

Misperceptions of Giftedness: Are You Struggling With What Those Around You Believe Gifted Is?

We all have formed perceptions regarding everything around us. Some may be grounded in reality, some may not. We also have assumptions of what perceptions other have of us or of things we do. Likewise, some of those perceptions may be grounded in reality, others may not. Having a gifted child brings on all sorts of perceptions for many of us. If we don't understand giftedness ourselves, maybe don't even realize we may be gifted too, we can have our own misperceptions of giftedness. Let's first address some of the basics of being gifted:

1. **The Brain:** There is a physical difference in a gifted person's brain than an average brain. In "[What Brain Imaging Shows Us About Gifted Learners](#)," Tamara Fisher briefly outlines results from a few studies.
 - a. A gifted brain receives information strongly through all senses (via Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities - see below). Under MRI scans, it's noticed to develop differently, and work more efficiently. One way to try understand how gifted people experience the world is using an analogy of TV channels; an average brain receives it's information from an antenna, getting 8 channels feeding into it. The gifted brain receives it's information through 200 cable channels feeding it, and sometimes overloading it. Gifted children often seem to know things they couldn't possibly have reference to, but somehow, through the hard work of all their senses, they have absorbed this knowledge along the way. They have made connections seemingly beyond their years.
 - b. Since the brain requires glucose (sugar) to function, gifted brains tend to need more glucose, especially when engaged, so if glucose is low in the body, a gifted person can experience [Reactive Hypoglycemia](#). If a child tends to melt down mid-morning and mid-afternoon, they may need a healthy high protein moderate carb snack to feed their brain, literally!
2. **Overexcitabilities:** Polish psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski, (1902-1980), developed The Theory of Positive Disintegration. Through this he came up with 5 overexcitabilities. These overexcitabilities appear more often in the gifted population than in the average population. A good overview of overexcitabilities is "[Overexcitability and the Gifted](#)" by Sharon Lind.
 - a. **Psychomotor** - A person who can't sit still or who can't stop talking.
 - b. **Sensual** - A person with a heightened experience of sensual pleasure or displeasure emanating from sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing. These senses can also overwhelm them if an outside force is too strong.
 - c. **Intellectual** - A person who needs to understand the truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze and synthesize data.

- d. **Imaginational** - A person with a strong tendency for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams. They can often mix truth with fiction.
- e. **Emotional** - A person who may seem to overreact to situations because they feel emotions intensely.

3. **Asynchronous Development:** As so nicely stated by Celi Trépanier in her post "[#6 Gifted Students Develop Asynchronously](#):"

"Asynchronous development means that a gifted child has the intellectual capacity to understand and synthesize information that usually is many years more advanced than what a typical child of the same chronological age could understand. Yet, their emotional maturity is much less advanced, maybe well-below their chronological age, and they are unable to handle the emotional impact that may be inherent in understanding this advanced information."

4. **Twice-Exceptional or 2e (Gifted with a Disability):** Often a person's giftedness can mask a disability. The term '[Stealth Dyslexia](#)' came about because often a gifted child's intellect can mask their dyslexic symptoms, causing them to read at or above grade level. This may cause the child not to be recognized as gifted. If this child had therapies to help with managing their dyslexia, they then might be recognized as gifted and have accurate programming provided. Twice-exceptionality can encompass giftedness with one of many disabilities; ADHD, autism spectrum disorder, behavioral problems, auditory processing issues, etc. A good resource on 2e is the [2e Newsletter](#).
5. **Misdiagnosis:** Often gifted children are misdiagnosed as having a disability, not realizing it's their giftedness manifesting as what may be perceived as a disability (Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Asperger's syndrome, etc.). A good example of this is [side-by-side](#) symptoms of Giftedness and ADD/ADHD. Sometimes, when the intellectual needs of a child are not being met, they may act out in ways that are perceived as a disability. A good overview is "[Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children](#)" by Dr. James T. Webb, Ph.D. Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) has begun the [Misdiagnosis Initiative](#) where you can find information and resources.
6. **Measuring Giftedness - Cognitive Testing versus Achievement Testing:** Cognitive testing measures reasoning ability. Achievement testing is more about how well one knows math, how well one knows, retains, and can make inferences from what they read, etc. Achievement test examples are CMAS, PARCC, ACT, SAT, and MAP. Cognitive tests are used for giftedness, some providing an IQ score. Cognitive test examples are CogAT, Wechsler Intelligence Scales (WISC and WPPSI), Stanford-Binet, and Woodcock-Johnson. Note that CogAT is not actually an IQ test. [Hoagies' Gifted](#) provides more information than you could ever want on testing.

