

Seven tips for supporting high performers at school

Nicola Slawson, Tuesday 8 August 2017, *The Guardian* – Teacher Network

From using games and activities to developing growth mindsets, experts [share their advice](#) on what parents and teachers can do to cultivate excellence

Is giftedness a case of nature or nurture? Opinion is divided. While one school of thought says that some children [have an innate ability to achieve higher](#) than their peers, others will argue that [most people can reach standards of performance](#) associated with being gifted and talented.

In [our recent Q&A](#), experts discussed the latest thinking on how people become high performers and what teachers and parents can do to help young people excel in their chosen areas. Here's a summary of their thoughts:

1. Ask students what they like

For a start, I think we could ask students what they like. It's much easier to do better at something if you are motivated to do so, so we should encourage children to do better in subjects they're good at. I think one of the main ideas around high ability education is getting people to achieve highly in areas where they already show competency. *Colm O'Reilly, director, [Centre for Talented Youth Ireland](#), Dublin City University*

If people don't enjoy a subject, I think schools have a responsibility to raise their attainment, but to not force them to excel. Schools can do many different things to raise attainment, such as whole-school approaches to behaviour or effective pedagogy, or individual interventions such as mentoring and apps. Encouraging learners who are assessed as having high potential to explore the subjects they really love is the way to go. *Simon Coyle, co-founder, [The Brilliant Club](#)*

2. Work out what is holding them back

Young people can be held back by not seeing the value of the gifts they have. As parents and teachers, we have to encourage them to see the potential in their talent, where it can lead them, and the opportunities it offers them. *Colm O'Reilly*

Gifted children are not good at everything. [Our assessments] show what can hold the child back: sensory issues, social and emotional issues such as perfectionism, and lack of resilience. Even the simplest thing can throw a child off course. Some children with high ability also have special needs or a disability. These children can have low self-esteem and underachieve because their needs are not recognised. *Denise Yates, chief executive, Potential Plus UK*

3. Understand how students learn

I don't hold with the view that all children can or should be taught in the same way. I used to support numeracy and literacy programmes for adults and it was about finding that lightbulb moment when someone says: "Now I get it!" That is what good teaching does. There are too many children, including high learning potential children, who are "square pegs in round holes". *Denise Yates*

4. Incorporate games and other activities

Games can have an enormous impact on high performance – think of the strategy needed for Monopoly, for example. Strategic thinking is essential for high performance, too. *Wendy Berliner, joint chief executive, Education Media Centre*

Using games and activities are such a powerful tool for high ability students. Learning strategy and technique is useful for bright children to apply in other areas of their lives, and activities such as the Model United Nations is a great way to teach current affairs and international relations. *Colm O'Reilly*

5. Get parents involved

Some children can be held back by parents who don't understand their importance as the child's first and longest-serving teacher. Parents need to have high expectations of their children if they are to do well – not unrealistic, just high. Research shows it makes the difference. *Wendy Berliner*

6. Be open about developing growth mindsets

The growth mindset has proved really helpful in some schools. The term, coined by Carol Dweck, demonstrates the difference between a fixed mindset – thinking that you have a set level of ability that will determine your academic outcome – and a flexible mindset, where you can grow your intelligence. It's true that you have to be overt in doing this. Many schools now talk to students about the fact that they can grow their intelligence, but it's sometimes a bit hollow because they don't talk about how they can do this. *Deborah Eyre, academic researcher and founder of [High Performance Learning](#)*

7. Talk about the future

I think it helps to show a child what their potential future holds if they can develop their talents, and show that this future is something that is fulfilling but also tangible. *Colm O'Reilly*

It's also helpful for students to see the link between a potential future and what they need to start doing to make it possible. *Deborah Eyre*