

Professional Sharing: Things Are Not Going Well for Parents of Gifted Children ...

Things Are Not Going Well for Parents of Gifted Children – What Can Be Done to Improve the Situation?

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The Challenges of Being Parents of Gifted Children

Parents of gifted children are seen as “pushy” and achievement-seeking. Such stereotype labeling may have stemmed from assumptions. It can, however, be damaging as it may discourage open mindedness or truthful expressions. For example, most parents of highly intelligent children notice the early signs of superior abilities in their children at the infancy stage. Frequently quoted signs of early superior abilities include, but not limited to, alertness, remarkable emotional connection between mother and the baby, early speech, fast pace of learning, recognition of slight changes in places, activities, people or things in daily life contexts and so forth. As more and more advanced abilities emerge in the early childhood, the parents not only deeply feel the joy of raising these spirited children but also wonder what makes such amazing development. These parents could hardly imagine that their concerns about the amazing progress in their children are viewed by some people as boasting. As time goes by, the parents are well aware of the importance of giving special attention to advanced development of their children. Usually parents will attempt to seek advice from pre-school teachers, paediatricians or other helping professionals, to see how the advanced development of their children could be supported in the school. Unfortunately, parents’ proactive approach to optimize the developmental potentials of their children is likely to be misinterpreted as “pushy”. It is not uncommon at all that the enthusiastic parents will be judged as over-emphasising the improvement of children’s academic achievement.

Rather than seeking improvement in their children, the parents who came to support centers such as ours, shared how they constantly sought improvement in themselves. Lots of parents with highly able children set high expectation on them. They reflected that the beautiful spirit of their babies elicited the joyful urge inside them to be perfect caregivers. They want to be devoted parents.

The fact is: parenting gifted children is definitely demanding. Yet, not many of the parents are prepared for that. On the one hand, the parents don’t really understand why there are notable qualitative differences in cognitive development and emotional sensitivity of their babies when compared with other age peers. On the other hand, they badly need advice from pre-school teachers, primary care physicians, paediatric nurses and the like. Regardless of their active search for professional advice, parents often find the assistance they get does not address specifically the kind of things relevant to the actual need of parenting the cognitively advanced and emo-

tionally sensitive children.

The Development of Gifted Children

In early childhood, these bright children are often seen as extremely inquisitive, highly energetic, observing, demanding constant stimulation, craving for mental challenges, expecting constant but undivided attention from caregivers, emotionally attached, with strong feelings towards people and things, and much more sensitive to their immediate environment. While young children can be very self-centered and controlling, the gifted children may express their emotions more intensely or explosively at times. In most cases, these emotional expressions are too complex to be explained. Parents are not sure what limit to set so that their child will listen to them. Even though parents try very hard to stretch their limits, they can’t see any significant improvement in changing their children.

Entering into primary One, most gifted children welcome new expectations on them. For example, they like being seen as independent and capable. They may enjoy new responsibilities such as studying textbooks, taking care of their school bags and personal items, and doing daily assignments. Even though the self-management skills vary a lot among gifted children, they enjoy the new identity as a primary school students. They probably take school seriously as they hold high expectation on school learning.

A few months later, these highly able children gradually discover that other than the routines, like dictations, assignments and class work, not many novel ideas, interesting things and challenging activities happen in the classroom. Their natural urge for stretching their abilities is not satisfied. What makes them dissatisfied is the lack of excitement and room for exploring interesting ideas in depth. Furthermore, in each lesson, there is very limited time for questioning and sharing of different views among pupils. There are also few opportunities to explore various learning topics in-depth, to examine alternative views, and draw creative connections between different learning contents. In addition, there are very limited hands-on experiences for pupils to integrate their affective, tactile and cognitive understanding. Outcomes of learning are narrowed to written assignments such as worksheets or workbooks rather than being expressed in a wider variety of formats. The most stressful of all, however, is the restriction of movements in the classroom owing to spatial constraints and traditional teaching approach. Most of the time pupils are expected to sit and stay quiet. Most primary schools have gone full day. As a result, the private time for pursuing personal interests becomes limited and brief. The

hunger of gifted children for private time to do their own things, to ponder interesting ideas, and to do mental trips through self-reflection and contemplation, which is the base of deep learning and personal growth, is hardly satisfied.

As the gifted children move up to higher grades, their motivation gradually cools down as they notice that the school is not going to stretch their potential capacities or provide sufficient challenge to their complex mind. While some sensitive children complain about boredom in class learning, others may divert to playing with friends during the recess or lunchtime. It seems that gifted children do not see textbooks and homework relevant to things that they have real concern with. For example, they are concerned about environmental conservation, the link between globalisation and poverty, ethics of biogenetic technology, war etc. They want to do something that has a positive impact on life. They want to learn something relevant and personally meaningful but not sure where they can get these learning experiences. Oftentimes, their aspiration and sincere pursuit of knowledge receive no echoing.

With more and more negative feedbacks from the school about the declining motivation of their highly intelligent children, parents are not sure about their bearing. Very often, parents are worried when the teachers tell them that their child should have paid greater attention in the class and more effort in the schoolwork. They may admit that their highly able children are not as enthusiastic about school achievement as before. What parents really are concerned is not exactly the school grades. Parents are concerned about the attitude and approach their children show in their learning.

