



Even as tiny babies, gifted children can seem different from most others. Parents and carers often notice that they focus their eyes at an absurdly young age. They have a quick recognition of tones of voice and words, an alert interest in their surroundings, and may also have early motor control, walking and speech.

As toddlers they often display unusual memory skills, advanced powers of reasoning and exceptional abilities to concentrate on activities that interest them. Many find it enormously frustrating when their motor skills are not adequate to carry out their ideas. Their intense curiosity and

Bright sparks

desire to understand can be challenging for both parents and practitioners. Some children will be gifted socially as well as intellectually, but others may not know how to talk to children whose language development lags so far behind their own, or simply not yet be ready to play in a group, a stage which some children reach as toddlers but others never fully master.

If a very bright toddler seems content in his own company, then it might not be a cause for concern. Certainly it is important for practitioners to avoid the suggestion of, say, Asperger Syndrome, just because a child's mind is engaged at a different level from most pre-school children. For this reason many gifted children prefer older playmates.

Gauging giftedness

For early years practitioners, giftedness presents challenges like any other special educational need. These children's needs and abilities are so far from the norm that the usual expectations may be inappropriate.

Gifted children often hate to be rushed from one activity to another, if they are able to concentrate for long periods. They may know colours and shapes, numbers and letters by the time that they start nursery, and have a wide general knowledge. Bright boys in particular, whose fine motor skills do not match their intellectual abilities, can find colouring a chore rather than a pleasure. Many gifted children are per-

The experience of exceptional children in the nursery is explored by **Dr Kate Distin**, who has worked as a counsellor of gifted children and has just edited a book on the subject

fectionists who are reluctant to have a go if they sense that they might fail.

Of course, not all gifted children are the same. A shy child who has a special interest in, say, dinosaurs, can be given confidence when practitioners encourage him to talk about that interest. Once he feels secure with them, he might feel able to join in with creative activities that at first felt intimidating. A child whose social skills are underdeveloped could be helped to understand turn-taking if practitioners provide a pretend bus-stop for the piece of equipment that he would otherwise hog.

Combating isolation

All children can be helped by adults using the language of emotions: 'You seem angry/scared/sad. Is that how you're feeling?' Many gifted children are unusually perceptive, and can feel lonely in a group when they sense that they are different from the others. But if they also sense that practitioners understand and accept them, this can help them feel safe enough to begin to connect with the other children.

Early years practitioners are often the first people to offer parents a professional perspective on their child. A gifted child's parents might initially

feel quite defensive about this perspective. They sometimes feel that nurseries do not understand their child, focusing on concerns about social skills while ignoring exceptional intellectual abilities - but may feel unable to say this because they don't want to be seen as 'pushy'. If a practitioner can, first, be open with parents about the areas in which their child excels, then it will be easier for them to listen, afterwards, to concerns about other areas of the curriculum.

These parents, like their gifted children, often feel isolated by their child's difference. It will come as a great relief when early years practitioners talk openly about their child's gifts, offering insights into what is typical of very bright children and what might, on the other hand, be a cause for concern. They will also be reassured if practitioners ask them about what their child is like at home. Does she have any special interests? Does he prefer to be on his own? What does she find difficult, educationally, socially or emotionally? When parents' confidence has been won by practitioners who engage them in a genuine dialogue, the chances of a fruitful home-nursery relationship will be much higher. **NW**



Further information

■ The National Association for Gifted Children can be contacted on 0845 4500221 or at www.nagcbrtain.org.uk

■ *Gifted Children: A Guide for Parents and Professionals* by Dr Kate Distin (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006) is available from www.giftedchildren.co.uk

