



## A Place to Start: Is My Child Gifted?

**The Davidson Institute for Talent Development  
Created in 2004 and updated annually**

This article summarizes a variety of views on why and when to seek an assessment, as well as the utility of different types of tests. Questions for parents to consider in the process of making such decisions are listed. Links to additional articles on assessment and its implications for educational advocacy and planning are also included. In addition, links to information on the most recent versions of the popular individually administered tests are provided.

Determining whether or not your child is gifted is no easy task. As you have likely already discovered, there are a plethora of definitions, characteristics, assessments, theories - a virtual quagmire of information. To help parents unravel some of the conflicting information - both objective and subjective - the Davidson Institute for Talent Development consulted eight professionals, in 2001, recognized for their work with the gifted-talented population. They offered their insights on the rationale for testing, the appropriate age for assessment, what should be included in an assessment, and which tests they believe are most accurate and effective. Although new versions of several popular IQ tests have since been published, the core messages shared by these professionals remain relevant.

This article summarizes their views on why and when to seek an assessment, as well as the utility of different types of tests. Questions for parents to consider in the process of making such decisions are listed. Links to additional articles on assessment and its implications for educational advocacy and planning are also included. In addition, links to information on the most recent versions of the popular individually administered intelligence tests are provided.

### **Why Test?**

Without exception, the experts we consulted cited school placement and educational programming when discussing why children should be assessed. Also without exception, the experts recommended a comprehensive assessment of the child's abilities rather than simple IQ testing. The rationale for assessment typically centers on the need for developing an understanding of a child's relative strengths and weaknesses and how these relate to educational and social settings.

Several professionals mentioned the fact that many schools and school districts do not offer programs or services based solely on IQ. Nancy Robinson, professor emeritus of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at the University of Washington, suggested that IQ scores - particularly in the exceptionally gifted range - "aren't going to be as helpful as educational assessments, specifics about what a student is ready to learn." She added that IQ test information is more persuasive when accompanied by information about age- or grade-equivalence. She concluded by pointing out that specific schools may be more influenced by different information - portfolios versus achievement or proficiency tests for example.

The rationale for assessment conveniently coincides with the experts' recommendations regarding the best age for testing. Generally, testing is believed to be most reliable and most predictive between the ages of six and nine years old. Although many of the modern assessments are approved to be administered to children as young as two years old, the consensus among professionals is that there is rarely a need to test before the child is ready to enter school and that testing at younger ages may not provide reliable results.

"I do not recommend testing very young children," wrote child clinical psychologist Deirdre V. Lovecky, Ph.D. "Under about age four-and-a-half scores are exceptionally unreliable, so a parent can feel their child is not gifted while it is a matter of neurodevelopment . . . Some kids are just too immature to assess at all. With young children I use a developmental history with examples, and look at particular skill areas. I usually ask parents to bring in an extensive portfolio of the child's work, as well as have them fill out an extensive questionnaire I have developed."

### **Which test is best?**

After parents have made the decision to have their child tested, the question, "Which test?" will come to mind. If the parents have done any investigation on their own (which we recommend), they will quickly discover that not only are there many tests for intelligence, achievement and adjustment, but there seems to be little consensus about which tests are most effective, especially when dealing with exceptionally intelligent young people.

The most widely used intelligence tests have been criticized by the GT community. IQ tests were not developed to adequately identify individuals at the extremes. By definition, scores in the profound ranges occur less than one time in a thousand. Their infrequency makes accurate measurement difficult, so few tests have been written to assess the extremes. This situation has fueled a spirited debate about which test is best for highly able children. Because of the flawed options available for testing exceptionally intelligent children, experts recommend utilizing a variety of tests or test sections to get the best combination of skills assessments. Robinson, warning that achieving high IQ scores should not take precedence, indicated the primary goal of assessment is "looking at a pattern of abilities in a number of domains, getting a sense of how advanced a student is in each of them, looking at the strategies the student uses in solving problems, and observing his or her response to challenge and even bafflement."

