

I look at my twins and wonder if differentiating will work at this young age. Yes, they're gifted. But there are a lot of traits that make them typical young kids. They scramble around in the yard creating elaborate games; they have to touch everything, get into every closed box and forbidden object they can. Frankly, I don't think the twins are concerned about the fact that things come easily to them. When they lose interest, it's mostly because the process isn't imaginative or active enough for them.

—Father of twin first graders.

When my child started school, I found that the school had an arrangement for students at different levels of literacy. My child and several others were put in a "cluster group" for advanced readers. At our school, differentiating is a way of making lessons more or less difficult, or allowing kids to work faster or slower. I guess what I wonder is: "How is this different from the old reading groups we had as kids?"

—Mother of Kindergartener.

# Differentiated Instruction for Young Gifted Children:

## How Parents Can Help

By Dr. Joan Franklin Smutny

Last year, we had a couple of college professors work with our elementary school on differentiating. We have a lot of bilingual and immigrant kids. I liked that they focused on the bilingual and cultural issue, and I felt that they helped a lot of teachers figure out ways to serve more students in this multicultural setting. But my child is bilingual and gifted, and I didn't feel they were tuned into the differences within our population.

—Mother of bilingual second grader.

I support the ideas of differentiated instruction, but what I find is that teachers often have to settle for a little here and a little there. It's a very demanding system and my son's teacher always looks a little harried. I would love to help her and I think I could be helpful. But how do I even begin? What steps could I take?

—Mother of second grader.

Parents of young gifted children voice common concerns about what is often presented to them as “differentiated instruction.” What benefits will my gifted child receive through this approach? How effective is it for young children generally? How responsive is it to differences between and within cultural groups? Does it provide for the creative as well as academic needs of my gifted child? What can I do at home or at school to support this approach?

During the primary years, children manifest a wider range of differences than older learners. As a general rule, the younger the age group, the more dramatic variations within the group and the more likely that the differences you see in school performance reflect deeper differences in developmental level. Add to this the influence of culture, special ability, and language, and you have a classroom where the range of knowledge and understanding in any given subject can span at least several years. The need for differentiated instruction in the primary grades is therefore very great.

Fundamentally, differentiating is about honoring the individuality of the child and letting that guide what he or she learns and how. Understanding the learners, therefore, becomes the foundation stone upon which every decision about the child’s education rests. Despite their inexperience in school, primary grade children bring worlds of knowledge, skill, experiences, traditions, impressions, tastes, values and ideas to the classroom. They have already learned more in the years before school than they are likely to learn again in a span of four or five years. Once they enter the classroom, questions immediately arise:

- What special abilities and skills do these children have?
- What life experiences and knowledge have they gained outside of school (this could include exposure to a wide range of areas—animals, farming, auto mechanics, architecture, storytelling, music, etc.)?
- What special interests do they have? To what materials and activities are they continually drawn?
- What are their learning styles? How do they best absorb new information? Apply concepts?
- What cultural heritage do they have? What languages do they speak?

You will find that primary classrooms today are colorful and vibrant learning places, especially compared to those of former years, when children sat crammed into rows of straight-backed chairs silently doing pencil and paper tasks. In those days, few primary schools concerned themselves with the needs of individual children, especially gifted children. But as the quotes at the beginning of this article illustrate, today you are more likely to find teachers who differentiate for young gifted children. The most commonly used strategies are: compacting, learning stations, tiered activities, and clustering. For readers who have not encountered these strategies in their child’s classroom, here are examples of what you might see:

**Compacting.** A girl comes to second grade already knowing most of the math for the first half of the year. Her teacher uses compacting to enable her to skip content she already knows and move on to more advanced work. This involves: (1) deciding what concepts, knowledge and skills in the unit are essential for all students to master; (2) determining, on the basis of some form of pre-assessment, what areas the child can skip; and (3) exploring with the child what alternative project she can do. This could be: a more accelerated and more complex version of the assignment; another assignment in the same subject but in the child’s area of interest; or an independent project on a topic of her choosing. The teacher usually creates a learning contract that specifies the project or task the child will do, the materials she will use, as well as the criteria, learning goals, and timeline for completing the assignment.

**Learning Stations.** A multicultural first grade class has children at all different levels of ability and skill. The teacher uses learning stations to accommodate these differences. Learning stations are designated areas of the classroom where students can work on different tasks within a unit. These areas are often sequential, with each one representing a higher level of complexity than the one before it. Students can move freely from one task to the next as they master the material (they are not identified and locked into any particular “level”).

