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**Talking About Special Education  
Volume VII ...**

# **Gifted Students**

**An Information  
Handbook  
Prepared by**

**First Nations  
Education Steering Committee  
and the  
First Nations  
Schools Association**

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## Introduction

This handbook is the seventh in a series of informational handbooks prepared by the First Nations Education Steering Committee (FNESC) and the First Nations Schools Association (FNSA).

The handbooks are intended to provide some basic information about a range of special education issues. Some of the topics covered in the other handbooks include FAS/FAE, ADD/ADHD, IEP development, and information specifically for parents.

We hope that this information proves useful to everyone who is working to ensure that all First Nations learners have every possible opportunity to fulfill their potential and achieve success.

## What is Giftedness?

Of course, all children have particular strengths and things they are very good at. In that way, we commonly think of all children as being “gifted” in one way or another. However, for the purposes of special school programs and services, a more specific definition of “gifted children” is used.

In the special education sense, a **“gifted student” is defined generally as a learner who has an “exceptional ability to learn.”** Gifted children also have been defined as those who, because of their outstanding abilities, are capable of uncommonly high performance.

A gifted student may possess exceptionally high abilities in terms of one or more of the following aspects:

- academic achievement;
- intellect (including curiosity, motivation, and attention span);
- creativity;
- personality traits (including leadership, ability, independence, and intuitiveness); and/or
- one or more specific disciplines, such as the arts or athletics.

Generally, gifted children are creative, innovative thinkers who

are able to see multiple approaches to a problem and work out innovative and unusual solutions.

Gifted students, however, should not be expected to have strengths in all areas. Also, some gifted children have hidden learning disabilities that may go unnoticed for years, because gifted children are able to compensate for their disabilities in the early years. Later, it may become harder and harder for them to excel, which can cause depression and behaviour problems.

Some people may believe that gifted children do not need special support because “they are smart enough to succeed on their own.”

However, all learners need help, encouragement and appropriate learning experiences in order to be successful, and gifted children do require different educational programs in order to reach their full potential. Many gifted learners will become underachievers and/or dropout from learning or from school unless they receive guidance and adequate challenge. For that reason, as for all students, it is important to develop programming to reflect the uniqueness of gifted students and help them to fulfill their potential.



## Identifying Gifted Students and Understanding Their Strengths and Talents

Identifying gifted students and their strengths and talents should be an ongoing process. Assessment procedures usually involve the following:

- formal testing and indicators of cognitive (intellectual) ability, achievement, aptitude, and creativity;
- teacher observations, including anecdotal records, checklists and inventories; and
- records of student achievement, including assignments, portfolios, grades, and outstanding talents and accomplishments.

Some factors may make it difficult to identify a student's giftedness, including:

- students' exceptional talents may not be obvious because of language delays or differences;
- formal tests may not reflect cultural factors;
- physical disabilities may affect students' identification as gifted;
- children may have learning or sensory disabilities which make it difficult to identify their giftedness; and

- testing and identifications may be affected by personality styles.

Exceptional potential may be also be unclear if the learning environment does not provide an opportunity for a gifted student to develop his or her talents.

For all of those reasons, identifying a child as gifted can be very challenging. Therefore, assessments usually require input from teacher(s), parents, and a person with expertise in special education.



## Developing a Student Profile

To provide a deeper understanding of a student's unique interests, styles and abilities, sometimes a student profile is very helpful. Gathering data from a variety of sources will ensure a well-rounded view to assist in educational planning. Five areas that may be considered in developing a student profile include:

- academic achievement;
- learning styles and strengths;
- interests;
- special interests; and
- visions and goals for the future.



## Gifted Students in the School Setting

Gifted children may be put in to a variety of different educational settings once they are in school.

- In some cases, gifted children participate in regular classes with peers their own age.
- An alternative to full-time schooling in the regular classroom is the “pull-out” gifted program, in which gifted students leave the class for several hours a week to join a special group for advanced instruction.

Both of those options have benefits and challenges associated with them.

Keeping gifted children in regular classes may be useful in terms of their social development and/or may be necessary because of school resources. However, gifted children generally cover course materials faster than their classmates. As a result, they may become bored and develop a negative attitude toward school if they are not adequately challenged. Underachievement in school is a common result for such students. In addition, some gifted children may feel compelled to hide their talents in order to fit in socially with their peers.

Pull-out programs may be beneficial in terms of offering gifted

students special instruction directed at their level of ability.

However, a gifted student who leaves class for several hours each week may feel self-conscious or not accepted. Pull-out programs can also make the pupils who don't leave feel bad, as well.

