



taught in the **CROSSEIRE**

Educators have notoriously difficult jobs, and those duties aren't made easier when a gifted student requires special attention. Working together, teachers and parents can make a difference. We'll show you how to work with your child, communicate effectively, become an ally, and get the most out of the men and women you rely on to maximize Johnny's potential.

By Lisa Van Gemert, M.Ed.

“If you don’t get me out of there, I’m going to become a discipline problem.”

These are not the words a parent wants to hear coming from her son after his first day of first grade. “The other kids can’t even read, can’t do multiplication, and the teacher talks to me like I was six (which, of course, he is),” he says. Even if your child did well in the less-structured world of kindergarten, he may act out when first grade begins. First grade is supposed to be “real school,” and in school you’re supposed to learn something you didn’t already know.

Sound familiar? It’s easy for gifted students and parents to become frustrated with a system that seems designed to foster learning in all but the children most capable of it, and that frustration is often directed at the face of education—the teacher. Parents of gifted children are quick to vocalize their dissatisfaction with the school system’s handling of their child’s education—below-ability classroom work, slow pacing, waste-of-time homework assignments, using the child as a teacher’s aide, and giving her more of the same level work rather than ability-appropriate tasks, etc. All too often, the teacher and parent end up pitted against each other in a battle of wills, even though they share the same goal.

Recognizing and clinging to this common ground is the key to helping your child succeed in a mixed-ability classroom. Cindy Perry, a third-grade teacher in Arlington, Texas, says, “The whole goal is to challenge the children, yet I get frustrated in my own lack of smoothness in

differentiating my classroom.” Her point is important. Parents must realize that what they want—the best possible education for their children—is difficult to provide. Teachers, even the most skilled and motivated teachers, face constraints that prevent them from giving every child the best education possible. Any parent with more than one child understands the idea of competing interests with limited resources. When you factor in that guiding a classroom is far more complicated than picking a fast food restaurant or what movie to watch, it is easy to see that a teacher with a classroom of 30 may not be able to please everyone, no

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matter how much she desires to meet every student’s needs.

In an era of standards-based education, teachers often must choose to allocate finite time resources to those things on which school performance is based. Teachers also report challenges such as too little space in the classroom, lack of quality materials, time required by the school district for testing or other activities that take away from instructional time, programs with large documentation requirements, and a lack of sufficient planning time. Most likely, your child’s teacher is just as frustrated as you are.

Sometimes, teachers are new and are still learning



the basics. Patti Cryer, the Secondary Gifted and Talented Coordinator for Marble Falls ISD in central Texas, says that before teachers can reach their potential, they have to be “comfortable in their own skin. A first-year teacher won’t have an understanding of the nature of all students and may not know how to handle the intensities and different ways of thinking” that come with teaching the gifted. Cryer, who is parenting gifted children herself, has a unique perspective as someone on both sides of the fence. “Some teachers have a belief that gifted kids are going to get there on their own, and they may not know how to challenge them,” she says. A parent doesn’t always know how to challenge his child, either, so it can be unfair to expect a teacher who has spent far less time with the child than he has to know what is going to work best.

Sometimes, the very practice that angers a parent makes sense when the teacher explains the rationale behind it. Eric Bear, an elementary Montessori teacher in Eugene, Ore., understands parent irritation at having her gifted child used as a teacher’s aid. “When they’re tutoring other students, they’re not learning anything new. They’re not getting an education any more,” he says.

Perry sees it differently. If she has a section of material to get through with the whole class, she sometimes has gifted students tutor more typical learners so that the class can move on more quickly to something that may challenge the gifted learner. She also recognizes that gifted children often enjoy teaching their peers.

This issue illustrates another important point: there is often no one right way to run a classroom. Although all

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educators would agree on certain standards, teaching is an individual art, and what works for one may not work for another. Because of this, sometimes the child is her own best advocate.

Patricia Bear, a mental health therapist, remembers her own son’s experience with a teacher in elementary school. “When Zack was in fourth grade, the teacher noticed he was bored with the vocabulary assignments, even though she had creative stuff,” Patricia says. “He was trying to make a joke out of it, so she asked him to make her a proposal of an alternate assignment. She didn’t punish him for already knowing it.” Bear allowed her son to negotiate his own learning with

The **Right (and Wrong)** Way to Approach your Child’s Teacher

Want to know how to keep your child’s educator on your side? We asked a few teachers to reveal the best strategies.

Wrong: “Haven’t you ever noticed this?” Of course they’ve noticed.

