

PROFILES OF HIGH LEARNING POTENTIAL CHILDREN

Summary

Children with high learning potential (HLP) do not all look the same. Some are confident and visible learners. Others may mask their abilities, struggle in school, or feel disconnected. Based on the research of Betts and Neihart (1988; revised 2010), this guide introduces six learner profiles to help families and professionals recognise how HLP children might show up in different settings. These profiles can help us understand what each child might need to thrive socially, emotionally, and cognitively.

Introduction

High learning potential is not always easy to spot. Children may excel in some areas while finding others overwhelming or frustrating. Sometimes their behaviours are misunderstood or mislabelled. Betts and Neihart developed six learner profiles to show how giftedness can look very different depending on a child's personality, their environment, their support network, and their strengths and needs.

These profiles are not static or fixed. A child might shift between them at different points in life, in different environments, or in response to changes in support. The aim is not to label, but to understand and respond in a way that respects each child's identity, affirms their differences, and supports them as they are.

The Successful

Often well-liked by adults, these children are high-achieving and comfortable in school systems. They tend to meet external expectations and are usually identified as gifted.

Strengths: Organised, reliable, motivated, socially skilled

Support Needs: May avoid risk, fear failure, or rely heavily on adult approval

How to Support:

- Encourage creativity and independent thinking
- Emphasise growth and learning over performance
- Offer safe opportunities to try, fail, and try again without judgement

The Creative

These learners are curious, energetic, and often question rules or routines. They may appear disorganised or outspoken and are sometimes misunderstood in traditional settings.

Strengths: Original thinking, imagination, enthusiasm

Support Needs: Need space for expression and flexibility in structure

How to Support:

- Validate their ideas, even when unconventional
- Use open-ended questions and tasks
- Avoid rigid behaviour systems that discourage divergence

The Dual / Multiple Exceptional (DME)

These children are both cognitively advanced and neurodivergent. They may experience sensory, communication, or learning differences, and their strengths and support needs often mask each other.

Strengths: Insightful, creative, highly focused in areas of interest

Support Needs: Often misunderstood; environments may not match their cognitive style or sensory needs

How to Support:

- Focus on strengths rather than deficits
- Co-create support plans that honour identity, autonomy, and wellbeing

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- Recognise asynchronous development and support both learning and regulation

The Underground

These children may hide or minimise their abilities to blend in socially. This profile is more commonly seen in older children or adolescents, particularly girls and children from minoritised groups.

Strengths: Emotionally aware, adaptable, empathetic

Support Needs: Need space to explore identity without pressure to perform

How to Support:

- Avoid pushing gifted labels or forcing visibility
- Provide a sense of belonging and peer connection
- Affirm their whole self, including their right to choose when and how to engage

The Unsupported or Marginalised Learner (formerly the At-Risk Learner)

These children may feel misunderstood, unsafe, or unmotivated in school. They may disengage, act out, or resist participation, often in response to repeated invalidation or unmet needs.

Strengths: Strong sense of justice, creative problem-solving, passionate interests

Support Needs: Environments that build trust, emotional safety, and agency

How to Support:

- Build consistent, respectful relationships before focusing on academic goals
- Offer interest-led learning and trauma-informed support
- Avoid punishments and instead offer compassionate co-regulation

The Autonomous

These children are self-motivated, confident in their learning style, and often work independently toward personal goals. They are often overlooked because they require little direct intervention.

Strengths: Independent, focused, reflective, goal-oriented

Support Needs: Risk of isolation or burnout; may not ask for help

How to Support:

- Provide access to advanced resources and like-minded peers
- Check in on emotional wellbeing and social connections
- Offer mentorship and celebrate progress, not just outcomes

Further Information

PA515 Supporting Successful Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support a successful profile high learning potential child.
PA516 Supporting Creative Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support a creative profile high learning potential child.
PA517 Supporting Dual or Multiple Exceptional Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support a DME profile high learning potential child.
PA518 Supporting Underground Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support an underground profile high learning potential child.
PA519 Supporting At-Risk Profile High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support an at-risk profile high learning potential child.

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PA520 Supporting Autonomous High Learning Potential Children	This advice sheet is aimed at parents and carers wanting to find out how to support an autonomous profile high learning potential child.
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/240729625_Profiles_of_the_Gifted_and_Talented	Betts, George & Neihart, Maureen. (1988). Profiles of the Gifted and Talented. Gifted Child Quarterly - GIFTED CHILD QUART. 32. 248-253. 10.1177/001698628803200202.
<i>Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted: 30 Essays on Giftedness, 30 Years of SENG</i> by SENG Authors	To celebrate its 30th anniversary, Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) offers a collection of 30 essays from leading experts in the gifted community.