of mixed ability. Differentiated instructional opportunities allow gifted students to interact with their intellectual as well as their age peers.

Through cluster grouping the intellectual, social, and emotional needs of the gifted students can be addressed.

Cluster grouping has become increasingly popular as a programming option to meet the needs of gifted students in heterogeneous classroom settings (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993). In 1993 current cluster grouping practices were examined in a nationwide survey. The purpose of the Cluster Grouping Survey was to determine how schools were implementing this programming practice.

The Cluster Grouping Survey had two components. The first, a general survey on cluster grouping was sent in August 1993 to 131 Collaborative School Districts associated with The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT) that noted in their

application form for the NRC/GT network that their districts used cluster grouping within the regular classroom as part of the organizational structure of their gifted and talented program. Responses were received from 53% (*n*=69) of these Collaborative School Districts representing 29 states. The second component of the Cluster Grouping Survey was a more detailed survey sent in September 1993 to 61 Collaborative School Districts that indicated cluster grouping was practiced in their districts at that time. Responses were received from 38% (*n*=23) of these districts representing 15 states.

The first Cluster Grouping Survey presented three questions. Respondents were asked if their school district had a policy on cluster grouping. Of the respondents, 17% indicated having an official policy, 17% did not, 62% said they had no official policy, but that cluster grouping was practiced.

The second question posed was "How does your district define cluster grouping?" Multiple definitions were given. Less than 1% indicated they had state definitions, while 1% noted that students in specific programs or who had specific abilities composed a cluster group. A majority (98%) of the responding schools used a certain number or percentage of students to define a cluster group. Examples ranged from 4-6 identified gifted and talented students in a heterogeneous classroom, to a group of 3-5 students of the top 5% students clustered together. In a large city, 33% of each cluster class were students identified as gifted and talented. Another school district defined cluster grouping as a group of five or more identified students in a classroom, plus any "watch and serve" students (students who are displaying high potential).

The third question on the first survey addressed the grade levels where

cluster grouping occurred. Over half (51%) of the respondents indicated that cluster grouping occurred most frequently in the upper elementary grade levels (grade 3-6) in their districts. Of the districts, 5% reported using cluster grouping in kindergarten and ninth grade, 32% reported the use of cluster grouping in the first, second, seventh, and eighth grades, and 12% indicated cluster grouping occurred in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth grades.

The results of the first Cluster Grouping Survey indicate that while some school districts around the country practice cluster grouping, many did not have official district or school policies regarding its use. Most definitions of cluster grouping were based on a number or percentage of identified gifted and talented students within a regular classroom. The first survey also showed that cluster grouping is a practice used at all grade levels, especially in the upper elementary grades.

The second Cluster Grouping Survey examined a variety of cluster grouping issues in 23 school districts nationwide using this program practice. These issues included: the selection process of cluster students, special populations represented, selection and training of cluster teachers, differences between cluster and non-cluster classrooms, program options used, reactions to cluster grouping, academic and social/affective effects of cluster grouping, and advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping. The respondents of the survey included: director/coordinator of gifted and talented programs (*n*=12), instructional/educational specialist (*n*=4), gifted and talented teacher/specialist (*n*=2), assistant superintendent (*n*=1), principal (*n*=2), school psychologist (*n*=1), and cluster teacher (*n*=1).

Selection Process of Cluster Students
Methods for identifying students for cluster groups varied greatly from

district to district. The methods listed were those used by many districts nationwide to identify students for other types of gifted and talented programming. Testing included use of the *Stanford Achievement Test (SAT)*, *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R)*, *California Test of Basic Skills (CTBS)*, other IQ achievement tests, and placement tests. Teacher input was sought using behavioral observation forms and recommendations. Parent input was gathered through recommendations and informational forms. Grades and writing skills were included in academic performance, while other considerations examined motivation and student awards.

