

EMERGENCE OF THE GIFTED CHILD: COPING STRATEGIES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

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Introduction

Navigating the day-to-day challenges of raising and educating gifted children should not feel like rocket science. A parent's or educator's greatest challenge may arise when a child's ever-increasing need for learning is combined with his or her emotional intensity. Useful strategies can be put into action to reduce the related stresses that delay the joy that comes with cultivating and enriching our even youngest emerging minds.

Developing an age-appropriate foundation for learning is a common strategy, but not a simple task when applying it to the very young and gifted. By taking a whole, seemingly difficult concept and breaking it down into smaller, more manageable parts, one can successfully build a foundation for continued learning even at this very young and tender age. A *pacing* approach allows the young and gifted child to assimilate newly acquired, complex, information without overloading his or her mind. In other words, it helps to reduce and remove the complication of intense emotion that child often experiences during a learning process.

There is no need to squash the enthusiasm of learning, due to perceived age constraints.

I have become passionate about finding, incorporating, and sharing strategies that are helpful within the developmental framework of preschool-aged gifted children. While raising my own gifted child, I discovered ample literature describing the characteristics that were being observed. There were many broad suggestions for preadolescent children and teenagers, yet only limited, difficult-to-find, information applicable to toddlers and children of preschool age.

As a Strategy Consultant for families for over 15 years, I have had the opportunity to specialize in the development and implementation of strategies for children with various levels of learning abilities. Although I have obtained my degree in early Child Development and completed my Masters in Art Therapy, I was not formally introduced to the realm of gifted children until my first daughter was born.

Over time, I noticed that the principles and strategies applied in my professional experiences were in large part useful with the gifted child. Recognizing and understanding gifted characteristics early will allow one to take certain steps to help reduce frustrations and other intense emotions that preschool-aged gifted children often feel when confronted with change.

Personal Journey

With hindsight, I now realize that there were early signs indicating the emergence of a gifted child in my family. Even by my daughter's first birthday, I noticed that she was interpreting the world around her differently from her peers. Her intensity, her need for interpretation, even her

ability and approach to processing information were all different. I did not, however, truly understand what I was noticing until she was formally identified as gifted a few years later. It is my hope that the description of our personal journey will help you to successfully navigate your own early stages of gifted development.

By eighteen months, my daughter had developed her first fascination, which was *Thomas the Tank Engine*. She would sit and play with her trains for hours. She would also study the Thomas shopping catalogues that would come in the mail. By her second birthday, it was becoming increasingly clear that her long-term memory skills had become extraordinary. From then on, she continued to do things that made her stand out from her peers, such as:

- she bit off the top of a triangle-shaped pizza slice and declared that she had made a trapezoid.
- she would ask for a particular song in the car by its track number, as well as rattle off, in order, the titles on her favorite CDs.
- she exhibited her good sense of direction and awareness of the rules of the road, becoming a miniature back-seat driver.

Her intellectual growth was all at once both amazing and exhausting. She had an intense need to understand what she did not yet understand, and her ability to retain information was seemingly immeasurable.

As I had done as a private strategy consultant for families of children with various learning disabilities, I began to apply the same coping strategies into our own daily lives. By creating an atmosphere that nurtured and supported my daughter's unique and ever-emerging needs, I was teaching her how to navigate in an environment that was becoming less and less accommodating of her accelerated development. These skills were introduced in small, incremental components that I like to call "Baby Steps." These Baby Steps were slowly incorporated into her daily activities and helped lay the groundwork for future, smoother transitions.

The earlier in a child's life that Baby Steps are introduced, the less anxiety the gifted child feels with each new encounter - be it social, emotional, or scholastic. I am a true proponent of this Baby Steps model. Whether it is adjusting a particular behavior or teaching something new, the process of breaking a concept down into smaller, more manageable parts helps reduce the frustrations that many of our gifted children often experience. This holds especially true for emotionally sensitive children. It also allows for the child to redirect an intense focus on something more controllable in size than the larger whole.

