



# Gifted infants – the realities of the first weeks and months

By Cathie Harrison

## Acknowledgement

Many parents of young gifted children are reluctant to disclose aspects of their child's behaviour and advanced development. Fortunately some are willing to come out of the closet and share the realities of parenting their exceptionally gifted infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers. Parents, like Lea and David, who are willing to share their experiences help to raise awareness of the particular needs of young gifted children and their families. In situations where parents of gifted children get together, where it is safe and socially acceptable to share such experiences, the memories and feelings surface. Parents of gifted children who attend the two-day Parenting Courses run each year by the Gifted Education Research Resource and Information Centre (GERRIC) at the University of New South Wales find comfort in the safe place which this opportunity provides to share similar experiences. Some of the experiences of the parents of young gifted children were used to illustrate this article. Thank you to Lea and David and to all those parents and families of young gifted children who have shared their experiences of giftedness in early childhood.

Parents of young gifted children, like Lea and David, recall vividly the dilemmas that come with parenting a gifted child in the first year of life. Some whose experience of parenting may be very dissimilar may doubt the truth of the claims but those who are parents of young gifted children would identify with and feel reassured by the story, 'Insomnia'. Community ignorance about giftedness means that little is known and little support offered

to parents of very young gifted children within the local community. There is frequently the assumption that children cannot be gifted until they start school and begin academic tasks. Parents of young gifted children, however, can identify aspects of behaviour and development, which indicate giftedness in the first days and months of life. Although young gifted children, particularly infants and toddlers, are considered an understudied and underserved population (Harrison, 1999) a brief review of relevant literature and research validates the existence of giftedness in infancy and offers some strategies for parenting young children who are gifted during their first year.

Giftedness results from both genetic and environmental factors (Clark, 1998). Given the significant influence of the genetic inheritance, giftedness impacts on development from, and perhaps even before, birth. As Clark (1998, p 9) suggests:

'Giftedness is a biologically rooted concept that serves as a label for a high level of intelligence and indicates an advanced and accelerated development of functions within the brain, allowing its use to be more efficient and interactive. Giftedness impacts on all aspects of development including physical, sensing, emotions, cognition and intuition.'

This broad conception of giftedness, which suggests that giftedness impacts on various developmental domains, endorses the reality that is familiar to many parents of young gifted children. Lea's account of the behaviour of her highly gifted daughters, Emma and

Megan, affirms this high level functioning soon after birth. Advanced and accelerated brain development can be evident in the first few months in various aspects of behaviour. There can be indications of increased alertness to sensory input such as visual and auditory stimulation. One parent recalled that her new born baby reoriented herself in the hospital crib, wriggling her body and lifting her head, to see the toy which had been placed in the upper corner of the crib. Another described her baby at two months with the following comment, 'so alert, looking at things so closely, echoing the pitch of my voice in a reciprocal sort of game.' Gross (1993, p 88) reports the experience of Jade:

When she was four weeks old we took her to the Drive-in with us one night. She was lying on the back seat of the car in her bassinet and we thought she was asleep. Mike had a bad cough and he began to cough and surprisingly, from the back seat, came a cough from Jade. This kept on for some time. At first we thought it was coincidence but then we began to realise that there was a pattern to it: each of Mike's coughs was followed by a cough from Jade. We began to try her out and sure enough, she mimicked every cough, laughing up at us after each one as if it was a big joke! We were just amazed.

Advanced physical development can also be evident in infancy with greater head and upper body control. Lea notes Emma's early ability to hold her head unsupported. Another parent noted 'at about ten weeks she would stop moving as if to listen more intently (Harrison,

p26). This can be followed with early mobility in rolling and crawling and later sitting and walking. Harrison (1999, p23) notes the example of Amaan.

'Although only thirteen weeks, Amaan was able to somehow propel himself along the floor. We would place him on the blanket as other parents of young babies would. Their children would remain in the same spot but Amaan would be off in some corner of the room staring at some object that had obviously caught his interest.'

This example also highlights the intense curiosity that can be typical of the young gifted child even in infancy. This can be seen in wakefulness, early visual focussing and tracking, long concentration span and the intense investigation of new objects and environments. Smutney, Veenker and Veenker (1991, p4) include this description of David at less than three months,

He soon began scuttling about on his stomach like a fish on water, poking into everything. He couldn't have been more than three months. I would find him running his finger over objects, turning them around in his tiny hands and examining them with tremendous concentration. His attention span at the age of five months on only a few simple objects, at times spanned over an hour or two. He never got tired of handling new objects, moving them around and letting out shrieks of delight every once in a while as he squirmed over to another part of the room.

While some young gifted infants can occupy themselves for extended periods others demand the constant stimulation of new objects and the constant presence of an interested play partner. This can be particularly demanding for parents who are adjusting to the parenting role and may have expected their new-born infant to spend most of the hours, of both day and night, asleep. The gifted infant may express intense frustration when an object of interest is removed or when he or she is removed from a situation of interest and expected to sleep. The need for stimulation seems powerful and ever present and can result in intense crying

episodes. As Lea and others have experienced, this tends to be interpreted and explained by the medical profession, friends and family members from the assumptions and expectations of typical development. Conditions such as hunger, pain, or over tiredness are thus often cited as the reason for the infant's distress. Parents can then be advised to respond to such distress by transferring the baby from breast to bottle, varying the mother's diet, trying various medications and persevering with efforts to get the baby to sleep. The result is often over tired and distressed parents as well as distressed infants.