Other types of programs may be used in different settings. For example, in multi-age classrooms, gifted students may be able to work more independently or in small groups with other students with similar ability levels.

The type of programs available for gifted students can vary significantly depending on the school they are attending and the resources available. Ideally, parents and school staff will work together to choose an educational setting that is right for each child.



# Characteristics of Gifted Children and Possible Challenges

It is important not to make overgeneralizations about any learners. Gifted children may perform exceptionally well or do very poorly in school. They may be cheerful and well-adjusted or lonely and unhappy. They may be learning disabled. There are all “kinds” of gifted children. However, many gifted students display common, identifying characteristics, some of which are highlighted below.

Gifted children’s *behaviour* often differs from that of their age-mates in the following ways:

- many gifted children learn to *read early*, they often read widely and quickly, and they have large vocabularies;
- gifted children commonly *learn basic skills* better, more quickly, and with less practice;
- gifted children often are better able to construct and handle *abstractions*, and they can pick up and interpret nonverbal cues;
- they can *work independently* at an earlier age and can concentrate for longer periods of time;
- gifted children often have seemingly *boundless energy*, which sometimes leads to a misdiagnosis of

hyperactivity;

- they usually respond and *relate well to parents, teachers, and other adults*, and they may prefer the company of older children and adults to that of their peers;
- they like to *learn new things*, are willing to examine the unusual, and are highly inquisitive;
- many gifted children tackle tasks and problems in a *well-organized*, goal-directed, and efficient manner; and
- they exhibit a natural *motivation to learn*, find out, or explore and are often very persistent. “I’d rather do it myself” is a common attitude for gifted students.

Gifted children also may display some of the following *learning* characteristics:

- gifted children may show keen powers of *observation* and an eye for important details;
- they may *read a great deal on their own*, preferring books and magazines written for children older than they are;
- they often display a *questioning attitude* and seek information for its own sake as much as for its usefulness;
- gifted children often have a *large storehouse of information* about a variety of topics, which they can recall quickly;
- they can readily *grasp underlying principles*, and quickly perceive similarities, differences, and anomalies; and
- many gifted children attack *complicated material* by separating it into components and analyzing it systematically.

Gifted children's *creative* abilities may also set them apart from other students their age, exhibiting the following characteristics:

- gifted children are often *flexible thinkers*, able to use many different alternatives and approaches to problem solving;
- they are *original thinkers*, seeking new and unusual combinations among items of information;
- they can also *see relationships* among seemingly unrelated objects, ideas, or facts;
- they often show great *emotional sensitivity*;
- gifted children often display intellectual playfulness and like to *fantasize* and imagine; and
- they can be more open in *expressing opinions* and ideas, and they often disagree spiritedly with others' statements.



## Potential Challenges

Giftedness has the potential to enrich a child's life in many ways.

However, some of the characteristics and personality traits common to gifted children can also create a variety of problems for the children, as well as for their parents, and their teachers. Being aware of these potential problems can enable parents and others who work with these children to be on the lookout for ways to help them.

- Gifted children often demonstrate high levels of independent thinking. This trait can lead children to question authority in ways that create disciplinary problems.
- Some gifted children have very high levels of natural curiosity and energy, which may result in them being labeled as difficult.
- Many gifted children would rather work alone than in groups, and in some cases they may not develop adequate social skills.
- The long attention span and concentration typical of many gifted children may make it hard for them to readily shift from one activity to another. As a result, the students may miss instructions and other important information being shared because they are intensely absorbed in another task.

- Sometimes gifted children develop an unusually wide or narrow range of interests, either of which can pose problems.
- Another trait common to gifted children is a heightened degree of emotional sensitivity, which may cause unusually strong reactions to events that would be less traumatic for other children.
- Perfectionism is another frequent challenge to the emotional well-being and academic success of gifted children.
- Gifted children may operate differently from others; they are likely to be more grownup, they may use big words that other children don't understand. Sometimes gifted children are seen as "bossy" or "the brain," and it is sometimes difficult for gifted students to make friends. As a result, they can be very lonely.

# Strategies for Working With Gifted Students

There are a variety of approaches that can be used to meet the needs of gifted learners. In the school setting, changes in the following areas may be useful:

- the **content** of the curriculum (what the student studies);
- the **processes** that engage the students (how the student works with information);
- the **products** of their studies (how students represent what they know); and
- the **learning environment**.

## Content

Gifted learners generally absorb materials at a faster pace, work well with abstractions, make learning connections easily, and often have interests more like older students. Therefore, they respond well to a variety of materials presented at a faster pace and at higher instructional levels than other students their age.

