



Joseph

by Kimberly Leigh

When Joseph was just a baby of 6 months old, I had a friend with a little girl just 1 week older than Joe. I remember her commenting on how he didn't just shove things into his mouth to suck on them like most babies do. He examined them first. He looked at the object from all angles, turning it over and over in his hands, and studying it intently before shoving it into his mouth.

At 9 months, he would sit quietly for hours looking through books. It amazed me that he would not only always have the book right side up, but that he would turn and study every page before going on. Family and friends couldn't get over how long he would sit and do this. By now, he was saying quite a few words. He used to love to watch "Sesame Street." He would repeat the letters and numbers that were said and before we knew it, he was singing the alphabet. At this time, he also loved to sit on his father's lap at the keyboard and find the different letters and type them

onto the screen. With a little prompting from his dad, he was very quickly typing out words like *mom*, *dad*, and *Joe*. We started buying him educational computer games to learn the letters, numbers, shapes, and colors. He loved them. Just from watching his dad doing things on the computer, by the time he was 4, he knew more about the computer than I did. If I was having a problem getting something to work on the computer and his dad wasn't home, I could ask Joe and most of the time, he could fix the problem for me.

He quickly became a very articulate child. People used to always believe that he was a lot older than he really was. We never spoke "baby talk" to him, but at the same time, we never purposely spoke above his level trying to force his progress. We always took our cue from him. He was a very curious child and would ask questions like "Why is the sky blue?" and "Where does the rain come from?" So, I started getting him books made for

kids that answer these kinds of questions—books with titles such as *1000 Fantastic Facts* (McKie & Royston, 1995) and *The Kids' Fun-Filled Question & Answer Book* (Resnick, 1998). We also watched educational shows on television together such as "Bill Nye the Science Guy," "Kratts' Creatures" (a show about animals), and other educational shows on the Discovery Channel. We also borrowed fun, educational tapes from the library, eventually watching every one that the library had to offer, which, believe me, was a lot.

We knew at age 4 that he would be ready to start kindergarten during the year that he turned 5. Unfortunately, the cutoff date to turn 5 is the beginning of September in Champaign, IL, and his birthday is the end of October. Luckily, University Primary School (UPS) agreed to test him to see if he could enter early and thankfully, they accepted him.

The project-based open classroom concept used at UPS was a great fit for

Joseph. It gave him a strong foundation to begin his accelerated education that continues to this date. This K/1 class allowed him to ask many questions and explore the different possible solutions, giving him the different avenues in which to find the answers. It allowed him to continue being excited about learning and allowed his natural curiosity to flourish. It did not limit his questions, answers, or topics to explore. We tried to follow the same philosophy at home. If he wanted to conduct some type of experiment to see what happens, we tried to encourage it. For example, if he wanted to see how different liquids froze, I would have different containers freezing in my freezer, or we would boil a supersaturated sugar solution to then watch the crystals that formed after cooling, and so on.

As a family, we did a lot of traveling. One of his favorite games to do in the car was to have us give him math questions and he would figure them out in his head. He loved to try to beat me at coming up with the answers and succeeded many times.

I've been told that gifted children can also be very sensitive, and we found this out when Joe was in kindergarten. Joe wanted a baby brother and was very excited when he found out that I was pregnant. Unfortunately, at 10 weeks, I had a miscarriage. Joe took it extremely hard and began to become obsessed with the concept of mortality, especially his own. It took many months before he quit fearing death and was able to move on. (A few years later, he did get the baby brother he wanted so badly, and he doted on him the first 4 years of his life. Now, they squabble like regular siblings do.)

Joe's teachers told me that he was well liked by his classmates, that he had a leadership quality about him. He was so mature that he came across like

a big brother to the other kids, which they liked. We were told that the kids used to fight over who would sit next to him during group time. As nice as this was to hear, being his mother, I was concerned that although he was nice to other kids, socially he wasn't necessarily making close friends. He tended to concentrate all his efforts on academics, and I wanted him to be a more well-rounded person. So, we had him take up soccer and join Cub Scouts. Sports have never been Joe's forte, but, to his credit, he did participate in soccer for 3 or 4 years before deciding to quit. However, Scouts was a different story. He loved going to Scouts with his dad (who ended up being a Scout leader). It was a good bonding experience for them. They came to love the outdoors: hiking and camping and hanging out with other guys. He made some good friends and is now one step away from becoming an Eagle Scout, which is the highest rank one can get in Boy Scouts.

