

How can parents effectively guide their high-ability student?

The following article was written for the ITAG Newsletter, May, 2003 by Janet Petersma, district parent and board member, Friends of Johnston ELP.

Lessons Learned by a Parent-in-Training

As another school year comes to a close, it seems an appropriate time to assess what I've learned. As a parent, I've come to realize that I'm enrolled in a never-ending "parent-in-training" course, all of it "on the job" learning. Fortunately for me, I have had the privilege of being involved with Friends of Johnston Extended Learning Program for the past several years, a group of parents and supporters of gifted education. Being a part of this group has given me the opportunity to "extend" my own learning in the area of parenting a high-ability child. So as this school year wraps up, what have I learned that I can share with you, as fellow parents-in-training?

- 1. I don't know everything.** This parenting thing is pretty humbling. Parenting a high-ability child adds even more challenge to the job. In light of this, one of my assignments is to seek out information about giftedness and all things related. The more I learn, the more effective parent I can become. The educational programs sponsored by our parent group feature topics of interest to those of us raising and educating gifted children. This represents a ready (and regular) opportunity for me to gain knowledge and insight. If there is a parent group in your area, I encourage you to take advantage of the programs offered. Check out your local library or the internet for a wealth of information on the topic. Strive to learn everything you possibly can about raising a high-ability child. It is not an easy task.
- 2. I can't do this alone.** I need to be connected with other parents who are raising children with similar needs. I need people with whom I can speak openly, without feeling uncomfortable, about the challenges and rewards of raising a high-ability child. Our parent support group provides me with easy access to several families who are in the same boat, who have faced the same challenges of raising a child who is seemingly many ages at once. Is there such a group in your area? If so, reach out and be a part of it. If there is no parent group in your area, consider starting one. There are people at the Iowa Talented and Gifted Association (ITAG) and in established parent groups who are ready and waiting to help you!
- 3. I need to parent the whole child.** We all know that a child is much more than the sum of his or her achievements, but when raising a high-ability child, it is easy to focus undue attention on the achievements. In doing so, parents may inadvertently put excessive pressure on a child who already pressures herself to achieve. Through our support group, I've met parents who do an excellent job of reminding me to consider the "whole child". What kinds of things am I doing to nourish my child's social, emotional, physical, and spiritual growth? Is my child happy, well-adjusted, and well-rested? I need to periodically step back and think about the big picture (much easier said than done).
- 4. I am my child's first and best teacher.** Too many parents completely relinquish the role of educating their child to the school system. This is one of the worst things you can do for a high-ability child. The school has to approach the educational system from the perspective of providing the greatest good for the greatest number of kids. The gifted child is usually not in that population. The school system can provide only so much to a child, especially one whose needs lie beyond that of the typical student population. While I have high expectations of our schools, I also take responsibility for being my child's first and best teacher. With this in mind, I look for ways to offer "extensions" at home. For us, this means regular trips to the theatre, opportunities to engage in music activities, a rich reading library, a well-stocked craft cabinet, math games, and educational family vacations. We look for ways to build on the curriculum, making connections between school subjects and everyday life.

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5. **I need to help my child discover her gifts.** One of the best parts of this parent-in-training job is helping our child discover her gifts, which may not necessarily be discoverable within the school setting. Through this process, we've found that our child has some abilities which we expected her to have, but others which came as a bit of a surprise. Helping our child discover her gifts involves encouraging her try new things, to experiment in different areas, to take risks. This is not always easy for a gifted child to do and requires much support from the parent.
6. **I need to nurture my own gifts.** As my child's best teacher, I need to model what I teach (again, easier said than done). A key lesson I've learned is how important it is to nurture my own gifts. At our house, a good deal of satisfaction comes from finding our gifts and thoroughly developing them. A child can benefit greatly in observing a parent doing what he or she loves. Even more exciting, you're likely to find that your child has some of the same strengths that you do.
7. **I need a partnership relationship with my child's school and teachers.** In order to most effectively support learning for my child, I need to develop a relationship with those involved in her education. For me, this means establishing a rapport with the school and her teachers. It means offering ideas and support, bringing up questions, and working with the teachers as a true partner in her learning. It means being willing to listen to different perspectives and adjust my own thinking. It means listening openly to feedback about my child (who, we've learned, is not really perfect after all!). If a problem arises, I find it much easier to work through if I have that partnership relationship already in place.
8. **I need to advocate effectively for my child.** No matter how strong the school system or how skilled the teacher, there will be times when I need to advocate for my child's needs. If I have fostered partnership relationships with my child's teachers, then advocating for my child will be much easier. I have seen situations in which parents, frustrated over what is seemingly NOT happening in school, confront teachers in an angry manner. This adversarial approach makes everyone uncomfortable, naturally puts the teachers in a defensive posture, and typically does not gain the desired results. Learning to advocate in a positive manner is a critical skill for all parents of high-ability children.
9. **I need to be involved.** There are countless ways to be involved in your child's education that benefit the entire student population, not just high-ability kids. For me, this means staying informed about what is happening at school, volunteering in the classroom, reading school information that comes home, and helping with our parent group. The more involved I am, the more informed I become, and the more effectively I can function as a parent. If there is a parent group in your area, contact them and offer your help. Whether you take on a leadership role, offer to stuff envelopes or run a concession stand, there are plenty of opportunities to contribute in ways that work with your schedule.
10. **I need to be an advocate for gifted education.** At the end of the day, I need to remind myself that I can make a difference, not just for my child, but for all high-ability students. To do this, I must become educated about legislative issues at the local, state, and national levels which may affect gifted education. I need to take responsibility for contacting my legislators to share opinions and express support for gifted education. One easy way for parents to start this process is to visit the ITAG website and join the ITAG legislative forum. You'll learn about legislative issues and how to influence the process so as to make a difference for all high-ability students.

We're finishing up a great year, a year of learning for my child and for me. Next year, I'll continue my training as a parent and will no doubt need some repetitions to fully master this list of lessons. How does your list compare with mine?