

Communicating Effectively with Your Gifted Child's School

by Dr. Joan Franklin Smutny

When gifted children struggle in school, they often have no other advocate than their parents. Parents attending workshops often ask, "What do I do if my child is unhappy in school?" The answer may seem obvious to some, but to most parents discussing their child's difficulties in school can be intimidating. We often hear stories of parents trying to convince a school of their child's unmet needs, of frustrated attempts to get someone -- anyone -- to respond to repeated requests for help.

Some of the difficulties parents have communicating with the school can be avoided with the right preparation and planning. I know a mother from Ecuador whose sixth-grade daughter, Marisol, has an exceptional ability in mathematics and science. But the school never identified her for the gifted program because her verbal scores were less exceptional. During the summer, I helped her mother get organized for the school year. She arranged to have her daughter tested by a professional who could administer standardized tests more suitable for bilingual students. In addition, she researched the philosophy of gifted education programs available in the district, created a portfolio of her daughter's projects and work at home and in courses offered at community centers.

Because this parent did some preliminary research and took time to organize her thoughts, she felt ready to present a strong case for Marisol's need for more advanced instruction in math and science. She told me, "At some point along the way, it became less important that my child get into their gifted program. All I wanted was for her to have the education she needs, however that could be arranged." As it turned out, the school claimed that the gifted program did not focus enough on math and science. But the teachers and principal were willing to arrange for her to attend seventh-grade math and science classes, with an option of moving into the eighth grade if needed. Had this mother not prepared herself beforehand, she might have given up after receiving her daughter's test scores in English.

Preparing to meet with the school

Begin with your child. Gifted children need to have a voice in any decisions about their education. Talk to your children about whatever problem they're having in school and try to get them to be as specific as possible. "I'm bored" doesn't really give you enough information. Even in the most stimulating environments there will be times when a class doesn't interest your child. You need to learn more in order to know what kind of boredom this is and whether or not it requires intervention.

Talk to your children about the actions you'd like to take and discuss the options. What would make school more interesting? If they could change in their school what would they change? When do they feel the most excited about classes? When do they tune out? Interesting information can sometimes surface in discussions like this. A mother once told me that in a casual conversation with her son, he happened to say, "I'd like to do art this summer; I sketched a lot of cartoons in school last year." It turned out that he developed an interest in cartoon art while doodling in his many "time-outs" in class.

Collect background information. It is important to know what your district is supposed to do to provide for high-ability children before you communicate with the school. You can get this information by contacting the state department of education; obtain state resource sheets from

NAGC. Contact the district office as well, and ask if they have a written policy statement. Focus on the underlying philosophy, goals, identification methods, time of year when schools consider children for programming, and services offered at various grade levels.

If your school already has a program in place, you can contact the gifted education coordinator, curriculum coordinator, gifted education teacher, or other parents for more information. In addition, your state gifted association should also know the state's philosophy, guidelines, and goals for gifted education; visit www.nagc.org for links to many state organizations.

What kinds of program options exist in school? Although it's unlikely that your district will have all of the program options listed below, it's helpful to have some general knowledge about what schools have offered to gifted students. Some examples include:

- *pullout program*: special sessions for advanced students who are pulled out of their regular classroom
- *grade-skipping*: admission to higher grade for all or some subjects
- *gifted class*: self-contained gifted education class
- *resource room*: a separate room or area in the school that offers a range of supplementary materials for study and research including books, videos, audio tapes, prints, and project materials, or where a gifted education teacher meets regularly with students.
- *differentiation*: classroom strategy for individualizing instruction to meet the needs of all students, including high-ability children
- *ability grouping*: students grouped together according to ability and skill level
- *cluster grouping*: gifted students clustered together within a regular classroom for more challenging instruction
- *learning contract*: written agreement between

teacher and student that stipulates learning goals, timeline, and rules of behavior for independent projects

- *magnet school*: a special school within a district, designed for a specific population (e.g., gifted) and/or one that offers a special program of study in certain subjects or talent areas (e.g., math and science, the performing arts). Magnet schools often require candidates to go through an application process.

Communicating With the Teacher

Always begin with the teacher. I can't stress this enough. A mother once called me because she had inadvertently offended her child's teacher. In talking to the principal about gifted education, she had discussed her child's problems in the classroom. He, in turn, talked to the teacher who promptly chastised this mother when she tried to pursue the matter further. While relationships can always be patched up later, it's best to avoid even the appearance of going behind a teacher's back.

Knowing a little bit about the teacher's attitude toward gifted education also helps. In open-houses and private conversations, you can gain some insight into curriculum, teaching styles and philosophy that will help you later on. Many parents I talk to already have a feel for the best approach to their children's teacher before they go to their first meeting.

