

Expert Advice on Ways to Motivate and Stimulate Gifted Children

To motivate and stimulate the minds of our brightest youngsters is essential. We can partner, help them discover their inner passions, encourage them not to hide their abilities, listen and keep them engaged in their search for knowledge.

Due to the sensitive nature of gifted children, we need to be careful not to continuously criticize and judge them. They already critically judge themselves, so we need to help build them up, not tear them down.

Perfectionism is a common issue with gifted children, so we should not expect perfection and let them know that mistakes are steps in learning. We should not reward their intelligence, but we should reward their effort. We need to develop children's interests and avocations without trying to redirect them into what we think they should be when we know it's not a natural interest. We want to teach them to enjoy life and develop their minds with confidence and success. After all, these children have the potential to be our leaders of tomorrow. Isn't it our job to help them develop these abilities to their full potential?

DO	DO
<p>Do listen to their opinions and ask "why?"</p> <p>Conversing with a gifted child can be both a learning experience and a lot of fun for adults. These children are able to understand subtleties and nuances most students can't, and they enjoy being asked "why" they hold certain opinions. They may surprise adults with their unique take on life and inventive solutions to problems.</p>	<p>Do keep kids engaged in the search for knowledge</p> <p>If there is one phrase gifted children use that make teachers and parent cringe, it is, "I'm bored." In some classrooms, gifted students' boredom is real—a result of being shoehorned into a standard curriculum they mastered two years before.</p> <p>However, the bored excuse also can result from the fact that many gifted students have not yet mastered the skills they need to study, research, learn and move ahead independently in areas of interest. They can go further than many other students, but eventually they may hit a brick wall. They aren't so much bored as frustrated. Adults can effectively model learning strategies by working with these students as a partner, showing them how they can find information, create hypotheses, draw conclusions and develop other skills that will alleviate boredom, now and in the future.</p>
<p>Do take the time to discover a child's interests and dreams</p> <p>Watch and listen. What does the child talk about? What does he do? What books does she select? All of these are clues to the child's particular passions. What can you do to hook these passions and allow the child to blossom? Be creative. One mother whose child was interested in theater enlisted the help of her neighbor, who taught musical theater at a local college. This professor gave the child an all-access pass to rehearsals for a college production, so he could see firsthand how it all came together—from costuming to lighting and sound to acting and singing. It was a real eye-opener for him and sparked an interest in stage managing.</p>	<p>Do treat gifted students as partners in their own learning</p> <p>Be a guide rather than a lecturer. A gifted child's knowledge about a particular subject may quickly outstrip that of both parents and teachers. And by encouraging gifted students to go as far as they can in an area of passion, you gain their trust and respect.</p> <p>Of course, adults must remain in charge at home and at school. Gifted youngsters are still children and require discipline and correction when appropriate. But when adults partner with them, rather than trying to force them to learn the same things in the same way others do, these students require far less correction. By helping them find individual learning goals and working with their strengths, we gain their cooperation, and they are far less likely to act out in class or at home.</p>
<p>Do encourage kids to be proud of their abilities</p> <p>Gifted children want friends, too, and will often disguise their talents to fit in with a particular peer group. They don't want to feel different. But in fact, they are different, and adults need to help them feel proud of their strengths. They need to understand that school is not forever and that a quest for that elusive thing called "popularity" becomes less and less important the older they get. Popularity is fleeting. Talent is forever.</p> <p>Of course, it is best if they don't brag that they are smarter than anyone else. Parents and teachers can help them understand the difference between becoming modest about their abilities and boisterous arrogance.</p>	

DON'T

Do not go toe-to-toe with gifted children if you have a disagreement

If you do this, you will lose. Gifted children almost always find a way to get the last word. It is far better to discuss desired behavioral changes and to reward interim goals along the way. A power struggle is exhausting and counterproductive.

Do not try to redirect gifted students from their interests to yours

Just because three generations of the family were doctors does not mean your child is inclined that way. Introduce gifted children to as many ideas as you can and see where their natural inclinations lead them.

Do not reward intelligence; instead, reward effort

Their intelligence is simply part of their genetic endowment and deserves neither praise nor special attention. In fact, praising a child by telling him, "You are a genius," or telling her, "You are the best dancer in the school," can set a child up for tremendous performance anxiety. Praising for efforts they have made is far more effective because it acknowledges work and real achievement.

Do not expect kids to be perfect

Perfectionism is a common issue with gifted students, and it can lead to disaster when they misspell the last word in the spelling bee, take only third place in the state science fair or fall off the balance beam just as they are about to claim victory in an important gymnastics tournament. We need to help gifted kids understand that excellence is good, effort is good and working hard to master something is good—but perfection is an impossible standard.

Do not be negative, critical and judgmental

Gifted children can be very serious in their outlook. They often appear to be old souls in young bodies. Quite aware of all the problems of this world, they sometimes think they should solve them—by themselves.

Although adults want to encourage empathy, kindness and serving others by modeling those traits themselves, we also want children to be able to laugh, play and find joy in the everyday. The best way for us to encourage enjoyment is to demonstrate it ourselves. Play imaginative games at the park, playact scenarios they concoct (the farther out the better), write progressive stories or work toward a goal, such as a 5K run for charity. Do whatever brings laughter, fun, joy and lightness to their lives—and to ours.

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