What Parents
(and Educators, Grandparents, Coaches…) Need to Know About Smart Kids

Austina De Bonte
President, NW Gifted Child Assoc.
Co-chair, Northshore HiCap Parents Council
I had no idea that my kid’s unique “quirks” were actually well-studied phenomenon that are common to large groups of highly intelligent children.

Knowing this changed how I parent in significant ways.

I hope it will help you, too.

Slides: http://www.nwgca.org/resources.html
Disclaimer: Your Mileage May Vary

I offer this presentation as a compilation of things I’ve found interesting or helpful, learned by reading books, consulting with professionals, attending conferences, participating in discussion groups, etc.

I cannot take responsibility for whether they work for you, as every situation, every child, and every family is different.

I offer this information as a starting place to help you and your family find the resources you need.

I’m sure there are other great ideas, people, places, research, and resources out there. If you find any, please tell me about it!

president@nwgca.org
This talk

- Invited to WAETAG Conference 2014 & 2015
  - WA Association of Educators of Talented and Gifted
- Parent audiences (plus some educators)
  - Wenatchee, Mount Vernon, Bellevue, Northshore, Bainbridge Island, Redmond, Lake Stevens, Edmonds, Dr. Cynthia Keller Pediatrician (Kirkland)
  - This spring: Issaquah, Everett/Mukilteo, Lynden
- Professional development for educators
  - Renton SD - HiCap Staff
  - Seattle Madison Middle School – All Staff
  - King Count Juvenile Court - King County Truancy District Reps
- Accepted to NAGC National Conference 2016
A Note

- I hate the word “gifted”
  - Poorly understood ("Every child is gifted")
  - Negative connotations
  - Many believe it is elitist
- But, it’s the term used by researchers and most professional organizations
- Synonyms
  - Smart, very bright, high intelligence, highly capable
  - NOT (necessarily) high-achieving
A few basics
“The Bell Curve”

Neurotypical
10 year old
IQ: 100
Mental Age: 10

IQ: 60
Mental Age: 6

IQ: 140
Mental Age: 14

Neurotypical

IQ Score

0.1% 2% 14% 95% 14% 2% 0.1%

55 70 85 100 115 130 145

Mildly Gifted (“Bright”)
Moderately Gifted
Highly Gifted
Profoundly Gifted

Mental Retardation
Moderate Retardation
Severe Retardation
Profound Retardation

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Asynchronous

- Different ability/maturity levels in different areas
- Example: a 5 year old
  - Doing math like an 8 year old
  - Reading like a 10 year old
  - Writing like a 6 year old
  - Emotional maturity of a 4 year old
  - Social maturity of an 8 year old
  - Social skills of a 5 year old
- Most gifted kids develop asynchronously
- Don’t assume a higher level of maturity...
- MYTH: “If she can’t do XX well, then she’s not gifted”
Equally Likely to Be Gifted

- Girls vs. boys
  - But girls are less likely to be referred for testing

- Poor vs. rich
  - But poor rely on public gifted programs more, “the rich have other options”

- English speaking vs. non native speakers

- Giftedness cuts across all socioeconomic groups, nations, ethnicities, race, cultures...
IQ runs in families

- Out of 148 sets of siblings
  - over 1/3 were within five IQ points of each other
  - over 3/5 were within 10 points
  - nearly 3/4 were within 13 points
- But second-born less likely to be tested
- Parents and grandparents too… 😊

(Silverman, 2009)
Twice-Exceptional - 2e

- Gifted AND
  - (Stealth) Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Dyspraxia
  - ADHD, Autism, Aspergers
  - Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), Auditory Processing (CAPD)
  - Anxiety, Depression, Mood Disorders, OCD, ...
  - Vision Processing Disorder (1 in 4, underdiagnosed, covd.org)

- Gifted program WITH IEP/504 accommodations

- Giftedness can mask learning disabilities
  - 2e kids can look very “average” at school and don’t get ID’d

- Beware of misdiagnosis
  - Common gifted traits mimic ADHD, Aspergers traits

- Diagnosis is tricky! Insist on an expert
Stealth Dyslexia

- In the gifted population
  - Dyslexia often manifests as problems with spelling, grammar, punctuation, conventions
  - Reading may be at or above grade level
  - Trouble with phonics, decoding unfamiliar words
- Early ID and intervention is important for long term success
- May not be formally diagnosed until middle or high school
Vision Processing Disorders