By my daughter's third birthday, she had become increasingly linear in her thinking: Things had to be factual in their meaning and she was unable to see the humor when the context changed. Perfectionism was starting to take a serious

hold on our lives and we privately acknowledged that she had some remarkable abilities that needed further understanding.

Finding information on school-aged gifted children was not difficult. There were some good resources identifying gifted characteristics (e.g. Alvino, 1985), looking at social/emotional issues (e.g. Delisle 2002, Silverman 1993, Webb 2007), and on modifications to school environments for the school-aged child, adolescent and teenager (e.g. Winebrenner, 2001). Finding information on gifted preschoolers, however, was very difficult, especially coping strategies. Few resources were available (e.g. Alvino, 1989). The difficulty was in the reliability of identifying a child as gifted before six years of age, as outlined by gifted-talented professionals in a Davidson Institute for Talent Development article (2004). This has resulted in too little information on appropriate coping strategies for young gifted learners, strategies that both parents and educators need to understand .

Perhaps if only there were more resources focused on the preschool population, some of their counter-productive behaviors would not be as pronounced later on . Uninhibited learning would be a lot of fun if parents and educators could put some coping strategies in place before our gifted children entered school.

The academic in me started collecting and arranging information from my undergraduate and graduate studies, and from my new research into academic literature on gifted children. This, combined with my consulting and personal experiences, brought me to a comfortable place, allowing me to successfully develop appropriate coping strategies for gifted preschool-aged children.

Coping With Perfectionism

When preschool-aged toddlers are increasingly thinking in rigid ways, the familiar “one-track mind,” what coping skills can parents and educators learn and impart to help them through this frustrating phase of development? Pointing out our own imperfections is always a great way to introduce the valuable lesson that even the greatest of role models are not perfect. Additionally, by incorporating specific skills, we are teaching these children to become more flexible, which will enable them to better enjoy their youth.

Desensitizing A Behavior

At eighteen months, when my daughter discovered Thomas trains, she was very clear on which characters were and were not trains. There was a helicopter, tractors and, of course, Bertie the Bus. On her train-table, Bertie the Bus was not allowed to ride the railroad tracks. He was a bus, not a train, and if she found him on those tracks, she would become very aggravated.

Even at this early age, it was important to desensitize her to this inflexible way of thinking. Yes, it is true, a bus should not be riding the rails. Yet, it is also true that Bertie the Bus was just a toy. I felt she could not begin to successfully use her imagination if she did not allow herself to stretch the truth through play. Therefore, while trying to respect her understanding of the different modes of

transportation, Bertie the Bus would purposefully find himself relocated to places a bus would not ordinarily be found. It did upset her at first, but eventually the strategy bore fruit as she came to appreciate the amusement odd locations could bring. Although this strategy – intentionally upsetting the child – may seem inappropriate, such strategies merely help reduce perpetuating behaviors that could present as more intense in the future and interrupt the flow of learning. Being able to see the humor in something is an important gift you can give to any child.

Finding Parts To Make The Whole

As part of a child’s overall development, there are a number of complex developmental stages that are necessary. Fine motor skills are one such area. Within the stages of motor skill development also lies the developmental stages for drawing (Kellogg and O’Dell, 1967). As children grow and gain strength and confidence, they learn to better represent on paper what they perceive (Kellogg and O’Dell, 1967). The fine motor skills of gifted preschoolers often develop slower than their comprehension. The National Association of Gifted Children defines this imbalance as asynchrony, which “describes disparate rates of intellectual, emotional, and physical rates of growth or development often displayed by gifted children.” As gifted children gain more ground in their intellectual abilities, asynchrony becomes increasingly apparent. Children may show great frustration when they are physically unable to complete a drawing task, that they know intellectually how to complete.

When my daughter wanted to learn to print her name using a Magnadoodle, she would begin to print her name and then erase it after the first or second letter – every time. It appeared as though she was quitting or giving up, that she was not following through with finishing a task. I soon realized, however, that she was trying to get it to look “just right.” How would she ever finish printing her name if she was never satisfied with the first few letters?

