



# Advocacy: How can parents tailor the best fit for gifted students' education?

**Michele Juratowitch**

Clearing Skies

An Australian Mensa Initiative

**2017 Australian Mensa Inc.**

**[mensa.org.au](http://mensa.org.au)**

*Australian Mensa provides this information which may be of interest to members or the public.  
The opinions expressed in this document are solely those of the author and not of Australian Mensa.*

Shopping for clothes usually involves deciding what is needed: identifying an appropriate store, finding the desired item and size among the range of options provided, determining the suitability and fit of the item, and arranging any alterations or adjustments to ensure the best fit. Over time, as the individual changes, further adjustments might be required to maintain a good fit. In some cases, the standard options offered may not be suitable to meet exceptional even unique, needs, and bespoke tailoring may be required.

Identifying and adjusting an item of clothing is not nearly as significant as identifying an appropriate educational 'fit' for a gifted student. However, there are some common processes that might be considered when trying to create a learning environment to suit the needs of a gifted student. Before selecting a school, parents should carefully consider their child's specific needs and determine the school where available provisions are the most appropriate to address *this* child's needs. Some adjustments may be needed to 'tailor' existing provisions in order to provide a better 'fit'. When it is not possible to develop, in consultation with teachers and school administrators, a good educational fit for the child, and the child's needs are beyond the scope of current, regular school provisions, then an individualised design may have to be created to meet their intellectual, academic and psychosocial needs. Parents and teachers of exceptional students may have to move beyond what is generally available, to creatively design 'bespoke tailored' provisions to more appropriately meet the individual student's needs.

## Determining your child's needs

Whether starting formal education or transitioning to a new school environment, it is

essential that parents gather information about their child that is relevant to their education and be prepared to share this with the child's school. Not all children need to be formally assessed. Parents may already know (or can check) if their child's developmental milestones are advanced. In order for a child to become a member of Mensa, a formal assessment report providing data about the child's advanced intellectual abilities must be provided. Many parents reading this will already have a psychometric report available.

There is a pervasive idea that all parents think their child is gifted. However, this is not correct. Many parents of gifted children initially normalise their child's precocious development. An infant may exhibit behaviours that are consistent with significantly advanced development or giftedness. Here are some examples: an unusual level of alertness, heightened awareness and perception, greater curiosity, an extended concentration span, advanced speech and play patterns, and exhibiting behaviours consistent with significantly advanced development or giftedness. Parents are encouraged to locate a list of the expected ages at which most children will reach various developmental milestones. Add to this list the ages at which your child reached these milestones. Attainment of developmental milestones at ages approximately one-third ahead of expected norms is an indication of advanced development, at least in a specific area. High-ability children tend to be asynchronous or uneven in their development, so advanced milestones may not be evident in all areas of development. A child may be well ahead of other children of a similar age in some areas, while developing as expected or exhibiting delays in other areas. It is the degree of difference from the norm that is important.

Parents might consider completing Saylor's checklist, *Things my young child has done*, recording relevant examples, based on observations of their child. If the child is demonstrating signs of advanced development, parents could begin to gather evidence of this, e.g. video the child reading aloud and show the book the child is currently reading if she is an early, self-taught reader, and take a photo of the child building a construction to show creative abilities and fine motor dexterity. Select just a few key items to provide evidence of advanced development. These might be shared at an enrolment interview and/or with the child's first teacher.

If parents are still deciding whether to arrange a formal assessment for their child, there are a few issues to consider. It is important that any assessment is undertaken by a psychologist who is knowledgeable about and experienced in assessing high-ability children, using standardised test instruments that are recognised and accepted by most schools.

A psychometric assessment is generally best undertaken after the child reaches the age of six. However, sometimes a formal assessment may be required earlier, especially if the child's suitability for early entry to school is being investigated. For the psychometric report to be an effective advocacy tool, it is critical that evidence of the child's intellectual abilities be accompanied by evidence of the child's current achievement levels. One without the other does not provide a school with sufficient information to determine adequate academic provisions for the child.