- How the brain processes what the eyes see
  - Convergence insufficiency, teaming, tracking, 3-D
- Common: 1 in 4 kids has issues
- May mimic dyslexia, ADHD
- Difficulty with standardized tests like ITBS & CogAT
- Only diagnosed by a developmental optometrist
  - Alderwood Vision Therapy (Lynnwood)
  - Dr. Pearson (Bellevue)
  - Dr. Neena Gabriel (Kirkland)
  - Covd.org for more listings
Auditory Processing Disorders

- How the brain processes what the ears hear
- One ear “hears” a split second sooner than the other
  - Dislike sudden noises, noisy environments, remembering multi-step directions, poor auditory memory, trouble distinguishing foreground/background conversation
  - Usually very acute hearing overall
- Only diagnosed by a specialist
  - Liz Zeitlin, NW Audiology (Issaquah)
  - ABLE Kids Foundation (Fort Collins, Colorado)
    - The only clinic in the world that makes an “ear filter”
    - One additional test – isolated words in background noise
Emotional life
Catch the Ball 😊

Shout out a personality characteristic of your gifted child

All of these characteristics can have both positive and negative aspects.
3 core personality traits

- perfectionism
- intensity
- sensitivity

SENG: Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (www.sengifted.org)

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Perfectionism

- Erase a hole in the paper
- Impatient with others, aren’t “doing it right”
- Meltdown at the first sign of trouble
- Can’t make a decision
- Hate criticism
- Trouble accepting compliments
- Dwell on mistakes
- Unwilling to start, afraid to try, “I don’t want to”
- Unrealistic goals
- May not reach for that “Extra Challenge” assignment...
Sensitivity

- Too loud: fireworks, movies, toilets
- Too scary: movies, even Disney ones!
- Scratchy tags in clothing, buttons, zippers
- Low pain tolerance
- Bathing/swimming: water in my eyes/nose!
- Sensitive to smells
- Picky eater, don’t like foods to touch, textures
- Food sensitivities/allergies
- Big reactions to minor setbacks, overreacts to discipline
- Sensory seeking - loves snuggling, soft fabrics...
- Or, hates to be touched...
Intensity

- Tears of joy at a beautiful sunset
- So focused they don’t “hear” you
- Obsessions about a topic of interest
- Difficulty with transitions
- Big focus on fairness
- Competitive: most, best, fastest, highest
- Intense nightmares, fears
- Sleep issues, hard to settle down to sleep
- Major meltdowns
- Mood swings: higher highs, lower lows
- Stubborn, strong-willed, inflexible
Overexcitabilities -

- Dabrowski’s 5 “super-stimulabilities”
  - Psychomotor
  - Sensual
  - Imaginational
  - Intellectual
  - Emotional
- Hard wired in central nervous system, not just psychological
  - Experience a more intense reaction
  - For a longer period than normal
  - To a stimulus that may be very small
- Honor it! Coach how to cope with it, not change it

Sensory OEs to an extreme…

Sensory Processing Disorder
Sensory Integration Disorder
Central Auditory Processing Disorder (CAPD, APD)

“The Highly Sensitive Person”
“The Out of Sync Child”
Occupational Therapy (OT)
Wilbarger Skin Brushing

OEs aren’t an accident; they support higher intelligence.

More energetic
Imagine deeper
More curious
Hear more
See more
Feel deeper
Other common traits

- Deep empathy for others
- Sincere concern for social justice, world issues
  - Activism, despair
  - Turn concern into ACTION
- Anxiety, worries & fears
  - Links to imaginational OE or perfectionism
- Existential angst & depression
  - “Nothing really matters,” fascination with death
- Imposter syndrome
- Food allergies & sensitivities
  - Artificial colors, gluten, dairy, etc.
Coaching Intense Emotions

- Anxiety, anger, fear
  - Leads to aggression, tantrums, withdrawal
- Is this a “baby” problem or a “giant” problem?
  - On a scale of 1 to 10, engage logical reasoning
- Your child may not be able to get over the initial hump on their own
  - Goal setting
  - Carrots & sticks
  - Sometimes they need a push
    - Hold accountable, insist on finishing, sit with the tantrum
- Food really matters
  - Protein and fats at every snack: “feed your brain”
Taming the Worry Monster

- From Dan Peters, Summit Center
- Amygdala is the seat of emotion & worry
  - Tries to trick you, exaggerates, lies, “takes over”
- Big brain surrounds the tiny amygdala
- Use your big brain to keep your amygdala from taking over
  - Keep your brain fed and strong
  - “Boss it back!”
Executive function
AND A LITTLE NEUROSCIENCE
Executive Function

“If I’m so gifted, why can’t I find my keys?”
- Or homework, lunchbox, jacket...

