

The Pivotal Role of Parents in Expanding the World of Young Gifted Children

By Dr. Joan E. Smutny

“There are no seven wonders of the world in the eyes of a child. There are seven million.” —Walt Streightiff

One of the greatest joys known to parents of very young children is the wonder in their faces when they encounter something new. A large shaggy dog is every bit as extraordinary as a praying mantis clinging to a leaf. Their determination to touch, feel, and taste whatever they can get their hands on comes from a deeply felt need to be fully in the world. Parents often remark that taking their young children on outings changes their own experience of the world around them. They remember the sense of wonder they had as little children and delight in knowing it never really left them.

I mention this because young gifted children begin life already filled with a sense of the large and expansive world at their feet. There are ways that parents can keep the world a wondrous place for their young gifted children and for themselves as well.

Between Home and the Outside World: “Gifted Programs” by Parents

Parents often ask what they can do for their gifted children now that cutbacks have reduced or eliminated funding for gifted education. I tell them that there is a “gifted program” waiting to happen in their own homes and communities. The most effective way for parents to create larger learning experiences for their young children is by coupling at-home explorations or interests with related activities outside the home. Gifted children discover meaningful links between the dinosaur facts they already know from home to the full-scale skeletons in a field museum. They apply their knowledge of constellations in a winter sky to the local observatory where they can then search for them in the real night sky. But there is a big difference between going to one of these places and actually investigating something there. The latter is inquiry-based, more active, and far more fulfilling for gifted learners.

Although not a comprehensive list by any means, here are some options worth pursuing with young gifted children.

Exhibits

Museums offer many children’s events of interest to young gifted learners. To make the most of a museum trip, parents should focus on and research specific exhibits. By limiting the trip to a few exhibits, children can take their time, observe closely, ask questions, and write/draw if they so choose. If live rain forest frogs have arrived at the aquarium, for example, find out what frogs will be featured. Young gifted learners are highly inquisitive beings and will relish the chance to pepper their parents with questions: “Why do most of these frogs live in trees? Why are they more colorful



than the ones I see here? How did the monkey frog get its name?” Whether parents are preparing for a visit to the art museum, the field museum, an observatory, or an ecology center, children connect to the experience more meaningfully if they have a purpose—things for them to look for, puzzles for them to solve. Allow them real choices in what they would most enjoy seeing/hearing/doing.

Libraries

Having a relationship with the local library is vital for young gifted children, most of whom love words and books of all kinds. I always encourage parents to go to a library event, an opportunity for young children to become aware of reading as a social and theatrical experience—something to be shared, savored, and performed. Nurturing the reading life at home makes trips to the library far more meaningful. Try to have a reading period every day or at specific times in the week and use library visits to explore a variety of genres, including books the children might not ordinarily pick up: poetry, stories, nonfiction, humor, and biographies. Encourage the children to read aloud as soon as they are able. Do oral readings together to share poems, humorous stories, and writings with word play they can understand and enjoy.

Nature Trips

The natural world offers the richest and most accessible resource for young gifted children to understand more of the outdoor world. Parents don't have to wait until vacation to get out of the city and into the woods. Urban nature holds as many surprises for eager young naturalists as the most pristine seashore. Many American cities conceal many pockets of nature where young children can experience the wonder of growing things and moving creatures. Even exploring the grounds in one's own neighborhood can inspire a young child. Consider possibilities such as these:

- Find a tree that the child wants to know more about. The child picks a leaf to study at home, feels the texture of the bark, and takes a piece (if already broken off). “What’s going on with the tree in this season? How does the bark feel? What is it for?” Use a simple guidebook to learn about the categories of leaf types



- (e.g., simple leaf, compound leaf, needles, and cones). Have the child take a picture of the tree. Look for animals and insects on the tree and ask: “What are they doing? What does the tree give them (e.g., shelter, food, protection)?”
- Take the child on a birding walk. Most parents know most of the local birds and, if this activity appeals to



them or their child, they can find birding groups and Internet links that lead to new opportunities for viewing birds. Young gifted children can excel in identifying animal species once they learn what physical features to observe and what kind of habitat they prefer. With little trouble, parents can also show them how to use binoculars to observe species more closely. At a very young age, gifted children can begin to build a conceptual understanding of the relationships between specific species and the climates and habitats they depend on for survival.