Special Populations
Responding schools were also asked about the special populations participating in their cluster grouping programs. The following shows the percentage of schools indicating the special populations served:

- Native-American– 39%
- African-American– 52%
- Hispanic-American – 52%
- Asian-American– 52%
- Pacific Islander– 17%
- Economically Disadvantaged– 82%
- Limited English Proficient– 30%
- Learning Disabled– 65%
- Physically Disabled– 35%
- Underachievers– 65%
- Emotionally Disturbed– 35%

Selection and Training of Cluster Teachers
Principal discretion was the method noted 40% of the time in the selection of the cluster classroom teachers. Other selection methods included: rotation of regular staff, volunteers (based on interest and willingness), selection after training, former gifted and talented teachers, and peer panel selection. Of the respondents, 22% indicated that teachers needed to be willing to receive training in order to be a cluster teacher. Responses varied

from state mandated teacher training to none. Training included district sponsored inservice, ranging from extensive (after school workshops, one week workshops, 1-3 days for beginning cluster teachers) to one day presentations. Additional methods of training cluster teachers included: attending state conferences and/or University of Connecticut—Confratute, graduate courses, reading articles, using gifted and talented consultants, and visiting other schools. Although several respondents (*n*=4) indicated no ongoing inservice training, a majority (60%) of the districts offered some type of training. These included: monthly meetings, a quarterly study group and team meeting, gifted/talented inservices, cluster network/inservice days, and four follow-up training sessions per year. Occasional workshops and seminars, and attendance at state conferences were also noted. The districts with the most inservice support reported the greatest satisfaction with cluster grouping and the most positive reactions from teachers, administrators, parents, and students.

Differences Between Cluster and Non-Cluster Classrooms

All of the schools indicated that the major difference between the cluster and non-cluster classroom was in the greater "qualitatively different" instruction that was occurring. This included the accelerated presentation pace, the increased depth of enrichment activities and presentation of issues, and a compacted core curriculum.

Program Options Used

Content differentiation, thinking skills, and content enrichment were the most widely noted options used in the responding school districts' cluster grouping programs. Almost all (99%) of the respondents indicated using content enrichment, 91% used thinking skills, and 74% used content differentiation in the cluster

classrooms. A variety of content differentiation methods were listed: more acceleration, compacting the core curriculum, more indepth enrichment, and more complex content. Also mentioned were acceleration of presentation pace, a greater focus on higher level thinking and reasoning skills, more pretesting of materials, and extensions of all lessons using higher order thinking activities. One district stated that the level of awareness of individual needs was greater, that collaborative teaching (cluster teacher and gifted and talented teacher) was stressed, and that whole class enrichment of all K-12 classes was ongoing.

Reactions to Cluster Grouping

Although all of the responding school districts indicated positive reactions of most teachers, administrators, parents, and students to cluster grouping, 30% also noted some mixed reactions. While one respondent said that ". . . by recognizing that high ability students have educational needs that must be addressed daily, teachers were given permission by the 'system' to utilize effective strategies and techniques every day with those students in their classrooms," another said some teachers were philosophically opposed to gifted programs in their district. One respondent noted, "Teachers continue to express concern about the difficulty they experience in providing differentiation within a classroom with a wide range of possibilities." This was less of a problem in schools that limited this range in the cluster classroom.

All of the school districts reported positive reactions by parents to cluster grouping, while only 1% also noted some negative reactions. Parents frequently commented on the positive reactions to the accelerated pace and instruction in the classroom. They believe that cluster grouping was successful in meeting their children's academic needs. Parents preferred

cluster grouping to total heterogeneous classrooms and saw the need for grouping to ensure provisions for high ability students were available. One respondent stated that parents of less able students in the cluster classroom had commented on the improved attitude of their children toward school, while another indicated that parents of non-identified students often requested their children be placed in a cluster classroom. Negative reactions included remarks that some parents didn't see anything different happening; some parents of non-identified, high-achieving students didn't like it; and some parents preferred homogeneous grouping in specific content areas.

