

So, your child is a genius? Then you really need to do your homework

Parenting a gifted child is a blessing, but comes with a unique set of challenges, as these parents of highly intelligent children explain

By [Tom Ough](#) 15 May 2021 – The Telegraph

How can you tell if your child – yes, that child there, contentedly ramming fistfuls of mud into his mouth – is gifted? The answer, says Ellen Winner, the author of *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*, is “completely obvious”.

Gifted children, she says, “are precocious; way ahead of their peers” and have what she terms “a rage to master”. As Winner, a professor of psychology at Boston College, puts it: “You can’t tear them away from what they want to do in their area of gifts. They are constantly doing it and exploring it and getting better.”

And if that description matches your child, how do you bring them up? The greater a child’s intellectual potential, the higher the stakes. It is a tough job, parenting a gifted child: it is hard to stimulate a rapacious young mind, especially when its intelligence is beginning to outstrip your own.

For every Mozart – composing by the age of four – there must be many more such prodigies lost to history, whether they grew tired of their hobby, were not sufficiently supported by their parents, or were simply less interested in composing piano concertos than in playing the fiddle in the local tavern.

The most recent young Briton to be publicly hailed as a child genius is Monty Lord. The 15-year-old from Preston has earned two Guinness World Records for his feats of memory, was a published author by the age of seven, and, thanks to a thesis about the effect of bedtime technology on the circadian rhythm, was in March named the youngest ever fellow of the Royal Society of Arts.

In [an interview with The Telegraph](#) earlier this year, Monty’s father Fabian Lord explained that Monty “was always into science, pulling things apart and seeing how things work”. He said: “We just encouraged that. As a family we didn’t have the money to throw at stuff; we couldn’t afford to go on expensive trips.”

Both he and Monty credit his state school, St Joseph’s RC High School in Horwich, Lancashire, with nurturing his interests – and Fabian is certain that the state school environment has helped his son to thrive. “I sometimes ask him, if the money was there, would he go to private school, and he always says no,” Fabian said. “He much prefers state school. He finds it more practical.

“It seems to me,” he added, “that parents who privately educate their children assume it’s just the job of the teachers to educate their children. It’s not: it’s your job [as a parent] to continue to help your child develop.” It’s the children whose parents make sure they are doing their homework and who take an active interest in making sure that things tick along nicely, who will flourish, he said.

According to psychologist Joan Freeman, Monty has had “the opportunity to find out the basic information on which to build in the first place. And doubtless, he has had support as well.”

Professor Freeman, who for decades has written prolifically on the highest levels of human ability, says parents of a curious child – no matter whether the child is gifted or not – should help them indulge that curiosity, though they should be warned that youngsters’ focus might change. “You say, ‘Oh, this kid’s fantastic in geometry.’ And then it changes when they’re satisfied and then move on to something else.”

This can be frustrating for parents, but there are greater dangers to navigate when you are charged with the care of a gifted child. As Prof Winner points out: “If you have a child who is academically gifted, they are likely going to be very bored in school.”

Such children might, Freeman says, make “nuisances of themselves. They could become a class clown, for instance, or withdraw, or become the subject of bullying by other children.”

The dilemma, then, is whether to keep the child in the year group befitting their age – or to send them to a year group befitting their intellect. Boys in particular, according to Freeman, struggle socially when jumping year groups, not least because of the difficulty of being physically smaller than their peers. Both professors raise, as a third way of sorts, what in American education is termed a “pull-out program”, whereby gifted students are brought together for advanced maths classes, museum trips and the like, depending on where their talents and interests lie.

The value in these excursions lies to a great extent in the bringing together of children who might otherwise have little in common with their peers. “That’s probably the most important thing I could tell parents,” Winner says, “to find at least one other child who is like your child, preferably in the same domain, but if not, at least in other domains, so they don’t feel like such outliers.”

She tells the poignant story of an art prodigy she once studied. The boy invited children the same age to come and play with him, “and as soon as they got over, he asked them to pose for him. That was all he wanted them to do, so they lost interest in coming.”

Many parents have made the mistake of pushing their child too hard. Winner mentions Andre Agassi, the tennis player who, once retired, wrote that he had come to hate his sport “with a dark and secret passion” thanks in part to his overbearing father.

Freeman recalls the example of Ruth Lawrence, the maths prodigy whose father escorted her to lectures and tutorials at Oxford when she was 12. They rode together on a tandem, and Lawrence, now a mathematician at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, was said to have rarely mixed with children of her own age. “She was brought up like a prize chicken,” Freeman says.

The parents of Jennifer Pike, the violinist, seem to have managed to nurture her talent without pushing her too hard. “When she was two,” says her father, Jeremy, “she picked up one of those toy chime bars, like a mini glockenspiel, and she was able to pick out a recognisable tune even at that age. It wasn’t just bashing, it was really feeling something. At that point we thought, hmm, there’s something interesting going on.”

