

the



Gifted Teen

SURVIVAL GUIDE

Smart, Sharp, and Ready for Anything

(Almost)

5TH EDITION



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Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle



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PUBLISHING®



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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Galbraith, Judy, author. | Delisle, James R., 1953– author. | Galbraith, Judy. Gifted kids' survival guide.

Title: The gifted teen survival guide : smart, sharp, and ready for (almost) anything / Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle.

Description: Fifth Edition. | Minneapolis, MN : Free Spirit Publishing Inc., [2022] | Revised edition of the authors'

The gifted teen survival guide, c2011. | Audience: Ages 11+

Identifiers: LCCN 2021052361 (print) | LCCN 2021052362 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631986789 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781631986796 (pdf) | ISBN 9781631986802 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Gifted teenagers—Juvenile literature. | CYAC: Gifted children. | BISAC: YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION /

Disabilities & Special Needs | YOUNG ADULT NONFICTION / Social Topics / Values & Virtues

Classification: LCC BF724.3.G53 G35 2022 (print) | LCC BF724.3.G53 (ebook) | DDC 155.5—dc23/eng/20211221

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021052361>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021052362>

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Note: The names of some students who appear in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

Reading Level Grade 9; Interest Level Ages 11 & Up
Fountas & Pinnell Guided Reading Level Z+

Edited by Meg Bratsch and Alison Behnke
Cover and interior design by Shannon Pourciau
Illustrations by Vigg

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1
Printed in the United States of America
V20300222

Free Spirit Publishing Inc.

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Minneapolis, MN 55427-3674
(612) 338-2068
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freespirit.com

Free Spirit offers competitive pricing.

Contact edsales@freespirit.com for pricing information on multiple quantity purchases.

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INTRODUCTION



Countless teachers are dedicated to ensuring that *all* students, including gifted students, are given the best chance to learn, grow, and succeed. In some communities, giftedness is encouraged, respected, and rewarded and strong, effective, exciting gifted programs are in place. If you are part of such a program, favored with such teachers, and nurtured by such a community, then you may not need this book, and the information in it may seem irrelevant to you. But if you have ever felt bored, unchallenged, confused, conflicted, frustrated, excluded, or unhappy with your school, your environment, your life, and/or yourself, and if you'd like to know how and why giftedness may have something to do with these feelings, read on. We don't pretend to have all the answers, but we do believe that gifted students who do have these concerns should have a resource to guide them as they grow. Which leads to . . .

How and Why We* Wrote This Book

This is not a book *about* gifted young people. It's a book *for* gifted young people. And it takes a side—*yours*. We wrote it with help from nearly 1,400 gifted teenagers from countries around the world including the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland, Iceland, Belgium, Netherlands, France, Italy, Austria, Romania, Greece, Turkey, Pakistan, South Africa, China, Singapore, Chile, Australia, New Zealand, and even Atlantis,** who responded to a survey asking them to identify their questions and concerns about growing up gifted—and from hundreds more we've interviewed, spoken with, taught, counseled, listened to, and heard from over the years. We drew on the expertise of forward-thinking educators, parents, and other experts on giftedness, and on current research and findings. And we thought deeply about our own experiences as educators of and advocates for gifted children and teens for more than 80 years of our combined lives!

*See page 289 for our author biographies.

**That would be the Lost City of Atlantis, which obviously does not exist, but we liked the respondent's humor.

Unfortunately, gifted education in the United States and other parts of the world is often ignored or under fire. Many school districts, faced with shrinking budgets and cutbacks, have dropped their gifted programs altogether. Tighter budgets mean fewer qualified teachers and heavier teacher workloads, and that in turn means fewer opportunities to give gifted students the individualized and challenging education they deserve and thrive on. Also, some people remain biased against special programs for educating gifted kids and teens. They make the (mistaken) assumption that if you're smart, you don't need any extra help—or that, even if you do, you'll simply be smart enough to figure it out for yourself. No other kids with special learning needs are subjected to this ignorant bias, yet it remains way too common when it comes to planning programs for gifted students.

Another possible hindrance to gifted individuals getting an education commensurate with their advanced abilities is the fact that in most classrooms—especially in elementary and middle schools—kids of all abilities are educated together. So a first grader who is learning the alphabet might sit right next to a first grader who has been reading chapter books for over a year. Don't get us wrong—we firmly believe that *everyone* deserves an education that begins with an understanding of their individual learning needs. But ask any teacher if it is an easy task to educate the full range of learners in their classroom and we can almost guarantee that what you'll hear is something like this: “Since I can't teach separate lessons to every child, I aim for the middle and hope that my less able learners will catch up and that the more capable kids won't be too bored.” If you happen to be one of these “more capable” students, school can be one dull day after another, a time of few truly stimulating learning opportunities but rather a long sequence of lessons that are unchallenging or repetitive for you.