After UPS, which only goes to grade 1, Joe tested into the self-contained gifted classes for grades 2–5 in one of Champaign's public schools. Here, he continued to flourish. This program allows the children to progress at an accelerated pace with peers who are as excited about learning as they are. He joined extra groups such as a "Space Day" group that designed and created a mock model of a rover that would explore Europa, one of the moons of Jupiter. They entered it into a contest put on by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). They won in their category and age group and won a trip to the Aerospace Museum in Washington, DC, for an awards ceremony. He began taking violin lessons on his lunch hour. Also, during this time, Joe was reading an average of one fictional chapter book a week. Originally, I was buying them, but very quickly realized that at that

rate, I needed to start borrowing them from the library.

Something that we both had to learn during this time was that he also needed some de-stressing time. This accelerated program came with a lot of homework, so much so that I was trying to get him to sit down and do it as soon as he got home from school so that he wouldn't be up really late trying to get it done. However, I began to notice that he would sit there and daydream and dilly-dally and it would take him four times as long as it should have. I asked his teacher about it, and she said he didn't do that in class; he got right to work. She suggested that I give him at least a half hour down time when he got home to de-stress from the day before tackling his homework. Let him have a snack, watch a half-hour TV program or play video games, or go outside before sitting down to work. This would give him time to regenerate and maybe then he'd be able to focus better. It worked.

Grade 6 was completed at the Geneva English School in Switzerland where his father was doing a sabbatical for the year. The main complaint from his teacher there was that he couldn't come up with enough things to keep him challenged. However, he was very happy that Joe was motivating other kids in the class to try to be better than him. Some things Joe did come away with from that year were learning French, as well as a great life experience of traveling around Europe.

He then entered University Laboratory High School (Uni) back in Champaign, a 5 year-accelerated high school program that allowed him to skip grade 7. He joined the orchestra after deciding to switch from the violin to the cello, which he taught himself to play. He entered a national math contest, and he and three fellow classmates came in fourth in his grade

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level in a relay contest. He will be a senior this fall and continues to excel in a lot of things he does. He's also made a couple of really close friends, also gifted kids from Uni, who like to go to each other's houses and play video games together. I think this is great because even gifted kids need some down time sometimes—time to get their minds off academics and just have some fun and be kids.

I guess the main ideas that I've come away with is to allow and even encourage your child to ask questions

and explore the different answers, give positive acknowledgement to what he or she does, and get excited with him or her at learning new things. Surrounding your child with peers who are also excited about learning helps a lot. So, if there are programs in which your child can participate with others who also get excited about learning, go for it. And at the same time, let your kid be a kid. Encourage his academic learning, but also show him that having fun once in a while and being a well-rounded person will make him be a much happier person. **GCT**

Books Joseph Enjoyed Reading

- Farndon, J. (2000). *4000 things you should know*. Essex, NJ: Miles Kelly.
- McKie, A., & Royston, G. (1995). *1000 fantastic facts*. London: Grandreams Limited.
- Parker, S. (1993). *The Random House book of how nature works*. New York: Random House.
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materials in hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of ways, can you imagine how many languages they could speak?

The Reggio Emilia schools were stellar examples of appropriate learning environments where teachers could nurture strengths, potentials, and diverse needs of young children. I shared my experiences in order to encourage others to visit the schools in Reggio Emilia, and to be inspired as I was to offer young children hundreds and hundreds of languages to develop their various gifts and talents. **GCT**

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of cutting behavior, unlike tattooing and piercing, is rooted in experiences of emotional pain. Cutting seems to provide temporary solace to the person who engages in this self-injurious act.

It is important to watch for signs of emotional distress among our gifted population and to seek counseling support if there is any evidence of cutting or scratching having taken place. This particular set of behaviors requires the assistance of experts in the psychological arena and fall well outside the realm

of typical patterns of social and emotional needs of gifted students. With vigilance in looking for and referring children who show evidence of these self-injurious acts, we can help them through this difficult and complicated period of their lives by providing the emotional safety net they need. **GCT**

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