

The Perils of Parenting..

Top 10 Things Not to Say to Your Gifted Child

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Gifted children, like all children, need nurturing and secure environments in which to grow. They need to feel they are loved unconditionally and that they live in a home with appropriate limits placed on their behavior.

Last week my husband and I were watching the television program, “Supernanny,” in which a children’s nanny was sent in to help a troubled family experiencing discipline problems with their children. While watching these struggling families, I couldn’t help but wonder why these parents just didn’t get it. Wasn’t parenting simply common sense put into practice? It was at that point that my husband reminded me of the parenting manual.

Experienced parents know what I’m talking about. It’s the secret parenting manual they send home with us from the hospital. It’s completely indexed and contains the answer to every problem. The answer to hyperactivity can be found between growing pains and jaundice.

Of course, there is no such manual, but wouldn’t it be great if such a thing did exist? I suspect that if such a manual existed, there would have to be a second volume for gifted children. If parenting in general is hard, parenting a gifted child may be even more challenging, for gifted children possess unique characteristics and abilities that often bring them incredible opportunity, but also may present special complications for both child and parent.

Having taught gifted children for 10 years, and parented three gifted children who survived the process (all are grown and gainfully employed), I’d like to contribute not a manual, but at least some guidelines. Like David Letterman, I’ve developed my ideas around a Top 10 List—the Top 10 Things *Not* to Say to Your Gifted Child. The suggestions are based on research, and focus on three guiding principles. Although these principles may seem deceptively simple, they can be tricky to implement:

- surround your gifted child with an unconditionally secure, loving environment;
- respect the uniqueness that is within your gifted child; and
- help your gifted child to become an academic explorer.

Sometimes when we’re navigating the precarious waters of parenting, we feel we only have at our disposal is a leaky canoe. The adults presented in the scenarios below are not bad parents. I, personally, have said most of these things at some time to my own children. The key to success may be the ability to see when we’ve made mistakes and to recognize and readjust.

Surround Your Gifted Child With an Unconditionally Secure, Loving Environment

Gifted children, like all children, need nurturing and secure environments in which to grow. They need to feel they are loved unconditionally and that they live in a home with appropriate limits placed on their behavior.

10. “You’re so smart, smart, smart! We love you!”

Eighteen-year-old Alicia’s SAT scores were almost perfect 800s on both the verbal and math sections. Her parents and teachers were all impressed, and her friends were in awe. Alicia had never received a grade lower than an A, so no one was surprised when she received the Harvard acceptance letter. They all complimented her, “You’re so smart! We love you!”

What’s wrong? On the surface, the people in Alicia’s life were paying her a compliment. Who wouldn’t want to be that smart? The problem is twofold. First, when approval is linked with performance, the gifted child may begin to feel that the reason people love her is because she is smart, and not because of her whole self. The catch is that there may come a time when she doesn’t achieve, and her unspoken fear may be that she will no longer be loved. Next, these high-achieving gifted children may start to feel like imposters, attributing their success to luck rather than to talent.

A better approach. From an early age, talk with your bright child about characteristics other than being smart. Maybe she’s a really good friend, or has a quirky sense of humor. Maybe she’s tenacious or a good athlete. Most of all, reassure your child that you love her unconditionally for who she is, regardless of her accomplishments.

9. “Don’t be silly . . . why are you so afraid of everything?”

Five-year-old Manuel was afraid of a number of things. He worried about Black Holes that he had read about in a book from school. Could they gobble up the Earth? He worried about the war in Iraq that he saw on television. He watched the adults around him for their reactions to the news. Did dad look worried because he

knew they weren't safe from weapons of mass destruction? Lately, Manuel had not been sleeping at night, and started crawling into his parents' bed for comfort. Mom and dad were growing impatient.

play stethoscope for his birthday and even had all his guests dress up as doctors and nurses. Unfortunately, Sammy hasn't played with the stethoscope, and spends all of his time with his rock collection.

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What's wrong? Dabrowski theorized that gifted children may be overexcitable in the areas of imagination and emotion. They may possess a heightened sensitivity in these and other areas. Gifted children may be extremely precocious in their ability to hear and understand events in the adult world, and their imaginations can spin facts into "what if" scenarios. The problem comes when children are not emotionally mature enough to handle an issue, or can't yet understand the whole picture. Being told that it's not real or won't happen are not satisfying answers. Sometimes gifted children draw incorrect or illogical conclusions, or have limited abilities to understand the likelihood of events occurring. Manuel may worry about an asteroid hitting the Earth, but may not yet understand how that event is unlikely.

A better approach. This is a hard one. If your child is debilitated by fear, for example, and if he is not sleeping, you might consider seeing a counselor together. If the problem is not debilitating, try talking with your child. Reassure your child that he will be taken care of. If scary topics come up, discuss them honestly, but be careful not to further escalate the situation. Some of these things are frightening, after all. The main thing your child wants to know is that you're the adult, you're there, and that you'll care for and protect him.

