Alex's Gifts

BY AN ANONYMOUS PARENT

ALEX is clearly gifted when observed through one lens and yet obviously lagging when viewed from a different angle. He knew his letters at 20 months, but didn't learn to tie his shoes until the middle of second grade. He taught himself to read just before his third birthday, but in third grade he still doesn't have any close friends. He reveled in his discovery of factorials shortly after he turned 5, yet stubbing his toe can trigger an hours-long meltdown even as he approaches his 9th birthday. Alex's academic gifts are stunning, but so are his emotional and interpersonal shortcomings.

Alex is the oldest of three siblings ages 8, 5, and 3. He was born when we were 30 years old, and we had minimal contact with infants or small children until he arrived. Aside from the woman at the local Thai restaurant predicting when he was in utero that he would be very smart, the pregnancy and birth were normal. He was a healthy, happy infant, achieving the usual developmental milestones at the expected times until he was 15–18 months old.

Not having much experience with children, we didn't realize it when he started outpacing his toddler peers. It didn't seem unusual that he could do simple jigsaw puzzles at 18 months when we also knew that he did not say many words. He began counting objects at 21 months and also recognized most of the alphabet. At 23 months he called himself "A-L-E-X Alex" and shouted out the letters H-O-L-Y B-I-B-L-E in the middle of Christmas Eve church services. He was very entertaining, and we were entirely oblivious to our unusual situation. We knew he was intelligent, but were unaware that he was gifted.

Somewhere in his terrible twos, we recognized that he was not only tremendously stubborn but also an extraordinarily bright boy. This realization shared space in our psyches with a difficult pregnancy resulting in the birth of Alex's sister shortly before his third birthday. During the 4–5 months prior to his party, we were consumed with pregnancy complications. Concurrently, it was clear that Alex was getting the academic stimulation he craved at his daily Montessori program. The intersection of these events directed us to try to improve his social skills. Although he was obviously ahead of the curve academically, he had difficulty relating to his peers and would choose independent activities over social interaction. We wanted to turn his attention to developing his interpersonal skills because his sister's arrival was imminent and we wanted him to develop peer friendships.

Alex had other ideas about where his efforts should be focused. While we were trying to teach him to say "please," "thank you," and "excuse me," he decided to teach himself to read. To our amazement, a month before his third birthday he could read simple words. It wasn't long before he could read anything he wanted. It was at this point that we realized, as Alex's parents, we were beginning a lifelong search for balance—for him and for the rest of the family.

Because his interests were and are mostly academic, we try to encourage these foci while also continuing to foster peer relationships. Alex's preferred activities are so different from most children his age that he finds it difficult to begin and to maintain friendships. After all, most people strike up relationships with peers who have similar interests and maintain those that include people who have outlooks or ideals like their own. A preschooler who cubes numbers and knows the capital of Mongolia finds it difficult to locate someone with his interests and life experiences. So does an 8-year-old who does algebra and can hum Australia's national anthem. While we applaud and encourage Alex's academic progress, we also want to see him develop socially.

Along this vein, we try to find peers with one similar interest, say chess, and foster that relationship with the hope that other intersections will develop. The most successful result is that Alex now gets along well with his classmates and can function in the school environment with little difficulty. He plays with other children at recess and navigates social interactions in the academic environment. He has yet to find a best friend, but his sister and brother force him to deal with a variety of social situations and to develop appropriate interpersonal connections. The best thing for Alex is having two siblings who are bright and who interact with other people in the expected fashion.

Of course, having three children means that we have to balance all of their needs. This is true for any family with multiple children, but more so for a household where one member's skills are extraordinary enough to consistently draw an unequal portion of the available attention. Sometimes, Alex is willing to share his knowledge with his siblings, thereby teaching them academic information while he acquires social skills in return. We also make sure the other two kids know that they have special gifts as well—a sense of humor, being a good friend, a loving personality, caring for other people. They are intelligent, so they see their academic skills developing and they accept that Alex is older and therefore knows more. Sometimes the younger kids have to sacrifice their time to observe or participate in something beyond their comprehension and other times Alex is forced to go to the park or endure a festival in the name of family entertainment.

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Because Alex's talents lend themselves to sedentary activities, we try to balance these interests with physical exercise. Often it takes real effort to get him outside, but once he's there he plays tag or ball with his brother and sister. He also goes through spurts of shooting hoops, hitting a baseball, or tossing the football on his own. The 2005 NCAA basketball tournament caught Alex's attention and years later it still leads him to reenact college games where he scores for both teams (thereby turning basketball into a math exercise). Recently, the best motivating factor for getting him moving comes from school; he learned in health class that exercise is an important component of being

a healthy human being. Because he tries to be perfect, this is one of the few times where his drive for flawlessness comes in handy.

This perfectionism is difficult most other times. His intelligence allows him to learn many things quickly and to do them correctly with little effort. When he is unable to pick up skills easily, he often gives up or will not attempt an activity if he believes he will not succeed immediately. This is not necessarily true in academics where he feels comfortable with his skills, but in social or physical coordination arenas he often withdraws. We consistently express that we expect only a whole-hearted attempt and that perfection is impossible for humans, but this is an area that continues to challenge Alex. It helps when he sees us make mistakes (which we sometimes overtly make). We also attempt to show how we mitigate the effects of the error through laughter or by correcting the mistake.

Another point of balance comes with pride in Alex's accomplishments. We love him and he is our child, therefore we derive great pleasure from talking about him. We continually learn from him and want to share that with others. When does that become bragging? Does anyone believe that these things happen? Sometimes the stories sound very unlikely.