Organizational
- Multitasking, keep track of more than one thing at once
- Planning, time management, breaking down tasks
- Sustaining attention through distraction

Regulation
- Impulse control, inhibition, self-control
- Waiting to speak until it’s your turn
- Mental flexibility
- Initiating, getting started
“The most agile minds had the most agile cortex.”

Figure 1.2  Changes in the thickness of the brain's cortex between the ages of 7 and 19 in individuals of superior, high, and average intelligence.

Source: Adapted from Shaw et al., 2006.
Empirical evidence agrees…

“Kids who had higher IQs to begin with seemed to have an extended period in adolescence during which they retained the ability to learn at a rapid pace, just like much younger children.”

Angela Brant & John Hewitt, Institute for Behavioral Genetics at the University of Colorado

But there is a downside...

- The later maturation of the cortex may explain why gifted kids tend to lag in executive function skills compared to neurotypical agemates.

- But most do catch up eventually...in their 20s.

- This population needs MORE scaffolding & support for executive function.
  - Similar to students with ADHD.
Executive Function

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Social Life
Introverts vs. Extroverts

- **Introverts**
  - Get energy by being *alone*
  - Stereotype: quiet, shy, reserved, need processing time, think before talking, prefer 1-on-1 over groups, want a few good friends
  - But, some can be very social as well!

- **Extroverts**
  - Get energy by being *with other people*
  - Stereotype: outgoing, enjoy parties, think out loud, want to have lots of friends
Independent vs. Conformist

- Independent
  - March to their own drummer
  - Their personal opinion matters more than the group
  - “To thine own self be true”

- Conformist
  - Want to be with the group
  - Will bend their desires to go with the group
  - Want to blend in, fit in
  - Sensitive to peer pressure
30% of the general population are introverts

60% of gifted children are introverts

75% of highly gifted children are introverts

60% of gifted children are independent
“When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often ‘a friend’. The children’s experience of school is completely colored by the presence or absence of friends.”

(Silverman, 1993)
Social mismatch

- More complex vocabulary
- More involved games, stricter rules, fairness
- Interested in niche topics, ask unusual questions
- “Let’s look for letters in the trees!” – 5 year old
- Kids realize very early - they are somehow different
- Social development requires PRACTICE

Results:
- Gravitate to older kids (similar mental age)
- Become a little adult (adults are easier to understand and relate to)
- Dumb themself down to fit in
- Feel like they have to “fake it” to make a friend
- Lonely, social isolation (even if they have playmates)
Social maturity

- **Stage 1:** “Play Partner”
- **Stage 2:** “People to chat to”
  - sharing of interests
- **Stage 3:** “Help and encouragement”
  - uni-directional
- **Stage 4:** “Intimacy/empathy”
  - bi-directional
- **Stage 5:** “The sure shelter”
  - PG 6-7 year old vs. neurotypical 11-12 year old
  - “A friend is a place you go to when you need to take off the masks. You can take off your camouflage with a friend and still feel safe.”

On average, the higher the IQ, the more mature a social relationship the child is seeking.

(Gross, 2002) study of 700 gifted & non

http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10400.aspx

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Asynchronous social development

- Desire higher maturity level relationships
- **BUT,** may lack practical social & friendship **skills**
  - Some kids need to be explicitly taught the rules of social conduct
  - Or, lack of practice
  - Or, just average social skills
- **ALSO,** there’s a difference between
  - Knowing what to do (“Smile and say hello”) vs.
  - Actually doing it (“I don’t want to”)
- **OR,** a child may have great social skills
  - Can flex to match interests, play patterns with others
  - But still longs for “someone who really gets me”
How it plays out over time

- Biggest social maturity gap ages 4-9
  - Gifted kids looking for deeper relationships
  - But, other kids still pretty inclusive
  - No one really understands me, “silent suffering”
- Social mismatch becomes visible in 4th-5th grade
  - Left out of parties, playdates, playground games
- Why? Neurotypical kids shifted to higher levels of social relationships
  - More focus on shared interests
  - Friends who are “just like me,” cliques begin
  - Fewer birthday parties inviting the whole class
Socially sensitive

► An offhand comment from a peer can cause serious turmoil

► Intense response to perceived rejection
  ► No one reached out to invite me to play the game
  ► He hates me, she thinks I’m stupid
  ► I don’t have any friends