Respect the Uniqueness That Is Within Your Gifted Child

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8. "Don't you want to be a doctor?"

Fourth grader Sammy's mom couldn't wait for him to go to high school, where he could take honors biology, which would lay the foundation for college science courses and eventually medical school. Sammy's mom dreamed of him becoming a doctor. She bought him a

What's wrong? Sammy's mom wants what's best for Sammy, and her heart is in the right place. However, your job as a parent is to guide your children towards an understanding of the gifts and interests that they possess, not telling them which gifts you want them to develop.

A better approach. Talk with your gifted child and find out what are his or her interests. Encourage him or her to try new activities. If a passion develops, support it! Sammy could benefit from joining a rock club. Sammy's mom would then become an opportunity maker, facilitator, or guide, rather than a director.

7. "You're good at so many things—you can be anything you want!"

Eighteen-year-old Marsha was talented in so many areas. She played the violin well, was a straight-A student, an accomplished athlete, and well-liked by friends and adults. Marsha should have been confident, but she was worried. She was involved in (and good at) so many different activities that she was unsure what she wanted to major in at college. Which classes should she take? To her surprise, the counselor was little help, insisting that she was so talented she could have her choice of fields.

What's wrong? Many gifted children exhibit multiple talents. Because they can accomplish so much, these children are reluctant to give up any activity, and often end up with too much on their plates. However, major accomplishment in most fields requires a devotion of concentrated time and energy. Many well-meaning parents of gifted children support multipotentiality because they believe it makes their son or daughter a better candidate for higher tier schools if they have more activities to place on their college applications. However, the college admissions counselors are more likely to focus on the importance of the student developing a passion in one or two areas, rather than on having many activities on a resume.

A better approach. Begin to help your bright child understand her multiple strengths and interests. Instead

of saying, “You can do anything,” start to ask questions that help her to focus on her true passions and interests. As she grows older, help her to make choices, a skill that takes practice. She may need to eliminate activities that are only marginally interesting, so that she may pursue other interests more wholeheartedly.

6. “You should try to make more friends!”

Leisha’s parents watched as she walked timidly up to the door and rang the bell. The birthday girl opened the door and gracefully acknowledged the present Leisha handed her. With a hesitant glance back to her parents, Leisha disappeared inside.

Two hours later, Leisha’s parents returned to find her absorbed in a book that had she had ferreted out of the gift pile. “Did you have a good time?” asked Leisha’s mom. “Fine,” came the reply. “Can we go home now?”

What’s wrong? Gifted children have varying needs for socialization. Some children need more, and some can be happy with a good book and one or two close friends. The issue is further complicated by the fact that many gifted children experience dyssynchrony—their social, emotional, intellectual, and physical abilities may develop at varying rates.

A better approach. Let your child be your guide in this area. Maybe there isn’t a need for a high level of socialization. See how often she asks to be with other children and let that be the guide for social events. You also may consider having different friends for different reasons. Gifted children may need several peer groups: an intellectual peer group, an emotional peer group, and a social peer group.

Help Your Gifted Child to Become an Academic Explorer

Gifted children exhibit great potential not only to do well in school, but also to embrace the world and experience life to the fullest. I like to think of them becoming intellectual explorers, curious about everything, persistent, and joyous about life in general. You can help your children become intrepid intellectual explorers.

5. “No more questions!”

Kyle is forever asking questions, usually while his Dad is trying to unwind. “Why is meatloaf brown?” “What makes a rainbow?” “What makes dirt?” Finally, one day, dad snaps, “That’s enough, Kyle! No more questions!”

What’s wrong? Researchers have suggested that the ability to ask good questions and to know how to find answers is an essential part of intelligence. Gifted children

start out full of curiosity, but then sometimes get the message that it’s not okay to be that curious. Where do they get that message? Home, friends, and even schools sometimes subtly interact to discourage children from asking too many questions, from being too smart, from wanting too much.

A better approach. As busy parents, sometimes it is difficult to stop what we’re doing and answer questions. Sometimes it’s impossible. If you can’t answer the questions immediately, why not schedule a Q&A time? Kyle’s dad could simply say, “Kyle, I am busy now, but I want you to write your questions down and in 30 minutes we’re going to sit down and have a discussion about them. And if I don’t know the answer, we’ll figure out how to find the answer together.” Dad’s interest and attention give Kyle the message that it’s valuable and important to ask questions. His intellectual humility tells Kyle that not even adults have all of the answers. His willingness to engage Kyle in the process of finding answers provides his son with important beginning skills in research and critical thinking.

4. “It’s not your fault!”