**Tiered Activities.** A third-grade boy attends a class where tiered activities are the norm. Like learning stations, tiered assignments demand different levels of mastery and provide different degrees of complexity. The idea behind tiered activities is that all students—regardless of differences in ability, skill, and experience—can focus on the same learning goal if this goal is broad enough to accommodate them. For example, a language arts class might focus on having students understand what “point of view” is. At one table, the kids write descriptions of themselves as though they are a character in a popular fairytale and what they think about the other characters in the story. At another table, the kids take this step further and write an essay on how they, as this character, feel about the whole story. Whose story is it? Do they agree with it? At another location, kids choose a character and write a fractured fairytale based on this character’s point of view.

**Clustering.** Several students in a kindergarten class are significantly ahead of their classmates in reading and math. The teacher decides to cluster these students in order to give them more advanced content. After giving the class a new assignment, the teacher usually spends some time instructing the cluster group and then gives them assignments or projects related to what the rest of the class is doing, but on a level that demands a greater mastery of skills and concepts, a higher level of thinking and at times, creative reasoning or imagining. As a rule, gifted students don’t get enough time to work with other gifted students, and for this reason cluster groups are urgently needed in the primary grades. They significantly increase the quality of learning that happens when high-ability students pool their talents

and experiences. Sometimes two teachers in the same grade will combine their cluster groups and take turns working with them. A knowledgeable parent can also perform this role.

Differentiating focuses on three areas—the content (subject, concepts, information, skills); the process (hands-on activities, applications of learning in new situations); and products (the work your child does—writing, drawings, math problems, science experiments, etc.). The question that parents of young gifted children often raise is, “To what extent does differentiating go beyond adjusting the pace and level of difficulty in a lesson or unit?” Compacting, learning stations, tiered activities and clustering may ensure that children don’t repeat content they already know, but these options in practice don’t always address alternative learning styles or the need young gifted students have to do more creative work. To be carried out well, differentiation involves a variety of factors for the teacher to consider. Let’s consider several suggestions about ways you can contribute to making differentiation powerful and positive for your child.

### *Supporting Differentiated Instruction in the Home*

In many ways, differentiated instruction, especially for young children, begins in the home. Parents know their child more intimately than does anyone else. They’ve observed her strengths and weaknesses, her passions and interests and they understand what situations frustrate or stimulate her. Over the years, they’ve gained a wealth of knowledge and insight into how, when, and why their child learns best and into the situations or experiences that tend to induce confidence or disappointment, apprehension or determination, fear or exhilaration. For these reasons, they are in a unique position to respond in an immediate and spontaneous way to their child’s learning needs. Here are two examples:

My son is a naturalist. From his earliest years, he quickly picked up the names of different plants and animals that people would mention. When he started reading at age 4, we bought him some nature books. He would pore over these books. At one point, though, I realized that just rattling off the names of different species was mostly an exercise in memory. It didn’t really apply to anything or demand much thought. So, I took him off to the woods and fields one day and wondered out loud what this or that bird or plant was. We brought our field guides and debated the possibilities. He was thrilled! This has evolved into he and I taking a few naturalist workshops together and doing art and science projects.

—Mother of 2nd grader.

My daughter loves to read. Towards the end of the day, she skulks off to a corner and reads for a couple of hours before dinner. My wife and I had this idea one day of having a family book club. We both enjoy children’s books anyway and as my daughter reads pretty advanced stuff, we thought: why don’t we all read at least some of the same books and then have discussions? This has been wonderful for our family, but it’s helped my daughter the most. She used to struggle expressing herself out loud. Our discussions have gotten her to come out of herself more and think more deeply about what she’s reading.

—Father of third grader.

These parents are doing, in a natural way, what teachers do in a differentiated classroom — creating projects that inspire creative thinking and reasoning and providing resources that peak the child’s curiosity and stimulate a hunger to learn more. Experiences like this in the home are vital for a young child’s emerging sense of himself as a learner and instill, in their earliest years, an anticipation and excitement for discovery. In her book, *A Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson illustrated the importance of these early experiences best when she wrote (page 23):

When Roger has visited me in Maine and we have walked in these woods I have made no conscious effort to name plants or animals nor to explain to him, but have just expressed my own pleasure in what we see, calling his attention to this or that but only as I would share discoveries with an older person. Later I have been amazed at the way names stick in his mind, for when I show color slides of my woods plants it is Roger who can identify them. “Oh, that’s what Rachel likes—that’s bunchberry!” Or, “That’s Jumer (juniper) but you can’t eat those green berries—they are for the squirrels.” I am sure no amount of drill would have implanted the names so firmly as just going through the woods in the spirit of two friends on an expedition of exciting discovery.

Like Roger, young gifted children build on their knowledge by exploring their environment. They finger, touch, taste and shape whatever they can get their hands on. They carry a “sense of wonder” everywhere they go. The world bombards their eyes, ears, nose, and taste buds with multiple and complex sensations. The beauty of Canada geese flying south at dusk awes them; the pounding beat of the bass from a passing car radio shakes them to their bones; the gentle breeze that sends the fallen leaves into a half-hearted spin makes them want to leap into the air; the pelting rain against their skin feels like a whipping from the sky.