Right: Be supportive. Ask the teacher, “Do you mind if I observe? Do you mind if I bring in extra materials?” Try to make sure the teacher sees you as a support, not a critic.

Wrong: “My child wouldn’t be a behavior problem if you...”

Right: Explain, “This is what I’m noticing. These are challenges we’ve had in the past. What are you noticing in the classroom?”

Wrong: “My child is bored in your class.” Those are fightin’ words that will put everyone on the defensive.

Right: Rather than criticizing, try to come at it from a different angle. “He’s really been enjoying learning about such and such, can he take that one step further?”

Wrong: “This is stupid (ridiculous, boring, below him/her).” If you come in and tell me what I’m doing is stupid, that is offensive, no matter what word you use.

Right: Be specific. Instead of saying, “My child needs to be challenged,” think about what that really means to you.

Other **Right** moves:

Be knowledgeable. Know the discipline well enough to talk in the teacher’s language.

Be patient. Wait for three weeks to see what’s coming home, and then conference with the teacher. Don’t ambush the teacher the first days of school. **Be accessible.** Make sure a teacher has a way to reach you, and tell the teacher the best times/ways to reach you. If you can’t receive calls at work, say that ahead of time, not when the teacher phones to tell you something about your child.

the teacher, an approach parents should consider. Gifted children often have superior reasoning skills. They can use those abilities in creating strategic plans for learning in a mixed-ability classroom. These children also frequently have more insight into the way the classroom works and understand the constraints of it better than parents who are not there everyday. Obviously, if the child is unsuccessful, or the results are unsatisfactory, the parent needs to get involved.

One of the key ideas in avoiding an adversarial relationship with a teacher is to recognize whether the issues you have are with the teacher, the school, or the system itself. Direct your proactive problem-solving skills toward the correct person or entity. Do this by asking questions without a passive-aggressive agenda. You may find that the person you have been complaining about is your biggest ally.

It is easy to get caught up in the idea that your child deserves to be educated to the height of her potential and ignore the simple fact that some children have potential that is so great it is difficult to discover what that is, much less meet it. It is not malice on the part of the teacher when he cannot meet the needs of your child in the way you would like. Children are all different, so there is no set way that a teacher can adjust for them. Some teachers are simply better than others, and sometimes you will not have a good match. If you can change teachers, great. If not, you will need to bear more of the responsibility for your child's education than may seem fair.

Be prepared to make practical suggestions, keeping in mind the constraints under which the teacher is working. Be ready to advocate for differentiation (the adjustment of the curriculum itself and the way it is delivered and assessed), not just "moreferentiation" (a made-up word that means dumping more mindless worksheets on the kid who finishes first). Be thoughtful and reflective about what has worked in the past, yet stay open to new ideas and methods at each grade level. Volunteer at the school so you experience the teacher's environment for yourself. You will see the classroom experience in a new way when you truly view it through a teacher's eyes. Who knows? You may find more than an ally. You may find a friend. 🤝

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Communicating effectively can go a long way toward making sure your child's needs are met. If you ask for more challenging work, be ready to say, "I'd like to see Sarah's work differentiated by having her do more things at the highest levels of Bloom's," and know what that means! Otherwise, the teacher may hear "challenging" and think more, not more appropriate, work.

- **Acceleration** Commonly called "skipping," acceleration can be done for an entire grade or for an individual subject.
- **Bloom's Taxonomy** Working with colleagues in 1956, Benjamin Bloom developed the idea of six levels of cognitive thinking, which he named Bloom's Taxonomy. The levels, in order of lowest to highest thinking level are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, evaluation, and synthesis. For information on Bloom's Taxonomy, see: www.saskschools.ca/~bestpractice/tiered/index.html.
- **Compacting (telescoping)** Shrinking the amount of time it takes to teach the curriculum through pre-testing and only teaching what is not known or through shortening the amount of time spent on the material.
- **Differentiated Instruction** Adjusting the curriculum, the way it is delivered, and the way it is assessed based upon student ability, interest, and prior knowledge.
- **Independent Study** Allowing the student to work alone, guided by a learning contract or other instrument, often done on a computer or in a library.
- **Learning Contracts** A negotiated agreement between a teacher and student that sets out specific assignments/projects, when they are to be completed, and the standard with which they will be graded.
- **Tiered Assignments** Having different students within the group studying the same curriculum in different ways according to ability and interest. You can see examples at www.saskschools.ca/~bestpractice/tiered/index.html.