

The Joys and Challenges In Raising A Gifted Child

by Nancy Delano Moore

Our daughter, Sara, is a "gifted" child. This means that she has special mental abilities, a high IQ, and an accelerated style of learning incompatible with an average educational system. Because of this, she has not moved through her elementary and secondary education in the traditional course. To meet her needs, we have had, first, to understand them, and, then, to assess the ability of the public and private systems of formal education to contribute to her development. In both cases we have had to educate ourselves, and many times we have needed to be active advocates for her.

Our total experience, measured by Sara's growth in maturity and intellectual powers, has been positive. But we can note this only in retrospect. There have been many frustrations along the way. We hope that this account of our experiences will help other parents to educate their own special child.

I.

Sara had her first school experience at three when she entered nursery school. She went happily and returned home in good spirits from the half-day activities. She enjoyed her friends, and her teachers reported that she was a pleasure to have in class. We took great delight in her eagerness to learn and her sponge-like ability to absorb anything.

At home Sara shared all the daily routines. She and I talked fractions as we cooked in the kitchen. We put labels with the French words on chairs, tubs, tables, beds, and lamps. We explored the yard during every season. We experimented at the kitchen table. We watched "Sesame Street" and "The Electric Company". Sara's father and I took on every question she asked, often with "We'll have to look for that answer." Then we turned to books, books, still more books; we shared our best times with books. Our reward was her irrepressible enthusiasm for life and learning. At that point we seemed able to stay ahead of her; the pace was



quickenning, though, by the time she entered first grade.

Sara read well and enjoyed simple addition and subtraction problems in kindergarten. Yet the rules said that to enter first grade, a child must be six by September 30; Sara's birthday is mid-October. And so, because she was in an adequate preschool program, because we did not fully recognize at the time her intellectual capacity, and because we did not want to seem like pushy parents, we waited until the September she was six - almost seven - to enroll her in first grade in public school.

Before a week had passed in first grade, Sara moved to second grade for reading. Within a month, her reading teacher suggested to the principal that Sara needed to be in the total second grade program. We gave our consent, Sara was asked and agreed without hesitation to the move. Suddenly we had a second grader.

That move - from first to second grade - is not in itself a significant indicator of special intellectual gifts. For many children, it may not be a leap worthy of remark, since most schools

have heterogeneous first grades where some children can read and do simple arithmetic and other second grade work. In our school, though, such a move was rare, happening, perhaps, once in every five years. Sara's promotion proved to be a key to her exceptional educational needs, both for us and for the school.

Sara thrived in the second grade for several reasons: school was still new enough to be exciting, her best friend was her classmate, and, most importantly, she encountered the first of the few truly talented and responsive teachers in her education. Her classroom was a creative, lively, and highly verbal place. In classroom activities the teacher openly encouraged Sara's intense involvement in learning. This teacher prized each student as an individual; she recognized Sara's intelligence and understood her sensitivity to people and problems. The successful relationship with this teacher fostered Sara's self-confidence. Sara quickly came to love her and still does.

Second grade worked for another reason, too. At that level self-pacing is easier. At the age of seven a child can read several years ahead of her group without a problem, since appropriate material is likely to be available in the school. At that level, too, the gifted child and teacher have access to the resources necessary to develop verbal skills. By the later elementary years, however, easily accessible resources often have been exhausted. For the advancing student the break between elementary and middle school can be critical. By the fourth grade, the gifted child might be reading on a college level and have mastered fractions. If so, the child may be without the proper materials and the teacher may lack the training, experience, or will to keep the child moving ahead. Stimulation of curiosity and pacing of educational development for such a child at this point calls for an educator of exceptional knowledge and skill with both child and curriculum.

In the third and fourth grades frustrations developed. This was in part due to her new teachers and in part due to the fact that school did not offer her enough hard and interesting work. Also Sara's abilities were accelerating, the novelty of school was wearing off, and her relationship with other children was becoming difficult. By then Sara knew

she was different, the other students knew she was different, and she knew that they knew. She restrained her natural inclination to share answers she could quickly see. She tried to rein in her independent thinking and behavior in order to be less conspicuous in a highly structured classroom. When she mastered material, her teacher refused her new challenges, instead assigning her unnecessary drills and errands while the rest of the class learned the lesson. Since her skills were mushrooming with no means of expression, she became bored and frustrated. Rather than disrupt the class, she daydreamed and doodled in order to escape. It was at this time that she lapsed into a response pattern which still plagues her - careless mistakes. Sara learned quickly, almost intuitively, and retained new information easily. She always wanted to move on to new material. When drill and repetition became part of the standard order, the "impossible" happened: Sara, our prodigious learner, was unhappy in school - the one place she most wanted to be.