Art Therapy teaches that the individual components of a picture may be just as important as the order in which one draws them. Yet those individual components cannot be drawn unless one is given the opportunity to see and practice them, as discussed by Silver (1978) in her book *Developing Cognitive and Creative Skills Through Art*. Following this philosophy, I began to teach my daughter the individual “parts” of her name.

By helping my daughter break down the letters of her name into smaller parts, she was able to concentrate on the individual components that made up each letter. This strategy resulted in her successful formation of the entire letter. After she mastered one segment of a letter, the next segment was then added with the goal of stringing them all together to form the complete letter. This approach of “small parts make up the whole” worked very well for this exercise.

Encouraging Creativity

Perfectionism and its tendency to stifle childhood creativity prove the on-going need to break down those

mental barriers preventing creativity from flourishing. For many of our young gifted children, once they master a template or design, they will not reproduce it any other way. As creative as this tried-and-true design may be, using it exclusively does not foster the development of creativity. One of many examples that I have is the construction of a castle out of blocks my daughter would build. Every castle constructed had to be the same size, with the same arrangement of colored blocks – only four spires of the same shape, just two windows, and only one door.

It was not fancy, but she loved it, and it was identical every time. Should I encourage her to try a new design knowing that it might become “traumatic?” Should I use an approach that might be intentionally upsetting? Yes, although I knew that it needed to be done in a careful, slow, and respectful manner. Not only did I feel that she needed the practice of getting upset and working through her discomfort, but she also needed to work on altering her ideas and expanding her self-imposed limitations. The strategy was to come up with various adventures that would take place at her castle – requiring the castle design to be modified within the framework of the adventure.

In one adventure, horses needed to enter the castle. How was that going to happen with one door that was only big enough for a little toy person? After brainstorming some possible solutions, appropriate modifications were then made to accommodate the horse entering the castle.

By following this strategy, just one piece of this favorite castle design got changed: a long, triangular block, creating a ramp to accommodate the horse replaced the square door block. It is much easier to tolerate one small change than to force the issue of an entirely new castle design. Encouraging change is so very important to the overall development of our gifted children.

Simplify Complicated Concepts

Asynchronous Development also occurs when children are driven to learn something new, but they do not possess the necessary vocabulary or life experiences to fully comprehend the new concept. One approach is to hold off exploring new and more advanced ideas until they are older. While this approach seems logical, presenting things in an age-appropriate verbal and emotional format not only helps satisfy their insatiable appetite to learn, but can also broaden their horizons. Even the most difficult of concepts can be broken down into smaller, more manageable parts.

Establish a Useful Foundation

At two-and-a-half years old, my daughter developed a passion for national flags from around the world. She loved their colors and different patterns. Already understanding the concept of the globe and the different continents containing different countries, she had an established foundation on which to build. I could have just taken a book on flags out of the library and looked at the pictures with her. Instead, I seized the opportunity to turn this new fascination into a tangible activity. I purchased a sticker book of world flags

and a set of flash cards. Planning to put one flag sticker on each card, I looked through the sticker book to decide how to maximize the learning potential of this new-found interest.

I felt the best approach was to create that first group of flash cards, using flags that initially sparked her interest. This helped to also establish a format for introducing new countries. Then I began building on this foundation by adding countries whose flags looked –different from each other. Although the flag emblems themselves were not “simple,” the approach to simplifying this activity into manageable parts was what I was striving to achieve. For this stage of “simplifying a complicated concept,” I was taking those flags with varying attributes to make them as visually distinctive as possible.

The next step was to add countries that were different from one another, but had visually identifiable shapes such as flowers, triangles, and circles. Shapes are an easily understood concept for children. And so it went. If I had chosen countries that had similar, simpler attributes, her level of frustration would have been increased and stopped her from proceeding.

This excitement and fascination with flags lasted about six months before her interest waned. Can she remember all the different flags today? Some, but not all. Is that important? No. It interested her at the time and it gave her a challenge that she apparently needed. It is important, though, to know when to stop. Preventing our children from burning out is an important responsibility we, parents and educators, need to be aware of to ensure their continued interest in learning.