IQ Test – Its Functions and Limitations

Recently, there is a growing awareness of gifted education. Parents are referred by the school teachers, pediatricians or relatives for assessing of intelligence of their children. The problem is that the intelligence testing of their children will generate IQ scores but not the follow-up that parents badly need. Even if they get an IQ test, parents do not know what exactly their gifted children need, what they can do to help, what support they need, and where to get the support. In fact, parents deserve more help. Psychological services should not be limited to Intelligence testing. Ethically and professionally speaking, assessment is for intervention. The function of assessment is to identify needs and explore ways to appropriately address these needs. An IQ score over 130 doesn't tell much about how much support is needed, when to provide what, and why certain support is more urgent than others. In many developed countries, gifted children are entitled to special education. It is mandatory to provide gifted students with individual support plan to ensure that their individual social emotional needs, learning pace, preferences and style, as well as advanced cognitive capacity are accommodated. Psychologists and professionals should know that serving the needs of the gifted should not end with IQ testing. At least, they should let the parents understand that a lot more should be done to differentiate and appropriately support the individual needs of their gifted child. And these should be done in a timely fashion.

Supporting Parents of Gifted Children

Unlike parents of non-gifted children, the parents of gifted children often find general parenting skills or parent-child communication techniques not working very well for gifted children. Some parents of gifted children would complain about the low relevancy of general parenting workshops to the unique set of challenges within their children and between their significant others. What is missing in most general parent training workshops is the impact of gifted traits on parent-child interaction and the significance of active listening. The parents needed professionals who are empathetic and resourceful enough to help them overcome various yet unnecessary barriers or pain.

Not surprisingly, parents often find that professionals seldom explain any further about the meaning of giftedness in the life span development of their gifted child. Parents definitely desire to know more about the implications of giftedness on parenting, sibling relationship, teaching, counseling, career education and personal growth. They don't benefit much from psychologists or other professionals who either soothe them that not much special support is needed, as their gifted children are so capable, or advise them on ways to promote the emotional intelligence of their children. Parents often find burning questions about their children's struggles as well as the parental stress unanswered. Once the giftedness of children is identified, parents do not merely rely on a single group of professionals to guide them. Parents of the gifted children will look for various paths to learn and seek improvement for their children.

In some developed countries such as the United States, however, more resources specifically designed to support the gifted children and their families are available in the community. In the first place, recognition of individual differences is emphasized as part of developmental and behavioral paediatrics. For example, the temperamental traits of infants can be identified to enhance parent-child bond. Detailed developmental history as well as screening of learning neurodevelopmental functionings are taken in clinics. Parents will be given professional advice on preventive education to address some areas of concern in the individual profile of children. The chance that gifted children receiving early identification is much higher. Early screening for learning differences is done in some States before children enter primary schools. For example vision processing and sensory integration dysfunctions are assessed for early intervention. Gifted children with various neurodevelopmental weaknesses will not be missed out that easily. With early intervention, gifted children do not have to stand on their own feet to suffer alone without timely support. The likelihood for gifted children having to cope with various risk factors of underachievement will be lower. Psychological services are sensitive and responsive to the individual needs of the gifted. Gifted children are seen as individuals who need special education. Professionals who work with gifted children understand that each of them is unique. Hence, gifted children are entitled to have an individualized education plan designed and supported by a team of professionals.

Furthermore, gifted children with Very Superior Intelligence will be given more attention on their social emotional vulnerabilities. As the gifted are seen as individuals, their mental health and body health is an area of concern as well.

Services of the gifted individuals are not limited to the provision of gifted education. Anticipatory guidance across significant developmental stages is very important so that parents can take a proactive stand to deal with various social emotion issues. Given the cultural differences and variations of national wealth, the services or resources available in the United States or some other countries may not be applicable to Hong Kong. The most important thing is that parents of gifted children need empathy and support from helping professionals. Parents understand that raising a gifted child is a very big challenge. We should understand that pushing children for competitive academic achievement is not the ultimate goals of parents. Parents of gifted children desire to see their children learn something relevant to their innate passion for knowledge, wisdom, enlightenment and compassion. Such desire, in fact, is shared by all parents, not limited to parents of gifted children. Our understanding of giftedness should be broadened to accommodate the individual characteristics of individuals with Very Superior Intelligence.

On humanistic ground, the community should support parents of

the gifted children to prevent waste of children's talents and giftedness. To build up the community culture of honouring individual differences is in fact constructing a more child-friendly and meaningful educational environment of the schools in Hong Kong. Honouring individual differences helps us find out the unique path for optimal individual development. While investing resources in developing the school culture of optimising the profile of individual differences may incur considerable public expense, the return can be huge. It is simply because all school graduates find support that optimally utilizes the profile and maximize their individual potentials. Eventually, these graduates will contribute their unique talents or strengths to the community in a unique but rewarding way. Commitment to maximizing potentials in students is, therefore, the commitment to prepare high quality citizens for the advancement of our city, the enhancement of our cultural, our economic and social heritage.

Postscript :

The 2006 Quality Education Fund (QEF) appears to be a god-sent gift to the local community. It considers the support for diverse learning differences as a priority theme. I wish that the gifted students, as well as other school-age children with diverse special learning needs will substantially benefit from some QEF initiatives that specifically aim at optimizing the learning capacities of these students.

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