

GIFTED PARENTING

RAISING A KID IS CHALLENGING ENOUGH, BUT DR. VIDISHA PATEL SAYS PARENTS OF GIFTED CHILDREN MUST BE EVEN MORE NIMBLE, FLEXIBLE, AND WILLING TO LEARN ON THE FLY.

BY LISA VAN GEMERT

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To what extent are giftedness and behavior connected?

DR. VIDISHA PATEL Gifted kids come in such a wide range, and their behaviors are equally wide ranging. I don't know that there's an exact correlation between the two. Some highly and profoundly gifted children are perfectionists, and that carries over to their behavior. On the other hand, some gifted children are twice exceptional, and their social skills are not something they are able to manage without outside assistance.

LVG One of the focuses of your practice is on stress and anxiety. How can parents teach children to behave appropriately without increasing stress?

VP Plan ahead. Prepare kids. With a lot of gifted kids, it helps them to know what's coming up. If you have a meal planned at some fancy restaurant, well before the gathering, it's helpful to plan. You explain to the child, "This is what we're going to do. This is the behavior I'd like to see." Explain it ahead of time in a positive, proactive way so there's no pressure. Mention the upcoming event several times so there are no surprises.

Role playing is also helpful. There are two ways to role play. In one way, you're actually showing them the behavior that is expected. The other way is to reverse roles, with you saying, "I'll be the child, you be the parent." Act like a child and have them try and figure out if they think that works. If it doesn't, ask them, "How would you handle it?" In this way, you're making them a part of the solution.



LVG What are the most crucial social skills kids need to learn?

VP They need to have an understanding of their own emotions. The foundation for social skills is built on relationships. You have to be able to be in a relationship with someone else to live in this world. You have relationships with people at the grocery store, with your peers, and with a variety of different people. Through that you gain an understanding of others, and the basis of it all is communication.

LVG How can children get an understanding of their own emotions?

VP In my practice, I use a list of words that are emotional adjectives. When children first come in and I ask

them what's going on in a specific situation, they'll have a limited vocabulary to describe what their mood or emotion was—maybe only three or four words. So I do exercises and play games to help them. For example, if their mood was the weather, would it be a sunny day or a gray day? I use art to help them identify their emotions. Having children draw emotions can make them very familiar with the concept.

Parents can support that by being open to it. We're a little scared of working with anybody's emotions. So much gets shoved under the rug. When



Mensa's Gifted Youth Specialist, Lisa Van Gemert, knows a thing or two about navigating the rigors of interacting with gifted children, having been both an educator and mother of bright kids. So she was the perfect choice to sit down with Dr. Vidisha Patel to discuss the finer points of raising above-average-intelligence children.

Patel, a practicing therapist in Sarasota, Fla., and a member of the board of directors for Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG), works in private practice and with pregnant teens. She is a frequent conference speaker, consults for Florida State University as a trainer of primary caregivers on infant mental health, and is married and parenting two gifted children.

“THE SOLUTION TO THIS IS THE PARENTS LEARNING MORE ABOUT SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN GENERAL.”



a kid gets angry, there can be a tendency to say, “Don’t be angry.” Instead of that, a parent can say, “Ok, you’re angry, but we need to get past that. What is a feeling that would make you feel better?” It’s almost like teaching them a new language. And this is a longer process, like learning any new language. Frequently, I’ll have kids go home and stop three times a day to ask themselves, “What emotion am I feeling right now?” When they practice that over time, they get better.

And then the next step is to apply that to others. You do that through active listening exercises, helping them take that new vocabulary and use it to understand the people around them.

LVG What are the specific challenges facing parents with regard to teaching gifted children the social graces?