The reaction of administrators to cluster grouping was mixed, but most (69%) of the respondents gave positive reports. "Supportive," "favorable," "helpful to everyone," "proponents" were remarks noted. One respondent stated, "The administrators have led the way in allowing us to do whatever is best and works to benefit the students." Most respondents, however, gave a variety of administrative reactions including: active support, supportive if good things are happening for kids, and ignoring policy. One respondent stated, "Those with sufficient understanding of the needs of the g/t students support the grouping. Other responses vary dependent on personal beliefs and experiences." While administrative support was seen by several districts as critical to the success of cluster grouping, 13% reported negative responses by administrators. Administrator resentment of a special group, scheduling difficulties, and strong biases against programming for gifted and talented kids were comments given.

Nearly all (90%) of the respondents indicated gifted students were very positive about being in a cluster classroom. Comments such as

"excitement with moving through material without having to wait for others to catch up," "enjoying their intellectual peers," and being "very eager to be challenged" were related. Only two negative remarks were given. One indicated a few students developing a "superior" attitude, and the other was a student's social separation from friends.

Academic and Social/Affective Effects

Cluster grouping may have a positive effect on the achievement of all students (Gentry, 1996). This was the case in the Cluster Grouping Survey. Three categories of responses developed from the question, "What academic effects of cluster grouping have you observed?" For identified highly gifted students, the academic effects were all positive. Respondents listed positive effects for this group of students, including: more time to work together on appropriate tasks; higher class expectations; more indepth and quality products; increased motivation and learning; more opportunities for above level instruction; increased student responsibility and level of change, and finally, more time to work with intellectual peers. Positive effects were also noted for the whole class. Remarks included: ". . . others in class are stimulated," "class expectations are higher," "raises everyone's level of achievement," and "everyone benefits." Teachers also recognized the positive impacts. A typical teacher response stated "cluster grouping gives them [teachers] an opportunity to pace the curriculum faster, that training has helped instruction, and there is a better understanding of the learning process and how to challenge kids." Another response indicated cluster grouping "compels the teaching staff to do more formal differentiation of the curriculum," thereby increasing the academic levels of all. In a major city, achievement gains continued to occur

in schools with cluster grouping programs that had clearly stated goals and objectives, ongoing staff development, curriculum differentiation, school-wide enrichment for all students, and parental involvement (Duncan, 1989). These findings concur with those in Qualitative Extension of the Learning Outcomes Study (Delcourt & Evans, 1994). Students in this grouping arrangement (Within Class) as well as Pull-Out programs "felt more capable in their academics, preferred more challenges in the classroom, and were more likely to want to work independently than their peers in Separate Class programs" (p. 4).

Except for two responses that indicated negative effects of cluster grouping (possible development of cliques and some "elitist" tendencies in cooperative learning groups), all the responses to the social and affective effects of cluster grouping were positive. These included: a focus on self-management and decision-making skills fostering a climate of caring and cooperativeness; a support system among peers; a productive, helpful environment that promoted an understanding that the world has many "different" people who can all get along; a better acceptance of being gifted, better self-esteem and friendships; an increased awareness of the talents of all students; an acceptance of students who are not age-peers (cross-grade clustering); and a recognition of students' self-confidence and self-reliance. One school district reported better support for academically talented students, both from their peers and the entire staff since implementing cluster grouping.

Advantages and Disadvantages

The Cluster Grouping Survey also asked the Collaborative School Districts about the advantages and disadvantages of cluster grouping in their school districts. The responses were many and varied. From cost effectiveness (students staying in

neighborhood schools, better use of limited resources and time) to viewing the classroom as a "laboratory" for staff development and instructional practices, cluster grouping was seen by 100% of the respondents as an organizational option that offered improvement in many ways.

An increase in intellectual stimulation, challenge, and level of expectations for students were advantages listed. Students were also allowed to move rapidly through the curriculum and work in their interest area. In addition, positive consequences for teachers were noted, including teachers taking more responsibility for the needs of gifted kids and allowing them to group students by need. Administratively, cluster grouping was seen as easier to observe and to guarantee differentiation. It was a more efficient delivery of services; all students at all grade levels could be served.