Three of the experts we consulted - Feldhusen, Robinson and Sheely - specifically mentioned the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) as a good supplemental test for children who top out on individually-administered intelligence tests. All three noted that, particularly for children between the ages of 11 and 14, the SAT is a valuable tool because it was designed for older students, and therefore has very high ceilings. Sheely was careful to point out that the SAT is not an IQ test, "but it will help the parents and teachers understand how the child's strengths compare to other students." The SAT, and other similar out-of-level testing options, has the added advantage of being used by many talent searches across the country for identifying qualified students. Other achievement tests, such as those that comprise the Woodcock-Johnson

are also of great value as they provide rough grade and age equivalents.

Out-of-level testing and the talent search model are addressed in the following Davidson Gifted Database articles:

["Discovering highly gifted students"](#)

["The talent search as an identification model"](#)

["Talent Search Opportunities"](#)

For additional information on assessment and its implications for educational advocacy and planning, please access the series of three exceptionally informative articles, ["Assessment, educational issues, advocacy: The process of parenting a profoundly gifted child,"](#) by Julia Osborn.

#### **What about the New IQ Tests?**

Several new versions of frequently used intelligence tests have been published since 2002. The Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-Third Edition (WPPSI-III) was published in 2002. The Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children- Fourth Edition (WISC-IV) and the Stanford-Binet, Fifth Edition (SB-5) were released in 2003. Professionals in the field continue to debate the merits and liabilities of these updated test versions. The Davidson Institute plans to provide additional information on these tests and their implications for use with highly able students as it becomes available.

On-line reviews of these tests are available from the [Buros Institute of Mental Measurements](#).

Information made available by the publishers includes the following:

[WPPSI-III \(Harcourt\)](#)

[WISC-IV \(Harcourt\)](#)

[SB-5 \(Thomson Nelson\)](#)

[Use of the SB5 in the Assessment of High Abilities](#)

#### **What kinds of question should I ask a tester?**

The following questions may be helpful in identifying an appropriate professional to evaluate your child and in preparing your child for an assessment experience.

Answers to many of these questions will be self-explanatory, while others will be more complex. If you receive answers that are not satisfactory to you, you may wish to seek a second opinion, if possible. Ideally, you will encounter a very knowledgeable professional who will conduct a comprehensive assessment of your child's abilities and make specific recommendations. However, if this is not the case, you will need to weigh the relative pros and cons of searching more broadly for an appropriate professional.

#### **Credentials/Training**

1. What is your training and background?
2. Do you have a Ph.D. in psychology?
3. Are you licensed and/or certified to practice as a psychologist?
4. What do you consider your specific area of expertise to be?

#### **Experience with Gifted Children**

1. How much experience have you had in testing very bright or precocious children?
2. What is your experience in working with a child of this age and with children of advanced cognitive abilities?
3. What is your professional experience with intellectually gifted children? NOTE: The [National Register of Health Service Providers in Psychology](#), has a list of licensed practitioners that includes their documented areas of expertise.
4. How much experience do you have in assessing giftedness?
5. What is your experience with exceptionally intelligent children?
6. Are you knowledgeable about the literature on extreme intelligence?
7. Are you experienced in testing lots of other types of children too?
8. Can you recognize common childhood disorders in gifted children?

NOTE: This is important to avoid missing a problem (all the child's problem behaviors are attributed to giftedness, mistakenly, because the tester does not know what AD/HD, depression, anxiety, Asperger's or bipolar disorder looks like in exceptionally bright young people). Conversely, it is important to have a tester who does not mistakenly attribute behaviors based on boredom to childhood disorders. On the whole, if a child needs more extensive neuropsychological evaluation, use an assessor who has experience with gifted children OR, if that is impossible, use one who is familiar with process testing. This means the test results are compared to the child's own norm not expectations for age level.

#### **About the Tests**

1. What tests do you typically administer in the context of a comprehensive assessment?
2. What is your practice when you don't get the information you need from a standardized test, how do you gather other types of information about a child?
3. How do you decide which tests to use for a precocious child?
4. If a child reaches the end of a subtest or test, without reaching a ceiling, how do you interpret that and how do you indicate that in your assessment report?
5. How broad a look at our child's abilities can we expect?
6. What do you know about the different assessments available for assessing a gifted child? How do you evaluate issues of underachievement in gifted children?
7. What is your experience with "out-of-level" testing?

