

15 Ways to Help Gifted Kids Thrive in School

by Lisa Van Gemert



Let's face it: most schools weren't designed with the gifted child in mind.

It's important to remember that doesn't mean that gifted kids can't thrive in them!

GT students are not unlike plants. Some plants are native to an environment, while others adapt to a climate and become some of the best plants to grow. Where I live (Texas), many of the plants in my yard that are my favorites are not native to this area, but rather are adapted to our heat and soil in a way that allows them to thrive.

Whether you're an educator or a parent, these fifteen tips will help you create the greatest possible likelihood for school success.

You don't need to do them all at once – feel free to take it step by step.

They're in no particular order, so read through them all in detail or just the ones that catch your eye.

I. Give as much choice as possible.

Feeling as if there is no choice is a sure fire way to make anyone unhappy.

Choice in school for the gifted can range from the very broad (choosing the school itself) to the narrow (giving choices in assignments, tools, or resources).

While choice alone is not sufficient for altering curriculum for gifted kids, it's a great place to start.

Can the child choose what kind of book to read? What presentation tool to use? What class she is in? What school he goes to?

Give the greatest amount of choice possible, and be prepared to explain where it is not.

See if you can find some room at the intersection of Impossible and Possible. Be ready to give a deeper explanation than you may expect, as gifted kids often have strong reasoning ability combined with a lack of respect for positional authority, and they are ready to challenge the reasons.



Rather than be defensive when the child pushes back, use it as an opportunity to be honestly reflective about why the choice isn't possible. Be open to other possibilities if a choice really isn't available.

2. Prepare the Adults.

Parents should share with teachers as soon as possible any needs or specific quirks the teacher is likely to encounter, keeping in mind that there will be some things beyond the teacher's ability to accommodate.

Be reasonable. Say, "Abby really struggles with loud noises. If she overreacts to a slamming door or other loud noise, it helps if she can [insert calming strategy appropriate for school]."

Teachers are not the only adults on campus, so if your child will be interfacing with the nurse (for an allergy or other issue), or other professional, reach out to that person as well.

Teachers should take the time to familiarize themselves with the child and the nature and needs of gifted children in general.

As soon as an educator notices that there is something about the child that is qualitatively different from the norm, do a little digging. Look at the cumulative folder. Talk to the parents. Have a private conversation with the student.

If it is the child's first time in school, it is likely that he has been looking forward to it with a combination of excitement and trepidation. The parent may be nervous, and intuitive gifted kids will pick up on that.



The more prepared both the parents and teachers are, the more likely it is that they will have lower anxiety levels, translating to a better experience for the child.

3. Prepare the Child.

Children must be prepared for the experience of school way ahead of time. Consider some of the things students may encounter in any new school year:

- New teacher
- New classmates
- New schedule
- New expectations for behavior
- Different amounts of homework
- Increase in expectations of executive functioning (managing time, working independently, etc.)
- Longer periods of time expected to sit still at a desk
- Larger class size
- New school (due to a move or due to a shift to middle/high school)



This list isn't even comprehensive, yet it's quite a spectacular amount of change for a child or teen to manage without preparation.

At the end of every school year, teachers should do what they can to let students know about changes they can expect in the upcoming year, making sure to convey the positive aspects of the change.

Parents should take children on tours of new environments, have brainstorming sessions about possible new dynamics and how to manage them, and keep communication open, staying positive about the changes.

4. Address organization.

It's an interesting dichotomy: some gifted kids absolutely love organizing things, forgoing actually playing with their toys in favor of getting them set up just so and then admiring them. Others have backpacks that look like nuclear fusion just occurred and left a huge mess in its aftermath.

Additionally, you have some kids who are super organized in some areas, while being entirely chaotic in others.



School requires a certain level of organization, gradually increasing as the student progresses through the grades.