A parent's guide to gifted children

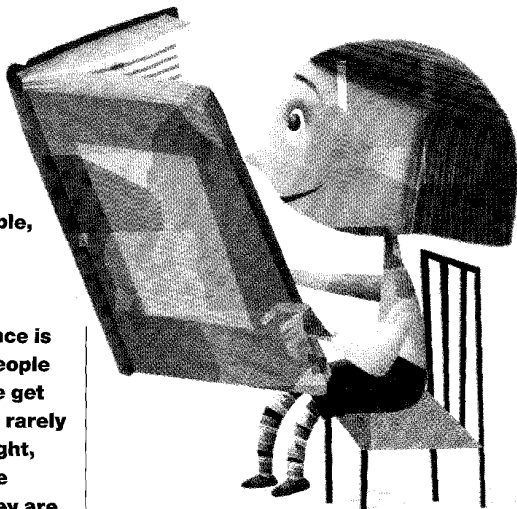
Children who are very focused from an early age may be in the small percentage classed as 'gifted'. By fully understanding their needs, parents can ensure that they feel accepted and comfortable, both at home and at nursery.

What is a gifted child?

Like height and weight, intelligence is one of the areas in which most people are fairly average. The further we get away from the average, the more rarely we see people of a particular height, weight or level of intelligence. We describe children as 'gifted' if they are in the top 5 per cent or so of intelligence. This does not mean that they are geniuses, or destined to be the next Einstein, but simply that they are very bright sparks.

How do I know if my child is gifted?

The first thing that parents will notice about gifted children is that they seem different from most others. Some, though not all, will pass milestones more quickly than other children – smiling, talking, sitting up or walking at much younger ages than would normally be expected. Other typical characteristics include a wide vocabulary and general knowledge, asking lots of questions and learning more quickly than others. They may



become bored quickly when asked to do more of the same, have a retentive memory and the unusual ability to concentrate early. They will have the ability to argue logically, but also to make original connections. Other characteristics can include a vivid imagination, strong opinions, intense feelings and highly self-critical perfectionism.

How can I support my gifted child at home?

One of the most important gifts that parents can give to a minority child is a place where he feels normal. When a child can see that his

parents enjoy his company, delight in his humour, find his questions worthwhile and interesting, believe in his abilities and love him unconditionally, then he will feel much more able to cope outside the home at those times when he feels out of place.

Gifted children seem to have a particular need for firm boundaries. As long as a rule has been explained, they appreciate a strong and simple link between cause and effect: if you behave like this, then that will happen – no matter how cleverly you argue the point or how much of a fuss you create!

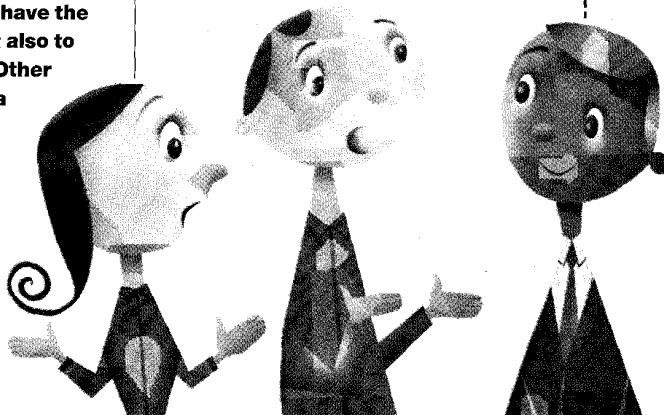
This is important for the whole family. Gifted children can exhaust their parents by their demands, questions, arguments and wakefulness. From time

to time parents must look after their own needs by saying, 'Enough is enough'.

How can I support my gifted child at nursery?

If a child is having problems, either socially or because she is bored by the activities, then her parents may feel that the staff do not understand her needs. A good starting point for these parents is to ask themselves what it might be like to look after their child in a group. They know what she is like at home, how articulate and knowledgeable she is, and how deeply she thinks about things.

But perhaps at nursery she is so unhappy and overwhelmed that she does not show what she can do.



Perhaps her behaviour has deteriorated to the point where it is all that practitioners can see. In this case, it can be useful for parents to explain what their child is like at home, and ask what she is like in a group setting. Then they can ask how they can work together with the nursery to resolve the problem.

Where can I find support for myself?

Gifted children are a minority, and this puts their parents in a minority too. They often feel isolated, as it can be difficult to talk to other parents about what their child is really like, and they may feel that they have to hide her abilities from other people. It is crucial that they find a place where they can be heard, whether that's in the company of a partner, a friend or even a counsellor.

