

GIFTED CHILDREN

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1. Core Definition and Scope

The term **Gifted Children** refers to a distinct population subset characterized by significantly superior intellectual capacity and potential compared to their peers. Operationally, this group is often defined psychometrically as the top 1 percent of the population, generally possessing an Intelligence Quotient (IQ) exceeding 135 or 140. This threshold differentiates them from the general population, establishing a standard for intellectual giftedness based on cognitive measurement.

Within this broad cohort, children whose IQs reach exceptionally high levels--typically above 170 or 180--are classified as **extremely gifted**. Historically, the identification and study of giftedness have evolved from anecdotal assumptions to rigorous empirical research, profoundly shaping educational policy and the psychological understanding of high potential. The modern concept emphasizes that giftedness is not solely measured by raw test scores but by the manifestation of superior abilities across various developmental domains.

2. Historical Misconceptions and Modern Understanding

Early assumptions regarding giftedness often perpetuated stereotypes suggesting that these children were inherently frail, physically weak, one-sided in their interests, or socially eccentric. It was commonly taken for granted that intellectual superiority necessitated corresponding deficits in physical or social adjustment. Extensive, longitudinal research, however, has systematically refuted this narrow view, demonstrating that these children are typically far more robust and adaptable than previously imagined.

Modern understanding recognizes that, far from being marginalized, the gifted population tends to score above average across most major developmental characteristics. While their intellectual ability remains the most outstanding feature, the group as a whole is more often above than below average in physical health, emotional stability, and social adjustment. This shift in perspective, driven by decades of research, underscores a holistic view of giftedness as a generally positive attribute extending beyond mere cognitive function.

3. Key Intellectual and Developmental Characteristics

The intellectual superiority of gifted children manifests early in life through several observable behaviors and cognitive advantages. In early childhood, these children exhibit heightened **curiosity**, frequently ask complex questions, and explore their environment more widely and

deeply than other children. This intrinsic motivation to learn is a hallmark of their development.

As they mature, their linguistic abilities flourish; they develop significantly larger and richer vocabularies compared to their age mates. Many gifted children demonstrate a precocious development of literacy, often beginning to read before entering school and frequently teaching themselves. This early literacy typically leads to a **voracious appetite for books** of all genres and types. Furthermore, they display superior cognitive processing capabilities, including an enhanced ability to remember, synthesize, and profit from past experiences, allowing for rapid learning and application of knowledge. They also tend to accept greater responsibility and demonstrate more mature moral judgments compared to the average child.

4. Social, Physical, and Emotional Profiles

Contrary to outdated beliefs, the superior intellectual characteristics of the gifted are typically accompanied by a generally positive overall profile. Research indicates that this group often enjoys **excellent health** and superior physical development. Studies, such as those conducted by Laycock and Caylor (1964), suggested that while they are physically advanced, this superiority might largely reflect the benefits of a superior home environment rather than a direct genetic link between IQ and physique, as they were not physically superior to their intellectually normal siblings.

Socially and emotionally, gifted children generally exhibit sound emotional adjustment, display **good character**, and maintain a wider than average range of interests. This well-rounded profile is significant because it dispels the myth of the "mad genius" and underscores that high intelligence does not necessitate compensatory deficits in other domains. Their general competence often facilitates positive interactions and adjustments throughout life.

5. Challenges and Adjustment Issues

Despite their overall positive development, gifted children encounter unique challenges, often related to the misalignment between their intellectual capacity and standard educational or social environments. Although they generally perform superior work in academic settings, some become **bored**, easygoing, or actively disenchanted with school, especially when no attempt is made to put them in special classes or involve them in special projects that match their accelerated learning needs.

Social concerns also pose difficulties. Some high-potential children work far below their actual capacity because they are afraid they will not be popular if they are too far ahead of their classmates, engaging in "hiding" their ability to fit in. A study by Gallagher and Crowder (1957) noted that a "sizable minority" experienced trouble with social relationships, and approximately 20 percent concealed hidden emotional problems. Furthermore, many high-potential children struggle

with surprisingly low self-esteem, apparently because they cannot consistently live up to their own extremely high personal standards.

These adjustment difficulties are often magnified in the **extremely gifted**, those with the highest IQs whose achievements sometimes take on legendary proportions, such as the eight-year-old proficient in multiple languages (Hollingworth, 1942). While these children are rarely antisocial or actively maladjusted, they are frequently characterized as **asocial**. They may display a profound disinterest in their age mates or typical peer activities, tending to inhabit an intellectual world distinct from their peers and sometimes from their parents as well, due to the sheer gap in cognitive processing and intellectual interests.

6. Landmark Research: The Terman Studies

Fundamental to the modern understanding of giftedness are the longitudinal studies conducted by Lewis Terman and his associates, beginning in 1921. This seminal research, which tracked over 1,000 children with a mean age of ten and a mean IQ of 140, provided remarkably definite answers regarding the familial backgrounds and the later developmental trajectory of the gifted population. The Terman studies established the foundation for evidence-based research in the field of gifted education.

A key early finding concerned socioeconomic background: the vast majority of the cohort originated from higher socioeconomic levels, typically having professional or business parents, while only 7 percent came from the lowest economic stratum. Terman's work suggested that this strong correlation could be attributed to both **hereditary factors** and the benefits of stimulating home environments. The indications were that superior interest patterns, emotional adjustment, and social competence were due largely to the enriching home surroundings, underscoring the vital role of environment in fostering high potential.

7. Adult Outcomes and Longitudinal Development

Terman and his associates diligently tracked the cohort through periodic follow-up studies to assess the long-term impact of giftedness. Reports published by Terman and Oden in 1947 and 1959 demonstrated overwhelmingly positive adult outcomes. Specifically, 90 percent of the boys and 85 percent of the girls attended college, and despite averaging two years younger than their peers, they accumulated three times their share of academic honors, proving the longevity of their intellectual promise.

Even though this group graduated during the Great Depression, less than 1 percent were unemployed by 1936, and many achieved national recognition. Approximately 150 out of 750 contacted subjects were judged highly successful based on high achievement criteria, such as holding responsible managerial positions and receiving recognition in publications like *Who's Who*.

Even those who received less public recognition were rated significantly more successful than individuals of average intelligence, confirming that the vast majority of gifted children make good on the promise of youth.

The studies also investigated the relatively few subjects who became school dropouts, criminals, or vocational misfits. Crucially, the research indicated that the differentiating factor was not intellectual ability but **personality factors**. These few individuals, unlike the successful majority, were generally poorly adjusted emotionally and lacked the necessary motivation to achieve success. This finding reinforced the conclusion that while high cognitive ability is necessary for high achievement, it must be supported by sound emotional health and robust motivational drives.

Further Reading

Lewis Terman

Intelligence Quotient (IQ)