He and Jennifer’s mother, Teresa, began taking her to concerts. Jennifer began playing her father’s violin, inventing her own fingering and notation before she could read or write. In 2002 at the age of 12, she became the youngest ever winner of the BBC Young Musician of the Year award. Accolade after accolade has followed, most recently the Australian arts platform Limelight’s Chamber Recording of the Year award for a record of Elgar and Vaughan Williams sonatas that Jennifer recorded in lockdown.

“She was totally self-motivated,” says Jeremy, who was a composing prodigy as a child and knew talent when he saw it. Teresa remembers that Jennifer was “headstrong, and she would definitely do what she wanted to do. We went along with it.”

Jennifer, now 31, recalls attending an international violin competition in Boulogne and seeing other children made to practice by their parents – while hers took her to the beach. “That’s when I saw I was quite lucky,” she says, praising her parents for being “encouraging but not militant”.

But Pike says we should be careful of labelling children geniuses: “It can come with prejudices, preconceptions.” She recalls feeling that such labels diverted attention from the music she was making. While growing up, she wondered: “Are people actually listening to what I’m saying with my music, or are they just impressed because I’m of a certain age?”

A common conclusion is that children should be kept out of the public eye. Not necessarily, says Rahul Doshi, [who won Child Genius, the Channel 4 show](#), in 2017 at the age of 12. Doshi made regular radio appearances thereafter, “and it really boosted my confidence. Before I was a little bit more reserved and quiet, but doing Child Genius made me more confident as a person.”

He credits his parents, Minesh and Komal, with being his “guide and steer”, encouraging him to take opportunities that come his way. Minesh, who remembers Rahul picking up the ability to read almost as soon as he opened a book, recommends that fellow parents of talented children “enjoy the journey really, nurture the talent and joy. Enjoy your child and enjoy seeing them develop.”

Rahul, a student at Queen Elizabeth’s School, a grammar in Barnet, says learning should be “led by the child, whatever the child wants to do”.

This attitude is mirrored by Louise Parker, mother of Alex, who, according to Mensa, of which he is one of the youngest members, has an IQ of 149. It was Alex, 13, who

wanted to put himself forward for Mensa, and Alex who has chosen to spend umpteen hours learning about superconductors, particle accelerators and climate change.

“When you hear about children who went to university and got a degree at 16, it’s been quite a lonely experience,” says Louise, a property developer. “I think it is very important that the child is within their group, and moves on to the next stage when it is the right stage.”

Alex, sitting beside her, offers an alternative view. “Most physicists do their work very young,” he points out, and indeed he is taking physics GCSE three years early. But he thanks his mother for “being really helpful and supportive, taking me to museums and all that stuff.”

He has all kinds of ideas for how he would like to spend his adult life: working on asteroid mining, designing maglev trains, using superconductor technology to treat illnesses. This is Winner’s “rage to master” in action.

Six tips for raising a gifted child

1. Let them follow their interests. Engage them with books, gallery visits or whatever else helps stimulate their curiosity. “Role model it,” says Prof Winner. “Do it yourself. If you have an artistically gifted kid, make sure you get really good art materials and encourage the child to take them to museums.”
2. Be cautious about pushing them up a year, let alone sending them to university early, but enable them to mix with children similarly engaged with their area of interest.
3. “Pull-out” classes with other advanced children can help your child meet like minds. Or try using online parents’ groups to arrange playdates with like-minded children and to exchange advice.
4. Don’t push them too hard: that is a recipe for unhappiness. Let the child be a child. Winner points out that prodigies subjected to strict regimens can become disillusioned.
5. Be wary of putting a child in the public eye, whether that be spelling bees or performances. Prof Winner warns: “Kids then feel like they have to keep this up.”
6. Don’t label a child a genius. As Prof Winner observes, where a child labelled a genius displays advanced skill, an adult labeled a genius has driven forward an entire field. In most cases, when prodigious children grow up “they are not going to be celebrated anymore. And that’s fine.”

Three ways to help a non-gifted child reach their potential

1. Gifted children demonstrate to parents what their passions are, but typical children might need coaxing. Winner says: “Take your children to a museum and see what

they gravitate to. And then provide an enriched environment around those proclivities.”

2. Those proclivities could be for maths, music, biology (insects, nature, dinosaurs...) but while it is ideal for all children to develop a passion, says Winner, many do not.
3. Reading can offer excitement and enrichment to children of any intellectual ability. “Gifted children are often hungry readers,” says Winner. “Parents of typical children can read to them books somewhat above their age level. Kids do not have to be great readers to love listening to complex stories.”