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# Matchmaking: Gifted Kids and Their Needs

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*Figuring out how bright children are,  
and how to address their needs*

“Otherwise normal kids except for their wonderful brains.” This phrase, coined by a colleague, is my favorite description of gifted children. Contrary to reports about the state of today’s youth, our country teems with these bright young people. About 200,000 students each year enroll in national “talent searches” for gifted kids run by four U.S. universities: Duke, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern and the University of Denver. The National Association of Gifted Children estimates that three million of the nation’s 53-million K-12 students are gifted.

Why are these numbers important? The first reason is one that I hope is self-evident to all reasonable, educated people: the brainpower of the next generation is the most precious national resource of our ever-more-connected world. As William Brody, President of The Johns Hopkins University, likes to say, “The next generation will be tasked to answer questions that none of us have even yet thought to ask.” To squander the potential of the group of gifted young people—the leaders, thinkers and doers of their generation—is to imperil all our futures.

The second reason is closer to home for many families, and it’s this: a few million school-age children in our country possess the academic ability, or performance, or motivation (though not necessarily all three) to work at a higher level than others students their same age or in the same grade. And that translates to households across the country where parents are trying to figure out how bright their children are, and how to address these needs.

Parents reading [The VincentCurtis Educational Register](#) are, by definition, trying to find the best educational match possible for a child. These are articles I love to write, because I know I am preaching to the choir—an audience of concerned parents who want the best for

kids with promising futures ahead of them. How Smart?

## How Smart?

Academic giftedness is usually identified by looking at either student aptitude, or student performance.

**Aptitude, Ability:** Either of these words describes a measure of a child’s potential. Potential is most often uncovered through some sort of testing. The tests range from fairly simply done and inexpensively administered, such as the nationally normed tests that students take in school settings.

Or, as indicated already, tens of thousands of students each year join a national University-Based Talent Search, take an above-grade-level test (such as the SAT given to 7th graders) so that they and their parents can compare their math and verbal abilities against a national landscape of similarly gifted kids.

Other testing is more refined and usually is administered and interpreted by a professional psychologist, often someone with deep experience in educational testing. In this case, over a period of a day or more, students will take a battery of tests—some frequently used are

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the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-II), the Woodcock-Johnson tests, and the Stanford-Binet test.

The value of tests such as these can be significant. Sometimes they will show surprisingly strong aptitude—surprising because the same student who knocks the top off a standardized test might be earning only middling grades in a classroom.

A test result in the high percentiles is of course gratifying for a parent to see, but more than that, it could—and perhaps should—have some real effects. For example, a good school will be responsive to data such as this. Suddenly, there is evidence that a student who shows up as a middle-of-the-road performer might need different placement in a language arts or (more typically the case) math class.

Some school personnel may be skeptical of one set of test results on the grounds that the results reflect only a snapshot in a moment of time. But any test result that shows marked difference between potential and performance should be looked at more closely. Parents and schools can agree for the child to be tested again. The results should be shared and discussed in a conference with a child's teacher.

Many parents and schools now recognize that a strong disparity between a test outcome and classroom performance could indicate a learning disability that is masking a child's ability and is intruding into the learning process. Common disabilities include ADD, ADHD, dyslexia, auditory processing disorders, and others. Although it may seem odd to couple the term 'gifted child' and 'learning disability,' the combination is fairly common: roughly 10 percent of the students who attend one such summer program for gifted children report some sort of learning difference.

Some educators and parents (and more than a few students!) believe that testing occupies too prominent a place in today's schools. But testing is an effective way to determine a child's academic potential. Its value is to display a 'cognitive inventory' of a child's learning strengths and needs. And test results at the upper levels or percentiles can indicate a child is capable of learning material at a faster rate than peers.

**Performance, Achievement:** Some children are 'naturals' at school. They like it, and have many if not all of the tools necessary—attention, organization, motivation, deadline-orientation, discipline—to thrive in a school environment.

