



GIFTED CHILDREN need you too

BY DR MIMI WELLISCH, CLEVER KIDS CONSULTANCY

It's not easy to find the obligations of services to children who are gifted, but they are there: page 197 of the 2017 Guide to the National Quality Standards, under additional needs. In practice this means that services must keep records of any special programming considerations to satisfy Regulation 160(3)(h).

“ Statistically, one in 10 children is mildly gifted. ”

There are also three elements in QA 6 that relate to parents of gifted children (6.2.2, 6.3.1 and 6.3.3), yet a recent study of educator attitudes to giftedness found that many didn't know how to advise parents, and only 27 per cent had some training in giftedness. Lack of educator training doesn't prevent the attendance of at least one intellectually gifted child in most services at any one time – often a child with an insatiable appetite for intellectual stimulation that only adults can satisfy.

In our research, one study participant described: “He just always wanted to be around us. It was this continual chatter-chatter to the teachers...great conversation skills [but] he didn't know how to enter play...”

That's a gifted child

Statistically, one in 10 children is mildly gifted. They are bright but may go unnoticed as they are often polite and able to blend in quite well even when other children and the program bore them. Children at higher levels of giftedness [see descriptors page 13] are more likely to be noticed.

Our study found three specific interwoven areas often misinterpreted by educators in working with intellectually gifted children:

- ▶ children were often perceived to have under-developed social skills
- ▶ social skills were classed as more important than children's additional need for intellectual stimulation
- ▶ parents were advised to hold children back as they were too socially immature for school

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These mistaken perceptions may mean children are prevented from social interaction with more suitable peers; their intellectual curiosity may wither due to lack of appropriate stimulation; they may be forced wait a year longer to attend school; they may develop behaviour problems and become educationally disengaged.

Being different from other children can cause a child to feel out of place and anxious. Helen, an early childhood teacher who participated in our study, was unaware of a child's giftedness and thought there were social-emotional problems.

"She was, I thought, just a normal little girl, little bit clingy... little bit, you know, emotionally immature."

Age groups are inappropriate

Other educators in the study described gifted children as having low attention – flitting between activities – or bossy – insisting on how a game should be played. They described frequent 'meltdowns', frustrations and disputes, for example when other children broke rules.

The social problems of the children described above, however, were not due to lack of maturity, empathy, or social skills. It was the context that was wrong: having to fit in with their age group.

What they needed was to be placed with children of their own mental age; to be paired with another child who was also gifted, or accelerated to an older group and readied for early entry to school, a provision that has been in place in NSW since the 1991 *Policy for the Education of Gifted and Talented Students*.

Guiding parents

Children who are intellectually gifted have a constant need for information and novel experiences that can be exhausting for parents.

When it comes to guiding parents, educators are well advised to obtain training, review the adequacy of the Early Years Learning Framework and the suitability of the setting. You might also question your usual image of the playing child. Lillard's review of more than 150 previous studies found pretend play is less crucial to development than generally believed.

Question your view of play

Some parents told us that their children did not play, but had excellent relationships with their family and a preference for the company of adults and older children.

Sandra, mother of a moderately gifted child, told us, "She wasn't the kind of kid who could sit on the ground and play with dolls... she needed to have a conversation and have interaction".

Jane, mother of a highly gifted child (IQ 153) said that the definition of play was too narrow for her child, whose play was to read a book.

Not a social fit for age peers

Children who are gifted may act out in frustration at the lack of suitable activities and company. They may isolate themselves from others, and object to attending child care.

Anne, an early childhood teacher and study participant, was unable to see that the problem may not have been with the child's readiness for school.

"Our focus is their social and emotional, so it's not all those academic skills, it's actually, are they independent, can they think for themselves, can they socially interact with other children, so that to me would be the benchmark."

Helen, quoted earlier, admitted that, "what we wanted to try and work on was her social skills and her empathy with others... we never really achieved it...".

