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VERY YOUNG AND GIFTED

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Georgia Brown showed all the signs of having rare gifts and talents. What was easy for her at the age of two and three quarters is what most children begin to learn when they start school at five. I had to keep reminding myself that she was so little; a big baby really. She would argue with me in her tiny voice with words far in advance of what normal two year-olds would use. For example, as part of the IQ test I was giving her, I folded a piece of paper and cut a piece out of it. Then I opened it out and showed her the shape I'd made. "Look," I said, "it's a square". "That's not a square", she squeaked, "it's a rectangle". True. She was swift and accurate in every test item where she had to match figures and do simple arithmetic.

She corrected me again when I said how nice she looked with her pink skirt, her pink tights and her pink shoes. "No", she replied, "my shoes are purple". True. Although many children know the main colours like red, blue, yellow and green, by the time they get to school, many do not. And few can distinguish such subtleties at two.

Georgia had absolute control of the pencil in her tiny fingers. She copied a circle perfectly without hesitation. Most two year-olds just scribble across the page; that is, if they can control a pencil at all. The test manual showed that she would gain a point for this item for simply making a rough attempt at a closed figure roughly like a circle. Hers was as good as an adult's. The sheer quality of what she did was astounding and unmeasurable by any test. How does one measure quality? That's where the human eye and judgement comes in. I have tested hundreds of gifted individuals of all ages, and I can say from my decades of experience that the quality of Georgia's responses was superb.

After about half an hour's concentration, which was in itself a very long time for a two year-old, she became tired. It really was nap time. She crawled into her mother's arms, reached for her dummy, and fell fast asleep. I hadn't finished the test, and she had scored perfect marks for a five year-old. I'll be testing her again soon, and this time in front of television cameras. Will she make it to age six or more?

Children like Georgia are still rare, but I'm sure she is not unique. To help her progress in the education system, Georgia's mother joined her up to Mensa, and on my test results they accepted her as the youngest little girl they'd ever had.

The follow-on media circus in which Georgia, her mum and I found ourselves was astonishing. We were on (I was told) about two million web-sites. My e-mails were pinging in at about one a minute. They came from all over the world. People send me pictures of their family in Texas and Singapore; requests to test their children and provide free advice to screeds of stories came from India, Singapore, Ireland and even California (I'd have thought they had plenty of help there). Many told me how desperate they were because no one believed them when they sought help. We were invited on to chat shows in many countries. The only one I took up was for Good Morning America, filmed in my study, which hits 20 million people. My cousin in New York was astonished when I appeared at his breakfast table.

They say you should never work with children or animals. It is tricky. The flow of tiny children I've had for testing in the last few months has brought out my latent coping skills. They don't sit still or take instructions, one wet my cloth-covered chair, and others are far more interested in the toys I have around than answering my questions. Parents tend to be anxious. It has been very informative. At times I wonder whether IQ has shot up for this new generation, then I test one who is not gifted and I realise that the IQ test measures well, even if some children are beyond its capacities. In truth, I get so used to testing the gifted that it becomes a norm, so that when I test a normal child it is salutary and brings me down to earth again.

What are parents to do? Not everyone has the resources or time to provide their children with a primary school education at home. And then, how can the reception class teacher cope with a five year-old who is working at eight year-old level? Even very little gifted children love to get to grips with some difficult learning, and shouldn't be spending time doodling around the poem they finished half an hour ago while waiting for the rest of the class to catch up. That way boredom lies. And after the boredom comes the turn-off from challenging learning.

Emotionally, the evidence shows that gifted children are normal. In fact, they need to be strong because they face their own special challenges, particularly of high expectations and pressure to achieve. Its complete acceptance which builds up any child's good feeling about themselves. And it's the family that provides the foundations of future gifts.

I've spent decades following the lives of more than two hundred children who are in the top tiny percentage. From the research over all those years I saw that the vital springboard which sends a child high into adult excellence is opportunity. Some children have it laid on in spades while others barely have a chance. You might think that a truly bright child would make their own opportunities. But if you're in a backwater where expectations are low, it takes a powerful personality to make it out of there. Few manage it.

Even as toddlers the gifted and talented love regular boosters of high vitamin learning. They do best with lavish material to learn with. Pablo Picasso would never have made it with just a piece of paper and a few coloured pencils. Would you tell an early Doris Lessing that she should read the same little starter book over and over again until she died inwardly of boredom? Not a good start for a Nobel prize. Sharp inventive teaching is needed, along with plenty of time and space to play and practice. Add example and encouragement and the prescription is ready for using.

How to spot a clever toddler

Here are the important things an adult can do for a bright child. The old physical milestones of when a child first sits up, crawls, stands up, or walks, are no longer seen as firm pointers to future intellectual potential, but they are excellent indicators. Gifted children are just as different from one another as any other group of children - some may be lively, into everything and very friendly, while others can be shy and prefer to keep to themselves. Here are four strong clues.

Lively minds:

The most noticeable feature of gifted children is the liveliness of their minds. This comes across in many ways, especially in their delight with words. Even as toddlers they're usually very quick to spot tiny differences and catch on to unusual associations between ideas.

Awareness:

Gifted little ones use their radar brains to seek and absorb information, sometimes catching your meaning before you've reached the end of your sentence. They copy other people's behaviour and learn fast from the experience. Sometimes they seem quite grown-up, but genuine maturity will come later.

Ability to learn:

A keen appetite for learning marks out the gifted, so that when they're given the chance they grab it. As they get older, their knowledge often becomes wider and deeper than that of other children of the same age so they seem to be even more intelligent. Parents wonder where clever children get all their knowledge from; they seem to absorb it from everywhere - television, people's conversations - the air!

Independence:

The clever toddler takes pride in what they can do. Even in their first few days at proper school, they're usually outstandingly independent and competent, though some get a shock when they find all the others working at a very much lower level. Some develop special interests even at nursery school, though these might change. By the time they reach primary school, they may be really beginning to know their way around a subject.

I've set much more out in detail in my book, *How to Raise a Bright Child*, published by Vermilion. Also, there are plenty of free publications on my web-site www.joanfreeman.com.