

Letter to the Editor

Giftedness in the Indian context: nurturing exceptional potential

Sir,

As a developmental pediatrician, I've had the privilege of meeting children whose abilities are nothing short of extraordinary. These children might be the ones who read books meant for older kids, solve complex problems with ease, or create art that leaves you awestruck. They are often described as gifted but in India, this label isn't always understood or embraced. Many gifted children go unnoticed, and as a result, their exceptional abilities remain untapped. Their needs aren't met, and their potential stays hidden. The time has come to recognize and nurture these gifted children.¹

Giftedness is not synonymous with high examination marks or with a single measure of intelligence. It can be expressed across academic, creative, artistic, leadership, and sensory-motor domains, and children may demonstrate exceptional aptitude or performance in one or more of these areas.² Gifted learners occur across socio-economic, cultural, and demographic groups; however, equitable access to learning opportunities is essential for them to realise their potential.³ In India, the National Education Policy 2020 recognizes the need to identify, nurture, foster, and develop the innate talents of every student, including those with particularly strong interests and capacities.⁴

WHAT DOES GIFTEDNESS REALLY MEAN?

Giftedness isn't just about acing exams. It's a broad concept that encompasses a range of exceptional abilities. Gifted children may excel in academic subjects, but they might also shine in areas like music, art, sports, or leadership. What truly sets them apart is their capacity for advanced learning and creativity. But here's the thing gifted children don't always fit into traditional educational frameworks. They may not stand out in a classroom that's focused only on exams and rote memorization, which is why many of them go unrecognized.²

WHY GIFTEDNESS OFTEN GOES UNNOTICED IN INDIA?

In India, the term "gifted" is still somewhat ambiguous. While there's increasing awareness about developmental conditions like autism and ADHD, giftedness isn't as well understood. In many ways, this means gifted children are at risk of being overlooked. Academic success is often seen as the ultimate indicator of

intelligence. If a child is not scoring top marks in exams, they may not be considered "gifted." But children who excel in areas like music, art, or leadership often don't get the recognition they deserve.¹

The Indian education system places intense pressure on children to excel in exams. Gifted children, however, may get bored with the standard curriculum. When their intellectual curiosity isn't engaged, they can become disengaged, frustrated, and even underachieve.¹ The National Education Policy 2020 emphasizes conceptual understanding rather than rote learning, alongside creativity, critical thinking, and the recognition of each student's unique capabilities; these principles are particularly relevant to learners with advanced abilities.⁴

Gifted children in India, especially in rural areas, often don't have access to the specialized programs or resources that would allow them to fully develop their talents. Unlike in other parts of the world, where there are gifted programs in schools, India's education system does not yet have a comprehensive and universally accessible approach for identifying and supporting giftedness.⁴ Giftedness does not depend on socio-economic background, but access to resources does. Many children with extraordinary abilities come from disadvantaged backgrounds and lack the opportunities and exposure to nurture their skills.³ Indian initiatives such as the NIAS Education for the Gifted and Talented programme demonstrate the value of inclusive identification methods that combine teacher observation, parent or community nomination, profiles, portfolios, and contextual assessment.⁵

THE HIDDEN STRUGGLES OF GIFTED CHILDREN

While gifted children often excel in certain areas, they face challenges that are unique to their abilities. These challenges can be difficult to navigate without proper support. Gifted children often feel unchallenged by the standard school curriculum. When their intellectual needs are not met, they may disengage and stop trying. This can lead to underachievement and frustration, even if they have the potential to excel.¹

Gifted children sometimes struggle to connect with their peers. Their interests and abilities may set them apart, leading to feelings of loneliness or isolation. Without a peer group that shares their intellectual interests, they might find it difficult to relate to others. Many gifted children are emotionally sensitive. They feel things more

deeply, which can make them more vulnerable to stress, anxiety, and frustration. Their heightened emotional responses, though a sign of their sensitivity, can sometimes make it hard for them to navigate everyday situations. Gifted learners may need support and guidance for their social and emotional development as well as in their areas of talent.³

The Indian education system does not yet offer adequate support for gifted children in many settings. Without specialized programs or teachers trained to recognize and nurture giftedness, these children may not get the guidance they need to reach their full potential. The National Education Policy 2020 states that teacher education will include methods for recognizing and fostering student talents and interests, that NCERT and NCTE will develop guidelines for the education of gifted children, and that teachers should provide supplementary enrichment material, guidance, and encouragement.⁴

THE NEUROSCIENCE BEHIND GIFTEDNESS: WHAT MAKES THESE CHILDREN DIFFERENT?