At age 4, Alex was playing with foam numbers in the tub. He was using seven different digits to create 7-digit numbers. After re-scrambling the digits three or four times, he came to an important realization: "Wow, it's going to take me a *really* long time to make all the numbers that I can make with these digits." Given his interest, we helped him compute how many possible 7-digit numbers exist. Through the Socratic method, we assisted Alex in determining for himself that there were 7 x 6 x 5 x 4 x 3 x 2 x 1 (i.e., 7 factorial) possible 7-digit combinations that could be constructed. This is how Alex discovered factorials.

The next day, he offered the following observation to his father: "Daddy, any number factorial must be equal to zero because if you start at a number and then keep multiplying it by the next lower number until you get to zero, then you will end up multiplying the total by zero, and anything times zero is equal to zero." When informed that the definition of a factorial is to stop multiplying at one instead of at zero, Alex unhesitatingly responded, "Well, in that case, we don't have to go all the way to one; we can stop at two, because after we multiply by two, then whatever the answer is, if we then multiply it by one, we will still have the same answer."

A more philosophical example occurred at age 5. After several time outs during the day for behavioral issues, Alex excitedly initiated the following exchange:

Alex:	"Mommy, Daddy, I thought of the hardest question in the world."
Mommy:	"Yes, Alex, what is it?"
Alex:	"Who made God?"

As we struggled to reply, he walked away. It turns out that he wasn't really interested in the answer to the question. Instead, the question *was* the answer: The real question that he was pondering was, "What is the hardest question in the world?" The answer was "Who made God?" When he came to us, he wasn't really interested in us telling him who made God, he simply wanted to report the findings to his own research problem.

We try to discuss Alex's achievements both rationally and minimally. I'm sure we sometimes go overboard, but it is important for Alex to know that we are proud of him and his successes. After all, we often focus, with professional help, on the areas where he needs improvement. As with everything else, we try to walk that fine line between not enough and too much when discussing Alex's talents.

Parenting Alex presents us with some of our biggest challenges and he gives us more than we imagined a child could give to his family. We have received endless lessons in the amazing capacity of the human brain and in how deep our reserves of patience really go. We all continue to work hard at making our household peaceable and balanced. Our family is better for having him in it, and he is more complete as part of our circle. GCT

Parent Resources

Barkley, R. A., & Benton, C. M. (1998). *Your defiant child: 8 steps to better behavior*. New York: The Guilford Press.

Greene, R. W. (2005). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children*. New York: Harper.

Gurian, M. (1999). *The good son: Shaping the moral development of our boys and young men.* New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam.

Kurcinka, M. S. (2000). *Kids, parents, and power struggles: Winning for a lifetime*. New York: HarperCollins.

Kurcinka, M. S. (1998). *Raising your spirited child: A guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, energetic*. New York: HarperPerennial.

Nelson, J., Erwin, C., & Duffy, R. (1998). *Positive discipline for preschoolers: For their early years—raising children who are responsible, respectful, and resourceful* (2nd ed.). Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing.

Phelan, T. W. (2003). *1-2-3 magic: Effective discipline for children 2–12* (3rd ed.). Glen Ellyn, IL: Parent Magic.

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Differentiation: Asset or Liability for Gifted Education?

The proliferation of definitions and practices related to differentiation has resulted in the overpopularization and subsequent diffusion of the term. The concept of differentiation has been used traditionally to recognize and support the differing needs, abilities, and interest of students. Today, this very same term could become a liability for gifted education. Ideas used to advocate on behalf of a cause have a definitive life span. The question is whether the idea of differentiation is at the point when it has lost its vitality to be a part of the advocacy efforts on behalf of gifted students.

The point where differentiation becomes a liability rather than an asset to gifted students is when it loses its identity as a defined and specific set of curricular and instructional practices. When differentiation assumes its definition in relationship to the contemporary demands of the public and educators rather than retaining its definition as a response to student-centered issues and needs, it is possible that the effectiveness of differentiation to advocate for students is compromised. The comprehensiveness of the definition of differentiation as a means to recognize how individuals differ in the context of teaching and learning must be held constant if differentiation is to be an integral feature of the advocacy platform for gifted students.

The point where differentiation becomes a liability rather than an asset to gifted education is when the term is used as a subtle means to exaggerate differences among learners and subsequently to create the very elitist perceptions of gifted education that most advocates are trying to dispel. When differentiation is used to justify educational practices that alter the ends or goals of learning rather than the means to these ends, it has the potential to become a deterrent rather than a facilitator to the education of gifted students. For example, during the study of the Industrial Revolution, the teacher differentiated for gifted students by defining their goal to write a persuasive essay to substantiate the positions of either the roles of employers or employees regarding working conditions. Other students in the class were assigned the task of completing a paragraph by filling in words or drawing a picture to depict their position related to the same issue. If the teacher had considered that all students regardless of their abilities needed to learn how to write a persuasive essay and had adjusted the levels of success to meet individual or group abilities to attain the same goal, differentiation could have been an asset rather than a source of ire by peers and parents. When the practices of differentiation resemble the practices of tracking or are perceived as the right of a teacher to establish predetermined or fixed ends for students that inhibit their opportunities to learn, differentiation has the potential of becoming a liability to the very populations it is trying to serve. When the practices of differentiation are recognized as the obligation of the teacher to adjust the teaching and learning means to the fixed or defined outcomes of learning, differentiation has the potential to serve the needs of all students, as well as to underscore the needs of the gifted students.

The misuse and abuse of any educational practice have ramifications that diffuse its original intent. Educators of the gifted can use the popularity of the concept of differentiation as an important catalyst to support the education of gifted students as long as they are clear about the intent of differentiation and the elements that must be included in defining the concept in order for it to be an asset to gifted students. GCT