Pairing the Unknown with the Known

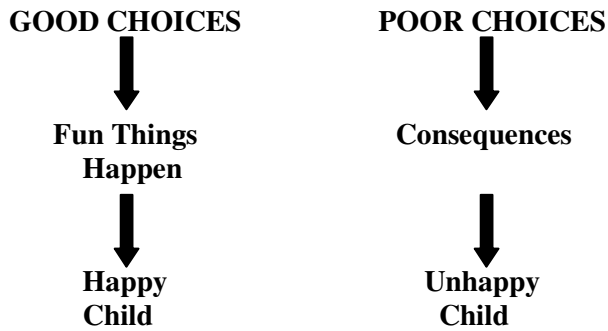
A second example of simplification involves basic math. Children like to label things so why should math concepts be any different? While looking for things to keep my daughter challenged in those early preschool years, I found educational computer games useful. Like most new learners of math, she began addition and subtraction of numbers in a typical horizontal display. But as the challenge increased and the numbers reached two digits, she had to stack them vertically – one set above another.

Although we needed to work in columns, the concept of a column was still unfamiliar to her. Relating this concept to something that she could understand would make it easier for her to grasp this new display of numbers. It was then that I coined the term “Tower Math.” She knew that towers were built by vertically stacking blocks, so it helped her to see the numbers as individual columns, or tall towers.

Visual Maps

My final example of simplifying complicated concepts involves a dilemma: what do you do when you have a young child who clearly understands good and poor choices regarding personal actions, but still does not quite understand the concept of cause –and effect? Why, when our children do something that leads to a consequence, do they

feel that we, their staunch supporters, created the “bad” situation?



When there is difficulty making the connection between behavioral choices and their results, a visual reminder, or cue, can be quite useful. A diagram like the one above, can assist in mapping out of your child’s choices and where those choices lead.

Routines: Empowerment To Handle Change

If we as adults went through our day not knowing what was going to happen next, we would probably find it unsettling. That is why most of us tend to use some form of calendar to navigate through our daily activities. What happens for that young preschooler who has a mature understanding of time, routines, and schedules, yet is simultaneously a rigid, linear-thinking perfectionist?

We can help our children become better empowered about their daily activities over which they generally have much control, while teaching them strategies to cope with change. By reinforcing, in a visual format, the outline of a daily plan, we can create a template that will diminish their anxieties over the unknown.

Using this approach, I devised a pictorial magnetic calendar that portrayed upcoming activities. I used magnets because they can be moved around. This is a key component to using this coping strategy because it shows the child that scheduled events can be moved, and that although time is constant, activities within a time frame are changeable. These visual cues provide reference and, like a security blanket, comfort the child trying to understand the order of his or her day.

The remainder of this strategy deals with preventing a meltdown. We all dread telling our rigid thinkers that some part of their day is going to change because we just know that we will be the ones to have caused the end of the world, right then and there! Adults may not like change, but we have learned tools necessary to handle it. Our coping skills have been developed and refined throughout our lives and we accept, for the most part, that things do not go according to plan. Coping strategies continue to be refined through our teenage years. What happens, however, for that child whom we know is still a very linear thinker? Disaster? Not necessarily.

One of the many lessons we have had to learn is that we are our children’s primary advocates – for everything.

We are their provider, protector, and promoter. So, what can we do to make life seem less traumatic for them?

For starters, avoid giving excessive notice of an event that has been added to their typical routine, like a playdate or special event. Excessive notice leaves too many hours or days open for factors to change. Ideally, wait until the morning of the event. Then, reinforce, remind, repeat, and reiterate:

- ❖ Reinforce frequently that there are factors that could change. For example, if you have a special activity scheduled:
 - “Why might a playdate get cancelled?”
 - “Let’s hope it does not happen, but how will it make you feel if it does?”
 - “What can we do to best handle those feelings?”
- ❖ Remind your child about change every chance an opportunity presents itself. As you know, gifted children are often highly emotional. Helping them not only to acknowledge their disappointment but also find appropriate ways to express their emotions is an important part to the process. Having a backup plan to offset disappointment can also give your child something to look forward to and help during a transition from disappointment to cheerfulness.
- ❖ Repeat, Repeat, Repeat! Practicing helps to ingrain the process into a child’s own mind. Strengthening “habits of mind” will help children stretch beyond linear thinking.
- ❖ Reiterate: Think of alternate ways to present the previous three strategies (reinforcement, reminding, and repetition) in different situations and environments. Doing this will help children learn how to generalize and empower themselves, stay in control, and develop a formula for coping with change.