Some gifted students fall into this category. They dovetail perfectly into a school environment at an early age by possessing the above qualities. And, sometime in their middle school or early high school years, they begin to connect effort and achievement in what they do now, with an academic and professional track they want for themselves in college and afterward. Research demonstrates that, more than the average students, gifted children fit this profile. They are 'self-directed'—

they know where they want to go.

Trouble is, these kids usually belong to a 'friend of a friend' but do not exist in our own households! As parents, we must remember that children are 'works in progress,' and they do not all spring forth into school possessing every quality needed for school success. This is, in fact, the reason for school—to provide a body of knowledge, yes, but also to help students to be inquisitive, to welcome the search for knowledge and information, and to develop the skills they need to acquire and interpret knowledge long after their school days are over.

So, if the perfect school child exists in your household, consider it a blessing. If, like many, you have a child whose classroom performance doesn't yet meet his or her aptitude scores, well, this is a fairly common phenomenon, even among high-ability kids.

### Choices, choices

College counselors always speak about 'making the right match' between a high school senior and a college. Of course, this is a critical task in the lower grades too, and families who choose an independent school are familiar with that choice. Having a gifted child in the house ramps up the importance of finding a good match at an early age—both to nurture academic talent and to sustain a love of learning through the school years and beyond.

That search might best be described by case study. David H and his wife, Katherine, knew their daughter, Abby, was bright. Abby's K-8 years were spent at a fine independent day school. "Every family meets with the guidance counselor the summer before the start of 8th grade," said Mr. H. "When Kathy and I met with her, she explained that based upon her review of Abby's academic record, she believed Abby had a good chance of being admitted to a highly selective boarding school."

Abby's father played the critical parent role of information-gatherer but then it was Abby's turn. Having attended a summer program for gifted kids, Abby had been away from home before and in an academic environment with very bright peers, and this experience led her to think beyond usual boundaries. "The thing that drew me immediately to that summer program was the promise of having classroom discussions and debates with other kids interested in the same things I was." Abby says. "It met my expectations and improved upon them, and I was hoping for the same thing at boarding schools."

In the case of this family, several factors shaped Abby's educational trajectory thus far. A home where education is valued. Good academic preparation at a fine K-8 school. Good advice from a counseling professional. Experience (on Abby's part) with a challenging academic program in the company of extremely bright peers. Good information gathering by the family. And a young woman who, like many gifted students, has the ability to be self-directed and know clearly what she

wants out of her education.

This may not be a universal formula for success, but clearly in Abby's case it's working. "Hotchkiss (School) has definitely met and exceeded my expectations, especially in the English and Classics departments," she says. "Finally I was in a class where I wasn't the only one ever talking—now I have thoughtful colleagues who have fascinating things to say. As for social life, I don't think it's possible to have a bad social life at a school like Hotchkiss. Everyone here, and I'm sure at other boarding schools, is extremely well-rounded and has a variety of interests, so it's nearly impossible not to find someone you click with."

### Supplemental Programs.

Another parent—John B, a freelance writer and editor—described his role in parenting his gifted son, Jonas, as that of an 'education general contractor.' Like David H, Mr. B found himself as the coordinator of services and locator of top programs to meet the needs of Jonas, who in 2006 graduated from Harvard, through his son's K-12 years.

Most good parents play this role to some extent. Does Joel have talent on the piano? Find a good piano teacher! Does Melissa show a flair for chess? Involve her in a chess team or find a coach! (Of course, as parents we are prone to shower our kids with all those great ideas for lessons—gymnastics, painting, ukulele, competitive swimming—that also don't 'stick.' But we get points for trying.)

Parents of gifted kids now have an abundant array of programs geared for gifted children. Which ones are best? The answer, as usual: it depends. Just as the family which largely followed their daughter's lead, so the same advice holds true for programs outside school. But there are questions you can ask yourself, your child, and educators involved in your child's academic life, that may provide a good direction:

The key question is: what sort of supplemental academic experience is right for my child at this time? It could be the answer is 'none,' especially if you and your child both feel that your child is fully challenged at school.