For older students transitioning to another school, it is important for parents to provide the school with relevant information, including reports provided by different professionals,

recent school reports and other data (e.g. ICAS results), which are useful indicators of the child's abilities and level of achievement. Assembling a slender portfolio (school personnel will not have time to read a large file of material) of key, current information can be extremely useful. Indicators of the student's abilities in a specific field of talent (e.g. Maths Olympiad participation, a CD of musical performance, and significant sporting results) can be extremely useful, especially if applying for a talent development program or scholarship.

There may be factors beyond intellectual, academic and talent development needs, which may need to be considered when selecting the best school setting for a child or adolescent. Examples of these factors include characteristics, temperament, personality, anxiety, perfectionism, mood, underachievement and behaviour.

## Selecting a school for your child

Although it is one of the most important tasks that parents will do on behalf of their child, identifying a school that is a good 'fit' for a gifted child is inherently difficult. Parents might start by considering a few basic questions:

- Is there a preference for a state, independent or religious school?
- Are there restrictions associated with location, transport, accessibility and/or financial factors?
- Is there a strong belief that a co-educational or single-sex setting would be best for this student?
- Are there factors associated with family traditions and practices that should be considered?

Determine if any of these issues are considered 'deal-breakers' or if there is a preference that could be offset by other factors, e.g. moving to another area or finding out whether a scholarship is available. Answering these questions should narrow the number of options, providing a short-list of schools to be considered.

Now it is time to carefully consider what various schools provide and how these options fit with your child's needs, as already identified. Begin to gather information about these schools from websites, brochures and enrolment registrars, attend education expos, school open days, and public events held at these schools. Use personal networks to identify parents whose children attend these schools and ask them about their experience of the school, bearing in mind that their child may have quite different educational needs. Develop a series of questions that you want to ask the enrolment registrar, principal, curriculum co-ordinator or gifted education specialist, if available.

Critical questions to explore might include:

- Have all teachers undertaken professional development regarding the educational needs of gifted students?
- Have any key staff (administrators, gifted education specialists, learning support teachers) undertaken postgraduate studies in gifted education?
- What provisions are regularly used to address the needs of high-ability students in specific subject areas?
- What interventions would be considered for identified gifted students?
- At what stage of the child's education can these options be accessed?
- What pathways are available to ensure

gifted students are sufficiently challenged throughout their school years?

- What provisions are there to nurture a student's emerging talents within your child's areas of strength and/or support a disability, if this is relevant.

A school that offers a 'gifted program', based only upon occasional withdrawal groups, accessible by students once they reach a certain year-level, a structured short-term activity or competition that is suitable for and accessible by all students, does not sufficiently understand, nor currently provide for, gifted students. Most teachers have received no training in gifted education as part of their pre-service tertiary education. It is important for parents of gifted students to identify if a broad understanding of the intellectual, academic, social and emotional characteristics of gifted children exists within the school and if it has processes in place to identify and address the range of needs of its high-ability students. Ask questions about education practices, including curriculum differentiation and compaction, pre-testing, off-level testing, subject- and year-level acceleration for gifted students.

These practices may not yet be in place at the school and it might not be possible to identify a school that you believe will be the 'perfect fit' for your child. However, responses to these questions should give an indication as to whether administrators and teachers are open to considering ways to facilitate the learning of gifted students. Determining whether this is a school where key personnel are flexible, open to learning about your child, prepared to incorporate external professionals' recommendations and are willing to work collaboratively with parents, are key considerations in selecting a school for your child,

whether for entry to school level or for a later school transition.

## Advocating for your gifted child's needs

The school selected may not provide for your gifted student's needs, especially as these may change over time, so there is likely to be an occasion when parents are required to act as an advocate. The term 'advocate' originally referred to a lawyer who pleaded a case in court. However, it has come to mean someone who speaks out to promote a cause or effect a course of action.

A parent with a balanced understanding of their child, who is well informed about research, interventions and resources that might be utilised to address gifted students' needs, can be a strong advocate for their child. Parents, who establish a positive, supportive role as a volunteer, in any capacity, enhance their reputation within the school. Parental involvement helps to establish networks, provides an opportunity to learn more about what is happening and possibly influence decision-making within the school.