Pace The Acquisition Of New Information

Pacing the acquisition of new information ties in with the concept, “less is more.” I am a firm believer that this concept can be successfully applied in many different circumstances related to teaching our gifted children. Lying, in an attempt to avoid a question is, of course, never advisable and will only lead to the violation of trust. Minimizing or “pacing” the delivery of information, however, is a useful tool and is not the same as lying. Just because a concept can be intellectually understood does not mean that our children can emotionally handle the exposure emotionally. By controlling the rate at which they acquire new information, we are giving them time to learn how to absorb and integrate that information at a manageable pace.

Because of their heightened sensitivities, need for routine, and insatiable appetite for knowledge, it becomes a huge responsibility and, I believe, a necessity for parents and educators to predetermine when and what their gifted children learn. They may want to learn about Egyptian history at age four, but that does not mean that we should teach them about mummification and all that this process

entails. They are not emotionally ready to handle the concepts of death and autopsies.

Even if we think that our gifted children are mature for their age, we must constantly remind ourselves that they are still children. Paying attention to every minute detail and understanding those details may be a double-edged sword, because gifted children may end up perseverating over those same details. To foster or enable worried, anxious behaviors would not be wise or fair. Pacing the acquisition of new information, slowly and methodically, enables these children to appreciate and internalize the individual components that will eventually make up the whole and better enjoy the process of learning.

Although young gifted children have the ability to note details and acquire information, they do not have the ability to filter or prioritize what they are learning. This gives us the opportunity to apply a “less is more” approach. For example, at one point we had two separate and exciting upcoming family events: a new pregnancy and a wedding. The baby was due in six months and the wedding was in eighteen months. Both couples wanted to share their news with my daughter, but I felt that sharing the news of both events simultaneously would not be respecting her need to process new and exciting information at a slower pace. To have six months of “Where do babies come from?” was not going to be the most productive situation. Nor would eighteen months of: “Can I wear my flower girl’s dress now?”

Deciding what information to share, when to share it, and in what quantity, I not only controlled the input, but also the output. Since we lived out of town, we were not going to see the pregnancy for another two months. We held back that news until a few days prior to our visit, when we were ready for the pregnancy news to be shared by phone.

Why not wait until we saw the pregnancy in person? By discussing the pregnancy a day or two before our visit, we gave my daughter just enough time to process this piece of verbal information first, to ask questions, to look at her baby book with us, and to talk about a special gift that we could bring. Sometimes, when we can break apart the aural from the visual, we can reduce the over-stimulation caused by too much information all at once.

After the baby was born, my daughter was able to see and enjoy her personal visit because she was not overwhelmed by the newness. The second upcoming event, the wedding, was still eleven months away and therefore a relatively intangible concept for a young child. As a result, we followed the same steps as with the new baby and held back the exciting news until the appropriate time.

This approach created an environment that allowed for the absorption of knowledge to occur at a pace that was not too overwhelming. By respecting my daughter’s limitations, she had time to question, ponder and get truly excited as she acquired and processed each new piece of information.

Conclusion

The strategies described in this article can be applied to almost any situation that fosters the intellectual growth and development of gifted children, while still respecting them emotionally. When practicing these strategies, try to apply them consistently from day to day and remember that they may differ from child to child. Trust your instincts because you know your children better than anyone. Remember that you are not alone. Be proactive and access the accumulated knowledge of parents, educators, and professionals, as well as other appropriate resources. Build a foundation that supports you and your children. Be mindful, however, that these strategies do not have to be followed to the letter to prove useful. Think of them as a guide, and feel free to be creative in their application to each new situation.

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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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