### Information Needed about Child

1. What is the array of tests and information you have or need to have to evaluate my child?
2. How much do you want to know about my child's previous testing?  
NOTE: The parent should inform the examiner of previous testing that the child has had and the results that were obtained, if these are known. If testing results are discrepant, one should ask for an interpretation of the conflicting results. It would also be helpful for the parent to share evidence of the child's talents both within the educational as well as home and community settings.

### How to Prepare Your Child

1. How should I best prepare my child?
2. How do you prepare my child for the testing?
3. How long should we expect the assessment to last?
4. How are break times determined?

(Some questions are ones to be asked internally) How does my child respond to this individual? How do **\*\*I\*\*** respond to this individual?)

### Meeting children's needs in school system

1. Are you in favor of special education services or programs to meet the special needs of precocious children?
2. Do you know the criteria for program eligibility at the state and local level? Often eligibility does not rest with just the scores on an IQ test.
3. How would you decide if a child was a candidate for grade or subject matter acceleration?
4. Are your test reports accepted by local schools and programs for the gifted as part of their admissions process?
5. Pragmatically, how can the information you expect to gather be put to use in the service of my child?
6. Have you worked with students in my school system before? If so, how would you describe your effectiveness?
7. Are you available to explain the educational implications of the test results to the school officials?

### Follow-up

1. How will the results be explained to my child? Do you do this or will you advise us on how to do this?
2. If the results seem inconsistent with what was anticipated, what would be the next course of action, if any?
3. Will you be preparing a written report for us, as the parents, and will you be available to interpret the test results to school personnel if desired or necessary? When will we receive the report?
4. What are your procedures for providing results to my child's school?  
NOTE: Some psychologists will provide a "sanitized" report to the school that thoroughly addresses test results and recommendations but doesn't include information that is unlikely to have a direct benefit for the child in the school setting. Information on family dynamics and labels, for example, is omitted so that parents have a choice of sharing the full evaluation report with the school.

Our panel: John F. Feldhusen, Ph.D. , Pat Howard, Ph.D. , Deirdre V. Lovecky, Ph.D. , Julia B. Osborn, Ph.D. , Steven L. Pfeiffer, Ph.D. , Nancy M. Robinson, Ph.D., Deborah L. Ruf, Ph.D. , Annette Revel Sheely, M.A.

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## Frequently Asked Questions About Giftedness

### Davidson Institute for Talent Development

Are you wondering - is my child gifted? Here are some FAQs that may help identify profound intelligence.

#### General Information

##### Q. Who are the "profoundly gifted/intelligent"?

Profoundly intelligent young people are those with an exceptionally high level of intellectual precocity. While neither exceptionally high nor low intelligence can be determined only in terms of an intelligence quotient, nor indeed, any single measure, an IQ score can be a useful index for identifying the intellectual potential of an individual by looking at scores in relation to a standardized sample, or other individuals of the same age taking the same test. The IQ score is also able to demonstrate how far the individual's scores fall from the mean, or the "average."

In terms of measurement, different tests produce different numbers. So, generally speaking, profoundly intelligent individuals are those individuals who have IQ's that are at the 99.999% percentile. For an overview of commonly used assessments, please view the Test, Score and Portfolio Guide.

It's important to also note that, despite many stereotypes, profoundly intelligent young people come from all ethnic groups, races, economic levels, and geographic areas. Like other young people, the profoundly intelligent are unique individuals with varied and multifaceted traits:

- Some of them demonstrate mastery in multiple domain areas; others excel in a single domain area.
- Some of them have highly developed social skills; others have limited social skills.
- Some of them are highly sensitive and suffer terribly from an unkind act or thoughtless remark; others are less affected.
- Some of them are perfectionists; others are quite comfortable taking risks and making mistakes.
- Some of them are extremely intense and appear to be hyperactive at times; others are not.
- Some of them excel in their classes; others do not.
- Some of them are both highly intelligent and learning disabled.
- Many are highly verbal, highly mathematical, highly musical, highly athletic, highly inventive, and many excel in other areas.