Gathering information (formally and informally) is the first step to effective advocacy. Talk with the student to gain an understanding of their perception of what is occurring at school. Understand that one's perception is one's reality. However, there are likely to be other perspectives about what is happening. It is important for the parent advocate to garner information from everyone involved to try to form a balanced view of the situation, while recognising that it is a parent's role to advocate for their child if there are concerns. Parents usually have no hesitation in advocating for a child who has a medical condition or disability

but may feel uncomfortable about advocating for a gifted child. Parents need to manage any discomfort that might arise from being perceived as a 'pushy parent'.

Gifted children may be as far from the norm as a child with a disability. Some students are twice-exceptional, having a disability in conjunction with being gifted. These students are no less, nor more, deserving of interventions that are appropriate to meet their educational and psychosocial needs and an individualised learning plan may be required to document these provisions.

Deciding upon a clear strategy at the outset is critical. Research relevant policies, examine the school's motto, and find statements on the website or in school newsletters that relate to your goals. It can be effective to consider how these might be referenced in support of what you hope to achieve. Schools are hierarchical organisations so it is best to start by communicating with the child's main teacher. Ask for a meeting at a time that is convenient for the teacher rather than trying to 'catch' the teacher for a quick chat as class is about to begin. Carefully prepare for the meeting.

Update formal assessments if there have been subsequent significant changes. Teachers have limited time so provide a one- or two-page summary of key assessment data and associated recommendations with a statement that full reports are available on the student's school file. Think about the most effective ways to convey the one or two concerns you have identified. Dress as you would if you were attending a meeting to consult with any other professional. Approach the meeting in a positive manner, assume positive intent, and try to develop a collaborative relationship and find common ground. Acknowledge positive experiences your

child has had with this teacher, provide specific examples and relay comments the student has made.

If you believe that your child requires further academic challenge, rather than using contentious statements such as “She’s bored”, it can be useful to express an opinion that your child learns quickly and seems to need fewer repetitions than most other students. Be aware that the student may not be demonstrating heightened abilities in class as they focus on gaining peer acceptance, so the teacher may not be fully aware of the child’s capabilities. Provide evidence of the student’s abilities and explain that you want (as you assume the teacher does) your child to learn to expend effort in school. Suggest that for this to occur, work that is different, harder, more advanced and with greater challenges, is required.

Goals might not only be associated with academic challenge, nor achieved immediately. By listening to a teacher’s perspective about your child’s learning and trying to establish a collaborative approach, further open communication is more likely to occur. Whatever occurs within the meeting, follow up with a thankyou note or email, expressing appreciation for the time and opportunity to discuss your child. If there have been undertakings by any participants (including you), these points should be summarised with a request for clarification to avert possible misunderstandings. If, after repeated attempts to discuss your concerns, there has been no resolution, it might be useful to progress to a different level in the school hierarchy, continuing higher and beyond the school level, if necessary. Advocacy can be a lengthy process, which requires patience and persistence. It is important to document all meetings, take notes, send emails with thanks

and summaries, follow-up on any undertakings and maintain a file of all communication in case this needs to be checked or referenced at any time.

Parents can be powerful advocates for their child but are most effective when they are supported by others who also advocate for gifted students, whether professional advocates, parents and teachers within the school, and through associations or informal networks. Gifted students need to trust their parents to advocate on their behalf to maximise their learning opportunities. Achieving this goal could be a parent’s greatest gift, apart from their love, that they could ever give their child.

*Michele Juratowitch is Director of Clearing Skies, a practice established to provide a range of programs and services, including counselling for gifted youth and their families, advocacy in schools, seminars for students, teachers, and parents. She has qualifications in counselling and gifted education, worked for more than twenty years in schools and was awarded a Churchill Fellowship to study the counselling and intervention needs of gifted children. She is co-author of “Releasing the Brakes for High Ability Learners”, a report about Australian acceleration practices and “Make a Twist: Curriculum differentiation for gifted students”.*

*Mensa is a not-for-profit society whose members qualify by having an IQ in the top 2% of the population. Mensa’s goals include identifying and fostering human intelligence for the benefit of humanity, and encouraging research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence. The Australian Mensa Information Initiative draws on experts to answer ‘frequently asked questions’ in an accessible way. For more information, visit: [mensa.org.au/giftedchildren](https://mensa.org.au/giftedchildren).*