

Precocious pre-schooler: Positive parent

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QAGTC is often called upon to answer questions from parents who are wanting to respond to the needs of their young child who may be gifted. The questions include such things as:

- How can I know if my child is gifted?
- Should I get my child tested and if so, where? And
- How can I get early entry to school? Is it a good idea?

The number of contacts with QAGTC bears testimony to the fact that there are many questions and challenges for a parent of a gifted child. The person responding to the phone call or email conversation may not be able to provide definitive answers for these listed questions, this is because each child and context is different and is likely to be unknown to the person who is responding. However, there are many ideas and resources that parents of gifted children have found to be helpful which QAGTC can suggest. Whether or not you get your child tested; or want and can access early entry; or find the perfect preschool or kindergarten; I hope this article can provide a few ideas and suggestions to help you parent your gifted pre-school child.

Cathie Harrison's Australian study of 15 gifted children (between the ages of 6 months and 8 years) documented several characteristics that young, gifted children shared in their ways of thinking: 'curiosity, intrinsic motivation, and independent investigation; exceptional memory; creativity; the formulation of research hypotheses and testing of theories; advanced awareness of literacy and numeracy concepts and processes; and advanced and detailed visual representation' (Harrison, 2004). Harrison summarises her understandings of these driving characteristics of gifted young children as a search for 'complexity and connection' and concludes with several pointers to help parents and educators navigate pathways for young gifted children:

1. The need to view them as 'complex, capable, curious' enthusiastic learners.
2. The need to respect the depth of knowledge parents have about their child and value the important role of parents in supporting the child's growth and development.
3. The need to allow young gifted children the opportunity to be 'co-learners with their teachers' in educational settings.

In the light of Harrison's recommendations and the ideas and suggestions gleaned over the years through my involvement with gifted children and their families, I make the following comments.

Develop your knowledge and understanding of giftedness in early childhood

One of the first things parents often do, that can be of significant help, is to develop their awareness of the characteristics and needs of gifted children. As parents read research, listen to the experiences of others and share their own experiences, they gain insights and ideas that help them to navigate what can be a difficult pathway. There are helpful books on the topic, journal articles that report on research, and websites. The QAGTC branches hold meetings with discussions, forums and guest speakers that allow parents to meet and share ideas, experiences and resources. On a more formal platform, the QAGTC's annual conference provides an opportunity to hear from a range of international, national and state based experts. If you are just starting out on the adventure or if

you are a seasoned traveller, consider expanding your knowledge by engaging with one or more of these sources of information and support.

Create and support opportunities for positive relationships

Harrison (2004) reports that one of the particularly challenging aspects for gifted children in early childhood is having sufficient opportunity to develop satisfying friendships. This is because, the gifted child may not have enough in common with their age peers in kindergarten, preschool and the early years at school, on which to base their friendship. If the gifted child's interests, social and emotional awareness are more advanced, this can make the conversations and togetherness required for making friends quite difficult to sustain. Parents can help in this situation by creating access to contexts where children can meet and interact with children who may share interests and abilities even if they do not share chronological age! Having even one really good friend can provide the child with a secure base from which to navigate the challenging social worlds in educational settings.

Another thing parents can do, is to encourage and teach social skills, and build sensitivity to and awareness of others. These skills and awareness can help the child manage the situations they face when interacting with age peers. We all have to learn how to interact with others who are different from us in many ways (including having more or less ability). Often in personal relationships we act from an intuitive or instinctive base, but when these relationships are difficult it can help children to have a toolkit of skills and coping strategies which can be used intentionally.

Provide access to new learning and hard challenges

All children need to learn how to learn, how to face a challenge, make mistakes, and persevere through failure. Parents have enormous scope to help their child to develop these life-skills for learning. When you consider the relative amount of time spent in school and out of school, the possibilities for parents to have a lasting influence becomes apparent. Harrison (2004) comments on the gifted young child's thirst for learning and desire for complexity. Their young minds are primed for dealing with challenges and sorting out problems. Before they have decided that learning is easy, parents can help to encourage the child's commitment to learning hard things and a mindset that prepares them to face challenges.

Nurture and extend appreciation of creativity and creative expression

One of the attributes that will help a gifted child to become a talented and productive adult, will be their ability to use their knowledge, insights and abilities in creative ways. Harrison (2004) found that creativity was a characteristic shared by the young, gifted children in her study. Parents can help to provide a physical and emotional environment that nurtures this early creativity and facilitates the ongoing development of creative responses by the child to their learning and experiences. Parents can give children opportunities to explore, appreciate and learn from the creativity of others. They can also help to provide the resources and encouragement to help children explore and develop their own creativity.

Be aware of your child's physical abilities (gross and fine-motor)

Giftedness can be manifest in several or few domains of development, so that a child might be intellectually and physically gifted. However, in early childhood, when gross and fine motor skills are often still developing, some gifted children can really struggle because their physical development does not keep pace with their cognitive development. This asynchrony can produce frustration and challenges in diverse contexts. A gifted child might be able to verbalise a long and complex narrative,

but physically tire long before a fraction of it is committed to paper. Another might be able to visualise the play and team work required by a soccer game, but not have the dexterity to manage the ball or the management skills to organise his/her team of age peers to listen to the plan and enact the strategy. Parents can help with these dilemmas, first through understanding the difficulties, by suggesting flexible and creative adaptations and by creating a climate of learning, perseverance and resilience. These more difficult responses are also profitable because they allow for great learning even though we may be tempted by the easy way out (e.g. to abandon or forget writing the story or to drop out of a sporting team).