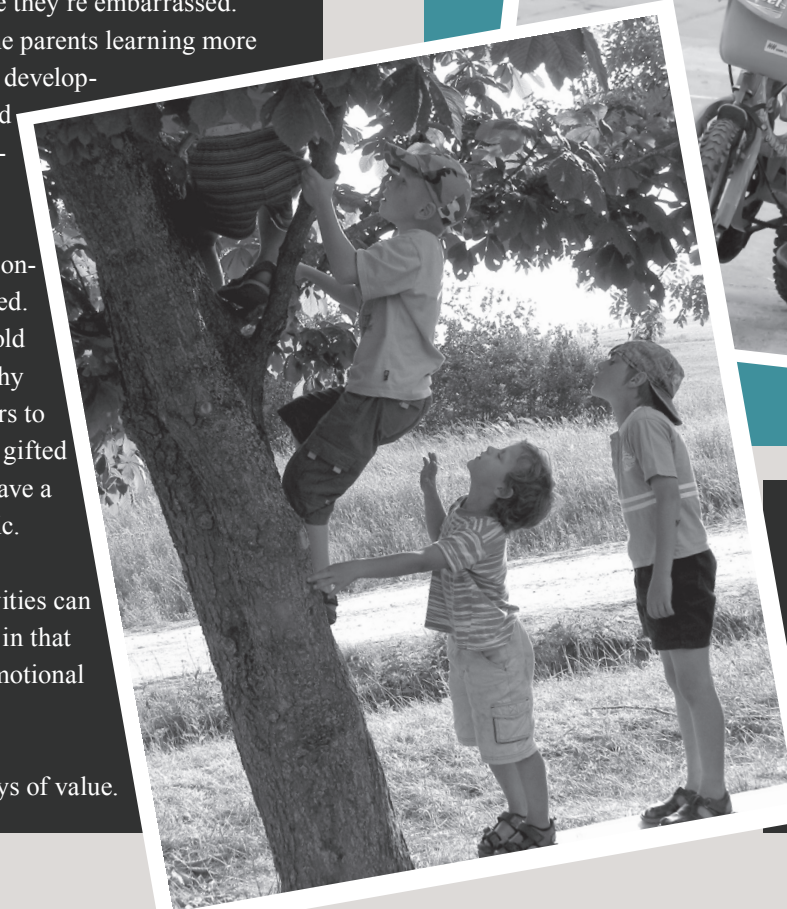
VP As a parent, you have to model how you want your kids to be. When you see something inappropriate, it’s coming from something someone around the child is doing. When people behave inappropriately, it is often from feelings of insecurity or embarrassment. The parents don’t know how to react, and, really, it’s the parents who need the guidance. Gifted children are so intellectual and they can think beyond their peers, but they are still kids. They need to develop socially and emotionally to catch up to their intellectual ability. If a parent jumps the gun and takes them to an adult venue and they don’t behave appropriately, it’s really due to a lack of under-

standing on the part of the parent. Of course, this is all done for the right reason—the parent is trying to provide intellectual stimulation—but it ends up making it worse for everyone. The parent puts the child in the inappropriate situation, the child behaves badly, and then the parent feels the need to make up for it. They end up making excuses because they’re embarrassed.

The solution to this is the parents learning more about social and emotional development in general. This would help them know what is appropriate. It’s hard because the child’s intellectualism blurs the line. Parents get confused. Teachers get confused. Am I talking to a 30-year-old or an 8-year-old? This is why it’s so important for teachers to be trained in working with gifted children. Otherwise they have a hard time with this dynamic.

LVG What kinds of activities can parents involve gifted kids in that can help their social and emotional development?

VP Team sports are always of value.



Depending on what the child’s interests are, music can be of value. Maybe not an instrument you play by yourself, but rather an involvement in a band or orchestra where you develop a relationship with others. It’s important to have the child do something

that expresses emotion—sports do that, music does that, art does that. Also, the opportunity to be with like-minded kids and families is valuable.

LVG How can parents avoid using giftedness as a way to excuse unacceptable behavior?

VP In certain instances, the parents are gifted but might not know it because when they were kids that word was not used. For instance, where I grew up in the Northeast, the term gifted wasn’t used. I didn’t hear it until I got to Florida. Unfortunately, parents use that label as an excuse for the successes and failures of their child.

Sometimes the parents aren’t gifted, and so they don’t understand what’s going on with the child. In that case, they need even more education and more support. Nobody ever does anything to intentionally create a scene or hurt someone, but they may end up in those situations, and it becomes very confusing because they are thinking, “I was trying to keep my child interested and motivated and it went wrong. Now what do I say to cover this up?”