Sara's boredom and frustration were increasingly evident within our family. She arrived home from school angry at everybody. She needed a great deal of time to unwind. She played less with her age peers, preferring to stay in her room and read, often several books a day. Our response was to give her more books, find more outside activities such as weekly lessons in dance and music and art, and expose her to varied learning experiences such as museums and concerts where she could enjoy being with adults. Sara gobbled this up at a voracious rate, never needing a day off and requiring less sleep than I did. These activities did not compensate, however, for the inadequate academic programming. Sara's emotions remained stormy, and we all shared in the stress. Her very real needs demanded much of our energy and attention.

We believe that parents are a child's primary educators, while the schools fill an essential, but auxiliary, role in fostering academics and socialization. We found ourselves working overtime to calm the after-school storms and to provide Sara with educational challenges. We discovered that no amount of parental effort will compensate if the child is in the third grade and ought to be in the fifth. We

did not fully realize yet that what we thought of as "Sara's problem" was really the problem of the school. Sara was reacting normally to an intolerable situation.

All in all, we knew we had to know more about our daughter. Just after her ninth birthday we arranged to have her tested at a nearby university center for psychological services. Although the expense in time and money was considerable, the results were priceless. For the first time we had an objective definition of Sara's strengths, and we found an educator whose experience and advice on working with a gifted child have proved helpful through the years. The testing confirmed Sara's ability to accumulate, master, and integrate knowledge at a rapid pace. We had seen the idea of acceleration work in the first/second grade and so it had occurred to us as an appropriate step, but now we had more than a theory; we had Sara's scores, an expert's opinion, and a newly found sense of conviction.

II.

We began to explore the nearby educational possibilities for Sara. We went first to her principal, who suggested a conference at the Central Administration. Central Administration was convinced any child could fit into the existing system. "Hang in there," said Central Administration, "because high school has honors classes for bright students." The county's newly established Talented and Gifted (TAG) program was also offered as a solution; however, because Sara was not a "model" student and did not have all A's, she had not been selected for the program. Her principal corrected this and for the second semester Sara spent three hours a week at the TAG center. This program provided enrichment and some in-depth studies suitable for some gifted students. For Sara, who required a barrage of challenging opportunities, it simply provided a pleasant interlude in a deadly routine.

Next we explored two local private schools we hoped might offer Sara what she needed. We talked to parents of students already enrolled, but learned little of use because no one else had the same situation we did. Next we talked with the administrators. The headmistress of one school seemed interested only in the school and did not discuss Sara's needs, so we chose to go no further there. At the other school,

the headmistress seemed more responsive, mentioning such concepts as individual program, independent study, and self pacing. We were so relieved to hear this, as well as her general reaction to Sara's needs, that, after consulting with Sara, we chose the second school without much further inquiry. This was our mistake. Our sense of relief had so overwhelmed our hard-earned skepticism that we accepted a line of patter without detailed challenge.

In retrospect several things we might have done would have helped us to choose a school. First, we should have consulted an expert in gifted children to map out a suggested course of learning as a sample of what the school must be prepared to do to educate Sara. An expert's support lends credibility to a parent's contention that the gifted child has special needs. We should have asked the school to tell us about the program of another gifted child. We needed to be certain that the school had been successful with another child whose intelligence and other learning characteristics were quite similar to those of ours. We should have sought out that child's parents to hear how they thought the program worked.

Lacking an example of the school's working effectively with such a child (a distinct possibility if the child's IQ is in the 160-200 range) we should have secured detailed, concrete commitments from the school. As we painfully found, the words "flexible", "independent", and "personalized" may mean nothing in the context of a sales pitch. We should have known: If our child wanted to move ahead in math and take senior math in ninth grade, would the school allow that? Even if it conflicted with ninth grade English? Would the school let our child take one of the courses on her own, with *pacing* and *guidance* and *encouragement* from a teacher? Would the child be encouraged and allowed to move faster in the classes in which she stays if she were motivated to do so? If the child were moving ahead of the (for example) history class, would she be able to take tests early and, with tutoring from the teacher or outside, expand the course in depth or scope?