Sandra, who sent her child to school under Early Entry, recalled the difference between preschool and school:

"Going from a child who cried, was frustrated, to first day at [school] – I walked in, and she gave me a kiss and

cuddle, bye, and off she went to school, happy – as Larry, never had any of the tears or trauma we had with preschool."

Early Entry

Finding the best pathway for gifted children means thinking outside the box: can inclusion funding be applied? Can she join the oldest children for special projects, will this hold her interest?

In fact, should educators, who may believe in 'holding back' based on experience with typically developing children, seek information about Early Entry and acceleration through preschool or school entry?

When it comes to gifted preschoolers, take your signal from their speed of learning and their 'additional need' to know more and their social-emotional mismatch. A cognitive assessment is needed and if a child is ready for early entry, you may need to reassure parents their child will actually not miss out on anything the service can offer the following year.

What they needed was to be placed with children of their own mental age



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AUTHOR BIO

Dr Mimi Wellisch is a registered psychologist, holds Bachelor and Master degrees in Early Childhood Education, taught preschool for more than 20 years, and is the Director of Clever Kids Consultancy. Mimi's journey in gifted education began through a chance choice of an elective unit in giftedness during her Bachelor studies. Her passionate interest led to the 1997 Masters degree research of NSW North Coast educator attitudes to gifted preschoolers. Mimi is the author of books and many articles, has presented at local and international conferences, and has been President, Vice President and Treasurer of the NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children. She was awarded a PhD in Psychology in 2015 in relation to her research on the association between attachment and IQ. She has recently completed a partial follow-up study of NSW educator attitudes to giftedness that was expanded to include Early Entry.

GIFTEDNESS DESCRIPTORS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD

A guide to the descriptors for levels of giftedness in early years. Bear in mind that intellectually gifted children's physical development, such as eye-hand coordination, will be at age-appropriate levels or even lag behind.

MODERATELY GIFTED

About one in 100 children is moderately gifted. Most services have at least one moderately gifted child enrolled at all times. Listens to books before 5 months, knows letters and colours by 20 months, counts, prints letters and numbers and asks a lot of questions by three. By four knows many sight words and may be reading.

Artwork or building creations will show complexity. Aware that they know more than others, they may appear overbearing or arrogant, take over play, and be seen as 'bossy'. This can be addressed by establishing into an older group from the age of three.



HIGHLY GIFTED

About one in 1000 children is highly gifted. You may see this child every few years. Alert from birth onwards, loves books and understands language by six months. Solves 35+ piece puzzles and knows the alphabet by age two, and reads before attending school. They are sensitive and may have occasional 'melt-downs'. They enjoy working with technology and talking to the teachers. They may attempt to play with others, but their language and play is too complex for typically developing children. Pair them with older children or peers of the same mental age.



EXCEPTIONALLY GIFTED

About one in 10,000 children is exceptionally gifted and they may only appear in your service.

They will love books by three to four months and by 15-22 months they will have extensive and complex language with huge vocabularies, and know the entire alphabet. By age five they need for pleasure and information and play board games.

The lack of agency these children experience in a children's service may cause them to have frequent 'melt-downs' caused by frustration of being placed in an unsuitable situation. They may spend much of the preschool day choosing to complete months workbooks or reading.



PROFOUNDLY/EXTREMELY GIFTED

About one in 100,000 children is profoundly gifted. You may only meet one such child in your career.

They can be gifted in every possible area from an early age. Everything develops much sooner and with more intensity than at the other levels of giftedness.

These children may require home schooling and mentoring. They will have external social contact through sports, lessons in music or art, or events for gifted children. You can expect them to enter university early to ensure the pace and level of learning is suitable to their intellectual needs.



Source: Dr Mimi Wellisch, *Giftedness* and *Giftedness: How Smart is my child?* <http://www.kimberly.org/wo/wellisch/2008/02/07/exceptionally-gifted.pdf>
 and D. L. POWER'S Levels of Gifted: School Issues and Educational Debates, Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

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