So, now that we have a basic understanding of giftedness, let's look at a couple big misperceptions out there:

1. **Elitism:** Anyone raising a gifted child can attest that it's NOT easy. We know that giftedness is across ALL race and socio-economic groups. The Colorado Department of Education has recently updated gifted identification methods for districts. It's an effort to do a better job of finding gifted students in the at-risk, minority, and English language learner populations, which are very underrepresented in being identified. But that doesn't tackle the true sense of elitism with respect to giftedness. It's more the perception that parents of gifted children have pushed their children to learn more, they have pushed them to read early or maybe they coached their children to do well on the test that identified them as gifted. This misperception is devoid of the reality that giftedness is a different learning style that needs to be addressed. Todd Stanley's article "[Are Gifted Programs Elitist? Or Do They Serve the Needs of Special Learners?](#)" discusses that very issue. Mr. Stanley points out, ". . . that special education children are treated differently, with services designed to meet their specific learning needs. No one would accuse special education of being elitist. So why the double standard?"
2. **'Gifted students don't need special educational programming. They're smart, so they'll be just fine:'** Oh, where to begin. This is the bane of our existence as parents of gifted children. Betty Vine in her article "[What Makes a Child "Gifted"?](#)" does a nice job explaining the brain's physical need for a different teaching method. Chris Croll's article "[The Truth About 'Gifted' Versus High-Achieving Students](#)" is a good starting point. This comparison of [Bright Child vs Gifted Learner](#) can also help. Unfortunately, this misperception is the crux of poor services offered by many school districts across the nation, not understanding that gifted students have a different learning style. Generally, they need information faster and more in depth. Typically a gifted student learns in two repetitions what it takes an average student to learn in eight to ten repetitions ([A Nation Deceived](#)). When these basic needs are not met by the school, often these kids check out and may begin performing poorly in school, or do just enough to get by, but not at their potential. Celi Trépanier put together "[A Gifted Child Checklist for Teachers](#)" to help teachers understand what it is to be gifted.

In an effort to help others understand the need gifted students have for specific programming, let's consider the analogy of an athlete. If you have a child who is naturally great at football, do you hold him back with his age level peers, where kids are learning to throw the football 20 feet? No, you find a league that will support his advanced natural abilities to throw across the field accurately, to kick field goals, and to tackle effectively. If we can identify that gifted athletes need special opportunities, why can't we see that for our gifted minded youth?

3. **'She can't be gifted, she doesn't get good grades:'** Again, confusing a gifted child with a bright high achieving child. Not that some gifted children aren't high achieving, but others can become [underachievers](#) due to boredom, bad study habits, or they may mask their abilities to try to fit in socially with their same-age peers. It's also possible they have a disability masking their giftedness. Along with this misconception is the idea that if a child is identified as gifted, they are gifted in all areas, which is a fallacy.

Some additional articles that might help you in discussions with those who don't understand giftedness:

["One of the Greatest Barriers to Gifted Education"](#) by Gail Post, Ph.D. explains how stereotyping is affecting gifted programming in our schools.

["Countering Misinformation: How Parents can Challenge Stereotypes and Misconceptions About Giftedness"](#) by Gail Post, Ph.D. offers some ways parents can educate others on giftedness.

["Equity & Gifted Children: A Father's Perspective"](#) by Dr. Donald Easton-Brooks looks at the similarities of special education and gifted education and services that lack for gifted students.

["A Story of Extremes - The 5th and 95th Percentiles"](#) by Tiffany Oft also compares special education and gifted education and makes some interesting observations.

National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) produced ["Myths about Gifted Students."](#)

["The "Me" Behind the Mask: Intellectually Gifted Students and the Search for Identity"](#) by Miraca U. M. Gross discusses the complex process some highly gifted children may go through in finding their personal identity.

["100 Words of Wisdom: Jim Delisle"](#) author of many books on giftedness reflects on a conversation with a gifted young man.

I would like to close this article with the highly regarded ["Is It a Cheetah?"](#) metaphor by Stephanie S. Tolan. I recommend you read it and pass it along to any and all who don't really understand giftedness.