Testing Your Gifted Child: A Springboard for Effective Advocacy

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> "Our middle school offers few advanced classes in order to teach children in heterogeneous groups. My son is refusing to do homework, which is all drill and practice. He says it's pointless."
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> "My daughter feels she's not learning anything new. I've approached the school about acceleration, but they insist she stay with her grade to ensure good social development. However, she feels she has nothing in common with most grade-peers."
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> "My high school-aged son has been denied access to advanced classes because he's underachieving. He's brilliant, but says he's too bored to care."
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> "The gifted pull-out is just an hour a week and they're doing *thinking skills*. When my daughter gets back to class, she has to make up the work missed and there's no accommodation for her needs in the regular classroom."

For the rare gifted student whose educational needs have been met, individual assessment may not be a priority. However, for the vast majority who remain in inadequate programs, testing can be a potent ally. It can address parent concerns and bolster advocacy efforts when the curriculum is restrictive and gifted accommodations are sparse. A professional evaluation can document cognitive strengths, assess academic achievement, and recommend specific strategies to meet a child's needs at school. It can document the need for advanced work and less drill and practice.

A thorough assessment incorporates not only test results, but the tester's observations of the child, developmental information from parents, and, sometimes, input from teachers. Intelligence tests explore cognitive abilities, which suggest how quickly a child will master concepts and advance through a curriculum. They examine reasoning, language, processing skills, attention, learning style, and offer objective insight into the child's unique profile of abilities. Achievement tests evaluate the student's current academic progress and whether he or she is placed in the appropriate grade and or classes. Both intelligence and achievement tests are administered by school psychologists to developmentally delayed or learning disabled children and are considered essential to determining what accommodations are needed at school.

Gifted children have equally critical special needs; however, limited funding generally confines gifted assessment to IQ screeners administered by teachers or gifted program personnel. Screeners are used for accepting or rejecting children from gifted

programs, but lack in-depth diagnostic capability. They are often administered in groups, ruling out critical observation of the way in which a child addresses a variety of tasks. Moreover, they generally utilize multiple-choice questions, which gifted children tend to interpret as more complex than they are (Pegnato and Birch, 1959). Furthermore, they tend to average the strengths and weaknesses of Twice Exceptional children (gifted with learning deficits), yielding scores too low for gifted program admission, and rarely reveal that a child might be highly gifted. Even when tests such as the Cognitive Abilities Test (CogAT), Otis-Lennon, or Screening Assessment for Gifted Elementary Students (SAGES) identify a child as gifted, the screeners fail to provide the in-depth information needed to guide educational planning.

Private Testing vs. Testing at School

Should parents request individual assessment at school? If the school agrees to provide it, testing may provide critical information not otherwise available. However, when the school does the testing, it is usually for the purpose of determining whether a child can enter a program or have access to particular school options. If personal finances allow, many parents prefer to seek independent testing with a professional who will evaluate the child's needs more broadly and consider a variety of educational possibilities, not just those offered by a particular school. Such a tester serves as an advocate for the child, recommending ways to meet his or her needs, as opposed to a gatekeeper, determining admission to programs. Additionally, private test results are the property of parents, who can decide what to do with them. Tests taken at school remain a part of the child's permanent record. This may be detrimental if the testing circumstances were not hospitable.

How to Choose a Private Tester

Parents should seek out a tester—licensed psychologist or part of a group practice directed by a licensed psychologist—who enjoys gifted children and has experience testing many of them (suggestions for finding one follow). Such a tester is accustomed to making accommodations for the individual, allowing the reflective child time to hone answers, supporting the perfectionistic child not used to making mistakes, and helping the active child maintain focus with a fast presentation and opportunities to move around. Someone who appreciates the curiosity, sensitivity, and humor of these children can make the testing session immensely satisfying, especially for the student who has few opportunities to stretch mentally at school. Good rapport is critical to eliciting the child's best performance.

Likewise, an experienced report writer knows to emphasize the child's strengths in order to gain access to gifted accommodations. Most testers document deficits in order to obtain interventions. Even when a gifted child has relative weaknesses, the report must carefully recommend a two-pronged approach in which the child's strengths are supported first, then additional modifications for any weaknesses are made—without creating concern that the child shouldn't be in the gifted program!

