

DISPELLING THE MYTHS ABOUT GIFTEDNESS

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What are gifted children really like? Are they puny weaklings with two left feet? Are they prone to physical and mental illness? Are they all social misfits? Will they be likely to burn out early or die young? No, none of the above is true. Yet misconceptions like these abound, and continue to injure the gifted. Here is a list of popular myths, some ancient and some new, with the short answer to each.

- *Is there such a thing as giftedness?*
Yes, giftedness is real.
- *Aren't all people gifted in some way?*
Every child is a gift. Every child is *not* gifted, just as every child is not mentally handicapped.
- *Don't all parents think their children are gifted?*
No. In actuality, parents have proven to be reliable and accurate identifiers of giftedness in their children. They are more likely to underestimate than overestimate their children's abilities. (Grandparents, however,...)
- *Doesn't this type of labeling give a child a swelled head?*
No, giftedness does not indicate greater worth; the gifted often feel like outsiders and the label is a relief that there isn't something terribly wrong with them.
- *Is giftedness just the result of "hothousing" by helicopter parents?*
High achievement may be the result of over-involved parents, but not giftedness. Like the developmentally delayed, the developmentally advanced come into the world that way.
- *Does giftedness disappear or cause untimely death ("Early ripe, early rot")?*
No, giftedness remains throughout the lifespan. Longevity is much more prevalent than early death.
- *Are people with unusual gifts born with some sort of compensating handicap?*
No, the "law of compensation" has been completely discredited. By giving the gifted person a handicap, we make it less desirable to be gifted, and we can dismiss the inequality. Giftedness is correlated with many positive variables.
- *Is there a link between giftedness and insanity?*
No, on the contrary, the gifted are less vulnerable to mental illness or mental deterioration in aging.
- *Are programs for gifted children elitist?*

No, programs for the gifted cure elitism. This may be the first opportunity a gifted child has to encounter others of similar ability.

- *Can't smart kids make it on their own?*

No, some gifted individuals drop out, become delinquent or commit suicide. Most gifted children underachieve; they sit and wait for others to grasp information they understood the first time, and practice poor study habits, since their work is not sufficiently challenging. There are countless cases of vanishing giftedness—those children whose talents are destroyed through lack of detection and development.

- *Won't the other kids catch up eventually?*

Just the opposite proves to be the case. It is not possible for other children to “catch up” to the gifted, because they have a different learning trajectory. The gifted hide their abilities when everyone has the same curriculum, when there is a glass ceiling on what they are allowed to learn, and when they are not allowed to learn at their own rate. When educated appropriately, the gap between the gifted and their age-mates widens each year.

- *Is the notion of giftedness obsolete? Shouldn't we be talking instead about talents in different domains or multiple intelligences or expertise developed through years of effort and practice?*

No. This is a confusion of giftedness with success—particularly recognized success of males.

The early myths attempted to offset the value of giftedness by presuming that there is some inherent flaw that accompanies a special talent. At the turn of the century, the “law of compensation” was believed as firmly as the law of gravity. The new myths do not attack the gifted, but rather provide excuses for neglecting them.

In their zeal to counter the prevailing myths, the early researchers were so successful that they inadvertently created a new myth of the gifted as superstar. Teachers began to believe that if a child is gifted in one area, he or she should be gifted in all areas and perfectly well-behaved. “If you're so gifted, why are you running down the hall?” “Why can't you tie your shoes?” “Why don't you have straight A's?” “How can you say Sallie is gifted when she spells so poorly?” These statements humiliate gifted children and negate special talents. This myth has made it difficult to identify twice exceptional children.

The goals of the educational process should not be the same for all students. One student needs to master enough basic mathematics to be able to balance a checkbook in adult life, while another needs to understand enough advanced mathematics to be able to discover a new source of energy. If the educational goal of one student is to be able to read books and the goal of another is to be able to write them, there is no point in keeping both of these students at the same level of instruction. This prevents the natural progress of the rapid learner and frustrates the slower one.

The most emotionally charged myth is the one that asserts that any grouping of gifted children will lead to elitism. Elitism is fostered by keeping gifted children with their non-gifted

age-mates, not by grouping them with one another. (One gets a warped idea of his place in the world when he is the top banana all the way through school without having to exert much effort.) For many students, placement in classes for the gifted is the first time they come across anyone as capable as themselves. They soon learn that there will always be someone smarter than them in some areas, and this breeds humility, not arrogance.

These myths are more than just inaccurate; they are destructive. They prevent the gifted child from being understood, accepted, and served appropriately by the school system. Some humiliate the child personally. Others are used as an excuse for negligence. The first step toward helping the gifted child is to eradicate these myths through awareness activities that involve the entire community: teachers, parents, students, and other community members.

What, then, does giftedness mean? Giftedness:

- is the mirror image of intellectual developmental disability (retardation);
- is developmental advancement (accelerated development through the developmental milestones);
- has been measurable for 100 years;
- is color blind;
- is gender blind;
- is present in all cultures;
- is distributed across all socio-economic levels;
- psychometrically encompasses 2 to 3 percent of the population;
- creates qualitatively different life experiences;
- means having significantly different needs;
- is the experience of being an outsider;
- requires early recognition and accommodations.

For expansion of this information, and the research supporting these statements, please see *Giftedness 101* by Linda Silverman (New York: Springer, 2013).