

Defining “Gifted”

What is Giftedness?

Educators, researchers, developmental psychologists, and parents of gifted children alike have found it difficult to answer this seemingly basic question. Is it something innate or something learned? Are individuals gifted whether or not they achieve or find eminence?

There are many definitions of giftedness, none of which are universally agreed upon. IEA advocates for the definition penned in 1991 by the Columbus Group, made up of parents and professionals well-versed in the needs of the gifted learner:

“Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.”

The Columbus Group emerged from the need to describe the innate developmental differences experienced by highly and profoundly gifted individuals. The group was originally composed of IEA Senior Fellow Stephanie Tolan, Dr. Christine Garrison (now Neville), Kathi Kearney, Martha Morelock, and Dr. Linda Silverman. They derived the term “asynchronous development” as it relates to giftedness, and the term has been a popular and effective way to explain this unique developmental reality of gifted individuals. (Off the Charts)

Similar to how a student can experience a gap in learning (for example, a student enrolled in calculus who is unable to solve basic geometry problems), children who develop asynchronously may experience “gaps” between their intellect and other parts of self. One such manifestation may occur with learners who encounter psychomotor setbacks with coordination or writing skills, despite their deep intellectual capacity. Often, gifted learners experience frustration and a widening gap between their intellect and their social and emotional behavior. Because asynchrony often creates these developmental gaps, it is crucial to provide appropriate resources and opportunities that best identify, challenge, and assist each gifted child’s specific needs.

See [Other Definitions of Giftedness](#)

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Giftedness is More than Achievement

Giftedness has often been conflated with achievement and accolade, with success being the primary identifier of a truly gifted child. This is a narrow perspective, considering the thousands of underachieving and at-risk gifted students across America, for example. It also fails to account for the notion that gifted children don't develop in a linear, synchronous way. Parents often speak of their gifted child embodying many ages at once, oscillating from an "old soul" to an emotional 3-year-old from one minute to the next. Imagine, for instance, the gifted child who spends her weekends learning computer languages like Java and C++ but who falls to pieces if asked to perform a repetitive task like copying vocabulary words ten times.

Success alone is not an good identifier of a gifted child. Many gifted children develop in a non-linear, asynchronous way.

Common Characteristics of Gifted Children

While no two gifted children are the same, research has shown that most gifted learners exhibit many common characteristics and behaviors. The following are common characteristics of gifted children, although not all will necessarily apply to every gifted child:

Cognitive	Affective
• Unusually well developed memory • Deep curiosity • Dislike of slow-paced instruction • Reasons at a higher level than chronological peers • Rapid learning • Preference for independent work • Have multiple interests • Ability to generate original ideas • "System thinkers" rather than linear thinkers • Asks complex questions • Immersion learners	• Well developed sense of justice • Emotional intensity • Preference for older friends • Different concepts of friendships • High levels of empathy • Asynchronous development • Mature sense of humor • Perfectionistic & self-critique • "Overexcitabilities"

Overexcitabilities / Intensities

Gifted young people are often more aware of, stimulated by, and affected by their surroundings. Children who feel things with great intensity experience the world in a different way. Emotional or physical reactions to events can last longer than expected and are often replayed in the child's mind. These experiences of heightened stimulation observed in many gifted individuals are referred to as intensities or overexcitabilities.

Intensities can be characterized by:

- Extreme feelings (positive or negative), feeling complex emotions, connection with the feelings of others, grand laughter and tears
- Physical reaction to emotion, stomachaches and headaches, blushing, rise in body temperature
- Strong affective memory, reliving or re feeling things long after the triggering event, nightmares, elaborate daydreams connected to actual events

There are five areas of overexcitabilities:

Psychomotor

High energy, rapid speech, restlessness; may appear hyperactive

Sensual

Heightened sensory awareness and aesthetic sensitivity; deep pleasure or discomfort from input

Imaginational

Vivid imagery, metaphorical thinking, rich fantasy life, inventiveness

Intellectual

Deep love of ideas, questioning, analysis, and theory; need to understand deeply

Emotional

Intense feelings, deep empathy, strong attachments; may feel emotions “too much”

Read more about [Intensities in the Gifted](#) and [Strategies for Managing Intensities](#)

Underachievement in Gifted Children

One of the greatest frustrations for parents of gifted children is the assumption that giftedness means performing well in traditional school environments. Gifted children are not intrinsically motivated by good grades; they are more passionate about the acquisition of knowledge than performing rote tasks. This causes a problem when the school structure and grades rely on repetition and memorization. Although there are many reasons gifted students underachieve, the most common are:

- A mismatch between students and their classroom environment
- Disinterest in content
- Poor selfconcept
- Fear of failure
- Learning disabilities
- Lack of selfregulation
- Lack of study skills

When possible, it is important to recognize underachievement early and address it quickly. If your children think that learning and school require little to no effort, they may continue to slack off and may not ever learn to challenge themselves and work to their full potential in higher level thinking (Winner, 1996).

Learn more about how to understand, spot, and address [Underachievement in Gifted Children](#)