Or, although you feel this is true, perhaps your child would enjoy a class with more hands-on learning, or that's more intensely focused and immersive. In the first example, perhaps there's an environmental camp where students spend their days canoeing but also doing a wildlife census and analyzing water quality. In the second example, several programs in the United States and overseas offer language immersion experiences patterned after State-Department-type intensive language courses. Such a program would be academically rigorous, but a radical change from the normal ways that students encounter a subject.

Some students, judging by the 15,000 students in programs offered by gifted student programs at Johns Hopkins, Duke, Northwestern, and the University of

Denver—clearly do want more academic preparation over the summer. In other words, these students choose to put something into their brains instead of hanging out on an online social networking site all day long. (Good for them! Good for us all!)

If you and your child decide on such a program, there are course types within these programs that may be more needed or appealing than others. Though they're not listed as such, and some are a mix, the courses typically fall into three categories. *acceleration*, *enrichment*, or *extension*.

*Acceleration* courses are just that: they aim to cover a year's worth of, say, high school chemistry, or Algebra 2, in three weeks.

*Enrichment* courses are those subjects that are rarely found in a school program during the academic year but one that might meet a strong specific student interest. Many reputable summer programs offer a wide array of such courses that range from robotics and engineering, to paleobiology and cryptography.

*Extension* courses involve using prior knowledge, often from traditional school programs, in advanced course work. A top flight example of this is the Research Science Institute at MIT, a program with lots of competition for entry but one appealing to extremely talented young mathematicians and scientists.

### Online Options

The web continues to open a universe of learning options for gifted students,

but . . .

Caution! Along with an explosion of knowledge, the web also set off a different powder charge—of unauthenticated knowledge and information. Students today do so much research on the web—nearly all unless told not to, it seems—that they run the risk of using bad information as gospel truth in their work.

This is why, even in online learning systems— we will always need teachers—now, as then, to help students wade through a mountain of information to find the true gold nuggets among the fool's gold.

Some questions to consider when evaluating any online course: what's the involvement of a human being in the enterprise? Who's the teacher? What's the track record of the program? In some ways it's not a bad idea to evaluate an online program the way one might have checked out a by-mail correspondence course in the old days. While the quality of the software (courseware) is important, the human element is more critical. The software is still just the tool: the quality of the teacher still rules.

### More resources

Good parenting involves helping to find meaningful, engaging, enriching, and motivating activities—in sports, music, athletics, or other areas—that bring out

the best in a son or daughter.

As you do this for a gifted child, remember that others have gone before you in this journey, and many are currently traveling the path.

Once again, online resources today are extraordinary.

For the kids, check out Cogito.org. This site, begun in 2006, is geared especially for students ages 8 to 18 with a passion for math and science. The site features two levels: a site open to the public, and more information and discussion groups open to students invited to join (for free) as members.

For communities of other parents involved with the academic and other needs of gifted K-12 students, subscribe to either TAGfam or GTfamilies. Google either of these titles to find more information and to subscribe.

Though others have tried, none has surpassed the number, depth, and breadth of resources to be found at [www.Hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.Hoagiesgifted.org). Created and managed by

Carolyn Kottmeyer, a parent of two gifted children, the site contains extensive information on testing and talent development for bright kids, as well as archives of articles on the subject.

### **Last words**

The final key resource not to be overlooked? Your child. Ultimately, this might be an early exercise in “letting go” as a parent, but with gifted children—especially those who have already shown good judgment and self-directedness, the move might be the right one. “Trust your child to make the right decision,” David H says.

His daughter Abby agrees: “Trust your child’s instinct. My parents and I were faced with a lot of tough decisions in terms of choosing a school, but there was something about Hotchkiss that appealed to me the instant we drove into Main Circle. And I couldn’t have been happier with my decision.”

