

SUPPORTING GIFTED PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.	Introduction.....	3
2.	What we mean by advanced cognitive development.....	3
3.	The term 'gifted'.....	3
4.	Supporting gifted children.....	3
	FIVE KEY STRATEGIES TO USE.....	4
	Strategy 1: Grouping.....	4
	Strategy 2: Be flexible with time.....	4
	Strategy 3: Increase the level of challenge and complexity.....	4
	Strategy 4: Stimulate high level thinking.....	5
	Strategy 5: Collaboratively explore learning games and other resources.....	5
5.	The role of play and the environment.....	5
6.	The need to make adjustments.....	5
7.	Web sites for young children and adults to explore together.....	6



1. Introduction

Every child is unique and there will always be variation in the rates at which young children develop and reach milestones in each aspect of their development: from learning to walk and talk through to toilet training and dressing themselves. From birth, some children consistently show behaviours that indicate they are developing more rapidly than usual, in one or more areas of development.

Parents are often the first to notice that their child is developing differently to other children. Research shows that parents are the most reliable source of information about their child's development, their interests, and the way that they learn. Parents have a critical role to play as their child's first educator.

2. What we mean by advanced cognitive development

We refer to the development of a child's thinking and mental functioning as their 'cognitive development'. For some children it naturally progresses rapidly from a very young age, without any 'coaching' from parents. The adults around a child may notice that they are able to remember and retell events in greater detail than expected, often using a very broad vocabulary. They may complete more advanced puzzles, play games with quite complex rules, and explain their understanding of the world in ways that might be expected from much older children.

It is important to know that advanced cognitive development does not necessarily mean that other areas of the child's development (for example their fine motor control), will be advanced too. Their development may be average or even slower than other children of the same age in some other areas.

3. The term 'gifted'

Advanced cognitive development can be referred to as "being gifted". Unfortunately, being gifted is often portrayed quite negatively in popular media, such as television shows and movies. However, there is a lot of solid research over many decades, which shows that gifted children are not the product of 'pushy parents' and they do, in fact, have needs that are significantly different to other children.

Further reading: a good overview of what is currently understood about the terms 'gifted' and 'talented' in young children is available from the Victorian Department of Education web site at:

<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/childhood/professionals/learning/Pages/understandgt.aspx>

4. Supporting gifted children

All children, including those who are gifted, need opportunities through play to engage with new knowledge and skills that match their interests and capabilities to develop their own understanding of how the world works. This ensures that they develop belief in themselves as capable and confident learners from a very young age.

Gifted children often show intense curiosity and a very strong desire to learn. They are often able to focus and concentrate on tasks that interest them for a long time. Their strong memory and abstract thinking ability means that they may begin to read, write or use numbers earlier than usual. They might say they find normal play activities 'boring' or children of their own age 'too babyish' and might seek out older playmates who share their interests and who like games with more structure.

It is tempting to think that such a child's needs can only be met by starting school earlier than usual. However this is not true for all gifted children. In some cases these needs can be successfully addressed by the adults who care for them in their home or a childcare environment, using the five key strategies described on the following pages.

5. Five key strategies to use

5.1 STRATEGY 1: GROUPING

All human beings have a strong need to belong and to feel valued and accepted for who they are. A common characteristic of gifted children is that they begin to compare themselves with other children at an earlier than usual age. They are often aware that they differ from other children of their own age, both in their interests and in what they are capable of doing. They may think there is something wrong with themselves. It helps to explain that they are simply learning more quickly than some other children and to provide regular opportunities for them to play and learn with 'like-minded' peers; other children who share a common interest or an older group, who more closely match their stage of cognitive development.

Opportunities for connecting with other children occur in community-based programs such as play groups; exhibitions at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, events for families and young children provided through LINC centres, club-based activities and learning programs such as music or foreign language classes.

Information about activities are available online at sites such as those below or search for your local area.

What's On 4 Little Ones? <http://www.whatson4littleones.com.au/area/tas/>

Tassie Out and About <https://www.facebook.com/tassieoutandabout>

5.2 STRATEGY 2: BE FLEXIBLE WITH TIME

Being flexible with the time that a child spends on play-based tasks is important. Sometimes they will want extra time to delve more deeply to follow something that catches their interest. They may return to it over several days, weeks or even months.