Strategies to provide content at an appropriate learning level

include accelerated learning, learning more materials in a shorter period of time, more independent study opportunities, and the use of learning or study centers.

## Process

To engage gifted students, their learning will ideally involve skills such as higher-level thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and research skills. Including these skills in their learning will help keep gifted students challenged and motivated.

## Products

Some examples of ways a student can show their learning are through models, diagrams, letters, videos, debates, displays, multimedia presentations, sculptures, and dramatizations.

## Learning Environment

Changes in the learning environment to assist gifted students can include providing physical, social, and emotional stimuli and support, as well as involving the study of famous people, bibliotherapy, and groupings for instruction. Gifted students can also be helped by people around them in their homes, schools,

and communities. Some of the strategies to try include those outlined below.

- Gifted students require a great deal of ***understanding***. Sometimes it is difficult for gifted students to be different from their peers. At times, they may feel that they do not fit in, and they may feel isolated. Showing gifted children that you understand their feelings is important.
- ***Support*** is very important. Because they learn differently from their peers, gifted children sometimes have trouble making friends. Because they often know answers quickly, other children sometimes find gifted students “bossy” or “know-it-alls.” If gifted children feel lonely, they need support from those around them.
- It is crucial that people be ***aware*** of potential challenges for gifted children, including the fact that they may often experience learning difficulties or trouble interacting socially.
- Gifted children should have access to adequately ***challenging learning materials and tools***. Books, games and toys of the appropriate level are key. It is also useful for gifted children with a special skill or talent to interact with adults who have a similar interest or skill. Stimulation is very useful.
- Engaging gifted children in ***special hobbies, sports, or activities*** is often helpful. Doing so can keep them from becoming bored and frustrated. It can also help them make friends and build their social skills. How-

ever, the number of activities for the children should be kept at a reasonable level, always remembering the need for adequate sleep, rest, and relaxation.

- ***Realistic expectations*** are the key. Gifted children need to be adequately challenged, but it is also important to not expect too much of them. Some gifted children have particular strengths in some areas, but they may not excel at everything. It is crucial that the children not be put under too much pressure to perform.



## Remember ...

Things are not always what they seem, and it is very difficult to predict a student's long-term abilities.

- Einstein was four years old before he could speak and seven before he could read.
- Sir Isaac Newton did poorly in grade school.
- When Thomas Edison was a boy, his teachers told him he was too stupid to learn anything.
- A newspaper editor fired Walt Disney because he had "No good ideas."
- Leo Tolstoy flunked out of college.
- Louis Pasteur was rated as mediocre in chemistry when he attended the Royal College.
- Winston Churchill failed the sixth grade.



## Resources Used in Creating this Handbook

The following web sites were very useful in creating this handbook:

The National Association for Gifted Children, at [www.nagcbrtain.org.uk](http://www.nagcbrtain.org.uk)

*The Gale Encyclopedia of Childhood and Adolescence*, found through [www.findarticles.com](http://www.findarticles.com)

The National Foundation for Gifted and Creative Children at [www.nfgcc.org](http://www.nfgcc.org)



## Sources of More Information on Giftedness

J. Delisle and J. Galbraith. *The Gifted Kids Survival Guide* (for ages 11-18 and for ages 10 and under). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.

The Gifted Children's Association of BC is dedicated to providing support and advocacy for gifted children and their families. Parent support groups are available around the province of BC, a newsletter is available for members, and an annual Bright Horizons Family Conference is held in October each year. Contact for the Association is: 3rd Floor, 210 West Broadway, Vancouver, BC. V5Y 3W2. 1-877-707-6111 Website: [www.vcn.bc.ca/gca/](http://www.vcn.bc.ca/gca/)

Susan Winebrenner. *Teaching Gifted Kids in the Regular Classroom*. That resource includes proven techniques and strategies to ensure that gifted students will be highly motivated, challenged, productive, and have positive learning experiences. For a copy, contact the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), 1-888-232-7733, or website: [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org).

Joan Smutny, Sally Walker and Elizabeth Meckstroth. *Teaching Young Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*. The book highlights realistic and creative resources to help teachers identify young children who are gifted and tailor the learning environment to meet their needs. For a copy, contact the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), 1-888-232-7733, or website: [www.cec.sped.org](http://www.cec.sped.org).

Dr. L. Kanevsky. *The Tool Kit for Curriculum Differentiation*. It is designed to help the student, teachers and parents select and design an optimal combination of learning experiences for each bright, gifted or talented student. P: (604) 291-5965 E-mail [kanevsky@sfu.ca](mailto:kanevsky@sfu.ca)