Plan in advance what you're going to say. Many parents find it intimidating to meet with their child's teacher. For this reason, it's a good idea to think in advance about what you plan to say.

Write down your own observations or thoughts on your child's abilities, avoid using the term "gifted education" for awhile. Rather than tell the teacher that you are seeking special services for your "gifted child," you might consider simply stating your dilemma without any mention of giftedness. A father from an urban school described his strategy:

"My son Harry was just floating through school. Everything came so easily to him that he never brought any homework home, and he's a seventh grader! Finally I went in and talked to his teacher and just told her that I was concerned about the fact that he never had to work at anything and wasn't this a bad message to give a youngster? The whole conversation was about giving Harry some challenge. She said she'd talk to the principal about maybe arranging for Harry to attend high school in his best subjects -- math and language arts."

This parent accomplished more than would have been possible in a debate with the teacher about whether or not his son was "gifted," whether or not the school should offer programming for gifted students. Keep the discussion focused on the specifics of your child's characteristics and needs rather than on some hypothetical or philosophical debate about gifted education. Examples of tangible goals might include: "My goal for this first meeting is to gain permission for my child to spend more time in the science lab." Or: "My objective is to arrange for my child to be evaluated by the school psychologist." Without goals like these, even positive discussions about your child will not necessarily bring tangible change.

Be diplomatic, but firm. The value of planning ahead is that you have a better chance of finding a balanced and fair approach to the teacher. Your aim should be to avoid communicating in a way that makes the teacher feel criticized or misunderstood. Teachers face extraordinary demands on their time and seldom appreciate it when parents tell them they're not doing enough.

At the same time, your child has legitimate needs that the school address and it's your job as a parent advocate to take action when this isn't happening. There's a way of doing this without negating what the teacher is already doing in the classroom. Here are some useful pointers for getting the most out of your teacher conference:

- Expect the teacher to be reasonable and understanding, no matter what you've heard from other parents or your child. Even unsympathetic teachers respond better to parents who approach them positively than to those who seem already on the defensive.
- Start out by thanking the teacher for giving you this time. Express in your tone and manner that you are a reasonable parent who recognizes the daily demands on a teacher and that you appreciate this opportunity to confer with him.
- Get straight to the point. State the reason why you felt it necessary to meet with the teacher and say it in a diplomatic way. For example, instead of saying, "My son is really bored in your math class" try this: "My son already knows this material in math and since he really loves this subject, I wondered if we could discuss other options for him in math."
- Listen carefully to what the teacher says. His objections to certain requests aren't necessarily rejections. Keep pressing for other options. If he says, for example, "I have no time to create a separate set of activities for your child," offer to work as a partner. If he argues that your child has been inattentive, sloppy in her work, or misbehaving, don't automatically interpret this as a criticism. Say something like, "I'm sorry if she's not been following rules and I'm happy to work with her on that. But could you also allow her to spend more time doing some independent projects when she's finished her work?"
- Work for a consensus. Since your goal is to find a solution for your child, try to find some common ground. Be flexible in areas where you can be flexible, but firm on the points that really matter. If your child is working at a third of his capacity, it is unjust for him to sit in his seat day

after day learning almost nothing. But you might be able to be flexible in negotiations how changes are made. For example, the teacher may not be able or willing to offer an alternative curriculum, but may be able to talk to the principal and other teachers about letting your child attend a higher grade in some subjects.

- Before you leave, make sure all your questions have been answered and that you both know what has been

resolved. Repeat back to the teacher what you heard and what you understand has been agreed upon.

- Have a timeline for any follow-up steps. Without some agreement about when certain things will happen, chances are, they won't happen. If the teacher says she'll talk an issue over with a principal, a curriculum coordinator, or anyone else, ask for a time when this will be done. You should also provide deadlines for your promises as well.

- Thank the teacher for giving you her time and say that you will stay in touch.

A number of parents have also expressed the feeling that their communications with the school were effective, only to realize later that no definite course of action was agreed upon. Other parents didn't realize how productive their meeting with their child's teacher went because they were put off by what they felt was a defensive attitude from the teacher or an initial negative reaction from their child.

Recently, a mother complained about the "touchiness" of her son's teacher, saying: "I tried to talk to her about Matt's need for more challenging content in science. She made me feel that everything I said was obvious and that somehow I was insulting her just by bringing it to her attention." I reminded this mother that she managed to get her son's teacher to talk to the science teacher in the next grade for accelerated work in this area and that the teacher promised to get back to her within the week with definite information. This more than many parents get in repeated meetings!

Here is a useful list of criteria for determining how well your conference went, from my book, *Stand Up for Your Gifted Child* (page 109).