Parents should seek out the organizational strategies that work best for the child (color-coding, separate backpacks, charts, daily debriefs, tech tools, etc.), and practice them before the first day of school.

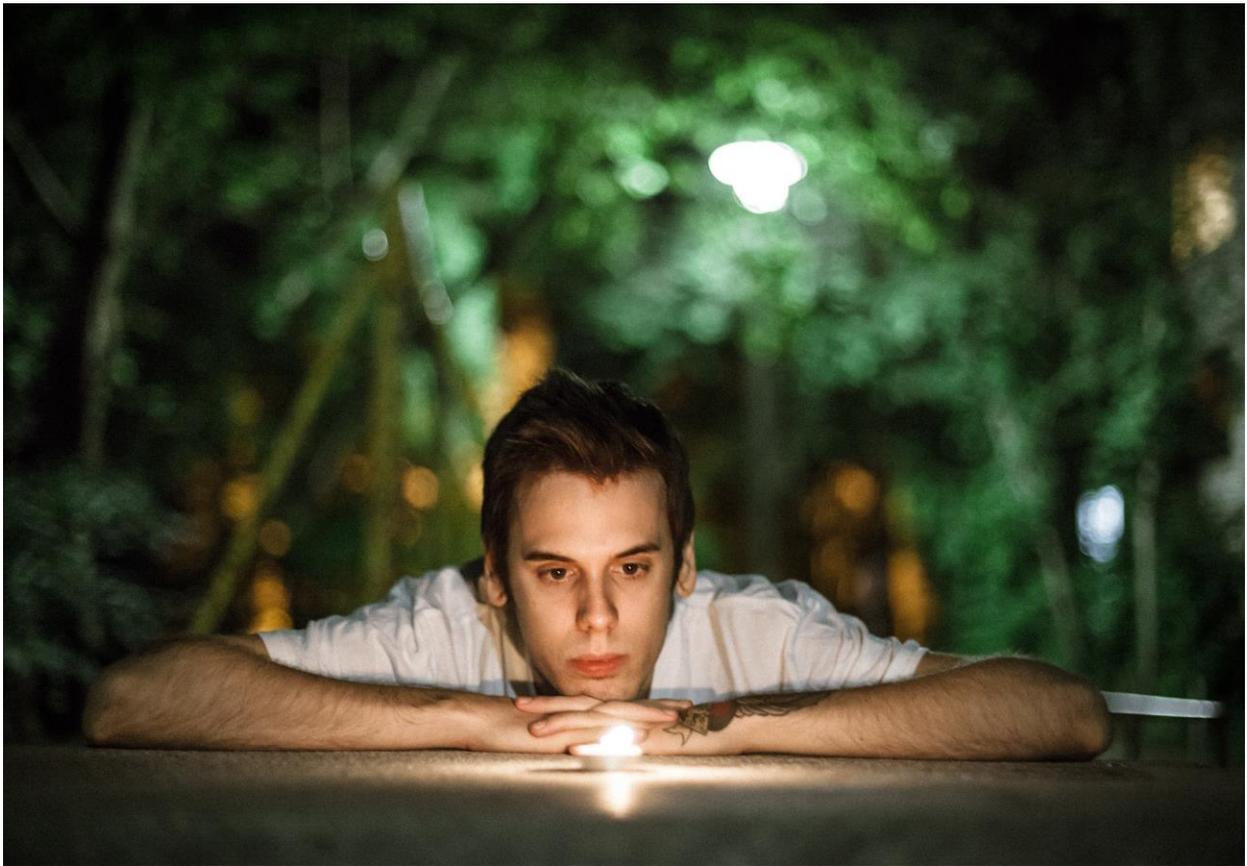
Do a dry run of where and how often the backpack and binder will be emptied or organized.

Teachers should make it as easy as possible for students to be organized by making expectations clear and sharing those expectations with parents, no matter how old the student. If parents know ahead of time that there will be a monthly assignment sheet given to each child and that there is a website to keep up with assignments and information, it goes a long way toward helping parents help students.

