

RECOGNIZING THE GIFTED CHILD

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How do you recognize a gifted child, especially if you are a librarian?

It is not easy, for gifted kids come in all sizes and all colors. They come from the ghettos and from the suburbs and mostly from the neighborhoods of America that seem inaccurately described as either.

Perhaps it is needless to say they are both boys and girls, though this is tricky. Girls seem brighter than boys, and they are especially good in verbal skills. Boys surpass in quantitative skills. There is no doubt girls get better grades and cause less trouble. However, giftedness is not all endowment or talent. Drive is important, too, as well as opportunity for the expression of one's talents and these tend to favor men over women, at least in our culture and time, and possibly for all times because of the special role that is woman's: to bear children. The gifts of gifted mothers are often manifest most publically in the achievements of their children, especially of their sons who have access to opportunities not fully available to their daughters.

Keep this in mind as a general guide: good things tend to go together. Contrary to popular opinion, the gifted child is not typically frail, delicate, bespectacled, bowed with books and burdensome thoughts, although he may be, for there is no set pattern, only general trends. Generally, the gifted child, boy or girl, will be

taller, heavier, healthier, than the average child. He will have a wider range of interests, and his moral and ethical values will be superior to those of an unselective group of children. He is often a voracious reader, a delight to librarians who like to see books used.

But it is really not as simple as all that. Although positive traits tend to go together, there are always great individual differences. There are gifted kids who are scrawny, miopic and mean. The problem is they are people and they are as diverse as people are diverse. And as challenging.

Race and ethnic background as related to giftedness are not yet sufficiently understood to warrant confident assertions, although confident assertions are made affirming the superiority of one ethnic group over another or announcing the absolute equality of all ethnic groups. The data are simply not all in. But this should mean that the librarian cannot afford to overlook giftedness wherever it may occur among children of all backgrounds and circumstances.

If a young person is both gifted and productive, a solid and zestful achiever, he is likely to have come from a family that communicates, that shares enthusiastic commitments to shared enterprises. Such young people are often remarkably well organized and goal-directed. Their commitment to some pursuit is thorough and they husband their time for their own private purposes. They are passionate about learning, about film making, intellectual games, Mozart, Chinese history, lasers,

ferns of the region. The librarian's pleasant task is to identify and provide sources of information to further well-defined projects. Such gifted young people are a complete joy, though often regarded by their peers as somewhat unusual because of the range and depth of their engagements.

Considerably less fortunate and even more challenging are the potentially gifted and productive young people who grow up in impoverished environments. Early deprivation of opportunity to learn may well be irreversible. Many a potentially gifted person fails to develop for lack of stimulation, lack of people to emulate, lack of opportunity to acquire motivations essential to success: love of books, persistence, the ability to delay gratification. The librarian faces a special challenge here. The most promising means of reaching deprived children early is through their mothers. Mothers from deprived circumstance are often highly motivated to teach their children and need mainly to be helped to know what to do. The librarian, especially those working among our less-advantaged people, has an especially challenging opportunity here.

The gifted child can create problems for himself and often does. It is not easy to manage knowing twice as much math as one's ninth grade teacher nor to have read more than the librarian who earnestly seeks to serve him. A special grace is required of both the child and the teacher and the child and the librarian. The gifted child can be extraordinarily difficult, stretching the patience and the skill of us all. But he can also be enormously rewarding.