Young gifted children crave artistic and creative ways to express these keenly felt impressions. But as practiced in the schools, differentiated instruction does not always address the sensibility and artistry of the young gifted child. Yet, because of the focus

on observation, hearing, feeling, moving, touching, intuiting, and imagining, creativity and the arts should always be a cornerstone of differentiated instruction. As parents, you can foster this at home. You can use the arts not only to support your child's talents, but also to expand on the assignments or projects she does for school. The following descriptions provide some examples.

In a language arts class, Sheila and several other students in a cluster group worked on writing book reports of favorite fiction stories. Her father noticed how much Sheila enjoyed fiction and began collecting prints of paintings and photographs that she could use as story starters. Sometimes Sheila used a print as an environment for a story, or she would choose several prints at random and create a plot around them. (Visual Art)

Juliette enjoyed her class on geometric shapes. One day after school, she showed her mother what she was working on and her mother showed her some prints from the "Cubists" and asked if she would like to create a geometric painting. Juliette spent a week designing her geometric painting and learned a lot about how the different shapes related to each other. (Visual Art)

Joseph loved what he was learning about the rainforest. He talked about all the creatures that live there and asked his parents if he could go there one day. His father took the family to the aquarium where there was an exhibit of lizards from the South American rainforest. Later, Joseph sketched a portrait of one of the lizards and wrote a "Day in the Life" story about himself as the lizard. He particularly enjoyed describing how each of his eyes moved independently and how his tongue lashes out at insects. (Visual Art)

Kara was studying the solar system in her science class. After a trip to the planetarium, Kara and her friends began arguing about which way certain planets moved. Kara's mother suggested that they look at the material they got from the planetarium and recreate the solar system using their own bodies. The children became excited about performing the solar system for their class. For hours, she could hear the children discussing orbits, directions, and distances. (Dance)

Jimmy did very well in math, but could never go far with it when people just explained how it worked. He had to do it. His father understood this and so together they would often dramatize the word problems (acting out the people, actions, or events presented in the problem). Jimmy always figured out the solution right away and sometimes they would continue the problem like a story and create even more complicated problems. From these experiences, Jimmy began to see math as a kind of theater. (Drama)

Simon didn't like social studies and groaned when he had to do a report on Henry David Thoreau. His mother suggested that he assume the role of the author and naturalist, rather than just report on him. She got a video about Thoreau from the library and she helped him with costumes while he did some research on the man. They went to a nearby pond so that he could practice reading a few passages by Thoreau while dressed like him. Simon discovered that he had to do so much research to impersonate Thoreau that writing the report was easy. (Drama)

Laura had to create a visual display and some text describing where her family came from and how they came to the United States. As her mother and grandmother told her about how her people came from Canada, they asked Laura if she would like to create a dance/mime about their emigration. Her parents helped her select important events in the journey. They looked at old photographs and told stories. They found costumes and props and when she finally performed it, her mother videotaped it to share with other family members. (Dance)

Young gifted students with agile and hungry minds always need a rich and varied medium for learning within different disciplines. Creativity facilitates this. It enables them to discover that the shapes and patterns they see in math also occur in art, in movement, in architecture, and in countless phenomena in nature. Without this creative dimension, differentiating cannot accommodate their unique sensibilities and talents.

### *Support Differentiated Instruction in the Classroom*

Primary teachers may have limited time to acquaint themselves with each young child in a class that is diverse in ability, background, and learning style. Many of them know that parents are a rich and often untapped source of information and insight. There are many points in a unit or lesson when the feedback of parents could aid the teacher and child in significant ways. Parents can do this by sharing an example of the child's work before a new unit begins. Or, they

might be able to shed light on a misjudgment about their child's ability or learning style that will guide the teacher to other options. Some examples follow.

When I got this note from the first-grade teacher about Brandon's need for extra help in math, I laughed. Brandon was already multiplying and dividing! I went to the teacher and showed her the sheets of paper with his math scribbles. I said that my son loved math so much that he had learned how to multiply and divide from his older brother. From then on, she worked out a way to accelerate Brandon through first-grade math and then put him in a cluster of kids from first and second grade who worked with the third-grade teacher on more challenging and, to Brandon, much more interesting material.

—Mother of first grader.

I was nervous about asking the teacher to help my child at the beginning of the year. We are from South America and it just isn't our way to make demands on teachers. I told her that I caught my son doing the homework of a much older kid in our neighborhood—for money! I told her I was concerned because he acted like school was just nothing to take seriously. He didn't work that hard in class and probably didn't look like much of a student. Anyway, the teacher was kind to me and said that she would take what I said and look at him more closely. She had another student who was doing more difficult work in the class and she would have them partner each other.