- Botanical gardens or ecology centers frequently offer activities for young children, sometimes in the form of spring or summer camps that introduce art, conservation, birding, and botany. Ecology centers also train volunteers to assist in special efforts to improve habitats by pulling up invasive species and planting native plants. Entire families can participate.

Community Resources

Parents can often find valuable learning experiences in their immediate community. Even if a workshop or class charges more than the family budget can allow, someone there might know about other options. If a community center doesn't have advanced classes for younger children in an area where a child has exceptional skill, ask if exceptions are ever



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made or if the child would be better served somewhere else. Here are some examples of valuable community resources:

- *Studios.* Explore dance, art, and music studios. There are often alternatives to the bigger, more expensive ones. A mother whose son loved art could not afford the city's larger art centers, but she discovered a small storefront with a more open and creative approach to the visual arts for community outreach. If the budget is tight, inquire at these studios about scholarships and other art opportunities in the area.
- *Community centers.* The advantage of community centers is the variety of offerings. If a child already has experience or skill in

a subject, parents can sometimes negotiate for a higher-level class. Community centers also provide outlets for gifted children to do physical things they may love, like gymnastics, dance, or martial arts. For children in neighborhoods with few resources, community outreach programs are havens where they can discover their talents and explore a much bigger world.

- *Parent groups.* Parents don't have to homeschool their children in order to collaborate creatively with other parents. I know two parents who met at a gifted parent group meeting. One had a visual art background; the other, science. They designed art and science activities around specific themes or

concepts. Every week, they swapped children to work on creative projects related to these two areas. Talented parents can find other parents through other organizations (religious, cultural, and social) and form networks to support their children's abilities and interests.

The Home: A Place for Curiosity and Wonder

In my experiences with many families, I've noticed that parents who are curious about many things and follow their passions in life foster these same qualities in their children. Real learning begins with feeling curious about something, whether it's the inexplicable



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behavior of several crows in a shouting match outside, the changing face of the night sky, or tales about faraway places heard at story hour in the library. We know this feeling ourselves when we're going about our day and something happens that stops us in our tracks and we think, "I've got to figure this out!" When children feel this fire ignite in them, they can't stop themselves from learning. It is this questing mind, so alive in young gifted children, that we need to nourish and support.

Young gifted children may have different interests from their parents, but they discovered them in a home where exploring the world around them in the broadest possible way is a way of life. E. Paul Torrance called this "falling in love with something."

A home environment that reflects and supports young children's interests is as important as the places parents take them. Consider some of these questions:

- Overall, do you feel that the design of your home reflects the passions and interests of the people who live in it?
- Do you display the works of your children and yourself?
- Are there places/nooks where you or your children can work on something they love—away from electronic noise?
- Do they have reading places/reading times?
- Do your children have sufficient supplies or the right kind of supplies to explore their interests or discover new ones?
- Are there areas where the family can keep and use instruments like microscopes and binoculars or where they can perform simple tests or experiments?
- Are there art materials and other odds and ends (e.g., bottle tops, colored wire, and other "found" objects) that children can use to create things?

Having a home that embraces the family's interests—a makeshift laboratory for the scientist, an art-making place, a quiet nook for reading—enables young children to continually expand their knowledge and skill. It also means that they can develop, over time, the ability to guide their own learning by making choices, practicing skills that increase their competence in planning and completing proj-

ects, and achieving goals that matter to them.

A Final Note

Expanding the world of young gifted children through a combination of at-home learning and related experiences beyond the home is immensely strengthening. It builds a foundation for them to discover their interests and nurtures a sense of independence and ownership of their own learning. This process of open exploration gives them confidence and resiliency, knowing that they can gain access to their world and discover its secrets for themselves. For us as parents, this kind of enrichment with our children enables us to see that the limiting circumstances of school or society cannot make the world small or stop our children from embarking on their own adventures. ☺

References

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Resources

- National Association for Gifted Children—Young Gifted Learner. <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1467>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children. <http://www.naeyc.org/families>

Author's Note

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