Additionally, both parents and teachers should consider their own organization habits. It's hypocritical to fault a child for a lack of organization when the adult spaces and systems are disorganized.

5. Teach mindfulness.

One of the key needs for gifted individuals is to develop the skill to quiet the mind. Mindfulness can help with this. If you're unfamiliar with mindfulness, it's essentially paying attention on purpose without judgment. Both educators and parents can help kids learn this skill.



Gifted students often struggle to maintain attention in school environments for a variety of reasons, including Ferrari brains on a go-kart track, intellectual or psychomotor intensities, a lack of practice in maintaining focused attention, boredom proneness, and many others. Mindfulness can address all of these issues and more. It's not a panacea, but it's as close as we get to one. You can find mindfulness resources created and curated by a therapist on giftedguru.com/emotional-health.

6. Role play.

Everyone who is really good at something practices that thing, and it's important to practice as close to the real environment as possible.

Our son Joseph's best friend, Wes, is in fire fighter school. As he neared the end, he began live fire exercises. They role



play real fire situations so they are not blindsided by real fires.

Gifted kids are more likely to thrive in school if they have had live fire training. It's not fair to students or teachers to allow kids to have unfettered access to video games all summer and then send them to school in the fall, expecting them to sit rapturously attentive in class all day. Let's role play to set them up for success.

How do you do this? Brainstorm with the child all the possible scenarios at school that may cause an issue (desire to blurt out, listening to others read out loud [Arghhhh], listening with eyes and ears, waiting your turn, etc.). Then, practice at home (kitchen tables work fine for this).

Help kids have strategies for dealing with the situations they will encounter that may be problematic. For example, "When someone else is reading out loud really slowly, I will not look at my book. Instead, I will try to guess what word comes next. I will give myself one point for every correct guess. I'll use tally marks to keep track. When I get to fifty points, I will draw a smiley face on my tracking paper. When I get five smiley faces, my dad will let me pick a \$5 or less book on Amazon."

Educators can do this same kind of role play, giving real time feedback with smiles, thumbs up, nods or other pre-determined code.

7. Find a friend.

School, like most environments, is best with a friend.

If a friend can be found before school starts, all the better. Social media can be helpful with this. Sharing a post along the lines of, "I've got a 4th-grader starting at Wonderful School this fall. Anyone know anyone else going to this school?" Set up a pre-school playdate at a neutral location (park, library, etc.). Just seeing a familiar face in the hall can be helpful.



If finding a friend before school starts isn't possible, stay tuned once school begins for opportunities to meet like-minded students. Parents' networking with other parents can lead to child friendships (but not always!), so be sure to put yourself out there as well.

Teachers make great friendship brokers for gifted kids because they see the student in a social environment. If educators notice that a child doesn't seem to have friends, the educator should keep an eye out for like-minded kids, bearing in mind that GT kids are far less constrained by age-based friendship cohorts than

typical learners, so don't be afraid to go up or down in grade levels. I actually have a marriage between students to my credit, and you, too, can help your students find a friend (if not a future spouse!).

My friend Dr. Dan Peters shares great information on helping your gifted child find friends that I put into a slide deck you can view at bit.ly/gt-friends, and you can read the article my best friend and I wrote on gifted kids and friendship at bit.ly/gt-friendship.

8. Set reasonable expectations.

When I was four and going to kindergarten, I thought it was going to be Dante's 7th level of heaven. I was going to have oodles of friends, there was going to be a plethora of books I had never read before, and my teacher was going to be in love with me. Reality? Not quite what I imagined.



Everyone involved – teachers, parents and students – needs to have reasonable expectations about what to expect. Those expectations need to be clarified and discussed ahead of time.

Gifted students need to align their expectations with the reality of school. Parents need to have reasonable expectations about what schools and teachers can really do (keep in mind, the teacher is one person!). Teachers need to have an understanding of the needs of gifted kids.