► Coaching
  ► Is it really true? Engage logical reasoning.
  ► “Playful” teasing vs. “hurtful” teasing
  ► Waiting for an invitation rarely works…
Consider this scenario…

- A gifted kid enters preschool with age-appropriate social skills
- In school, feels “different” from other kids, desires deep friendship, but doesn’t find it
- After a few years, starts falling behind in social skill development due to lack of practice
- Lack of social skills makes it even harder for them to flex to find common interests with agemates.
- Loses confidence due to perceived rejection.
- Kid is visibly struggling socially, and the parent believes that kids “need to be able to get along with all kinds of people in this world”

What should the parent do?
Solving this scenario

- When a kid is struggling, do you:
  - (a) Keep throwing them into the deep end of the pool
  - (b) Put them in the shallow end with a float and a teacher

- Make the environment easier, so that they can get skill development back on track
  - Group together with true peers
  - Coaching & support

- Neurotypical kids don’t need to bridge these asynchronies to develop socially
  - This is an unrealistic challenge for a gifted kid who is not also gifted socially
Solving this scenario

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Even better, prevent this scenario by providing true peers from the beginning
Peer relationships

- **Goal: Find my tribe**
- **What is a true peer?**
  - Similar age?
  - Similar grade level in school?
  - Similar abilities?
  - Similar maturity level?
  - Similar interests?
- **Ideally, all of these**
  - School programs with similarly gifted age-mates
- **Not always possible to find**
  - The higher the IQ, the more compromise is needed

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A portfolio of friends

- 4H/girl scouts/boy scouts/campfire
- Sports teams
- Classmates
- Neighborhood kids
- First Lego League, Destination Imagination, …
- Math Club, Science Club, Olympiads, …
- Enrichment & summer camps for gifted
  - UW Robinson Center, CTY, SIG, Davidson, Yunasa
  - Full list: [http://www.nwgca.org](http://www.nwgca.org) (Resources)
School Life
3 Factors in a Good School Fit

- **Level**
  - Appropriate level of challenge
  - Enrichment vs. acceleration

- **Pace**
  - Gifted learners need 1-3 repetitions
  - Neurotypical learners need 6-8 repetitions

- **Peers**
  - True peers to discuss, challenge each other, work together, etc.
  - Optimal for social development
When the school doesn’t fit…

- Constantly ask probing questions
  - Annoy teacher & other kids
- Trouble socializing with other kids
  - Lack of common interests
  - Advanced vocabulary
- Dumb themselves down to “fit in”
  - Consciously or subconsciously
  - Particularly gifted girls going “underground”
- Become the class clown
  - Or the dreamer, the loner, or the victim…
  - Or the A+ student!
Gifted programs help kids socially

Gifted children have better social adjustment in classes with children like themselves.

The brighter the child, the lower his or her social self-concept is likely to be in the regular classroom.

Social self-concept improves when children are placed with true peers in special classes.
Why not put one gifted kid in each classroom? Doesn’t that help other kids?

- Gifted kids are NOT role models
- When other kids look at the natural abilities of gifted students, they only get discouraged that there’s no way they could possibly “catch up.”
- When gifted learners are removed from the classroom, other bright kids step up and become more meaningful classroom leaders.

(Delisle & Galbraith, 2003; Winebrenner and Devlin, 2001; Shunk 1998; Kulik & Kulik 1993)
Won’t kids get arrogant if they are in a gifted program?

Actually, when kids are among true peers they are no longer the smartest kid in the room

- Humble
- Get challenged by peers
- Develop true self-confidence, self-reliance

Kids realized they are somehow different in preschool or kindergarten…they already know.
Is it OK for school to be easy?

- If a gifted child is allowed to “skate” through regular classrooms where they pick up the new ideas seemingly without trying, they never learn how to tackle a genuinely hard problem.

- Eventually, they find themselves in middle school geometry, or high school physics, and are faced for the very first time with a topic that is not intuitive for them—and have no experience, no strategies, and limited emotional reserves to tackle it.

(Dweck 2007, Cross 2002)
Shocking statistics

- 10%-20% of high school dropouts test in the gifted range (Rimm, 2003)
- 18%-25% of gifted learners drop out of high school (nagc.org)
- Up to 20% of the prison population is gifted (Streznewski)
Grit is more important than IQ

- Duckworth & Seligman studied success at:
  - West Point Military Academy
  - National Spelling Bee
  - Adolescents: High school juniors, 8th graders

- “It wasn't social intelligence. It wasn't good looks, physical health, and it wasn't IQ. It was grit.”

