



Your Only Child Who is Gifted or Your Only Gifted Child Among Siblings: Navigating the Waters of Differences

By Kathi Lundstrom, Ph.D.

Parenting a gifted child can be challenging, but also the most wonderfully rewarding experience of a parent's life. Bright kids offer new perspectives to parents as they navigate the world through their own special lens. Their insatiable desire to learn, their intense focus on specific passions, and the sense of social justice found in many gifted children and youth can leave a parent breathless with trying to keep up.¹

When Your Gifted Child is an “Only”

For a gifted child without siblings, the onus tends to fall on the parents to keep their child motivated, entertained, and challenged, while earning a living, paying the bills, and maintaining some sense of order.

According to research, only children tend to be ambitious, well-adjusted, independent, have strong character, and are intelligent.² When we layer these characteristics with giftedness, we see some similarities. Kids with intellectual giftedness tend to be ambitious and driven, particularly in an area of their passion. They are often very drawn to social justice issues, and can have a keen sense of right, wrong, and fairness. Other types of giftedness such as extreme musical, artistic, or athletic talent show unrelenting drive in their area of ability, the very picture of ambition.³

An only child who is gifted needs many things: a parent who plays with them, creates plenty of social contact with like-ability children, provides challenges and new experiences, and is not afraid of or exasperated by answering the constant “why’s.” It is important that parents of only children who are gifted seek out groups where their child can explore, flourish, and meet others, such as sports, music lessons, local community center classes, group hobbies, or enrichment camps.⁴

There are low-cost and free options in many communities for challenging gifted kids, and simply taking your child on nature walks and googling interesting plants, animals, or even rocks, make for wonderful family learning time. The local public library may have suggestions, as well. As your child reaches middle and high school there may be opportunities to shadow or volunteer in a nearby business, non-profit, house of worship, or other organization. This provides a way for your teen to learn new things in a different environment, practicing their independence.

Time with extended family is also important if your family lives nearby. Unconditional love and family fun helps get gifted kids out of their own head and involved with others. Make sure you don’t compare your child’s intellect or talent to other children in your extended family. Differences of any kind are obvious enough without pointing them out. Your only child needs their cousins, if they live nearby, who can become surrogate siblings and life-long confidants.

Tips for Parents of Gifted Only Children

- **Encourage interaction with other children, beginning at 18 months.** As your child grows, seek out children with similar abilities and interests.
- **Encourage laughter.** Gifted only children tend to be scholarly and logical, which is great, but also indulge in silliness and humor.⁵

- **Resist the urge to rescue your child.** Allow your child to find their own solutions, unless, of course, there is a threat of physical harm.
- **Don’t ask for or expect perfection.** Your child is flawed, just like you. Allow your child to learn through mistakes, which builds character.
- **You are not your child’s friend, so don’t confide adult information with a child.** Be a parent and foster your own adult friendships and relationships.

When One Child is Identified as Gifted and Another is Not

So, what if you have a child who is identified as gifted and another who is not? Research shows that within a family group, the offspring tend to be within 5-10 IQ points from one another.⁶ Therefore, it is likely that where there is one gifted child, there tend to be others. That does not mean that all have been identified gifted. Perhaps your child was having a bad day when the test was administered. Maybe she or he has test anxiety. Maybe the test emphasis (logic based, for example) is not your child’s area of strength. He or she may also have learning challenges or different thinking styles, or your child may be overthinking on the test. Be that as it may, your “non-gifted” child could be gifted in other ways.⁷

Because gifted student identification isn’t standardized in the U.S., there can be a wide range of abilities within a gifted program.⁸ It’s also important to remember that a gifted program within a school is just that—a program.⁹ It is one of many programs that school districts offer to students. But, it is not the only program designed to challenge gifted students and to open up wider opportunities for them to explore. Your child may also be interested in music, sports, technology, or a host of other classes and school clubs.