#### Characteristics

##### Q. What are some of the characteristics of profoundly intelligent children?

While profoundly intelligent children are a diverse group of unique individuals, some of the characteristics they share in common are:

- An extreme need for constant mental stimulation.
- An ability to learn and process complex information rapidly.
- A need to explore subjects in surprising depth, to understand the why and how as well as the what.
- An insatiable curiosity; endless questions and inquiries about how things work.
- A need for precision in thinking and expression. A student who answers questions with that depends... is your first clue of extreme intelligence.
- An ability to focus intently on a subject of interest for long periods of time.
- An inability to concentrate on a task that is not intellectually challenging, such as those that involve repetition or that present material in bite size pieces.
- A propensity toward underachievement, particularly in females and adolescents who want to fit in with their classmates.

#### How Many

##### Q. How many profoundly intelligent young people are there?

We don't really know. Statistically it is estimated that individuals with an IQ of 145+ appear in the population at a ratio of 1 in 1,000 and individuals with an IQ of 160+ appear in the population at a ratio of fewer than 1 in 10,000 and those with an IQ of 180+ appear in the population at a ratio of fewer than 1 in a million. Because the most commonly used IQ tests, including those listed in the Davidson Institute's Test, Score and Portfolio Guide, have a ceiling of 159, it is difficult to determine how many individuals have IQ's above 160.

Some researchers make the case that the actual incidence of such children in the population is demonstrably higher. Lewis Terman, author of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (the first American IQ test), expressed a great deal of surprise when he conducted a major longitudinal study of gifted children in the early 1920s, and discovered that children above 170 IQ were "all out of proportion" to the numbers he had expected to find. Other researchers, clinicians, and educators, separated by a century of time and located in widely varying geographic locales, have also discovered an unexpectedly high incidence of exceptionally and profoundly intelligent children.

Some researchers have estimated that there may be six to 10 times as many children in the 160+ IQ range than previously thought (see Robinson, below). Finding these children, in part, seems to be a function of actually looking for them, as well as using a variety of formal and informal assessments that can measure the full range of their abilities.

To learn more about IQ and population numbers, please reference the cited material in [this factsheet](#), which is available in the Davidson Institute's press room.

### ***IQ and Testing***

#### **Q. When and how should students be tested for giftedness?**

The optimal age for assessment is between the ages of four and nine. In general, testing a child when he/she is younger can be more revealing than testing an older child. According to Kathi Kearney, "The older the child is when the test is administered, the less 'room' there is on the test itself to demonstrate advanced ability; thus, an older child's score may not reflect the full extent of his giftedness."

When considering whether or not to have a child assessed, parents should determine the specific academic outcomes they hope to address through formal assessment. This will help both the tester and the family to select appropriate assessment instruments.

An IQ number alone does not provide adequate information about a student's intellectual abilities. Other information that should be evaluated are samples of the student's work, as well as observations of the student's parents and teachers.

There are a variety of instruments available that assess intelligence and achievement. Many are listed in the [Davidson Young Scholars Qualification Criteria](#) and detailed information on various testing and assessment instruments can be found in the [Davidson Database](#).

An assessment of the extent of a student's precocity may assist parents and educators to provide the most appropriate intellectual and emotional support for the student. Assessment of giftedness provides schools with the information required to make the appropriate educational provisions for the profoundly intelligent student.

### ***Developmental Issues***

#### **Q. What are some of the developmental issues of profoundly intelligent children?**

Very often profoundly intelligent children have unique developmental needs because their development is "out of sync" with the normal development of their age group. Their advanced cognitive abilities may cause them to perceive the world differently than their age-peers.

This may sometimes cause them to feel "different" and socially isolated. Leta Stetter Hollingworth, one of the early experts on profoundly intelligent children, observed significant differences in the development of the moderately and profoundly intelligent. After years of research, she identified an IQ range of 125-155 as "socially optimal." Children scoring within this range were generally well balanced, self-confident, and outgoing; they were likely to become effective leaders because they were able to win the confidence and friendship of their age-peers. However, children with IQs of 160 and above were so different from their age-mates that developmental problems were common, particularly between the ages of 4 and 9. As Hollingworth noted, "To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties."

