

Summary

Asynchronous¹ development, whereby a learner appears to be 'wise beyond their years' but in many ways is still very immature, has been described as the **defining** characteristic of exceptionally high potential learners. This advice sheet explores the issues relating to asynchronous development in high potential learners and provides useful strategies and guidance to teachers on how to support learners who are developing asynchronously.

Introduction

Most children develop at a relatively even rate across all the key areas of development; physical, intellectual, emotional and social. However, the development of high potential learners, especially those who are exceptionally able, can be characterised as being asynchronous, literally 'out of sync'; and the higher the learner's intellectual ability, the greater the degree of asynchronous development. Essentially, cognitive (intellectual) development supersedes emotional, social and/or physical development considerably. Children experiencing such obvious and visible asynchronous development can find it difficult to cope in social and educational settings.

There are many ways in which teachers can support a child to firstly understand and accept their asynchronous development, and secondly to work on the areas of development in which they are noticeably lagging behind.

Examples of Asynchronous Development

The most common issue associated with asynchronous development is that physically high learning potential children may appear to be like any other child; however, their intellectual development is speeding ahead considerably faster. This can be a problem for parents and teachers as it is difficult to know how to parent and educate a child with such differing emotional, physical and intellectual needs.

When high learning potential children first start school, their teachers often have little information what their intellectual abilities are. Once their natural high intelligence is recognised, it is often apparent that there are also areas of development in which these children are lagging behind. This asynchronous development may be the cause of social and emotional problems and anxieties relating to fitting in and communicating with their age peers.

Teachers of high learning potential children often rightly observe that it is possible for high learning potential children to appear to be many different ages during the course of a single day! For example, the same child who makes a passionate and eloquent argument against caged animals may later throw themselves on the floor kicking and screaming if they lose at a playground game. Similarly, the child who has mastered the concept of prime numbers may be distraught at the fact that, whilst other children can skip with ease, they still cannot manage to coordinate their arms and legs. These are examples of emotional and physical development lagging distinctly behind intellectual ability.

Understanding and Supporting Asynchronous Development

It can be difficult for parents, teachers and other children to fully understand how to communicate and deal with a child whose development is significantly asynchronous. The higher the child's IQ, the greater the gap in areas of development. It is this anomaly that causes the most social and emotional problems for high learning potential children. These children are trying to fit into a world where at times they want to be treated as mature, intelligent, capable individuals, yet at the same time they remain small children or young people requiring the same amount of (in some cases more) nurturing, care, discipline, attention and affection.

High potential learners developing asynchronously often feel frustrated with their parents, teachers and classmates. This can lead to behavioural problems at home and at school. Their frustration of being misunderstood is further exacerbated by another high learning potential characteristic – a strong sense of justice. High potential learners can often feel that they are being unfairly treated by their parents, teachers and the children at school. It certainly can be a very difficult task to reason and communicate with a child who is developing asynchronously. These children, on the whole, are highly astute, eloquent and have fantastic memories which mean that they will remember every detail and fact during a disagreement. At the same time, this type of child is highly sensitive, is a deep thinker and can be very emotional.

It is advisable to consider all these facts when dealing with a high potential learner struggling to fit in and feeling misunderstood. These youngsters are still children and should be treated as such. Of course, they are highly intelligent and want to be treated with respect, but respecting the young person's opinion and doing whatever the young person wants or agreeing with everything they say are two different things.

It is important to acknowledge the high potential learner's feelings and opinions but to also follow through with consistent and fair responses and/or discipline if necessary. To differentiate between intellectual ability and obvious emotional, physical and disciplinary needs is crucial when educating such young people.

Friendships

It is vital that teachers recognise asynchrony in high potential learners. In doing this, teachers can better support the learner's social and emotional needs. When they are struggling, helping a high potential learner to form friendships is crucial to their well-being and general social and emotional development. A learner who is developing asynchronously benefits greatly from forming friendships with different kinds of children to meet their different needs and interests. As well as ensuring collaborative learning opportunities with similar ability peers within classes, teachers can organise clubs, networks or challenge events across classes, year groups and schools to provide high potential learners with opportunities to mix with like-minded peers.

Too Much, Too Soon

Children who are developing asynchronously can face the danger of being exposed to themes which they are not emotionally ready to process. This is particularly a concern for high learning potential children who are fluent readers, intensely curious and independent researchers.

Although these are all positive characteristics, it can mean that high learning potential children stumble across adult themes or language that they are too young to fully understand. Teachers need to be aware of the requirement to balance meaningful challenge with appropriate content, for example if the learner is on an accelerated reading scheme or is allowed time for extended study or projects.

Asynchronous Development and High Learning Potential Provision

A learner who is developing asynchronously is not fitting into expected norms. As such, these learners require an education that meets their academic needs as well as a school ethos that is sensitive to learners who may be lagging behind in social and emotional maturity.

High potential learners with obvious gaps in their cognitive, physical and emotional development sometimes struggle to fit into the classroom that is typically geared towards children whose general development is on par across all areas. Teachers can find it difficult to cope with a highly intelligent learner who lacks the maturity to follow instructions or does not want to cooperate with other learners. In planning for high learning potential provision it is important to differentiate between academic ability and emotional or physical maturity. High potential learners need to be intellectually challenged to fully benefit from their time at school. At the same time, they need consistent and fair discipline if their immaturity gets out of hand and is causing problems in the classroom or playground.

Further Information

S501 Social and Emotional Needs of High Potential Learners	Educating happy, well-rounded and successful learners is important for every teacher. As social and emotional issues can appear frequently among high potential learners, this advice sheet looks at the cause of these and offers some advice on dealing with them in the classroom. This advice sheet is aimed at lead teachers and class teachers so that they are aware of and can understand the particular social and emotional needs of high potential learners.
http://www.brighthub.com/education/special/articles/28354.aspx	Article on Asynchronous Development of High Learning Potential Children
<i>Gifted Young Children</i> by Louise Porter	A comprehensive guide to identifying and working with young children with advanced development. Contains information on Asynchronous Development.
<i>Living with Intensity</i> by Susan Daniels and Michael Piechowski	This resource describes overexcitabilities and strategies for dealing with children who are experiencing them. It also provides essential information about Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration.

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¹ The Columbus Group, 1991