

Acceleration is not for everyone, and the decision to accelerate should be made carefully. To determine whether a child is a suitable candidate for grade skipping, consider the child's intellectual ability (a tested IQ of at least 130 is recommended), large and small motor skills, current achievement levels in reading and arithmetic, and social and emotional maturity, among other factors.⁴⁶ A helpful tool for gauging readiness is the *Iowa Acceleration Scale*,⁴⁷ which is designed to help a child's parents and teachers gather information about factors that research has shown to be important in decisions regarding early entrance or whole-grade acceleration. It also lists circumstances in which acceleration should *not* be used.

Differentiation

One widespread approach to meeting the needs of gifted children in a regular classroom is through differentiation of both curriculum and instruction. This means that in a mixed-ability class, the teacher plans and organizes different content, materials, and methods of instruction for the different types and levels of learners in the class.⁴⁸ Ideally, this allows the gifted students in the class to work at their own level of ability.

Deborah Ruf views differentiation somewhat differently, suggesting that students in the same class "might study the same topic at the same time with the same basal textbook and materials, but the extensions, enrichment, and practice assignments are modified according to each child's needs."⁴⁹ She then offers a caveat: this version of differentiation is limiting for highly gifted children, since the same textbook and materials would not challenge them.

Unfortunately, research shows that "very little differentiation of instruction occurs for gifted children unless the teacher is experienced, has training in the techniques, and has support from others such as administrators or other teachers."⁵⁰ Finding value in the idea of differentiation while promoting more focus on the different needs of high-ability learners, the National Association for Gifted Children strongly encourages schools to provide differentiation for gifted students.

Parents as Advocates

Successful parent advocates prepare by gathering much more information than we've had room for here from books such as *Helping Gifted Children Soar*,⁵¹ *Re-Forming Gifted Education*,⁵² and *Academic Advocacy for Gifted Children*.⁵³ These books provide invaluable insights to help parents learn what they need to know about their child, both as a unique individual and as a gifted learner; about the teaching strategies most likely to help the child blossom; and about how the local school can provide appropriately for their child and others like her. With this background, they can begin to inquire politely—but persistently—about their school's provisions for students of high ability, remembering that some decisions about programming for gifted students require administrative approval and that individual teachers may be limited in what they can do. In short, parents should gather all the information they can and then work from there.

Parents Respond

Remember that for gifted children, intellectual needs carry double weight—they are emotional needs, too—and parents are on the front lines in the struggle to meet both types of needs. Fortunately, in recent years, parents have become much more active in monitoring their children's school experience. They support the schools' good efforts for all children and ask for more for their own children when more is needed. Sometimes the mere fact that parents are asking questions helps the schools to move forward.

But sometimes parents seek other options. In a book that combines her background as both a neurologist and a middle school classroom teacher, Dr. Judy Willis⁵⁴ describes her decision to send her gifted daughter to private school. Quoting research showing that public school teachers are almost twice as likely as other parents to choose private schooling for their middle school-age children,⁵⁵ Willis explains why she joined them. Through parental "due diligence," she learned that because of pressure to improve test scores to meet requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind legislation, the

gifted program in her daughter's public school suffered from reduced funding and no longer offered the challenge and enrichment that her daughter needed.

Whether they are considering public (including charter) or private schooling for their gifted children, parents should actively seek these three pieces of information:

- a description of the kind of educational program that is best for their child
- how much of the desired program the child is receiving in school
- what they can do at school or at home to compensate for any missing elements

Even though they may advocate for suitable programs at school, in the end, parents must compensate at home for what schools do not provide. They can do so through becoming informed; through enrichment; in some cases, through homeschooling; and through reading to and with their child.

Becoming Informed

If you are a parent reading this book, you have already begun to respond. You may be familiar with the growing collection of books on every possible aspect of giftedness, or you may want to follow through by reading many of the books referenced here. One of the most comprehensive books for parents is *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*,⁵⁶ which addresses both emotional and intellectual development, as well as a wide range of issues encountered in parenting gifted children. Many other helpful books on a wide variety of topics related to giftedness are listed at www.us.mensa.org/Content/AML/NavigationMenu/Programs/GiftedChildren/BookList/Gifted_Children_s_Bo.htm.

Enrichment

Chances are excellent that you as a parent are already responding to your child's need for intellectual challenge every day. You answer questions as patiently as you can, or you look up answers with your

child in a book or on the Internet (see Chapter 5, and ask a librarian's help to learn Internet search methods that will take you beyond Wikipedia and Google). You enjoy learning with your child, working with him at his "cutting edge" until his knowledge surpasses yours. You take him to the library, find movies you can enjoy together, and watch television with him so you can talk about the program. You plan family vacations and trips to museums and concerts and plays with your child in mind. You introduce him to the outdoors with hikes and camping trips, if that is an interest, and you find summer enrichment classes or music or art lessons that he will enjoy.