LVG How can you balance the need for kids to learn to behave appropriately with the need to be themselves?

VP As a parent, you can control the situations you put them in. It’s going to be trial and error to see what works. If you take them to the movies and they scream and yell and carry on because they have a hypersensitivity to the darkness or the noise, you leave. The next time you try a different tactic. If that still doesn’t work, you learn, OK, this is not a place I can take this child. It’s trial and error because each child will be different. As a parent, you have to forgive yourself. We’re not given a handbook, so we’re learning as well. Understand that your child is not doing this intentionally. Work with your child, not against him. Many of those situations occur when there is confrontation between the parent and the child. This is another situation where role playing is very helpful.

LVG How can a parent be objective about his or her own child’s behavior? We’ve all met people in denial about their “little darling.”

VP It helps to get outside guidance because it's very hard to be objective about your own child. It also helps to think about it and contemplate their behavior when they're not there and there is nothing that's involving them that's there. Frequently, the reason we have the parents who are not objective is because they're acting in the moment and not prepared.

I would encourage parents to look at their child through an outside party unless you have a couple who can be objective for each other. Sometimes you get a relationship in which dad's too strict and mom's too lenient or vice versa, but sometimes they can balance each other. The difficulty is that there is no perfect balance because you achieve balance and then something will throw it off and the balance is gone. It's a continuous process, and as adults we sometimes forget that. We think, "OK, we've got this down." And then the kid develops and the balance shifts. It's a lot like riding a bike—you're never really perfectly in balance; you are constantly adjusting in order to stay up.

LVG How do you avoid arrogance and yet help a child have self esteem?

VP You need lots of modeling by a teacher and by parents, especially. There is appropriate appreciation of the child, and praise [should be] used, within reason. But it is also important to watch the child interact. It is important to be there when the child is interacting with others so you can see how she is doing. Does she seem arrogant, shy, angry, or unable to communicate? You can see it quickly in a situation in which you are not participating. For instance, go to a birthday party with your child but stand away and observe; you can learn a lot about where your child is in terms of interaction with others.

Also, you can role play and turn the situation around. Depending on the intellectual level of the child, you can say, "I know that you understand this [subject] a whole lot better than Johnny, Sarah, and Susan, but when you say that in those words, it doesn't come out right. Can you think of a different way to say you're proud of your work?" It helps to ask open-end-

"IT HELPS TO GET OUTSIDE GUIDANCE BECAUSE IT'S VERY HARD TO BE OBJECTIVE ABOUT YOUR OWN CHILD."



ed questions because if you just tell a child what to do, he won't do it. He'll argue back or just not do it. If you make him part of the solution, he is more likely to do it.

LVG As a mother of two gifted children yourself, what advice can you give other parents as a parent, not as a professional?

VP I tell myself as much as I can (and I try to tell my friends also), we're not perfect—we're learning. It is so important to be patient with ourselves because if we lose patience with ourselves, how can we help our kids? It's OK to get it wrong. Many parents think that they should have it down pat right away, but sometimes I make more strides with my children when I can talk with them about how I was wrong and how I can improve the next time. ☺

MENSA RESOURCES FOR PARENTING GIFTED CHILDREN

Plenty of Mensans are still sprouting through shoes faster than parents can purchase them. If you're the parent of a gifted young Mensan, the organization offers resources for you and your child.

JOIN THE DISCUSSION The Bright Kids Listserve (www.lists.us.mensa.org/mailman/listinfo/brightkids) is a busy, vibrant forum open to members and non-members alike. With discussion topics ranging from picking schools to testing, this list is wide-ranging and lively—parents helping parents.

JOIN A SIG The MPowered Parenting SIG is the group for Mensans parenting bright children. Share tips, strategies, success (and unsuccessful) stories. Find more information at groups.yahoo.com/group/MPoweredParenting.

HOP ONLINE The Mensa Foundation sponsors www.mensaforkids.org. Here you'll find resources for parents, teachers, and children, including games, lesson plans, and more.

GET IN TOUCH Mensa's Gifted Youth Specialist Lisa Van Gemert is available at giftedyouth@mensafoundation.org to help point you in the direction of other resources.