Parents can locate testers with such experience through local gifted associations, school gifted and talented personnel, and online resources, such as the list of psychologists specializing in gifted assessment on Hoagies Gifted Education Page (http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/psychologists.htm).

Costs and What's Provided

The cost of assessment is based on the time it takes to test the child one-on-one, largely hand-score the child's original answers, interpret the results, and write a report that reflects that child's unique ability profile. An IQ test and achievement test (a combination frequently requested) usually involve four or more hours of testing, but testers spend far longer writing reports.

The report is vital because it will serve to document a child's needs for years to come. A good report can be used from first grade to high school, with new achievement test results interspersed, for educational planning, entrance to programs, and whenever acceleration is considered. Given such long-term expected use, parents have a right to a high-quality document! A good report should include the child's developmental history, a clear description of each test given, interpretation of the results, the child's behavior during the test, a summary, and recommendations for what should be done at school and at home to support the child. Simply giving parents a copy of the scores is insufficient for a gifted child with special educational needs.

Questions to Ask

A post-test consultation may also be a good idea to answer more specific questions about the testing, interpretation of the scores, and educational options for the coming year. "What are my child's strengths and weaknesses?" "What school would be the best fit?" "What is my daughter's learning style and how can it be supported?" "How can my son advance in math if his school refuses to accelerate him?" "What options will address both his giftedness and handwriting weakness?" "How can we nurture her writing talent?" "Is acceleration a good idea?" The tester and parents (sometimes joined by the older child) can discuss such issues and decide on school recommendations to be included in the testing report.

Of all the opportunities parents provide to support children's strengths and promote their interests, testing offers invaluable insight into the child's needs and a road map for the future. Testers of the gifted can usually suggest resources, and may also be able to help with advocacy after testing, such as conferring with a teacher or principal about special provisions.

Test Choices

Individual Intelligence (IQ) Tests

Most gifted assessment begins with an individual intelligence test the child's school knows and accepts. As several tests have been revised since 2002, be sure to request the newest edition, except in the case of the Stanford-Binet L-M (see below). Experienced testers <u>should</u> be able to suggest a test for a child that can document both that child's strengths and any relative weaknesses that might require accommodations. However, testers are still learning about this new generation of tests. Current research is clarifying which tests are best under a variety of circumstances, and which portions are preferable for the gifted when choices exist. New scoring options are even being developed. Parents need to be aware this is happening because some testers may be unaware of important developments in the field.

For example, we know that gifted children are best identified by reasoning tasks (verbal, spatial, mathematical) and that many score lower in processing skills, such as visual-motor speed (they may be reflective and perfectionistic) or short-term auditory memory (memory for meaningful material may be much better than for non-meaningful). For most, this is not a problem; it is normal. A few need accommodations for processing skill weaknesses, but all need gifted programming to satisfy their need for cognitive complexity. How can testing document their giftedness, especially as some new tests have emphasized processing skills to better serve learning disabled populations? The popular WISC-IV has doubled its emphasis on processing skills (Working Memory and Processing Speed) in the Full Scale IQ (FSIQ), causing some clearly gifted reasoners to earn overall FSIQ scores below the gifted range. Testers must be aware that when scores vary too much, the FSIQ is deemed non-interpretable and a General Ability Index (GAI), based on reasoning portions of the test, may be the best global estimate of ability (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004; Silverman, Gilman & Falk, 2004). When large scoring differences can result depending upon the approach taken, a knowledgeable tester is essential.

The table below lists frequently used individual IQ tests, age requirements, and considerations for testing the gifted. Refer to *Empowering Gifted Minds: Educational Advocacy That Works* for more about the testing process and the advocacy that follows. Once the test results are in, what educational accommodations should be made?

