

"Psychology Works" Fact Sheet: Giftedness in Children and Youth

What is Giftedness?

People who have exceptionally high intellectual abilities are referred to as "gifted." Many researchers have tried to explain what gifted means, but there is still no agreement on a single definition to date. In the past, *giftedness* and *talents* were used interchangeably, but nowadays, researchers agree they have distinct meanings (Gagné, 2009). Currently, the most accepted definition for **giftedness** is having exceptional natural abilities in a specific area (Margrain et al., 2015).

Alternatively, a second definition of giftedness uses a three-ring conception of giftedness, which combines three intertwined concepts. A gifted learner demonstrates: (a) exceptional intellectual abilities; (b) creativity, such as finding unique solutions to problems; and (c) task commitment, showing persistent motivation to complete tasks. These three elements allow us to identify gifted learners by using rating scales, questionnaires, psychological testing, and observations (Renzulli, 2005).

A third approach conceptualizes giftedness more broadly than having exceptional natural abilities (potential), but the result of using opportunities for developing this potential (Worrel et al., 2021).

The lack of a consistent definition for giftedness creates challenges for governments and international organizations in determining how to formally identify children and adolescents who require specialized curriculum to meet their needs. Not all Canadian provinces and territories officially recognize giftedness as an exceptionality, and even among those that do, the level of support and programming varies greatly. However, most theories and research agree that gifted learners possess remarkable abilities in different areas, such as language, reasoning, and the arts (Vaivre-Douret, 2011; Renati, 2023).

How Do I know if a Child is Gifted?

Certain characteristics or signs may suggest giftedness in children and adolescents. These examples, adapted from Clark (2008), are based on four different areas (*please note that not all gifted learners will display all of these traits*):

1. Intellectual abilities:

- a. Intellectual curiosity and eagerness to explore new concepts
- b. Large vocabulary
- c. Voracious and early reader
- d. Persistent, goal-directed behaviour
- e. Independence in work and study
- f. Interest in problem-solving and applying concepts
- g. Quick learning and ability to grasp complex ideas

2. Creativity and imagination:

- a. Intuitiveness and ability to generate novel ideas
- b. Ability for fantasy
- c. Keen sense of humour
- d. Flexibility
- e. Creativeness and inventiveness
- f. Openness to stimuli, broad interests
- g. Comfortable with unconventional approaches to challenges

3. Motivation and task commitment:

- a. Constantly asks questions
- b. Insatiable curiosity
- c. Mood changes, especially related to perceptions of failure
- d. Can be impulsive, eager and spirited
- e. High expectations of self and others often leading to feelings of frustration
- f. Need for consistency between abstract values and personal actions

4. Social and emotional aspects:

- a. Experience emotions deeply and intensely
- b. Idealism and sense of justice
- c. Advanced levels of moral judgment
- d. Heightened self-awareness, accompanied by feelings of being different
- e. Highly energetic – needs little downtime
- f. High levels of frustration – particularly when having difficulty meeting standards of performance (either imposed by self or others)

What Is a Twice Exceptional Learner?

Gifted learners can also present with other exceptionalities. For example, gifted children and adolescents can have a learning disorder (Beckmann & Minnaert, 2018), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (Budding & Chidekel, 2012), autism spectrum disorder (Cain et al., 2019), higher levels of anxiety (Guignard et al., 2012), or more emotional difficulties and peer problems (Morawska & Sanders, 2008).

When a gifted learner has another exceptionality, as outlined above, they are often referred to as **twice exceptional**. Being twice exceptional can create additional challenges for these individuals to reach their full potential. They may face barriers that hinder their academic progress and struggle to meet regular curriculum expectations. For example, gifted learners with a learning disorder may struggle to acquire basic academic skills despite having superior intellectual abilities. They may rely on their high intellectual abilities to compensate for the academic difficulties, which can mask both the giftedness and the learning disorder. As a result, they may not receive the appropriate support and accommodations necessary to address both aspects of their exceptionalities, which could affect their overall development and academic performance.

What to Do if You Suspect a Child is Gifted?

If you are a parent or a school staff member, seeking advice from a trusted professional like a psychologist can be helpful. Psychologists can conduct formal assessments to evaluate a child's intellectual and academic abilities and assist in determining appropriate programming. In Canada, the identification of gifted learners varies across provinces and territories. Additionally, educational authorities (e.g., school boards) may have distinct procedures for identification. For example:

1. Some children may undergo an individual brief or full assessment - referred to as a *psychoeducational assessment* - to evaluate their cognitive abilities, academic performance, social-emotional abilities, and potential characteristics for giftedness.
2. Others might be assessed using a group-administered cognitive screening measure within their school to identify giftedness by a qualified teacher.
3. In some cases, a combination of both individual and group assessments may be used for identification.