Abby’s mom could tell she was in a bad mood as soon as she stepped off the school bus. “That Mrs. J! I hate her! She never explains things the right way! She likes some kids more than others, and she doesn’t like me! She gave me a C on the paper I wrote!” “You’re joking!” replied Abby’s mom. “That’s terrible! You worked so hard on that paper! That teacher must be wrong.”

What’s wrong? Most parents understand that their gifted children are accomplished, and they validate their successes. It’s harder to acknowledge failure, but gifted children, like all children, need to acknowledge both their successes and failures. Abby’s mom wants to believe that her child is not at fault, and she may not be at fault. However, by making that decision prior to discussing the matter with the teacher, Abby’s mom is letting Abby know that she is willing to take her side, regardless of the evidence. However, if Abby doesn’t accept her contribution to the grade on the paper, there can be no possibility for improvement.

A better approach. Explain to your children that they will be successful sometimes and unsuccessful at other times. It is important to recognize both their successes and failures. Don’t jump to conclusions about who is to blame. Learn the facts and get different points of view and help your children to see the other side. Focus on improvement, not on blame.

3. “If it’s hard, you can always stop.”

Jonathan, a sixth-grade student in the gifted science program at school, is having some problems on recent tests and quizzes. Jonathan has been mostly an A student, particularly

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in reading, but in science he's bringing home C's. Jonathan's mother is concerned, because Jonathan has been making noises about moving out of the gifted science class. Finally, one day Jonathan brings home an F and tearfully presents it to his mother. "That's okay, Jonathan," comforts his mom. "If it's that stressful you can just drop the class."

What's wrong? Gifted children often have many talents. Things come easily to these . . . sometimes too easily. The first time they run into a difficult class, a hard task, or a goal that seems out of reach, they may panic and want to stop. However, high expectations are important in the educational setting. Jonathan's mom is having an understandable reaction. However, in the long run she's showing Jonathan that when things get too hard, it is okay to give up.

A better approach. Discuss with your child that everyone tries difficult things and that everyone experiences setbacks. Try to help him problem solve. Begin by talking through the problem. Maybe it's homework or the reading in class. Discuss and agree on some possible solutions to the dilemma. Perhaps more homework time needs to be dedicated to the class, or a conference with the teacher to problem solve together is in order. Emphasize with your child that it's important for him to persevere, while reassuring him that you're there to support him through the experience.

2. "Why don't you draw the lines straighter?"

Third grader Shakira had an intense passion for art. She loved drawing and painting . . . blending colors to see how they came together. Lately she had become interested in abstract art. She loved the way she could draw her cat and make it look like the cat she saw in her mind when she closed her eyes.

For her mother's birthday she decided to make a drawing of her mother. She spent hours in her room working on the painting, even skipping her favorite television show. Excited, she ran downstairs and presented it to her mother. Shakira studied her mom's reaction to the painting. She could tell her mom was puzzled. "It's very pretty, but where are the eyes?" Shakira doesn't paint as much anymore. She likes to spend time now coloring in her coloring book and tries to stay inside the lines.

What's wrong? Research studies have shown how rigid parental demands, especially with young children, may diminish creativity. Shakira's talent in art was discouraged because she did not feel that she had gotten it right. This focus on getting it right can deter our children's creativity in art, math, writing, and many other areas.

A better approach. Encourage your children to take academic and creative risks. It's not only about getting it right; it's about learning and improving each time they attempt something. Coloring outside the lines can bring creative fulfillment and great rewards.

1. "You're so smart! This should be easy for you!"

The moment 12-year-old C. J. stepped into his new Algebra class, he broke out into a sweat. He shouldn't be in this class. It was full of the smart kids. He was only in here because his parents had insisted that he take Algebra instead of Pre-Algebra. He knew he would bomb this class. He was not good at math.

C. J.'s predictions proved eerily correct. He managed to scrape by with a C on his report card for the first grading period, but by the second, his grade had slipped to a D. His parents were furious. They really believed that because he was so able at everything else, math would be easy for him.

What's wrong? Gifted children, like all children, have strengths and weaknesses. Because they are very talented in one or more areas, many parents mistakenly believe that their child's intellectual ability applies to all academic areas. This belief may lead to a fear of failure on the part of the child. Successful children who experience failure may question their giftedness, which can possibly impede the pursuit of their gifts and talents.

A better approach. Be realistic about your gifted children's capabilities. Work with them to help understand that they will be strong in some areas and not as strong in others. Identify opportunities to validate their strengths and improve on weaknesses.

Conclusion

It's late at night and the television is on again. This time, instead of "Supernanny," Steve Martin is cavorting with his 12 kids in the remake of the classic *Cheaper by the Dozen, II*. The kids are raucous, irreverent, and happy. The neighbors' kids are controlled, respectful, and

happy. As I watch the film, I'm struck by the number of good parenting styles. You can be strict or lenient, quiet or raucous, irreverent or serious. The main thing is to know your children, love and challenge them, and help them find their way when the path is not so obvious.

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