- your child was the main focus, not the opinions or agenda of you or the teacher
- both you and the teacher listened to each other and considered each other's point of view.
- you negotiated for solutions that will meet your child's needs without disregarding the teacher's responsibilities or your knowledge of your child
- you came to an understanding even if you had different opinions
- you both agreed to work on a solution that will help your child and to continue working together
- you both made commitments and scheduled actions

Follow Up

Don't assume everything's fine after the conference. Even if it all turned out well, there's almost always a need for follow-up and further communication. Lack of communication at this critical point can make your progress uncertain. For example, the teacher may agree to test your child out of certain material he has already mastered. Be sure she does this. If there's a learning contract for your child that stipulates goals and outcomes, make sure you have a copy. Talk regularly with your child and the teacher to see how your child is doing. Be consistent in

supporting whatever learning option you, the teacher, and your child agree to pursue. Don't let the burden of the extra work fall entirely on the teacher. Show that you are willing to do your part and lighten the load in any way you can.

If your child has no gifted program in her school, you may have other goals to follow up on. For example, your child's teacher might agree to talk to the principal about having an inservice for teachers in the school to work with an expert in gifted education. Or, the teacher might agree to allow your child to attend a higher grade for certain subjects as was the case with Harry. Another possibility might be that your child's ability does not show up in standardized tests and as a result he has not been selected for the gifted program. Or, you may have a child who is bilingual and the tests used in the school are inappropriate for gifted students with limited proficiency in English. In a case like this, you may have an agreement with the teacher to review his portfolio, and recommendations from other people who have observed him closely in other settings, or schedule an evaluation with a professional psychologist outside the school.

For any of these scenarios, try to establish with the teacher the following:

- the specific actions each of you will take
- a timeline for agreements (e.g., by next Friday, the parent will bring to the teacher the results of an independent psychologist's assessment, plus the child's portfolio and referrals; in two weeks, the teacher will report to the parent what the principal and other teachers think about having your child attend a higher grade for certain subjects)
- the date when you will communicate next.

Establishing clear goals at the outset will help to keep the communication lines open and create workable partnerships with teachers and administrators.

Exploring Other Options

Conferences with the teacher don't always work, even when parents have prepared for the meetings and expressed themselves diplomatically. Some teachers oppose gifted education because they think it's elitist or because it will entail more work than they can afford to devote to such a small population. Others have had some negative experiences with a few parents who have made them feel that all parents of gifted children are demanding.

There are also legitimate reasons why a teacher might not be able to do more for your child. They include:

- a lack of funding for special programs and resources as well as little or no expertise on gifted education in the district
- the programs offered are not offered for your child's grade
- the school holds other priorities for its student population's immediate needs.

If this is the case, you will still need to create some kind of adjustment for your child. If the teacher proves unwilling to work with you, move up the ladder of the school administration. The next person to address may be the gifted coordinator, the curriculum director, the assistant principal, or the principal. If none of these prove receptive, then go to the superintendent.

Explore as many possibilities as you can think of that will help meet your child's immediate need. Can your child be placed in a higher grade for certain subjects where she has special abilities? Could she spend a morning or day at home once a week to work on projects that interest her? If the teacher is unwilling to provide more advanced content, could something be worked out

where the child is paired with a mentor who would work with her after she had completed or tested out of subject matter she already knows?

Find out if there are any parent groups in your area. Contact your state gifted association for this information. Start talking to other parents and find out if others feel as you do. Parent groups can provide valuable information about local schools and their response to gifted students as well as moral support for you and your family.

Look into gifted programs outside the school. These may be sponsored by a local university or institute. State gifted associations often have information on programs and other services for high-ability children.

In addition to whatever other support services you can find, try to supplement your child's education at home. Spend time with him exploring subjects he loves; seek out materials that will challenge his imagination and critical thinking. Consider locating a mentor for your child in an area of her particular interest at universities, visual and performing arts studios, and personal contacts. Think of new and different ways you can enrich your child's life. Here are two examples from parents whose children do not attend gifted programs in their schools.

- A mother who is an architect decided to teach her son some preliminary lessons in architectural design. "His questions and eagerness to learn made think about what I was doing in a different way," she said later. "I never realized how much fun it could be to share my passion for architecture with my son. And it obviously gave him the challenge he lacks in school -- plus a chance to use his abilities in art and mathematics, two of his favorite subjects."

- The parents of an eleven-year old girl with an exceptional ability in computer science found an opportunity for their daughter to work with a local environment organization on setting up their web pages. The organization was impressed with her skill and talent, and, in return for her service, allowed her to take free classes at the nature (ecology was another of her favorite subjects).

Some Final Thoughts

If I could give parents only piece of advice, it would be this: never underestimate your power. Determined parents have made gifted education what it is today. You can bring substantive changes to your children's education, even if they seem like small, incremental ones at first. Also, the process of advocating for your children will teach them the value of determination and creative problem solving -- skills all children need to negotiate the obstacles to their continued progress and achievement.

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