9. Build relationships.

Gifted kids will often tolerate and thrive in less-than-ideal circumstances if they feel valued and understood. You know what? Parents and teachers are like that, too. It's not just kids.

Invest a little time in building relationships. Friendships can be built in the most challenging of circumstances, so avoid feeling discouraged based on past experiences. Every new year, every new teacher, every new student, is an opportunity to build a friendship that can last a lifetime.



Parents, find out what some of the teacher's favorites are; teachers, do likewise. A kid who is a budding paleontologist will love a teacher who lets her talk dinosaurs at recess or who shares a cool TED® talk on how there really wasn't a dinosaur called a Brontosaurus (true). "An apple for teacher" or a note of appreciation aren't required, but they're nice.

10. Negotiate.

One of our family's favorite games is *Settlers of Catan*. In it, we often have to make trades of resources. Of course, the more valuable the resource, the more you have to be willing to give up to get it.

The same is true of negotiation in school. Do you want your gifted child to be able to read ahead? Then offer to supply the alternate books. I also suggest using my Read Ahead Contract available free at bit.ly/readahead (for elementary) and bit.ly/read-secondary (for secondary students).



Are you a teacher who wants a gifted child to stop blurting out? Offer another way for him to share his excitement and knowledge and receive the feedback he craves from you.

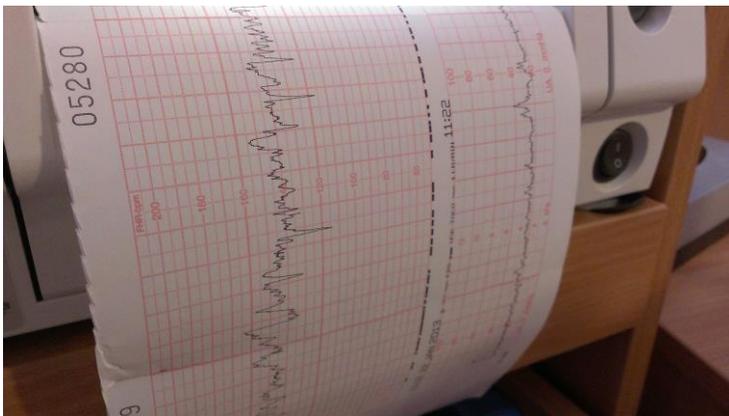
Are you a parent who wants more information from the teacher than you're getting? Ask, "How can I make it easier to facilitate that?" Can you create a checklist the teacher could easily use?

Consider the reasonableness of your requests (from all parties). Make sure you have an accurate view of the time and attention burdens on the other people. If everyone wanted from this person what you're asking, would it be possible for the person to meet that burden? If not, reconsider your request. Keep in mind what the goal is, rather than the way to accomplish it – keep that part flexible. How you get there isn't mission critical – the result is.

II. Get a good evaluation, if needed.

Both parents and teachers may come to the point where they realize that they don't have a 360° view of what is going on with a child. Sometimes this occurs when there is a discrepancy between what the parent is seeing vis-à-vis what the teacher is seeing. Sometimes it can be difficult to tease out what the child is actually capable of, especially when there are learning differences present.

In these cases, it can be helpful to get an evaluation. Notice that I tossed the adjective "good" into the title. If there is an evaluation to be done, it should be done by someone who is experienced in testing children AND the gifted. If there are other issues (ADHD, etc.), the evaluator should be experienced with those issues as well. It can be very difficult to find an appropriate evaluator, but if you don't, save your money because your odds of getting a useful evaluation are low.

