



# Why We Should Have Gifted Education Programs

Dr. Del Siegle, NAGC President

Like all new parents, my wife and I marvel at each new developmental milestone our infant daughter reaches. And like other parents, we wonder whether her development is on schedule, early, or late. Recently, we were discussing the implications of possibly having a daughter who might “do things early.” Having two parents with advanced degrees in gifted education can lead to relentless child observations and speculation. Whether or not our little one is gifted, our conversations have led to some interesting discussions and caused me to reflect upon my chosen field of gifted education.

My wife spoke and read at an early age. She entered kindergarten reading fluently and equipped with sufficient math skills to correct cashiers if she received incorrect change at the store. She also found school rather boring at an early age. So, what if our daughter follows her mother’s footsteps and arrives at school reading and doing math? Does this mean she is gifted? Does this mean she may be a great writer or mathematician? What are the implications of having a child who masters certain skills earlier than other children?

We often hear that gifted children are a national resource that needs to be cultivated, and that they represent the best hope for the nation’s future. The problem with this argument for supporting services for gifted children is twofold. First, this is a high expectation to place on a 5-year-old child with some early skills headed to kindergarten. Such expectations can cause some children to begin to question their giftedness. This may lead to issues such as perfectionism, procrastination, and imposter syndrome. Second, while it is true that many innovative individuals may have been classified as gifted as young children, others did not demonstrate their exceptional gifts at an early age. We simply have not yet developed procedures to reliably identify future adult eminence in young children.

I believe we lose our way and waste valuable resources and credibility when we try to predict future giftedness. Our time is better spent recognizing individual differences in children and meeting their educational needs. In order to do this, we must do a better job of assessing and understanding children’s learning patterns and providing educational opportunities that match their learning needs. In a recent survey on acceleration, we learned that 83% of

educators believed that the best reason to accelerate children was to match the curriculum to their learning needs, while only 17% of these educators believed the best reason to accelerate students was to enable them to achieve at higher levels in the future.

Perhaps special education has been more successful in advocating for the needs of its constituents because it has focused on the immediate needs of children. If we in the field of gifted education focused on the present educational needs of gifted children, rather than their distant potential for future accomplishment, more people might be accepting and supportive of services for gifted and talented children.

Our young daughter may or may not be an eminent writer or mathematician, but she will need to have her learning needs met when she enters school, regardless of whether those needs are advanced or delayed. We hope she is gifted because it brings with it opportunities for an interesting, inquisitive life. However, we also realize that her early abilities won’t necessarily translate into adult genius, and we will love her no matter what her chosen occupation.

As parents, my wife and I are striving to provide our daughter with enriching opportunities that enable her gifts to surface. With the aid of NAGC and other advocates of gifted education, we will lobby for appropriate educational opportunities for her. Gifted education is important because every child has the right to learn something new every day. Without gifted and talented programs, this is merely an empty promise for many of our nation’s talented children.

In order to keep the promise, NAGC recently pledged considerable time and financial resources to educate legislators and the public about the educational needs of gifted children. This initiative cannot succeed without the active involvement of parents in every state. Our organization and children throughout the nation need your involvement as a local, state, and national advocate for improving services for gifted children. Visit the NAGC Web site at <http://www.nagc.org> to see how you can become involved in keeping the promise alive so that every child learns something new every day for your child and other gifted children across the nation.