

9 Challenges Facing Gifted Children (and How You Can Help!)

by Erin Dower

Has your gifted child been struggling with some social, emotional, or academic issues lately? Giftedness comes with a surprising set of problems, ranging from perfectionism and competitiveness to friendship issues. Learn about these common challenges and some steps you can take to manage them and help your child thrive.

Self-Esteem Issues

Being gifted academically can make a child feel different from her peers and may even lead to the child being bullied and becoming depressed. Studies have shown that the more intellectually gifted a child is, the greater the risk of social difficulties and unhappiness. It's important to keep an eye on your child's self-esteem and work with her teacher and school counselor if she's really struggling. Negative talk about oneself and frequent mood swings can be signs of self-esteem problems.

Tip: Find a sport or hobby that helps your child build self-confidence, feel like a "regular" kid, and connect with her peers through play. Soccer, skateboarding, and hip-hop dance are a few ideas.

Guilt

Some gifted children feel pressure to "give back" because they feel so fortunate to have their own intellectual gifts. Helping other people and good causes is great, but if your child begins to feel guilty about his giftedness and overextend himself, talk with him about those feelings. Help him find a healthy balance between taking care of himself and his responsibilities and volunteering to help others.

Tip: Encourage your child to focus his "giving" by choosing one volunteer opportunity or cause per school semester — whatever he is most passionate about.

Perfectionism

Gifted children are often driven to be high-achievers in all areas of their life. Your child may procrastinate on starting homework or school projects or spend a lot of extra time on them because of her desire to get everything just right. Also, your child may be extremely gifted in some subjects but an average-achiever in others, which can also fuel her perfectionism all around. Aiming to get everything perfect is time-consuming, tiring, and even bad for one's health. Perfectionism is associated with abdominal pain, eating disorders, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorders.

Tip: For a younger child, avoid correcting every little grammar or factual mistake she makes, and remind her to go easy on herself when her perfectionism comes through.

For an older child, help her establish some basic goals and guidelines for a successful school project or report before she dives in. For example, review the assignment with her, get a sense of how long and detailed the project should be (how many pages, how many references cited, etc.), make an outline or rough draft, and establish about how much time she should invest based on the assignment's impact on her grades. In other words, help your child "know when to quit" and enjoy the process of learning from a project rather than stressing about getting everything perfect.

Control Issues

Many gifted children like to feel in control. From an early age, your precocious child may demonstrate extreme independence: "I'll do it myself!" As time goes on, your child's desire to be in control can lead to perceived "bossiness" among his peers as well as a fear of taking risks — especially as he gets older and learns more about consequences.

Tip: Nudge your child to try fun new things, such as scary rides at an amusement park. Also, help him find a healthy outlet for his desire to lead, such as helping to tutor or coach children younger than him.

Unrealistic Expectations

Gifted kids tend to be their own toughest critic. Many struggle with testing because of the sky-high expectations they feel when they sit down for an exam. After earning mostly A's in school, getting a B or C grade can be crushing to your child — and shocking to Mom and Dad. Help your child keep a healthy perspective on grades. It's impossible to maintain straight A's from kindergarten through graduation. Also, be supportive if your child is labeled "gifted" one year but not the next.

Tip: "Gifted" is a term (intended for parents and teachers to help bright students) and not a goal for your child. Instead of using "giftedness" itself as a motivator or standard for your child's performance in school, try to keep the same high-yet-healthy expectations you had when you just knew that she was a bright kid.

Impatience

Gifted children can get frustrated and impatient with themselves and others. Your child might get flustered when he doesn't immediately understand a word in a book or a homework question, or he might be quick to abandon extracurricular activities that he doesn't excel at right away. Younger children who aren't yet aware of their giftedness can get frustrated with their classmates who don't grasp concepts as quickly.

Tip: Encourage your child to pause, close his eyes, and take some deep breaths whenever he feels agitated. Remind him to be kind in his thoughts about himself and others during moments of frustration.

Friendship Issues

One of the potentially most difficult aspects of giftedness is having trouble making or keeping friends. Gifted children may appear to be socially mature and well adjusted, but might feel lonely or sad about problems with peers. Your child may feel that she has little in common with her classmates or may have trouble initiating play or joining groups. Or, she might make friends easily but later be perceived as a "show-off" or have different expectations for the friendship than her peers because of her intellectual depth and emotional sensitivity.

The most highly gifted children tend to have the most difficulty with friendships. It's important to help kids with the greatest social/emotional difficulties as early as possible, with the help of a school counselor or an outside therapist. Social difficulties can increase with age.

Tip: Help your child by arranging play dates with children with similar interests and level of intellect. Ask your child's teacher for help in identifying other gifted kids in your child's school (not only in her classroom). Explore opportunities like science clubs and writing workshops where your child might meet bright peers.

Attention and Organization Issues

Many gifted children struggle with attention problems and organization skills because they can be abstract thinkers and get bored easily. Education experts have found that it's more common for boys to be disorganized and distracted. Fortunately, there are tips and tools you can use to help your struggling gifted student — boy or girl. Get to know your child's particular pitfalls and talk with his teacher about problems and possible solutions.

Tip: Use a written homework chart rather than a mobile or online system to track assignments. Plan short homework breaks about every 30 minutes to give your child's mind a rest.

Burnout

Many gifted students are highly energetic. But they are also at risk for becoming exhausted and depleted. While your child's intellectual gifts may come very naturally, her running to-do list of mastering homework, staying organized, and striving for perfection in extracurricular activities can take a toll. Stress and overtiredness can lead to lower quality sleep, illness, and trouble in school.

Tip: On top of everything your child does, her body is using a lot of energy to physically grow! Be sure that your child is eating well and getting enough sleep for her age.