We should have asked these things, but we did not. Sara bore the burden of living without this flexibility in her education for three years. During Sara's time in that school, we were

stymied anytime we sought a solution to a problem, no matter how simple. The school seemed unwilling or unable to modify its way of doing things to meet Sara's needs.

Most of the administration and the staff viewed Sara as a problem. The lack of encouragement, repetitive homework, rigid attitudes, and social cliques created an unsafe atmosphere for her. In conferences, teachers concentrated on Sara's shortcomings - her evident unhappiness being seen as a personality defect, her requests to move on to new work being viewed as self-indulgent exhibitionism. As parents we encountered muted hostility when we requested some degree of flexibility for Sara. Tellingly, we were once informed that 99% of the parents left their children's education to the school once they were granted admittance.

Sara was stifled mentally, emotionally, and socially in an environment where the expectation was that everyone be alike, that children of the same age be held together; it was all right to "make hundreds," but not to skip grades. When she left at the age of twelve, Sara commented, "I was a square peg and they had round holes. They kept trying to change me, but I didn't want to change." These children were not intellectual equals, and the greatest injustice to Sara - indeed, to each of them - was to treat them equally.

III.

For Sara's sake - and for ours - something extraordinary had to happen; the ordinary was destroying her. Fortunately when she was twelve, her break came. Throughout her elementary years, she scored at the 99th percentile of any in-grade math and verbal testing. Because of this high score she qualified to take the College Board's Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) under the auspices of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth (SMPY), a research and educational support program for gifted twelve year olds directed by Dr. Julian C. Stanley at The Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore. Two months after her twelfth birthday and without benefit of the special "prepping" which so often precedes them, Sara took SAT's and scored higher than the average college-bound twelfth-grader in both the math and verbal parts of the tests. Out of the 3600 twelve year olds taking SAT's, Sara was invited to participate in a fast

paced summer math class. We recognized a unique opportunity for Sara - for the first time she would be with children who were her peers in both age and intellect. Her new course would allow her to move rapidly through the material and satisfy her need to know. She eagerly entered the program with one hundred other students.

When Sara found the ideal education experience, she knew it. She made a significant commitment to the program. Over the eight weeks, she spent sixty hours commuting the one hundred fifty miles to Baltimore and forty hours in the classroom. Her homework averaged eight to ten hours a week. She moved quickly through the pre-calculus sequence: she immediately "tested out of" Algebra I, then studied Algebra II for four weeks before passing the final. In the last two weeks she tackled geometry; it fell to her in an examination on the last day of class. Her teacher recommended that she enroll in Trigonometry and Math Analysis in the fall.

SMPY had a tremendous impact on Sara's life; at last she experienced the positive, truly individual learning environment for which we had yearned. In this group, being intellectually talented did not mean being "different." With intelligence set aside from the focus of attention, personality characteristics emerged with new clarity. Within the exceptional group a typical cross section appeared, ranging from the shy but diligent student to the gregarious ringleader. These twelve year olds acted as naturally in their social behavior as their age peers the world around. They still had in common, though, their special love of learning. Sara quickly established warm and happy relationships with her classmates. The teachers, young and gifted themselves, and "just great people," provided appropriately challenging work and the safe encouraging environment needed to spur the kids on. In SMPY, each child was prized as a person with differing needs and potential. Sara explored her gift of intelligence and experienced great satisfaction from her efforts. Best of all, she found a place and people who liked her just as they found her and she responded to that acceptance with a period of soaring personal growth.

The summer had personal meaning for us, too. The commuting left us tired,

but we were renewed by a fresh awareness of our child. It was the first time in a long time we had seen her genuinely happy with herself, her peers, and her curriculum. Among the exceptional, Sara's performance affirmed her intellectual prowess and high motivation and effectiveness. Socially, we watched with delight as she giggled, threw frisbees, shared approaches to tricky math problems, and planned reunions. Just as satisfying, through the program we met other concerned parents working full time to educate a gifted child.