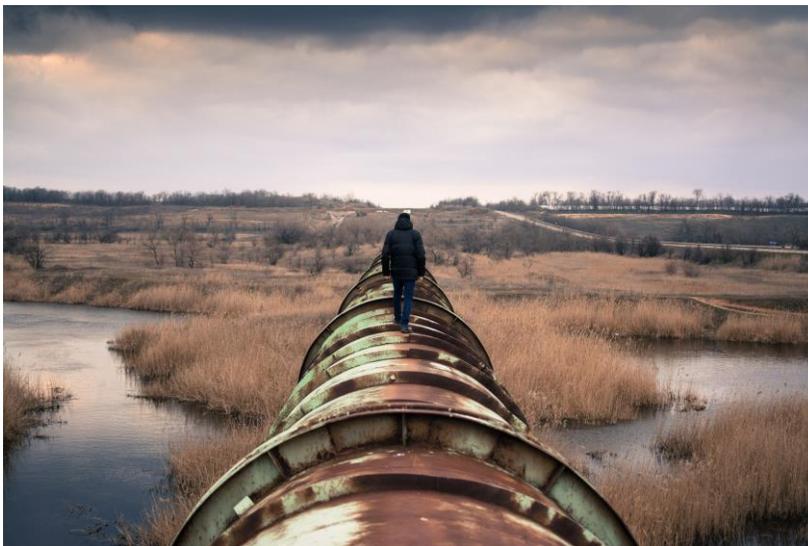


Unfortunately, it's not as easy as an ultrasound machine that can measure heart rate or other data. Even a good evaluation isn't an MRI – it's a best, educated guess.

If an evaluation isn't possible, then focus on addressing the student's needs from a service model paradigm. Educators don't need a diagnosis to serve kids. We can make reasonable accommodations without one. If a child has trouble with loud noise, we can let them wear headphones. If they need to move while learning, we can let them sit on an exercise ball or stand while they work on a clipboard. Approach it from the perspective of, "How can we help this child be successful within the constraints we have?"

12. Be a resource.

Sometimes the parent will be a resource for the teacher, and sometimes the teacher will be a resource for the parent. Sometimes they will share resources with each other. No one need worry about who should or shouldn't know what, but rather focus on what information is useful to share with each other.



No matter your role, keep the image in your mind of yourself as a pipeline of valuable information. No one invests in building a pipeline to carry worthless resources. We build pipelines to carry essential resources, so don't firehose the other party

with too much information or information that is not necessary or pertinent. Be a gentle wave of ideas, not a tsunami.

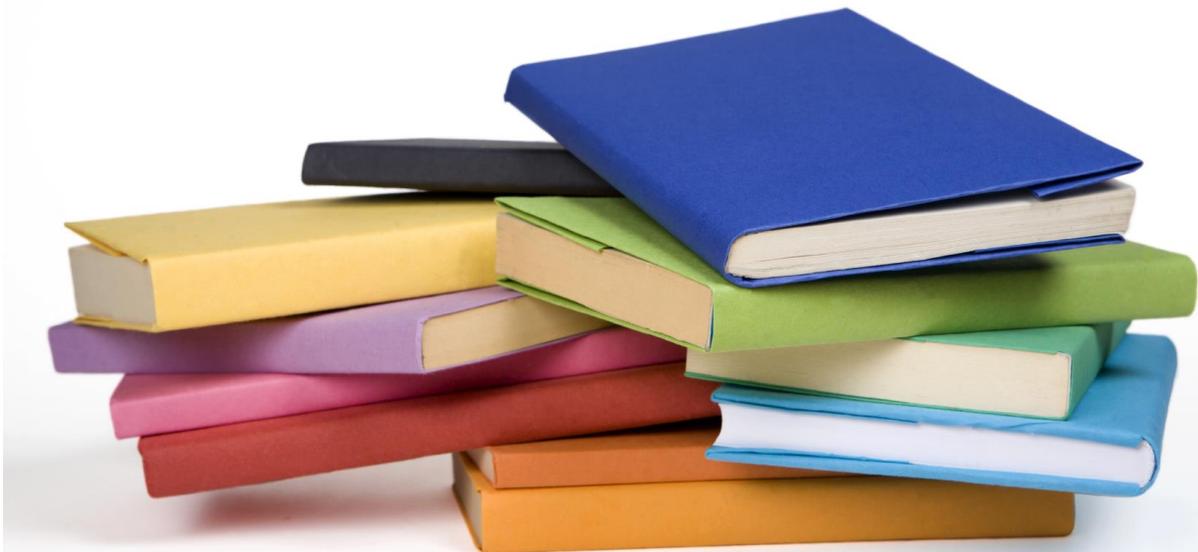
Where can you find useful resources? Join the organizations that serve the community – NAGC and its state affiliates, SENG, National Council of Teachers of [insert content area here], the American Dyslexia Association, the Asperger/Autism Network, or other organization that match the needs of the child/teacher/parent.