Individual IQ Tests	**Ages (years-months)**	**Gifted Testing Considerations**	
Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-4th Ed. (WISC-IV)	6-0 thru 16-11 (for gifted teenagers, use WAIS-III at 16)	Often requested by schools. Excellent verbal/visual-spatial balance, plus processing speed, memory. Strong diagnostic test. "Ceiling" has been extended. May need GAI instead of FSIQ.	
Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale-3rd Ed. (WAIS-III)	16-0 thru adult	Strong adult test. Verbal/visual-spatial balance, plus memory. Use to document need for accommodations when deficits exist.	
Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence-3rd Ed. (WPPSI-III)	2-6 thru 7-3, using forms for ages 2-3 and 4+ (use WISC-IV at 6)	Strong, child-friendly, early test of verbal/visual reasoning, some fine-motor. Useful for gifted school/program entrance.	
Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale-5th Ed. (SB5)	2-0 thru adult	Strong test of mathematical and visual-spatial reasoning (verbal abstract reasoning is limited, although half of the items are presented verbally) plus memory. A score of 120+ (not 130) on Verbal or	

		Nonverbal Composite indicates giftedness. Consider scoring options: Rasch Ratio, Roid Gifted and Nonverbal Composites. Pair with SBL-M for better verbal coverage.	
Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale—Form L-M (SBL-M)*	2-0 thru 9+	Excellent older reasoning test with less emphasis on processing skills. Used as a retest to differentiate higher levels of giftedness following high scores on a current test. Features a ratio-based metric and very high scoring ceiling when used with younger children.	
Differential Ability Scales (DAS)	6-0 thru 17-11	Offers Verbal, Nonverbal and Spatial IQ scores and untimed spatial reasoning. For ages up to 17-11, it has a somewhat higher ceiling. Use the WAIS-III to document learning disabilities for ages 16-17.	
Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Cognitive Ability (WJ III Cog)	2-0 thru adult	Use for gifted/learning disabled children for diagnostic purposes. Emphasizes processing skills heavily. Gifted children may earn lower scores.	
Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Test (NNAT)	Grades K-12	Strong test of visual abstract reasoning and pattern recognition Use nonverbal tests (NNAT, Ravens, UNIT) for children with visual-spatial strengths, culturally-diverse backgrounds, hearing deficits, speech/language issues, or limited English. Do not use where high verbal abilities exist. A Wechsler.is preferable.	
Ravens Progressive Matrices: Coloured, Standard, Advanced	5 thru adult	Strong nonverbal test of visual abstract reasoning and pattern recognition See Naglieri	
Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT)	5-0 thru 17-11	Features nonverbal instructions See Naglieri	

*This test with older norms is approved by the publisher to explore higher levels of giftedness in younger children, following near-ceiling-level performance on a test with current norms.

Individual Achievement Tests

Achievement tests determine how advanced the child is in academic subject areas such as reading, math, writing, and spelling. Unlike grade-based tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, California Achievement Test, and Terra Nova, individual achievement tests sample knowledge over many grade levels. They demonstrate what a

child has already mastered and what he or she is ready to learn, which can be helpful in suggesting the type of work the child should be doing at school. These tests provide grade equivalent scores, documentation of achievement that is essential when acceleration is being considered. All have norms for ages 6 and up, and may also have norms for younger children. Ask the tester, as these vary by subtest.

Individual Achievement Tests	**Gifted Testing Considerations**
Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement (WJ III Ach.)	Graduate school scoring ceiling is useful for highly gifted individuals. Fluency tests (timed tests of simple reading, math, and writing) are irrelevant unless accommodations for slow processing speed are needed.
Wechsler Individual Achievement Test Second Edition (WIAT-II)	Offers correlation with Wechsler IQ tests
The Kaufman Test of Educational Achievement Normative Update (K-TEA/NU)	Offers brief and comprehensive forms

When gifted children are learning appropriately, which may require access to advanced instruction, their achievement scores should approach their IQ scores. When the scores are close, students are usually challenged and happy.

Assessment Results

The benefits of testing become clear as the parent shares the report with a child's school. A professional's evaluation now documents the child's needs and prescribes accommodations, relieving some of the parent's burden. The need for accelerated math, a writing mentor, a full-grade skip, or college classes taken concurrently with high school is supported by assessment. Modifications can also be recommended for weaknesses, such as the need for a keyboard for classroom writing. Yet, much more is accomplished.

Testing provides us unusual access to understanding the highly complex cognitive abilities of these children and insight into ways to support their gifts. Assessment tempers our conjectures with a healthy dose of realistic analysis and allows us to arrive at more meaningful conclusions about the needs of these children. More confident to make perfectly arguable requests of teachers and school administrators, we become empowered, effective advocates

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