That summer we found resources for our role as parents of a gifted child. The staff of SMPY was always available to parents. In response to the program's rapid growth, SMPY helped create the Office of Talent Identification and Development (OTID) in 1979 to take over the talent searching and educational facilitation. SMPY lives on to follow up students from its six talent searches and its newly started "700M Before Age 13" national search for the top one in 10,000 mathematical reasoners.* We found a broad base of information in books like *Educating the Gifted: Acceleration and Enrichment* (William C. George, Sanford J. Cohn, and Julian C. Stanley [Eds.] Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979.) In all these friends of gifted children we found patient listeners, creative thinking, and expert guidance. We never felt so alone again.

Sara's accomplishments at Hopkins demonstrated that she needed and was ready for the flexibility of a new school. She wanted to enroll in the academically oriented public high school. This meant skipping eighth grade. Administrative barriers tried our resolve, but Sara's talent and maturity, along with numerous testimonials to them, carried the day. Once there, she found encouragement and acceptance from the faculty and students as well as much-needed flexibility in attitude and scheduling.

Sara enrolled as a twelve year old

*Actually, one may qualify up to age 13 years and nearly 10 months by earning 10 points over 700 for each month or fraction of a month beyond the 13th birthday. OTID has an analogous "630V Before Age 13" talent search, for which one may qualify up to age 14 years and nearly 5 months.

freshman, taking Honors English and Biology, Latin I, French II, Physical Education, and Trig and Math Analysis. Because of this appropriate placement, the novelty of high school, compatible older friends, and outstanding teachers, she thrived again. During her high school years she has taken senior courses as a freshman, and, later, supplemented the curriculum with advanced courses - mostly in math - at a nearby university.

We have found educational acceleration to be helpful at all stages of Sara's development. People ask, "How will she get along? She is so young, won't she miss a lot if she skips these years?" We feel another question is just as important: "What will happen to her if she does *not* move ahead rapidly?" Problems were the prevailing realities when we considered acceleration, and the choice seemed to be to tolerate the intolerable or to risk further problems in the process of solving things.

Frequent arguments against acceleration concern social poise, emotional maturity, and creative development. Perhaps Sara's greatest benefits came in just these areas. Happy, challenged, and purposefully occupied, she was freed to be herself. She had contact with students whom she enjoyed, frequently through their school work, and established friendships. Young only in years, her emotional maturity seemed a better fit with the older students. The increased opportunities on the higher curriculum level afforded her expanded possibilities for creative development and decision making. Within active club memberships, she participated in designing and implementing projects. She created lesson plans to tutor students in lower grades. She chose her curriculum from a wide range of courses, all more appropriate for her abilities.

Gaps in knowledge have not been a problem either. When Sara has not known something, one explanation has been sufficient for her to learn it. The ability to reach back for some omitted item of knowledge, then to place it and stitch it firmly into the pattern of her learning is one of the remarkable traits she shares with many gifted children.

Sara's activities during her high school years included much more than just class work. She joined German, Latin, and Science clubs and served as an elected officer in them. She was

invited to join a girl's service club and elected to office there. During the summers she wanted to be purposefully occupied. She has worked with the Hopkins Program teaching math. One summer she took a computer class sponsored by the National Science Foundation. The next summer she represented her school at the Governor's School for the Gifted, where she was voted by her peers the young woman most likely to succeed. She volunteers at a hospital to be closer to the medical profession she hopes to enter.

She has become a healthy, well-adjusted, constructively occupied - and still rather shy - teenager. She baby sits, goes to movies with friends, watches M*A*S*H, half heartedly practices piano, and enjoys helping with the children at church. She likes to cook and helps at home, even though her room remains an obstacle course with stacks of keepsakes and books all over the floor.

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Sara's intellectual gifts have not been an outright bonus. Along with the good has come internal and external conflict in the short span of ten years. Parents alone have the motivation and intuitive knowledge of the child necessary to resolve these conflicts with the help of experts. Informed parents are the child's chief advocate and primary educator.

To pave the way for a gifted child parents need to remember the following:

- know the signs of gifts
- have the child tested by an expert
- assess yearly the child's educational environment, growth, and needs
- expect resistance
- be armed with expert advice
- tolerate some routine
- treat the child as a partner in decision making affecting her.

Instead of asking "What will happen if I treat my child differently?", the question for parents, educators, and gifted children to ask is "What will happen if I do not acknowledge and act on these differences?"

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