

Does Gifted Child Need Professional Help? By Steve Curtis, Ph.D.



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The parents are sitting across from me awaiting the test results of their son. They wonder what I will say. I look at them and begin. "Here is the bottom line. At first, when I began evaluating your son, it appeared that the core of your son's challenges were due to fundamental issues with attention. The teacher is concerned that he won't pay attention and he disrupts others by talking too much. You reported that he does not get his work done and that he seems to be easily distracted. Based on the checklists and background information presented, some would say that your child has Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). However, after talking with him and reviewing all his test data, it is clear to me that the main issue is not one of ADHD, but one of giftedness. Gifted children often demonstrate behaviors that could be considered "problematic". In the case of your son he meets the classic profile of a gifted child who is eager to learn. His mind is moving fast and he has lots to say. These kids are frequently misconceptualized as having ADHD and in my professional opinion he does not have this disorder." The parents look at me with a blank stare and begin asking questions.

As a child clinical psychologist in private practice, I regularly see children with a variety of puzzling behavioral, social, and learning challenges. Some of these children have autism, others have ADHD, others just have challenges with life, and others may have some type of learning issue. However, others have gifted intellectual ability with additional difficulties. Some of these children are completely normal and others need professional intervention.

In the example above, the young man has gifted intellectual ability and is not getting his cognitive needs met in his current classroom setting. Prior to my enlightenment and involvement with SENG, I would have given the boy a diagnosis of ADHD and recommended medication and behavior modification. While these strategies still are recommended in certain cases, curriculum changes with gifted children that build upon their interest areas have produced the most dramatic results. Now, my strategy would be to help improve the current educational experience to fully address the cognitive needs. Once these needs are met, many of the initial concerns are expected to subside. In this scenario, the gifted child was found to be fairly "normal" with minimal need of additional professional help.

[How can I tell if my gifted child is normal?](#)

Deciding whether a particular gifted child is “normal” or “disordered” is complex and often depends on a child’s culture, the background of the provider, and the tolerance of the concern by a particular caregiver. The concept of “normality” is often still in the eye of the beholder despite all the recent advances in the medical sciences. It is clear that gifted children are frequently misdiagnosed as having a particular disorder when they actually are quite normal for who they are. In order to investigate normality, each child must be looked at holistically and systematically. Sometimes true abnormalities can be found for a particular challenge (e.g., a hearing impairment or sleep disorder), but most times the reasons for a particular concern are multifaceted and the concept of normality is not answerable. In these cases, it is much more productive to ask the questions, “What does my child need?” or, “How can I help my child grow in positive manner?”

What can parents do to help? Five steps to finding the right solution

When there are concerns about a child, preliminary assessment (as described below) by the parents can be extremely valuable. In addition, a strength-based plan of action can immediately begin to help even though the presence or lack of a disorder has not yet been determined. To complete both of these tasks, I recommend that parents use a problem-solving approach to understanding. This is a step-by-step procedure that helps to clarify concerns and to systematically investigate causes for the behavioral, social, or learning challenges that you see in your child. I also recommend that parents use a profile-based approach to intervention. This is an intervention approach in which the parents use information about their child to create an effective plan that will address both the areas of challenge as well as areas of strength. The combined steps for these two approaches are as follows:

1. Clarify and prioritize concerns: The first step to understanding a child is to fully describe and prioritize actual concerns. What am I or others concerned about with my child? Be very specific and take some time to list these on a piece of paper. Then, ask yourself the following questions: Are they a concern for you or just others? How worried are you? The key here is to try and fully articulate what the concerns are and whether it is a real problem or not. Some issues are a concern for some but not for others. While analyzing the concerns, keep the common characteristics of gifted children in mind. An excellent reference is *A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Children* by Webb et al. This book will help you evaluate if your child is demonstrating behavior that is common amongst the gifted population. If so, then your child is likely “normal” for the gifted population. If there are additional concerns, then more evaluation is necessary.
2. Conduct a functional assessment of each concern: The second step is to explore the conditions surrounding each concern. Parents are encouraged to conduct a simple functional behavioral assessment or FBA. The FBA helps to determine the function of the concern in the environment. To complete this assessment, answer the following questions: “When does the concern occur? Does it occur in the afternoon or morning? Does it occur after something else? Is it present both at home and at

school?” For example, tantrums may occur in the afternoon when the preschooler is tired and after he or she is being told no to a request for ice cream. The function of the tantrums is to get the ice cream. See if you detect any patterns.