Advantages of cluster grouping could also be found in the affective domain. A better understanding of the gifted and talented student was found, as well as being able to offer a more challenging curriculum. Better opportunities to address the psychological needs and concerns of high ability students were noted. More and improved exposure to instruction and activity encouraged and fostered the abilities of all students. Many districts stated that expectations were higher for the whole class.

When they were asked about the disadvantages of cluster grouping, only two districts stated that they had not experienced any problems or disadvantages in their districts. Almost all (91%) of the respondents indicated difficulty in the implementation process. Several noted that it was difficult for traditionally trained teachers to change their methods of teaching. A lack of teacher training and funds for inservice were also mentioned. One respondent stated, "The move to heterogeneous grouping

. . . is very detrimental to our program. We used to be able to service kids from several programs at once. If we do that within each class, the students who need differentiated curriculum only get 1/4 the service. Collaboration time has not been built into this new plan, and teachers feel too busy to work with us." Not meeting the needs of highly gifted or high ability non-identified students through this delivery method was also a concern expressed by 1% of the respondents. Resentment toward cluster teachers and gifted students was also seen as a disadvantage. Less than 1% of the respondents expressed concerns over cluster grouping leading to tracking and slighting students in non-clustered classrooms. One respondent stated that "theory was still better than practice in some schools."

Recommendations

The Cluster Grouping Survey found that many districts around the country are using cluster grouping in various ways and obtaining positive results. Districts exploring the cluster grouping option need guidance in planning an effective program, however. Kaplan (1974) developed a list of items that need to be addressed in planning a cluster group:

1. Develop criteria for selecting students.
2. Define the qualifications of, and the selection process for, the teachers.
3. Plan the differentiated experiences for the cluster of gifted students.
4. Plan for support services and special resources.

From the responses to the Cluster Grouping Survey, it is recommended that a school district adopt a formal policy on cluster grouping for gifted students before selecting students. Coleman (1995) also suggests schools examine the attributes of true cluster grouping during the planning process.

As Kaplan indicated, the selection of cluster teachers is very important. Weber and Battaglia (1982) list qualities a cluster teacher should have, including a willingness to: understand the unique attributes and needs of talented students; be intellectually alive; be creatively productive; be flexible and willing to find appropriate outlets for student products; be attuned to the process of teaching, not just the content; be a role model for students; and be able to foster positive feelings among students and faculty toward the gifted and talented program. Rogers (1991) adds that the cluster teacher must also be sufficiently trained to work with high ability students, and be given an adequate amount of preparation time. The cluster teacher should also be willing "to devote a proportionate amount of classroom time to the direct provision of learning experiences for the cluster group" (p. 4).

In planning and providing for the experiences of gifted students in the cluster group, Coleman (1995) suggests that cluster teachers use the following strategies: curriculum compacting, acceleration of the content, enrichment with the curriculum areas, interest-based learning, and opportunities to work with other high ability learners across grade levels. Delcourt and Evans (1994) state that "curricular and instructional provisions for the gifted must be carefully maintained lest they disintegrate into a no-program format" (p. 9).
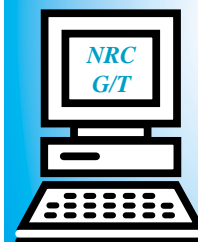
Support and special services are essential components for cluster grouping to be effective. Responses from the Cluster Grouping Survey indicate the need for these services. Coleman (1992) states that a cluster teacher should have access to a consultative/collaborative teacher who is a specialist in meeting the needs of high ability students. Access to counseling services is also necessary to meet the social and emotional needs of the cluster students.

The results of the Cluster Grouping Survey support research studies (Gentry, 1996; Hoover, Sayler, & Feldhusen, 1993) that gifted students do benefit from this program approach. Planning and delivery of the services need to be carefully considered, however, if cluster grouping is to be successful in meeting the needs of high ability students in regular classrooms.

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