Keep balance and perspective

We all want to be great parents and give our children the best. Sometimes in our enthusiasm, things can get a bit out of control. A gifted child may have a voracious appetite for activities, but parents have a multitude of demands on their time, energy and resources. So, choose activities and commitments wisely and don't succumb to feeling guilty when you have to say 'No'. Don't forget to allow time and space for your child to get bored and have to invent their own fun and find their own challenges. My family had a 'no screen time and no outings' rule for the first few days of every holiday, enduring the complaints of boredom until they were overcome by the children immersing themselves in reading, play, art.

Here are a range of activities (listed in no particular order) that can offer learning, challenge and opportunities for positive relationships and friendship. Many of these can also provide room for creativity and/ or for problem solving. Some will be things your whole family can enjoy, some happen during term, others can be holiday and weekend activities.

Family friendly individual sports- e.g. kayaking and canoeing, orienteering, bush walking. Joining a club is ideal because it provides the possibility of interaction with other children and adults. In this way relationships are not age bound. Involvement in a club will also mean you and your child can learn new skills and have access to new challenges (both mental and physical).

Art classes and art materials –access to art classes can be a term time activity, a holiday pursuit or even a fairly informal interaction with someone who has a creative skill to share. Aunts, uncles, grandparents may be able to teach some new artistic skills. A book from the library can also provide a starting point.

Art gallery visits- provide a way to extend your child's knowledge and appreciation of art and artists. Visiting specific exhibitions or just exploring a more permanent collection will reveal interesting materials, techniques, and themes. Children can then be encouraged to make their own art following up on the media, the techniques, the subject matter and themes they encountered on their visit.

Music- learn an instrument, join a band, an ensemble, an orchestra or a choir. Community and faith-based bands and choirs love to have new young members and may offer lots of encouragement and support. Learning a musical instrument can be expensive, but some of the community-based avenues for musical expression offer less expensive options and opportunities for challenge, relationships and creativity.

Theatre and drama- are another avenue for appreciating the creative expression of others and for developing the child's creativity. Of course, you can access professional productions, but there are a range of more local, community-based experiences that can also be enjoyable and rewarding experiences. A local theatre society may welcome new members too! Don't forget 'Out of the Box' a

biennial arts festival for young children held at South Bank- it's brilliant and low cost. And on the long summer holidays, challenge your children to create their own play or puppet show or movie in response to an experience they have shared.

Dance- learn some form of dance. It doesn't have to be ballet or formal lessons with the associated costs. Community groups offer low cost dance options to explore. Bush dances are still around, Line dancing and old-time dances in community halls can be found with a little bit of digging. These lower cost options can also provide family friendly fun, opportunities for new skills and for new friendships.

Scouts/Guides/ Boys and Girls Brigade and other similar groups- While children do meet in a broad age group there is some flexibility and the age grouping can allow for younger children to mix with older children. There are skills to learn and leadership opportunities and lots of new and challenging adventures to be had.

Environmental activities- can be engaged in as individuals, as a family or through joining a club or community activity e.g. Bird watching clubs, Landcare and Bushcare groups, local working bees and even Clean Up Australia Day activities. Joining an organisation is a possibility which will allow wider interaction with adults and other young people not in rigid age groups and provide avenues to learn new knowledge and skills and solve problems.

Reading and libraries- encourage your child to read for themselves but don't stop reading to them. Shared reading is such a pleasure! Try reading to your child books that may be daunting for them to read to self, that have challenging (but appropriate) language and concepts e.g. some of the classics. Involve them in choosing and reading widely. Find a list of important books and work through the list. Include non-fiction, biography, poetry, plays and a wide range of genres. Try having some rich, philosophical discussion about the books or poems you read together. The types of questions we ask children really can stimulate their thinking and challenge them to make connections. There may even be some real world applications they can make as a response to the reading and thinking with which they engage.

Thinking games- learn and play games of strategy that require thinking- Chess is the obvious one, but Mah-jong and card games that involve strategy, skill and team/partner work can also start children on a lifetime of fun. Games to try: 500, Bridge, Scrabble and Pictionary, Dominoes, Backgammon can be fun and involve some strategy and challenge. Games such as these also provide opportunities for social interaction and friendship formation.

Themes- this is one of the best ideas I know, shared by a friend. Their family have year-long themes and it is always interesting to hear the variety of activities, books, experiences, creations, projects and excursions that emerge during the year. The beauty of investing in one theme for a whole year, is that it allows time for deep, connected learning, creativity and reflection. While this family started the tradition when the children were in early childhood, it has endured the test of time and continues during the high school years. They have shared: The Year of the Boat, The Year of the Tree, The Year of the Insect, The Year of Geology just to mention a few. This idea celebrates the wonderful world we live in and the excitement of learning together.

This list is not exhaustive, and I hope it leaves you saying 'but what about visiting museums, starting a garden, making a collection?' Write your good ideas down for future reference and try one soon!

I hope that this article has affirmed your knowledge and role as a parent, provided insights into the joys and challenges of your gifted young child's journey through childhood and given you some ideas

as to how to encourage their learning and relationships before, above and beyond formal educational experiences.

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