Our older son told us, years after the fact, that for a few years in elementary school, he tacitly understood that learning did not happen at school—but it did happen at after-school programs at the Nature Center and through the books that he found in the school and public libraries. Like my husband and me, you may not know what you are now doing that your child will always remember. The enrichment that you provide should be seen not as a series of optional extracurricular activities, but as an essential component of his education. You may well be better than the school at pitching to your child's intellectual level. Trust your intuitive response to your child, and stay involved.

Homeschooling

Parents decide to homeschool for a variety of reasons, one of which is to meet a gifted child's schooling needs when the school does not. This is particularly true of parents of highly gifted children, whose unique needs may not be met in even a strong school gifted program.

Although it is not an easy path to follow, when homeschooling is offered to enthusiastic learners by parents who are skilled at teaching and who have access to rich community resources, it can be a very successful alternative.⁵⁷ In fact, the average scores of homeschooled students on standardized tests range from the 65th to the 80th percentile—15 to 30 points above the norm.⁵⁸ College admissions officers now receive so many applications from homeschooled students that they have established criteria by which to judge their nontraditional resumes.

A good place to start when considering this educational option is the book *Creative Home Schooling: A Resource Guide for Smart Families*.⁵⁹ If you do decide to join the ranks of homeschooling parents, you will find the list of books in Chapter 8 in this book helpful as well.

Reading Aloud

When their children learn to read, parents should give some family reading time over to hearing the children read aloud—but they should also continue reading aloud to their children. Regrettably, most parents stop this practice by the time youngsters are eight or nine.

Research shows that soon after parents stop reading aloud, their children's television time begins to increase. In contrast, parents who continue reading to and with their children will have "found" time to introduce them to literature that the children might not find on their own, such as classic children's stories, folklore, poetry, and mythology. Children will happily listen to adults read not only more advanced literature than they can read themselves, but also books they can read but would not necessarily choose. Children's literature consultant Jody Fickes Shapiro writes in a column for parents, "By continuing to read aloud daily, you can remain active in the development of your children's intellectual and spiritual lives. Select books that challenge and entertain, expand awareness of the world, generate thoughtful discussion, and whet the appetite to read more."⁶⁰

Slower-paced books of real quality lend themselves to reading aloud. *Old Ramon*, by Jack Schaefer, is one of these; it is not initially an exciting book, and children who want adventure will not choose to read it themselves; however, a fifth grade class that included many gifted boys sat silently listening day after day, coming to love the book and identify with the boy, and sad to have the story end.

The story hour at home remains important for the warmth provided by the luxury of reading in a frenetic world, and it can answer a crucial need: unhurried, quiet time for reflection. One mother, a busy physician, took turns reading the entire *Harry Potter* series aloud with her gifted daughter, valuing the shared experience enough to make time for it. Another mother said that she read to her eight- and

10-year-old daughters each morning at breakfast before leaving for her work as a middle school English teacher. How much would have been missed if they had stopped when the children learned to read!

The longer parents keep up the tradition of story hour, the better, both for the quality of family life and for the intellectual development of their children. Booklists of literature for reading aloud (and suggestions for choosing books especially for this purpose) include the *Books Kids Will Sit Still For* series⁶¹ and *The Read-Aloud Handbook*.⁶²

In addition to reading a wide variety of literature, parents looking for ways to compensate for gaps in the school program can use read-aloud time to branch out to nonfiction. A good place to begin is with a visit to the children's section of the public library, where the librarian can learn of the child's current interests and help with an initial set of books to check out. With parental encouragement and the librarian's help, the possibilities are endless.⁶³

How Books Can Help

Many bright and gifted people suppress awareness of their need to learn. Teaching children to use books is one way of demonstrating that learning is important and that books can be a significant part of their lives. When teachers go to the trouble of establishing book discussion groups, or when parents take the time to read what their children are reading and talk to them about it, it becomes clear that these significant adults value and encourage reading. If reading and book discussions are happy and successful experiences, children learn to love books.

A glance back over the list of intellectual characteristics and needs found earlier in this chapter should confirm that reading and book discussion are ideal ways to respond to the characteristics and meet the related needs of gifted children. Especially where programs designed for gifted children are unavailable, a vigorous use of books can be a real contribution to children's growth. Few activities are as available, as inexpensive, and as richly rewarding. No wonder some of their best friends are books!