Parents can gift a teacher with a membership to one of these organizations or attendance at a conference or webinar. Teachers can pass along information or resources they get through their teacher channels.

13. Bring on the books.

Gifted kids thrive in environments led by adults who are at the top of their game. Even if we aren't in a position to read peer-reviewed journal articles or attend conferences, we can read books about giftedness that build our repertoire of possible responses to student needs.

Parents can consider gifting a copy of a great resource book to the school's professional library. Teachers can consider sharing things they learn in the books they read with parents.



Some books are written specifically for gifted youth, so as soon as a child is old enough, share appropriate titles. Consider a book study with the educator, the parent and the child.

There are a few publishers who specialize in giftedness – Prufrock, Free Spirit and Great Potential Press, for example. Get on their mailing lists. Encourage your local library to stock some of their titles. Add them to your Amazon wish list. Share them with friends. Read!

14. Address the intensities.

Gifted kids often have intensities, and since many parents of gifted kids are gifted, too, they may also have intensities. And since many teachers of the gifted are drawn to gifted education because they themselves are gifted, they may have intensities as well. So, there can be a lot of intensity! This can be a recipe for disaster, but it doesn't have to be.



Gifted kids will thrive in environments where their intensities are understood and accepted as a part of them. A child who wants to wear a hat all year round to cover her ears to protect them from too much noise isn't trying to be a jerk: she's trying to cope.

While not all gifted kids have intensities, they're common enough to warrant some study. There is really only one book-length treatment of intensity and the gifted, so go grab a copy of *Living with Intensity* and grow your toolbox of strategies.

15. Consider the schedule.

Many gifted youth struggle with executive functioning issues for a variety of reasons, some connected to cognitive giftedness and some not. Parents and educators both play a role in helping students be successful, and part of that is how we schedule.

Parents should not overschedule students. Kids who are picked up from school and then raced from one activity to another all afternoon and evening with little or no down time may struggle to juggle assignments and planning. Slowing down, drawing back and making sure that kids have



unstructured time every day simply to think and be kids is vital to mental health.

Teachers, horizontally align outside-of-school assignments so that students don't have overly burdensome amounts of homework.

Share and stick to a schedule of work to the greatest extent possible. If changes must be made, share it with parents rather than just verbally with students. Sometimes we forget that students may be receiving information from multiple sources that they have to hold in their heads.

Make it easy to for parents and students to stay on top of the schedule. It reduces anxiety when you know what to expect. Also, don't worry so much about whether a student is "too old" to have a parent help them remember things. Who among us doesn't rely on other people or technology to help us remember what to do and when?

WRAP-UP



So there they are – fifteen ideas to help gifted kids thrive in school. You may have noticed that many of these tips apply outside of school environments as well, and many would apply to homeschooled gifted kids. They are simply some of my ideas for best practices for working with GT kids. It all boils down to respect from and for all parties.

I hope you've found them helpful. Whatever your role, thank you for your passion for gifted children. Adults who strive to create environments in which gifted children can thrive can transform lives forever.

I would invite you to connect with me wherever works best for you. You can find me on:



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