In general, profoundly intelligent children who have a safe, supportive home environment and a schooling situation that is appropriate to their advanced cognitive abilities will be more successful in their ability to cope with developmental issues.

### ***Schooling***

#### **Q. What about schooling for profoundly intelligent young people?**

Most schools group children based on age, which in most cases is not a productive learning environment for these students. The best situation for the profoundly intelligent child is for the parents and the school to develop an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) that takes into account the child's intellectual precocity and emotional development. Educational programs for profoundly intelligent children need to be customized for a profoundly intelligent learner. Sometimes an educational advocate can help. In the words of Miraca Gross, "Exceptional students are surely those for whom their schools should make an exception."

If you identify a profoundly gifted learner in your school or classroom, here are some options you can put into practice to help him or her learn:

#### **Early Entrance to Kindergarten**

A child has a right to work at his or her appropriate level. Some children may benefit from early acceptance to kindergarten by having their academic needs met in the classroom at a younger age.

#### **Subject/Grade Acceleration**

No other arrangement for profoundly gifted children works as well as acceleration. Support the profoundly intelligent student by accelerating him or her in one or more school subjects to provide intellectual challenge in areas where he or she is particularly advanced. Utilizing the Iowa Acceleration Scale can help parents and educators determine the best fit for a particular child (or student).

Parents and educators need to be aware of the research on acceleration ([A Nation Deceived](#)) and then work with schools to provide multi-age grouping of intellectual peers for highly intelligent students.

#### **Self-contained Classes**

In some cases, self-contained classes for the gifted are even more effective in providing students the opportunity to be challenged by and to connect with intellectual peers. It also simplifies a teacher's role by having a class of like like-minded individuals, rather than trying to differentiate within a heterogeneous classroom.

#### **Independent Study**

Before beginning a unit, allow students the opportunity to demonstrate what they know through pre-testing. If a student can

demonstrate mastery, which can be considered 85%, work with him or her to develop an independent course of study to delve into the topic in greater depth. Examples of independent study options are online distance learning courses, correspondence courses, and forming a learning partnership with a mentor-teacher.

**Pre-assessment and/or Credit by Exam**

Some school districts offer examinations whereby students can skip one or more grades or a particular course by performing well on an examination of the material.

**Dual Enrollment**

Meeting the educational needs of a profoundly intelligent student may require enrollment in two or more levels of schooling at the same time: elementary and middle school, middle and high school, high school and college, elementary or middle school and college.

**Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) Programs**

Courses for students in high school which cover material at the college level and prepare students to take AP exams offered through the College Board testing program.

**Extracurricular Opportunities**

Extracurricular opportunities can offer intellectual challenges to profoundly intelligent students. Talent searches, state governor's programs, contests/competitions and the pursuit of a significant piece of work for a Davidson Fellows award are among the opportunities that could be explored.

**Parenting**

**Q. How do you parent a profoundly intelligent child?**

Parenting profoundly intelligent children is one of the most difficult parenting challenges. As Stephanie Tolan, writer and parent of a profoundly intelligent child herself, states:

Raising a profoundly gifted child can be agony, ecstasy, and everything in between. Adults must perform almost impossible feats of balance; supporting a child's gifts without pushing, valuing without over-investing, championing without taking over. It is costly, physically and emotionally draining, and intellectually demanding. In the first flush of pride, few parents realize that their task is in many ways similar to the task faced by parents of a child with severe handicaps. Our world does not accommodate differences easily, and it matters little whether the difference is perceived to be a deficit or an overabundance.

Unfortunately, there is little information or support for parents with profoundly intelligent children, and traditional parenting practices may not take into consideration the specific needs and sensitivities of these kids. As James Webb observed, "In some families, continual evaluation and criticism of performance--one's own and others--is a tradition. Any natural tendency to self-evaluate likely will be inflated (by the profoundly intelligent child). Depression and academic underachievement may be increased." Asynchrony in the child's development also may lead to asynchrony in the family system. While normal, this asynchrony presents a special set of challenges (and joys).

The experts agree that the most significant way parents can help their profoundly intelligent children become comfortable with themselves is by providing them with a safe, supportive home environment where they are loved and accepted for who they are, differences and all.

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