3. Investigate other causal factors: The third step is to gather additional information that could be related to each concern. This step may take some time to complete and it is an ongoing process. In general, investigate questions such as: Does your child have some undiagnosed medical difficulty? Has the hearing or vision been checked by a qualified audiologist or optometrist? Are there speech or language concerns? Are the child’s academic skills on par? There are many factors that affect puzzling behavior, and the parents are encouraged to continue identifying these factors as they intervene.

As you investigate, formulate a working theory regarding why your child is having challenges. Finish this statement, “I believe my child is having challenges because....” This will help you clarify what you personally believe is happening with your child. (By the way, parents are often right in their assumptions!)

The next steps focus on intervention. These steps should be implemented simultaneously with the first three steps previously described.

4. Identify strengths and challenges: We all have something we are good at and something that is hard for us. We also would rather spend time doing something that we are good at and enjoy. Gifted children are no different. In this step, it is recommended that you identify the activities your child enjoys and the talents your child has displayed. This will help you articulate some strength-based goals and will help your child develop a particular niche. For example, a struggling gifted child with social challenges may enjoy and be good at piano, computers, and math. These are potential areas where the parent could provide supplemental instruction in order to further improve on these areas of strength while addressing the social challenges with the help of a speech pathologist.

In addition, it is recommended that you identify the areas of challenge that you would like to see improve. At-least one of these areas of challenges has already been identified in the previous steps. Examples of areas of challenge include trouble with language expression, not being able to complete tasks, or having difficulty with anxiety.

I recommend that a child work on no more than three areas of challenge and three areas of strength at one time. Everyone has something to change and some people

have more to work on than others. Keep in mind that any human being can get very discouraged if he or she has to work on too many things all at once. For anyone, it is best to pick a few things to work on at one time. This is how true progress is made and noticed.

5. Implement a strength-based plan: The next step is to develop and implement a strength-based plan. In this step, interventions are identified that build upon the identified areas of strength and address the areas of challenge. For example, a child who likes music, but not written language, will be given music and writing lessons simultaneously. This particular child will enjoy the music lessons which will help give him develop a more positive self-concept. Then, when he or she has to work on writing, he or she is more apt to be less resistive. This may sound a bit simplistic but it works! In my practice, I have had the most success when interventions have built upon strengths. As a common example, I have seen many gifted children who are unmotivated at school. When these children are encouraged to develop a passion area, these children tend to become alive. Once they have become engaged again in the learning process, they are much more likely to be open to working in areas of challenges as well. This is because the child's mood will have become much more positive. This is the positive psychology approach that is largely based on the work by Martin Seligman, Ph.D., *Authentic Happiness*.

It is good to keep reviewing goals/intervention targets periodically. The specific interventions picked to improve areas of strength and challenges very much depend on the issue at hand.

When should I enlist the help of a professional?

When parents systematically analyze the puzzling concerns of their gifted child, it is expected that insights regarding what to do will surface. A simple change in lifestyle or way of doing business throughout the day may be all it takes to eliminate the concern. Even if you have not 100% figured out the cause of a particular concern, the strength-based plan will help your child grow in a positive direction.

After completing these preliminary steps parents may still have many concerns that remain unanswered. In this case, enlisting the help of a professional is warranted. When you decide to seek help, make sure you choose a professional that has the training and experience consistent with the concerns you have. Don't just blindly pick a caregiver that a neighbor or friend recommends. Do your homework, and pick the right one. Do not be afraid to ask questions. It is best if the chosen professional has some experience and knowledge of working with gifted children. This will make a huge difference.

Throughout your “quest for help” make sure you dialogue with other parents in similar situations. This can be extremely helpful. And, when all else fails, or when you are frustrated, keep in mind that it is extremely difficult to predict the future. Keep positive, celebrate small gains, and point out the good. Following the steps above will help ensure that your and your child’s hard work will likely produce dramatic and long lasting results in the future.

For further information, readers are encouraged to read the author’s book, *Understanding Your Child’s Puzzling Behavior: A Guide for Parents of Children with Behavioral, Social, and Learning Challenges*. This book is available at bookstores, Amazon.com, and Lifespanpress.com. Readers may also wish to review the SENG publication, *Selecting a Mental Health Professional for Your Gifted Child* on the SENG website.