- “Self-discipline predicted academic performance more robustly than did IQ.”

- “In our data, grit is usually unrelated or even inversely related to measures of talent.”

Duckworth grit scale
http://www.sas.upenn.edu/~duckwort/images/12-item%20Grit%20Scale.05312011.pdf
**Mindset**, Carol Dweck

“The Perils and Promises of Praise”

- **“Effort Effect”**
  - Kids who were told they were smart didn’t try as hard next time
  - Kids who were praised for effort did better

- **Takeaways**
  - Don’t praise kids for being smart
  - Praise effort and progress (not results)
    - “Keep on trying…”
    - “Practice really works!”
    - “The brain is like a muscle. It needs a workout to get stronger.”

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Smart kids are at risk

- Less personal experience with challenge and effort
  - Fewer opportunities to practice
- So, less likely to develop
  - Growth mindset, Grit, Perseverance
  - Tolerance for failure
  - Time management, study skills
- It’s hard to truly challenge a gifted kid
  - They are capable of a LOT more than they let on
  - Perfectionism leads them to stay away from challenges that they aren’t sure they can tackle
  - Need a LOT of support from teachers to stretch out of their comfort zone and really put forth effort
Underachievement

- Has its roots in 1st, 2nd, 3rd grade

“When they start to underachieve, the natural response for self-preservation is to actually stop caring. They're like: "I don't care about school anymore, this is stupid, this is boring." You'd rather be disengaged and do bad, than TRY and do bad.

Typically, over time we start to see elements of anxiety and depression that kick in.”

- Dr. Dan Peters, Summit Center
Underachievement: Other Causes

- Dumbing down to fit in socially
- Learning disabilities (2e) may be hidden until the material gets challenging enough
- Delayed development of executive function
- Under-challenging curriculum: “this is pointless”

Underachievement – very difficult to reverse
http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/underachievement.htm

- Prevention is everything!
I never recognized myself as gifted, and school came easy to me. I never learned to study until I almost failed my first year of college. Kids who weren't as smart as me, had skills that I had never learned, and understood how to work the system, it was humiliating to figure that out the hard way.
I was never challenged in school until college, and I almost lost an academic scholarship my first semester because I had never learned how to study or work hard!

My whole concept of self was shaken when I finally "failed" at something.
“I’m not good at things I’m not good at.”
“Equity” does not mean the “same” education for every kid

- Different kids are in different places
- Every kid should learn something new at school every day
  - Vygostky’s Zone of Proximal Development
- Not **MORE** work, **DIFFERENT** work
  - Not just more classwork on top of the “regular” stuff
  - Make sure the kid doesn’t feel punished for being smart by giving them more work
- Piles of homework is NOT the goal
- Not a pressure cooker, just the right level
Now What?
Bottom line...

Smart is NOT Easy
So what do I tell my kid?

- Talk to them about being gifted
  - They already sensed they were somehow different
  - Their brain works differently than for other kids
  - They are more sensitive (they aren’t dreaming it)
  - They learn at a different rate, and sometimes with a different style
- Talk about the many faces of perfectionism
- **DO NOT** praise them for being smart
  - Praise & reinforce effort, perseverance, progress
  - You only grow if you do challenging things

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Now that you know…what’s next?

- Take stock of your parenting techniques
- Advocate for your kids’ needs
  - Positive, cooperative relationship with teacher
- Learn more: books, websites, conferences, etc.
- Get resources
  - Therapy, enrichment, social skills groups…
- Support gifted legislation
  - Join the WA Coalition for Gifted Education
  - Tell your representatives that you care about gifted education ([http://app.leg.wa.gov/districtfinder/](http://app.leg.wa.gov/districtfinder/))
  - Donate to NWGCA ([www.nwgca.org](http://www.nwgca.org))
What you might be feeling

- Grief…that your child is not “normal”
- Guilt…that you should have done something differently in the past

Remember that these are kids
- They need DOWNTIME
- Don’t overschedule with every stimulating experience you can think of
- Follow the child’s lead, don’t push
- Be selective with therapy, it’s a long term journey
- Not all gifted kids are born to be scientists and mathematicians
- They may take a different path than you expected
Upcoming Dates

Bring your spouse, friends, neighbors! 😊

**April 5, 2016:** 6:30pm
Explorer Middle School
900 Sharon Drive, Everett

Future dates for this presentation will be posted at:
http://www.nwgca.org/events.html

Yes, this FREE presentation can be given as professional development for educators.

Invite us: info@nwgca.org
Thank You 😊

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