

## I Know My Child is Smart; Why Does She Need Testing?

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Welcome to Lake Woebegone, where all our children are “above average.” In the rest of the world, there is a vast range of individual differences in abilities. Children who are below average are spotted quickly by doctors and teachers, and their parents are advised to seek assistance. Early detection of children’s learning deficits is vital, as *early intervention* is essential for optimal development. A well-kept secret is that the same developmental rule applies to children who are unusually advanced. Early detection and intervention are also essential for optimal development of gifted abilities.

So, if your child is smart and appears happy in school, what would be the point of having private testing? Isn’t testing reserved for children who have problems? Actually, no. Testing can *prevent* problems from occurring down the road.

Here are some typical scenarios of smart children:

“My daughter dumbs down at school. At home she’s reading, but at school, she won’t let on. She doesn’t want to be different from the other girls who can’t read yet.”

“My son was so eager to go to school, but now he complains that he isn’t learning anything. They keep drilling information he learned way before he started school.”

“The school is recommending that we hold our son back in Pre-Kindergarten for another year so that he can grow socially. He was reading books at age 3, has learned all his addition and subtraction facts, and relates beautifully to older children in the neighborhood. Should we hold him back?”

“Our child has never met a puzzle she couldn’t master. She’s great with mazes, can always find our car in the parking lot, loves doing art, and is crazy about science experiments. But she is having difficulty memorizing her math facts and her reading is not as advanced as the other students. She is starting to say, ‘I’m stupid!’”

“Our house is a battleground every night as our son refuses to do his homework. We’ve tried everything, but nothing works.”

“We’re homeschooling our children and they don’t like the curriculum we’ve bought. While it seemed like such a fun idea at first, now we’re all dreading it.”

These scenarios are recipes for underachievement—children of promise who are not getting their basic needs met. If any of these anecdotes sounds familiar, you need professional advice about how to change the situation so that your child doesn’t fall through the cracks.

Sometimes smart children receive less attention than other children in the class. We often assume that they can “make it on their own.” In some classes, smart children become teachers’ helpers, and assist children who are struggling or get to do errands while the others “catch up.” In too many classrooms, the goal is for all students to meet minimal standards, since funding—or even the teacher’s job—may be at stake if the state achievement test scores are too low. So all the energy is focused on bringing up the bottom. Children who are already achieving minimal standards may be neglected, since they have already mastered the goal.

I have asked many groups of gifted elementary and middle school children what they wished teachers knew about gifted students. Here are some of their comments:

- Some teachers make everybody do the same work. We want harder work.
- We don’t want extra work. We want challenging work instead of lots of easy work. Lots of easy work gets boring. We aren’t bored when the teacher lets us do harder work and doesn’t hold us back.
- We don’t want hard work that’s beyond our knowledge. We want challenging work that stretches the edge of our knowledge.
- Challenging work is work we know it’s possible to do—it just takes longer.
- It’s not the quantity of the work, it’s the quality.
- We don’t get the same amount of attention as students who are having trouble learning or making trouble for others. Teachers don’t realize we need help, too.
- But we don’t like being singled out and treated differently from the other students.
- If we have different work in the regular classroom, the other students make fun of us.
- We often feel like outcasts.
- When we’re placed with other gifted students, we feel more normal, but it’s harder to be special.

When gifted children are not given opportunities to work at their own level and pace, they settle for less than their best. They learn to slide by without stretching themselves. Patterns of underachievement are subtle and cumulative; they become harder to overcome with each year. Students who attain A’s on their papers with no effort are not prepared to take more challenging classes in high school and college. When work is too easy, self-confidence to attempt difficult tasks is steadily eroded. A student who has the potential to win a scholarship to an Ivy League university settles for a B average at a state college.

What can you do to prevent underachievement in your gifted child? You need to become informed so that you can ask the school to provide for your child's needs. The first step in advocating is obtaining information about the level of your child's abilities. Smart children who are college bound often have IQ scores in the 115 to 125 range. You may be surprised to learn that your "smart" child is actually in the 2<sup>nd</sup> percentile, more capable than 98% of the other students. Once you have solid information about your child's strengths, weaknesses, level of potential, achievement, self-concept, personality and learning style, you have an objective basis for requesting a more challenging curriculum, or advanced reading material, or enrichment, or special class placement, or even acceleration.

Your children need you to be their advocate—an informed advocate—who knows what they need and how to help them get their needs met. Smart children need smart parents, who are willing to fight the system, if necessary, to help them develop to their fullest.

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