So, what should parents tell their child who has not been identified as gifted? How best can this situation be handled so that all children feel supported, loved, and encouraged in their endeavors? A study done a few years ago examined family dynamics when there was one identified gifted child in the family with siblings who were labeled “non-gifted.”¹⁰ The researchers found that the most important thing to child satisfaction and happiness was how equitably all the children felt they were treated, and this feeling of equal importance determined how positive the relationship was between siblings. The researchers used *Family Systems Theory* to label and create three methods parents used to encourage their children who were not identified as gifted:

- **Differential Equity** refers to the way parents encourage areas of strength in their non-gifted children.



- **Artificial Equity** is when parents tell the non-gifted child he or she is gifted and that the test was wrong.
- **Situational Equity** is when the parents create opportunities for the non-gifted child to show their own special abilities.

The researchers emphasized that no method was more effective than another; the strategy differed by parent preference and family dynamics.

Tips for Parenting Siblings with Differences ¹¹

- **Avoid comparing your children** in an unfavorable manner.
- **Recognize that strengths lie in many areas**, not just academics.
- **Expect your children to cooperate** with and enjoy one another.
- **Teach your children that you can be fair** without always being equal.
- **Spend a lot of family time** just having fun.
- **Spend individual time** with each child on a regular basis.

Whether you have just one child who is gifted or many, your life will be filled with the wonder of discovery and potential. Navigate these precious years with your children with a large dose of patience, a heap of humor, and a boatload of understanding as you watch your children grow in self-discovery. 💡

Resources

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Author's Note

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Endnotes

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- ⁸ Lundstrom, K. (2014, November). *The role of lived familial experiences in the underachievement of gifted females who are members of Mensa: A qualitative interview study*. www.proquest.com/openview/a6d634a6567e6865242300d5ea191877/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750
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- ¹⁰ Artzey, N. B. (2020). Gifted but equal? Parents' perspectives on sibling relationships in families with gifted and non-gifted children. *Gifted and Talented International*, 35(1), 27–38.
- ¹¹ Goldstein, L. A. (2015, March 9). *When one child is gifted: avoiding sibling rivalry when kids have different academic aptitudes*. www.noodle.com/articles/when-one-child-is-gifted

An Example of Family Dynamics Using Three Encouragement Methods

This example may resonate with your family situation. If so, your children and family dynamic may benefit from using one of these encouragement methods. Here are a few additional suggestions for parenting in a family with multiple children.

- **Amelia** is 14 years old and a talented athlete. She loves to volunteer at a food bank and works hard to achieve strong grades in all her classes. She was not identified as gifted.
- **Becca** is 12 and is taking Algebra in sixth grade, two years ahead. She was reading at four, and also plays the violin. She was identified as gifted in third grade.
- **Cole** is 11 and a LEGO® fanatic. He loves to build anything and wants to be an architect. He is also strong in math but is frustrated by reading. He has not been identified as gifted.
- **Lauren** is the baby at 9, but she is formidable. She stands up for what she believes and doesn't let anyone boss her around. She loves to read and play basketball with her siblings. She has not been identified as gifted.

Their parents use the *Differential Equity* strategy when speaking with Amelia about her strengths. They emphasize their pride in her heart for marginalized people, and make sure to attend every basketball game to cheer and celebrate afterwards.

Becca was identified as gifted, so her parents pay for violin lessons separately from the school orchestra, and make sure to encourage her to have friends with similar interests.

Cole, being the only boy in the family, gets to go on fishing trips with his dad, which do not interest the girls. His parents encourage his reading by providing books about LEGO® bricks and architecture. They use *Situational Equity* to enter him in a LEGO® competition and introduce him to a young architecture major at the local university, hoping to form a bond.

Lauren seems to be gifted but did not pass the identification test, possibly because she skipped a question on the Scantron form. Her parents use *Artificial Equity* to encourage her that perhaps she will pass next year, and that they know she is very capable.