The formal assessment process aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the child's abilities and ensure that appropriate support and programming are provided to nurture their talents and unique needs. In addition, it can also provide crucial insights for parents, educators, and the child to understand the reasons behind the child's academic performance and any challenges they may be facing. At the school level, school psychologists play a vital role in implementing appropriate interventions and support. Their involvement extends beyond just identifying the child's needs. They collaborate with parents, teachers, and other professionals to develop personalized strategies and accommodations to help the child thrive academically and emotionally, such as enrichment programming, extracurricular activities, special education support, and mental health support (Worrell et al., 2021).

Formal Identification of Giftedness

It is important to note that giftedness **is not** a psychological diagnosis but rather a descriptive term. Psychologists and educational systems use this term to address the needs of these students. It allows for a better understanding and support of these students' unique strengths and requirements to help them thrive academically and personally.

In education, the concept of giftedness is framed as the result of providing opportunities for all individuals to nurture their potential. This is accomplished by exposing them to domains where their inherent abilities can flourish (Worrell et al., 2021). Gifted children and adolescents can generally be grouped into three main categories based on their academic performance:

1. Some perform above the level of their average-functioning peers.
2. Others perform at the same level as their average-functioning peers; and
3. Some may underperform or struggle academically.

There are different reasons why a student may not perform at their full capacity, such as neurodevelopmental disorders, lack of social skills, and not being motivated to perform. Regardless of their category, addressing their giftedness needs is essential because it can lead to better outcomes regarding their mental health and academic performance, for example (García-Martínez, 2021). This can be done formally within the education system or through suitable extracurricular enrichment activities.

Common Facts About Gifted Learners

1. Gifted learners are not always at the top of their classes. Being gifted does not guarantee high academic performance. Some gifted learners underachieve for various reasons, including having a co-occurring exceptionality, difficulties with motivation, lack of engagement, or difficulties with executive functions.
2. Gifted learners may not be fine on their own. Gifted learners require appropriate educational environments that challenge and enrich their learning experiences. If not provided with adequate support and stimulation, gifted learners can become bored and disengaged, which may lead to underachievement and not reaching their potential. Without the appropriate educational opportunities that nurture their unique abilities, gifted learners may not thrive academically and may even experience frustration or disinterest in their studies.
3. You can be gifted if you have a learning disorder. As stated above, gifted learners with a learning disorder are referred to as twice exceptional. Twice exceptional individuals face unique challenges and strengths. Their giftedness may mask their learning difficulties, or their learning difficulties may mask their giftedness, making identification and support essential. For these students to reach their full potential, developing appropriate supports that address their specific needs is crucial.
4. Gifted children do not all exhibit the same characteristics. Giftedness is usually determined as being among the top 2% of the population based on intellectual abilities, but within this group, there is significant variability in characteristics and abilities. Gifted learners can display a wide range of strengths and challenges. Some may excel in social-emotional aspects, while others might face difficulties. Similarly, some gifted learners may have a more balanced set of cognitive processing abilities, while others might have specific strengths and weaknesses in different cognitive domains. A psychoeducational assessment is a valuable tool for identifying the specific strengths and areas of need in gifted learners.
5. Gifted learners may or may not prefer to socialize with their same-age peers. While most children's intellectual, emotional, social, creative, and physical development occurs at a similar rate, some gifted children experience **asynchronous development**. This means that different aspects of their development may not occur simultaneously or at the same pace. Asynchronous development can lead to variations in the level of maturity among gifted children and adolescents. Some may be more mature than their same-age peers, while others may have similar maturity levels. Consequently, their preferences for socializing and engaging in activities can differ significantly. It is essential to recognize that every gifted child and adolescent is unique, and their social preferences and interests can vary widely. Some gifted learners may prefer to socialize with peers with similar interests and intellectual pursuits, regardless of age. Others may enjoy interacting with same-age peers and participating in activities typical for their age group.

*Adapted from [Myths about Gifted Students | National Association for Gifted Children](#)

Helpful Resources

From Canada:

- For resources in English (from Ontario), [The Association for Bright Children of Ontario](#)
- For resources in French (from Québec), [Association Québécoise pour la douance](#)

From the USA:

- Several studies conducted by Renzulli's Research Team are considered seminal research that guides the design and development of programs and services to meet the needs of gifted and talented students, [click here](#)
- The World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, [click here](#)
- The National Association for Gifted Children's mission is to support those who enhance the growth and development of gifted and talented children through education, advocacy, community building, and research, [click here](#)
- Resources for parents of gifted children, teachers, mental health professionals, and gifted adults from the Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted association, [click here](#)
- For resources, articles, books, and links to help and support parents, teachers, and gifted children alike, [click here](#)

You can consult with a psychologist to find out about having an assessment for giftedness or treatment for accompanying difficulties. Provincial, territorial and some municipal associations of psychology often maintain referral services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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