—Father of second grader.

To gauge how your gifted child is doing in a differentiated classroom, discuss class activities and projects in different subjects. Let him explain the papers, projects, tests, and assignments he brings home. If he says he's bored or unhappy about something, try to discover why. Is it that he's not interested in the topic or skill, that he finds the activity predictable, difficult, or confusing, or that he has to repeat content he's already mastered? Avoid quick judgments based on one or two comments the child makes or on a paper or project he brings home. Try to find out as much as you can about your child's complaint before going to the teacher. Is the problem what the child says or could it be something else that he's not saying? For example, does he think his language arts class is boring because the content isn't challenging or is it because he has to do an oral report that he dreads? Is this complaint part of a pattern?

Many parents find that primary teachers are open to feedback and suggestions, provided they approach them diplomatically. Here is the story of a mother whose child was not thriving in an arrangement meant to help her:

Since differentiating rests on who your child is as a learner and

My daughter's second-grade teacher has a cluster group of gifted students and she had Marianna join them. After a couple of weeks, I sensed that something was wrong and Marianna finally admitted that she didn't feel comfortable in the group. When I pressed her for details, she said that the other kids were all friends with each other, but not her. I tried telling her that she was still a new kid in school, but she kept saying that she didn't like doing any of the things they had to do in the group. I finally met with the teacher and explained the problem. The teacher said that she would try grouping Marianna with some of her friends and give her more challenging assignments within that group. She knew Marianna was a voracious reader and loved challenge, but understood that, for now, she needed to feel like she fit in somewhere.

—Mother of Second grader.

what she brings to the learning table (strengths, habits, learning styles, interests), you as a parent are indispensable to ensuring that your child benefits from whatever strategies a teacher uses. As the school year progresses, you will get a better handle on how this system is working for your child and whether or not the teacher really understands her abilities and learning needs.

### *Getting Involved in the Classroom*

Some parents have had a significant impact by participating in the classroom itself. As districts continue to experience budget cuts, they are turning more than ever before to parent volunteers to help them provide enrichment and guide groups of children in different activities. Parents of young gifted children have helped instruct and support cluster groups, acted as aids at learning centers, and provided one-on-one support and guidance for children doing independent studies. Differentiated instruction is a daunting task for any teacher and it practically cries out for helpers. Because of this, classrooms today are more open than ever before to the contributions of parents, particularly if those parents understand how the system works and have specific skills or areas of expertise to share.

Here are several examples from parents:

I come from a family of journalists. I did some journalism in my twenties and then in the thirties went into business. But I had the chance to reignite my love for journalism by working with a group of gifted kids in my daughter's class who wanted to start a school newspaper. It's been an incredible experience. We study a variety of newspapers; we explore interview techniques, writing styles, photojournalism, and discuss what departments we want to include. We've worked out who should handle what. We have movie and book reviewers, reporters and features writers. All the kids in the class now want to get involved and write for the paper. It has become a catalyst for writing, discussing, and debating all sorts of issues.

—Father of third grader.

I've always loved art and I do a lot of art activities with my kids at home. One of the parents who volunteers at the school told my child's teacher about me and she asked if I'd like to share some of my techniques with the class. That was two years ago and now I'm doing these "sessions" in different grades. I meet with the teacher, we talk over how I can relate my session to specific topics and then I plan it to meet different needs. I love it because it encourages divergent thinking and the gifted children go wild over it. I also enjoy working with other gifted children besides my own. It's taught me a lot and given me a larger sense of the needs gifted kids face.

—Mother of first grader.

Participating in a classroom may not happen right away. Often, you need to build a relationship with the teacher first. It helps to present yourself as someone who understands the enormous responsibilities of a differentiated classroom, but as someone who is also committed to the ideal of giving children (including the gifted) the kind of education they need. As the teacher comes to know you as a supporter, learns what you can do and how you can help, opportunities will open up for you to become more involved in your child's classroom. And each time you assist with a cluster group or tutor a couple of students about to embark on a new project, you will be helping to make differentiation a system that really serves young gifted students.

### Recommended Readings

Belgrad, S. (1998). Creating the Most Enabling Environment for Young Gifted Children. In J.F. Smutny (Ed.), *The Young Gifted Child: Potential and Promise. (An Anthology)*. (pp. 369-379). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Over the first few months of the year, I had a number of conversations with my gifted son's teacher about his needs and how differentiated instruction could help. Recently, Clay told me that he was in a "cluster group." Because I've had a good relationship with my son's teacher, she's agreed to have me come in and help the group. Sometimes, under the teacher's guidance, I help them with their projects. Other times, I help come up with resources and activity ideas for the learning goals set by Clay's teacher.

—Mother of second grader.

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