

## Summary

Parents are often the first to recognise that their children are bright for their age when they learn quickly and sometimes surprise people with their advanced thinking. However, parents may not realise that other parts of their children's personality are connected to their abilities. There are some characteristics that are common amongst children with high learning potential, though not every child with high learning potential will have all of them. This advice sheet is aimed at parents of high learning potential children and gives more information about where the list comes from, its use and why these characteristics are present.

## Introduction

All children are different, but it has been shown that many children with high learning potential share common characteristics because of their advanced thinking ability. Below is a list of the most common characteristics of children with high learning potential that has been drawn up through research by Dr Linda Silverman. Different children with high learning potential will have a different mixture of these, but each should display a majority of them.

### Children with High Learning Potential:

- are able to learn quickly
- have a rich vocabulary
- have an excellent memory
- have a long attention span
- are early or avid readers
- persevere when interested
- have a wide range of interests
- are good at puzzles
- reason well (good thinkers)
- show ability with numbers
- show compassion
- are perfectionists
- are intense
- are morally sensitive
- have strong curiosity
- are emotionally sensitive (feelings hurt easily)
- have a high level of energy
- prefer older companions/adults
- have a quirky or grown-up sense of humour
- are concerned with justice and fairness
- tend to question authority
- have judgement mature for age at times
- are highly creative
- are keen observers
- have a vivid imagination

Potential Plus UK fully recognises that it can be difficult to parent children who display a number of the above characteristics. It can be daunting for parents to decide how to educate, parent, entertain and emotionally support children with high learning potential.

For further information on how to raise and support children with high learning potential, please take a look at our other advice sheets on a wide range of parenting and educational topics. If you are a member of Potential Plus UK, you may also wish to book a telephone consultation with an Education Consultant to discuss particular issues or concerns in greater depth.

## Research

The Characteristics of Giftedness Scale was originally developed in 1973 by Dr Linda Silverman after 10 years of teaching and counselling experience with children with high learning potential. The descriptors were selected to meet the following specific criteria:

- (a) representative of the majority of children tested;
- (b) applicable to a wide age range;
- (c) applicable to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds;
- (d) gender fair;
- (e) easily observed in the home environment;
- (f) brief and clearly worded for ease of interpretation by parents.

The number of characteristics has increased in various versions. An earlier version, called *The Silverman/Waters Checklist for Identifying Gifted Children*, consisting of 16 items, was copyrighted in 1984. Different versions have appeared in *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* (Silverman, 1993), in chapters, professional articles and newspaper articles.

In 1982, a detailed parent questionnaire was developed for research purposes, containing 60 directed questions and several open-ended questions. A number of studies followed on from this.

Karen Rogers, of the University of St. Thomas, conducted a study of 241 exceptionally gifted children (IQ scores 160+) tested at the Gifted Development Center between 1979 and 1995. The characteristics of giftedness endorsed by the parents were compiled as part of this study. The children ranged in age from 2.5 to 12.5 years. The sample consisted of 112 girls and 129 boys. Over 80% of the sample was reported to fit 20 of the 25 characteristics.

The following characteristics were endorsed by 90% of the parents of this group of exceptionally gifted children:

- Learns rapidly
- Extensive vocabulary
- Excellent memory
- Reasons well
- Strong curiosity
- Mature for age
- Good sense of humour
- Keen observation
- Compassion for others
- Vivid imagination
- Long attention span
- Ability with numbers
- Concern with justice, fairness
- Sensitivity
- Wide range of interests

The following characteristics were endorsed by 80% of the parents:

- Ability with puzzles
- High energy level
- Perfectionism
- Perseverance in interests

- Questions authority
- Avid reader
- Prefers older companions

### Explanations

**Learns Rapidly** – Children with high learning potential are able to learn rapidly and easily make connections, often jumping ahead of others. They often want to move on quickly and do not enjoy repetition.

**Extensive Vocabulary** – The majority of children with high learning potential begin talking early (before 12 months old) and progress quickly through the stages. They can use complex sentence structures and are naturally able to understand difficult words and use them in the correct context.

There is also a small percentage of HLP children who are late talkers. These children are able to follow complex conversations and respond accordingly (although non-verbally). These children actually have an excellent understanding of language; but are not verbally expressive until much later than their peers.

**Excellent Memory** – Many children with high learning potential have excellent memories. They are able to remember facts after being told only once or twice. They can remember the way to places they have been to only a few times. Some HLP children have very good detailed memories about things that happened when they were very young. They may not have such a good memory for instructions they are given as their minds can get distracted before they carry them out!

**Reasons Well** – Children with high learning potential are able to reason well in discussions and decision-making. Although their decisions and viewpoint may not always agree with those around them, there is often a logical thought process leading to them.

**Strong Curiosity (asking questions)** – As children with high learning potential have an inbuilt capacity to learn quickly and a good memory, they want to know as much as they can about many things. This means they ask many questions about things around them or related to one another.

**Mature for Age** – Their developed thinking skills and perception means that children with high learning potential often seem mature for their age. However, there are also times when HLP children appear to behave immaturely as well. This is very common and further advice on this topic can be found in the advice sheet PA514 Asynchronous Development.

**Good Sense of Humour** – Children with high learning potential often have a well-developed sense of humour for their age. They are able to see irony in things and sometimes have a quirky viewpoint. They may develop the use of sarcasm and witty banter far earlier than their peers and this can sometimes lead to difficulties with friendships. Although adults will be able to appreciate and understand a HLP child's highly developed sense of humour, other children might not get the joke at all.

