

GIFTEDNESS

Red Ladder Optimized Learning Staff

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Everyone is good at something, but some children and adults are unusually good at something or appear to be good at almost everything. “Giftedness” used to be thought of as the ability to master academics, but a contemporary understanding of giftedness involves more than just math, writing and reading. Giftedness can involve unusual creativity, leadership abilities, abilities in the visual and performing arts, or athletic development, as well as academic progress. Most people can become good at many things with practice, but truly gifted individuals have special and outstanding ability to learn and develop skills in certain areas, and work hard.

A person who writes or works in mathematics well beyond expectations may be gifted. An elite athlete or a young musician playing with a national orchestra could also be considered gifted. A person who is gifted in terms of creativity or productive thinking has the ability to think synthetically, seeing connections among things typically seen as unrelated. This person might have an exceptional capacity for novel problem solving, or for invention, or for finding new uses for things. Gifted leaders have exceptional group social abilities and negotiate well in difficult situations. They have a knack for getting people to come together over a shared interest.

Problems with giftedness

A major problem for many gifted people is that their environment lacks sufficient stimulation or opportunity to demonstrate their capacity. If not properly identified, gifted children and teens may end up bored with a regular school

curriculum and even end up performing below grade level or interfering with others’ learning. Some gifted people have learning difficulties, such as dyslexia, or ADHD, so that performing to their potential is difficult or impossible. The discrepancy between some of that person’s capacities and others may be enormous, and may need address.

Children and teens who display giftedness within one or more domains need to have educational programs individually tailored to their needs. In order to realize their personal potential and contribute their ideas to others, programs will probably include extra teaching or training to develop the strength, or individual academic instruction which accommodates a demanding athletic or artistic training schedule. Some gifted children do best when they are at school for half of the day, which is enough time for them to manage the curriculum and spend time with friends, and then receive home schooling the rest of the day, with special field trips and excursions, and opportunities to explore.



redladder
OPTIMIZED LEARNING

RED LADDER OPTIMIZED LEARNING
633 - 1445 PORTAGE AVENUE
WINNIPEG MANITOBA R3G 3P4
P - 204.489.1682 F - 204.489.1748
E - info@redladder.ca

Evaluation

Now that the definition of “giftedness” has been broadened, evaluation of giftedness has needed to be as well. Conventional IQ testing measures only broad verbal and visual reasoning abilities, short-term memory and visual-motor processing speed. Mensa, a society for intellectually gifted people of all ages, requires that members have an intelligence score above the 98th percentile, or higher than ninety-eight percent of people. The problem is that a high IQ on a standard cognitive measure isn’t sufficient for a designation of giftedness, because a person must also show motivation and creativity in completing academic tasks. Many people with exceptional potential may not perform at all exceptionally.

Tests of academic achievement and tests of visual or spatial abilities are available, but psychologists don’t give tests of musical ability, creativity, leadership, or athletic ability and cannot assign a percentile rank to these forms

of achievement. Athletic or musical giftedness is usually evaluated based upon evidence of consistently excellent performance at a high level of competition or concert.



Finally, very young children may display gifted behaviours such as very early language development or precocious abstract reasoning abilities. However, although children as young as two and a half can be evaluated intellectually, the rate of individual development varies so much that parents might need to wait until the child is four or five before reliable assessment is possible. □