At other times they will understand a concept or master a skill very quickly and be ready to move on with little or no need for consolidation. Being tuned in to how they are progressing allows an adult to help them move on or explore more deeply, as and when required.

5.3 STRATEGY 3: INCREASE THE LEVEL OF CHALLENGE AND COMPLEXITY

It is very easy to underestimate the capabilities of children and to inadvertently limit what they do by making assumptions about things such as the level of complexity in the puzzles we make available, the content of books that we share and the sort of thinking required for an activity.

As for all children, it is critical that gifted children have opportunities to wrestle with a problem that they find hard, to try a range of strategies, to concentrate deeply and to develop persistence and resilience in their learning. They are learning how to learn!

Failure to have those challenging learning opportunities can result in the development of a mindset that learning should always come easily, with little or no effort and mistakes aren't viewed as a valuable part of the learning process. Such a 'fixed mindset' can have major, negative implications later on in the child's education journey.

To keep bright young children stimulated and engaged, ensure that jigsaw puzzles, tangrams, books and other resources cover a range of levels of difficulty, (including ones that may be considered way too challenging for them) and are readily available for them to explore. Use them as the basis for observing and interacting with the child to see where their understanding is up to. Give them challenges and ask questions (see strategy 4) in ways that support them to move on in their learning and understanding.

5.4 STRATEGY 4: STIMULATE HIGH LEVEL THINKING

Gifted children thrive on tasks that require high level thinking. While the child is playing, an adult can support them by asking probing and open-ended questions from time to time; questions such as:

“what if ...”

“when might ...”

“which would ...”

“who might ...”

“why do you think ...”

“how could we ...”

These questions can be asked when sharing a book, video, puzzle or interactive game with an adult or when the child is engaged in playing with other children.

Children can also be invited to participate in tasks where they:

- apply their understanding (“show me how you ...”)
- make evaluations (“which is best; ... or ...”)
- analyse (“let’s group ...”) or
- create something new (“can you make a different ...”).

5.5 STRATEGY 5: COLLABORATIVELY EXPLORE LEARNING GAMES AND OTHER RESOURCES

As well as traditional toys and resources that support play, there is now a wealth of digital resources, apps, programs games, puzzles, songs etc. available for parents and other adults to explore and share with young children. Often they are open-ended (allowing the user to take their learning to their own level), provide immediate feedback (providing a safe way to try out ideas) and are presented in contexts that are very engaging and fun. To get you started, a collection of ‘gateways’ to quality online resources is listed on the next page. For other media recommendations, the ‘Common Sense Media’ web site is a good place go: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>

6. The role of play and the environment

“Play provides opportunities for children to learn, as they discover; create, improvise and imagine.” Early Years Learning Framework, page 15. It is important to provide an environment for play that offers a range of objects and materials for children to explore and make discoveries, to provoke their interest, to provide opportunities for sustained thinking, to invite interactions with others and to enable connections to be made with nature.

Adults can take on a range of roles within children’s play; from encouraging them to explore independently, to creating opportunities for inquiry, to actively joining in by responding to their ideas, modelling thinking and asking questions that might challenge their understanding.

7. The need to make adjustments

A child with disability needs their caring adults to provide the extra support they need to help them to successfully participate in play, so they continually learn about the world around them, in ways that work for them.

Adults caring for a gifted child will also need to make some adjustments to the environment and to the activities they do, to ensure their unique learning needs are met. Through careful and critical observation of how they

respond to materials, activities and situations during play, a parent or adult carer can take their cue from the child to see what they might be ready for, or need next, to move on with their learning.

Further reading: an excellent source of further details, information and strategies is available in the Book titled: Gifted and Talented: Inclusion and Exclusion, by Cathie Harrison, available from the Early Childhood Australia Shop <http://www.earlychildhoodaustralia.org.au/shop/product/gifted-talented-inclusion-exclusion/>

8. Web sites for young children and adults to explore together

ABC for Kids - The Playground <http://www.abc.net.au/children/playground/>

ABC Splash <http://splash.abc.net.au/>

KidsPsych <http://www.kidspych.org/index1.html>

Early Childhood collection from the Victorian Department of Education <https://fuse.education.vic.gov.au/child/>

ABC @ 2Learn <http://www.2learnabc.ca/>

The KinderSite <http://www.kindersite.org/Directory/Games.htm>