**Keen Observation** – Children with high learning potential often pick up a lot of information from the world around them and their excellent memory means that much of this information is stored, leading to great observational ability and quick learning.

**Compassion for Others** – Many children with high learning potential have great compassion for other people and are very perceptive to other people's feelings. This can cause them to become upset at times when confronted with suffering.

**Vivid Imagination** – Whilst most young children are imaginative, many children with high learning potential have a vivid imagination, having pretend friends and creating characters for cuddly toys, although their imagination may be limited to a particular area of interest. They can invent complex, imaginative games that other children of the same age find difficult to follow.

**Long Attention Span** – Children with high learning potential are generally able to concentrate on areas of interest for long periods of time. They may have difficulty concentrating fully on something they find tedious and may look as if they are not paying attention (daydreaming or fidgeting); although if asked they can often repeat what is being said. Because their minds are working quickly they may seem to flit from one subject to another, although these may be logically connected in their thought process. As children with high learning potential tend to learn quickly, they do not need repetition and this can cause them to become frustrated when asked to do more of the same.

**Ability with Numbers** – Children with high learning potential often have ability with numbers well beyond their age group. They can find it easy to grasp the abstract ideas in mathematics and can relate knowledge to new situations. However, it should be noted that some HLP children are more interested in words and language or artistic pursuits than numbers and hence may not excel in mathematics.

**Concern with Justice and Fairness** – Children with high learning potential often appear to be overly concerned with justice and fairness. They understand the need for rules and they often hear the rule and adhere to it. They can get very upset when others are not sticking to the rules. This can sometimes become a problem during play times at school as other children may in fact enjoy breaking rules and pushing boundaries away from the restrictions of the classroom. HLP children may require pastoral support to understand that not everyone shares their diligent observance of rules and that sometimes during play, it is ok to bend the rules as long as nobody gets hurt (either emotionally and physically).

**Sensitivity** – Many children with high learning potential are emotionally sensitive, causing them to become angry through frustration, upset over 'silly' things or overly scared. Some HLP children are also sensitive to loud noises, have a heightened sense of smell, taste or touch which can cause them distress.

**Wide Range of Interests** – Many children with high learning potential are interested in a variety of subjects; they soak up information and their knowledge and understanding of the world is exceptional from an early age. They are often passionate about certain subjects and will learn about these deeply, some for a short period and others throughout life.

**Ability with Puzzles** – Children with high learning potential are normally very good at problem solving. This shows itself from a young age with the ability to complete jigsaw puzzles beyond those recommended for their age. Often they need less prompting than other children and are able to work independently on puzzles that interest them, be they word-based, number-based or logic-based.

**High Energy Level** – Many children with high learning potential have a high energy level from a very young age. This can impact upon sleep patterns from birth. As toddlers, these children can be difficult to handle and are constantly on the go. Children with high energy levels need a lot of physical exercise and may learn better outdoors or after exercise. Having high energy can mean that a child fidgets and finds it difficult to sit still, except when fully engaged in a task. This characteristic shows itself more when agitated or excited.

**Perfectionist** – Some children with high learning potential have a tendency towards perfectionism, and for some this can mean they have a fear of failure resulting in them not wanting to try new things if they think their performance may fall short of perfection. HLP children can be very self-critical or become emotional if things don't go well in their eyes (even if others feel they did what was expected of them).

**Passionate about Interests** – Whilst children with high learning potential may not always appear to be paying close attention, there are often very passionate in their chosen areas of interest. This can cause problems in school as they can become upset when an adult tries to get them to move on from their preferred tasks. This kind of intensity can be difficult for others to cope with but there are obvious advantages as they get older and are able to focus.

**Questions Authority** – Many children with high learning potential question authority and feel it is their right to do so because they may know better. Unfortunately, their manner can sometimes seem arrogant to figures of authority. For the child, respect is not gained merely by being an adult, it needs to be earned. Adults can earn respect by listening to the child and acting fairly. It may take time for a HLP child to respect an adult; but at the same time, it is important for parents to reinforce the importance of following instructions set out by teachers and other adults as a persistent failure to do so may well result in disciplinary measures.

**Avid Reader** – Many children with high learning potential learn to read easily (some very early) and enjoy different kinds of books to entertain them (imaginative fiction) and extend their learning (topic and non-fiction books). Many enjoy poetry because of the play with words and sounds and the different ways of making sense of the world. HLP children often progress very quickly from picture books and devour all kinds of reading material. Some HLP children learn to read easily but enjoy a more limited range of material, for example only reading non-fiction for learning about particular topics. Some may have a learning difficulty that prevents them from reading easily, such as dyslexia.

Prefers Older Companions – Many, but by no means all, children with high learning potential have difficulty finding friends within their age group. Many prefer the company of older children and adults to bounce their ideas off and play games with. When they are young, this is because they are thinking in more complex ways and are interested in different things to children of the same age.

Finally...

In fully understanding the characteristics of children with high learning potential (which can often come across as 'quirks' or 'oddities' to others), parents are in a far better position to support, educate and nurture their children. Potential Plus UK strives towards raising awareness of what makes children with high learning potential 'tick', so that parents/carers and educators are able to provide them with the right level of support as well as challenging and enriching experiences.

Further Information

Table with 2 columns: Reference/Source and Description. Row 1: PA103 Needs of Children with High Learning Potential. Row 2: www.gifteddevelopment.com/What\_is\_Gifted/characgt.htm. Row 3: A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children edited by James T. Webb.

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