How Smart Is My Child?

by

Deborah L. Ruf, Ph.D., 2006

Many parents wonder how their children compare to other children. They may have very good reasons to suspect their children are gifted (for example, their five-year-old is adding pupils and eyelashes to their drawings of people or their three-year-old can read an “Exit” sign), but they're not sure how to prove or disprove it. Proof about giftedness can be critical, because it helps parents to provide more opportunities for their kids’ increased growth, enjoyment, and success in areas of interest.

There are certain childhood behaviors — milestones — that can tell us when children are ahead of or behind others their age. Most of the charts on childhood development show the typical range of behaviors for each age group. If your child is ahead of those tables, that doesn’t necessarily mean he or she is on the fast track or slated to become the next Doogie Howser, M.D. Levels of Giftedness range from those who are simply bright to those who are intellectually astonishing.

Here’s an overview of the various levels of giftedness and milestones that are common—but not necessary—to each Level. Here, also, are the numbers at each Level of Giftedness that you are likely to find in an average elementary classroom of 28 children. It is the overall “feel” of where the child fits that tells you the Level.

1. Level One
   These children show interest in many things before they are even two years old - like colors, saying the numbers in order, and playing simple puzzles.
   Most of them are good talkers by age three, and by four, many print letters and numbers, recognize simple signs, their name, and know most of alphabet.
   By the time they are six years old, many read beginner books and type at the computer, and most read chapter books by age seven.
   It is not unusual to find six to eight Level One children in an average classroom, children who are nearly always a few steps ahead of what the teacher is teaching the whole class.

2. Level Two
   These bright children love looking at books and being read to, even turning pages without ripping them, by 15 months. Some shout out the name of familiar stores as you drive past.
   Many of these children know lots of letters by 18 months and colors by 20 months, and between ages three and four, they count small groups of objects, print some letters and numbers, and they very likely drive their parents crazy with all their questions.
They’ll sit for what seems like hours as you read advanced level books, especially fiction and fantasy, to them, but they require a bit less of your time by age six, because most of them read for pleasure and information on their own by then.

Level Two children can find only one or two others in their classroom who are as advanced as they are, which starts to make it hard to find good friends.

3. Level Three

They’re born wide-eyed and alert, looking around the room, reacting to noises, voices, faces.

They know what adults are telling or asking them by six months. You say a toy, pet, or another person, and they will look for it.

Everything Level Two children do by 15 months, these kids do by 10 to 12 months, and they can get family members to do what they want before they are actually talking.

By two years, many like 35+ piece puzzles, memorize favorite books, and know the entire alphabet – in or out of order!

By three years old, they talk constantly, and skip count, count backwards, and do simple adding and subtracting because they like to. They love to print letters and numbers, too.

They ask you to start easy readers before five years, and many figure out how to multiply. Divide, and do some fractions by six years.

Most of these children are a full two to five years beyond grade level by age six and find school too slow.

There are one or two Level Three children in every 100 in the average school. They are rarely in the same elementary class and can feel very, very lonely.

4. Level Four

Level Four babies love books, someone to read them, and pay attention within a few months of their birth.

They are ahead of Level Three children by another 2 to 5 months while less than two years old.

They have extensive, complex speaking by two years, and their vocabularies are huge!

Most of them read easy readers by 3½ to 4½ years, and then read for information and pleasure by age five, with comprehension for youth and adult level books at about 6 - 6½ years.

There are about one per 200 children in the average school. Without special arrangements, they can feel very different from their typical classmates.

5. Level Five

Level Fives have talents in every possible area. Everything is sooner and more intense than others Levels.

They have favorite TV shows before 6 – 8 months, pick out letters and numbers by 10-14 months, and enjoy shape sorters before 11 months.
They print letters, numbers, words, and their names between 16 – 24 months, and often use anything that is available to form these shapes and figures. They show ability with 35+ piece puzzles by less than 15 months and interest in complex mazes before they are three.
Musical, dramatic, and artistic aptitudes usually start showing by 18 months. Most speak with adult-level complexity by age two.
At two and three-years-old they ask about how things work, and science – particularly biological and life and death questions – emerge.
They understand math concepts and basic math functions before age four.
They can play card and board games ages 12 and up by age 3½ to 4.
They have high interest in pure facts, almanacs, and dictionaries by age 3½.
Most read any level of book by 4½ to five years.
They read six or more years beyond grade level with comprehension by six years and usually hit 12th grade level by age 7 or 8.
We know they occur more often than once in a million and regular grade school does not work for them. Levels Three through Five score similarly on ability tests—very high.

Once you have a sense of your children’s abilities, you can provide them with more activities and experiences that build on these strengths and take advantage of their talents. Parents who have more than one child may notice that each child seems to have different interests and talents even when we encourage them equally. This is because we don’t cause our children’s abilities; we can only recognize and nurture them. To do less is truly depriving them of chances to do what they are good at and what they enjoy. To do less for our children probably chips away at their potential, too, for how can we get good at the things we don’t get to practice? There are more potential geniuses – children who are remarkably intellectually different from their same-age classmates – than most people believe, and your child may well be one of them.

Deborah Ruf, Ph.D., Minneapolis, specialist in gifted assessment, test interpretation, and guidance for the gifted, has been the National Gifted Children Program Coordinator for American Mensa since 2003. Having been a parent, teacher and administrator in elementary through graduate education, she writes and speaks about school issues and social and emotional adjustment of gifted children. Her book, Losing Our Minds: Gifted Children Left Behind (July, 2005), summarizes “levels of intelligence” and highlights exceptionally to profoundly gifted children. See http://www.educationaloptions.com/.