Giftedness can also be evident in emotional sensitivity and this can be seen in the early forming of attachments, and the sensing and sharing of others distress or anxiety. One parent recalled her baby's distress when hearing another baby crying. Another commented on her young baby's responsiveness to her own moods and emotions. The infant's intense sensitivity to emotion can also be problematic when expressive language has not yet developed and the infant is unable to verbalise feelings of fear and anxiety. Parents can feel inadequate when trying to make sense of seemingly inexplicable emotional outbursts.

The behaviour of the gifted infant can be both fascinating and perplexing for parents. It can be exciting to share daily experiences with an infant who is highly alert and responsive. There is real joy to be found in parenting the gifted child. The opportunity to play with an infant who remembers the patterns of interaction of simple games, who engages adults in their play through intense eye contact, early smiling, cooing and babbling, who understands more than could be expected and who adores his or her caregivers can be a great privilege. There are, however, also the difficulties that come with the delights. Caring for a gifted infant can be a mixed blessing. Parents of gifted infants face issues of:

- How do you keep a young wakeful baby occupied and stimulated for so many hours of the day and often the night as well?
- How do you get the domestic tasks done when your baby demands your attention fulltime?

- Who else can care for this demanding baby who expects so much of his or her carers?
- How do you respond to the often contradictory advice which suggests possible remedies but does not indicate understanding of the gifted infant?
- How do you deal with the emotional sensitivity which creates intense emotional reactions?

The research suggests that the advanced development of the gifted infant should be responded to. This requires the provision of a rich and stimulating environment and a responsive caregiver and play partner who can interact with the child in ways which are responsive to the observed behaviours (Clark 1998, Harrison 1999, Smutney and Eby

1990, Tannenbaum 1988). The adult needs to cue off the child, observing closely and listening intently to the infant's efforts to communicate. Interestingly parents note that gifted infants quickly find ways to communicate through different crying behaviours to indicate different needs. Lea suggests that Megan already has an angry cry which is different from her distressed cry. Body language and facial expressions are also used effectively by gifted infants to direct the responses of the attentive adult.

Clark (1998) suggests that during the early learning periods of a child's life the most appropriate focus for concerned adults is on allowing the child to continuously interact with materials and people that the child finds interesting. 'High intelligence regardless of how it is expressed results from the interaction between inherited and acquired characteristics supported by a rich, stimulating environment'(Clark 1998, p9).

The new brain research (Gunnar, M. & Barr, R.G. 1998, Newberger, J.J., 1997 and Shore 1997) affirms the importance of the first months and years for brain development.

Shore (1997, p ix) emphasises the significance of the relationship between child and care-giver for healthy brain development in the first years of life.

Throughout the entire process of development, beginning even before birth the brain is effected by environmental conditions, including the kind of nourishment, care, surrounding and stimulation an individual receives. The impact of the environment is dramatic and specific, not merely influencing the general direction of development but actually affecting how the intricate circuitry of the brain is wired.

Erikson's eight stage theory of human development (Erikson, 1964) also affirms the need for responsive interactions and care-giving in infancy. The first stage outlined by Erikson, 'trust versus mistrust', suggests that it is during the first year of life that the infant develops feelings of trust or mistrust depending on the responsiveness of care which is given. Eby and Smutney (1990) affirm the need for interactions which are responsive to advanced development as does Tannenbaum (1992, p128) who identifies the need for care which is tailor made for the gifted child's development. 'Children with superior inner resources can fulfil their promise only if the nurturance they receive is tailor made to meet their special needs.' Linke (2000, p 5) suggests that the effects of stress during infancy are also significant. 'For infants everything is new. It is the repeated sensitive response to infant's needs over the early months that builds a sense of security and lays down the foundation for being able to cope with later demands and stresses.' The needs of gifted infants are at risk of being ignored or misunderstood if a preoccupation with typical development over-rides consideration of the needs of the gifted individual.

The message from the research clearly affirms the need for interactions and stimulation in infancy which are responsive to the particular child. For the gifted infant, this may require play opportunities and interactions which may be considered more relevant for an older child. These might include reading stories of interest, looking at and talking about pictures and objects in the natural environment, listening and responding to music of various types and experiences that may be considered developmentally inappropriate for a

child so young. It may require visits to places of interest, seeking out other families with older children or other gifted children who can provide stimulation, and calling on friends and family to take turns at meeting the demands of a very curious and attentive child.

Opportunities for parents to share strategies and tactics employed to get through this demanding period reveal an interesting range of responses. These include strategies such as:

- Organising the extended family to take turns caring for and playing with the infant.
- Having a night-time roster for parents and/or grandparents to occupy the baby.
- Allowing the infant to have the light on at night and toys to play with.
- A daily trip to the local library to borrow books for the baby and the use of taped stories to listen to when others in the family are sleeping.

Parents also become very resourceful with finding play opportunities in household objects. They also learn to cope with a home that may appear chaotic but reflects the active engagement of the gifted infant in the many play and learning possibilities that the home environment offers.

One of the most useful survival strategies appears to be establishing a connection with other parents and families who share similar experiences. It is in an environment that is safe and affirming where parents and families willingly share the delights and dilemmas of parenting their gifted infant during the first months of life. This can help to overcome the isolation which many parents of young gifted children experience particularly during the period of infancy, when the child's needs are largely met within the context of the immediate family.

Gifted infants demonstrate particular behaviours and require care-giving responses that are responsive to their advanced and distinctive development. The sharing of the experience of parenting the young gifted children can help others to recognise and respond

effectively to giftedness in infancy.

If you too would like to document and share your experiences of giftedness in early childhood please send to Cathie Harrison, University of Western Sydney, PO Box 555 Campbelltown 2560. Confidentiality will be respected.

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