Giftedness isn't just about "being born smart." There is a complex interplay of genetic, environmental, and neurological factors that contributes to individual differences in exceptional abilities. Genetic influences contribute substantially to variation in brain structure and cognitive development, while environmental exposures and learning opportunities also shape developmental outcomes.⁶

One important concept is neuroplasticity the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming and strengthening neural connections in response to experience. Advanced learners may show efficient use of cognitive processes and sophisticated knowledge structures during demanding tasks, although no single brain feature can define giftedness in an individual child.⁷ Higher-level cognitive functions, including planning, problem-solving, working memory, and decision-making, involve distributed neural systems that include prefrontal and parietal regions. Research on high-ability learners suggests differences in the recruitment and coordination of such networks during complex cognitive tasks; these findings should be interpreted as group-level observations rather than diagnostic markers.⁷

Gifted children often process information quickly and may show strong memory, rapid learning, or creative problem-solving in areas of interest. Their ability to integrate information from different domains can support flexible reasoning and originality. However, ability is heterogeneous: a child may have advanced skills in one domain and average or even impaired performance in another.²

IDENTIFYING AND SUPPORTING GIFTEDNESS: WHAT PARENTS CAN DO

Identifying giftedness early is key to ensuring these children receive the support they need. As a parent, you're in the best position to notice when your child is showing signs of giftedness. Gifted children are naturally curious. If your child is always asking "why" and "how," or showing interest in topics beyond their age level, they may be gifted. Their curiosity drives them to explore and understand the world in greater depth.

Gifted children tend to learn quickly. They may read or solve problems at an unusually early age. If your child seems to grasp concepts effortlessly, that's a sign of exceptional cognitive ability. Gifted children often have deep, focused interests in particular subjects. Whether it's dinosaurs, space, or a specific area of math, they tend to dive deep into subjects they love, absorbing vast amounts of information along the way. Many gifted children are also highly sensitive to emotions. They can often sense the feelings of others and may react strongly to perceived injustices. This emotional depth is part of what makes them unique.³

Parents and teachers should view these observations as prompts for supportive exploration rather than as a stand-alone diagnosis. A comprehensive assessment is ideally multi-dimensional, using developmental history, observation across settings, educational performance, portfolios, and appropriately selected formal assessments when indicated. The NIAS-EGT programme illustrates an Indian contextual approach that uses nominations, behavioural rating, longitudinal profiles, portfolios, interviews, and observation, rather than relying only on a single psychometric score.⁵

HOW PARENTS CAN SPOT GIFTEDNESS IN THEIR CHILDREN

Your child may start speaking in full sentences early, using a sophisticated vocabulary or complex sentence structures. Your child might ask more questions than usual and want to know the "whys" behind things. They may explore ideas far beyond their years. Gifted children often have excellent memory retention and may recall details or facts that others forget.

Gifted children may fixate intensely on subjects or hobbies they are passionate about, sometimes spending hours learning or practicing without getting bored. If your child reacts strongly to emotional or social issues, they may be more attuned to the world around them than other children. Gifted children often solve problems in creative and unconventional ways. They don't always follow the "rules" and are able to come up with innovative solutions to challenges. These signs should always be interpreted in the context of the child's overall development, opportunities, interests, and functioning at home and school.²

GIFTEDNESS VS. HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM (HFA): HOW TO TELL THE DIFFERENCE

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Sometimes, giftedness can appear similar to high-functioning autism (HFA), especially when a child shows advanced abilities or interests in a specific subject. However, there are key differences to look for. Gifted children typically have no difficulty with social communication and can build relationships, although they may feel different from same-age peers or prefer the company of children and adults who share their interests. Children with autism spectrum disorder may show persistent differences in social communication and social interaction, together with restricted or repetitive patterns of behaviour, interests, or activities that affect daily functioning.⁸

Gifted children are often emotionally aware and can understand complex emotions in themselves and others. Children with autism spectrum disorder may have difficulty recognizing or interpreting some social-emotional cues, although abilities and support needs vary greatly between individuals. Gifted children are generally more flexible in their thinking and can adapt to new ideas and situations, whereas insistence on sameness and distress with changes in routines can be part of autism spectrum disorder.⁸

While gifted children can have intense interests, they often explore a variety of topics. Children with autism spectrum disorder may have highly restricted or unusually intense interests, particularly when accompanied by social-communication differences and repetitive behaviours. Giftedness and autism can also co-occur; therefore, a child with advanced abilities should not be assumed to be free of developmental needs, and a child with autism should not have their strengths overlooked. A developmental assessment should consider the complete profile of strengths, challenges, functioning, and support requirements.^{3,8}

By recognizing and supporting gifted children, we can help them harness their potential and allow them to thrive. Giftedness isn't about putting pressure on them to excel it's about providing the right environment, resources, and emotional support to nurture their unique abilities. Let's make sure that no gifted child in India is left behind, and their incredible potential is given the chance to flourish.

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