Although many gifted students may be unchallenged in school, famous whiz kids like Larry Page and Sergey Brin (founders of Google), Natalie Portman (Oscar-winning actress, Harvard graduate, and published science researcher), Gabby Thomas (Olympic medalist in track, and Harvard graduate in neuroscience and global health), Amandla Stenberg (movie star and singer), Ellen Ochoa (engineer and astronaut), Barack Obama (44th president of the United States), Mitchell Baker (she helped launch the Mozilla Firefox browser), and Amanda Gorman (National Youth Poet Laureate and

US inaugural poet) have made it cooler than ever to be smart. However, just because “geek is chic” in some schools and communities, there are still way too many instances where smart teens are sidelined for being too dorky, nerdy, or “weird.” Sure, other people may want you working on a group project with them (after all, they assume you’ll do most of the work!), but when it comes time to socialize or share lunch, your presence might not be as welcome. Bullying, both in person and online, is an all-too-common experience for many a gifted teen. And that’s tough to deal with for *anyone*. Our advice: Try not to fear showing and sharing your abilities and interests. After all, dismissing or diminishing them doesn’t allow you to be *you*. Plus, we believe the temporary inconvenience of being thought of as a “nerd” by a few people is far outweighed by the realization that most people will welcome and appreciate your insights, your honesty, and your amazing mind. Most of all, it is our hope that in this book you’ll find perspectives, suggestions, and encouragement as you navigate your school days and beyond.

“I definitely believe that those involved in athletics are valued more than others in our society. They are the ones who receive the hefty scholarships and get into their first-choice schools because revenue from a successful athletic program is key for a successful college or university.”

—Erika, 17

About This Book and What’s in It for You

The Gifted Teen Survival Guide presents facts, findings, ideas, quotes, insights, strategies, tips, quizzes, resources, and more about giftedness, intelligence, brain development, emotions, stress, expectations, time management, technology use, school survival, college preparation, career options, relationships, bullying, depression, philosophy of life, and other topics of interest and importance to gifted students. How do we know they’re important? Our survey respondents identified all of these topics.

Over the years, gifted students have told us that problems with school and teachers are their number one concern, so you’ll find a chapter all about taking charge of your education through proper planning and action. Also, gifted young people have identified confusion about giftedness and relationships



TIP: We suggest that you keep a journal—in a notebook, on a laptop, in an app, or however works for you—as you read this book. Journaling is an excellent way to keep track of questions, insights, ideas, and feelings you have as you explore these topics. We’ve included a special icon in places where we discuss ideas or topics that you might want to write about in your journal.

with peers as other pressing issues, so we’ve devoted considerable space to these topics too. We offer what we hope is solid advice on how to handle the elevated expectations parents often have of their gifted children, and fascinating research into the brains and personalities of gifted people. But perhaps most importantly, we’ve included many observations and questions from gifted young people who took part in our survey as well as numerous “Gifted People Speak Out” and “Expert Essay” pieces contributed by gifted teenagers and adults. In fact, you might find these personal essays to be among the most important and gripping parts of this book! So whether we are citing research or sharing personal reflections from gifted individuals, we hope our book gives you the tools you need to take control of your life, make good choices, and get what you want and need.

It’s important for you to know up front that this book doesn’t contain any quick fixes or easy solutions to the issues you may be facing as a gifted teen. We have made every effort to avoid preaching, moralizing, shoulds, got tos, and ought tos, although sometimes we can’t help ourselves (after all, we’re teachers and one of us is a parent). If some of our suggestions are useful to you (and we hope they will be), that’s great. If you don’t find all of them useful, that’s okay too. Some of the things we say may appear self-evident to you, even boringly obvious. But before you dismiss a suggestion, *try it*. No matter how plain, ordinary, or simplistic it might seem. As a wise old adage goes, “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”

We wrote this book for gifted teens, but we hope your teachers and parents will read it as well. We believe it can give adults who work and/or live with gifted teens a clearer understanding of the capable young people in their classrooms and families. We know that we won’t be on-target with our advice or suggestions 100 percent of the time, but we do promise you that the ideas we offer are all based on one fundamental premise: that adults and teens

both have experiences and insights that deserve to be listened to, considered as legitimate, and treated with respect.

In addition, our experiences have shown us that problems between teachers or parents and teens seem to diminish when respect is both offered and given. We want adults to start asking, “What can I learn from you?” . . . and we want teens to ask the same question of the adults in their lives. To that end, we have included several suggestions you can use to get your needs met constructively, working *with* your parents and teachers whenever possible.

You’ve probably heard the saying that life is a journey. We hope your journey will be more than an exercise in survival. We hope it will be challenging, adventurous, happy, and fulfilling. We hope you will learn to accept your giftedness as an asset, if you haven’t already, and use it to make the most of who you are. You owe it to yourself to appreciate and value your uniqueness.

Best wishes,



Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle
help4kids@freespirit.com

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NOTE: Throughout this book when we use the word *parent*, we are referring to any adult caregiver or guardian you have in your life—including a biological parent, stepparent, foster parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, older sibling, or other person.

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Giftedness Defined

2E: One Label, Many Facets

Maddening Myths

Who Gets Left Out?

Gifted Throughout Cultures

What This Means to You

The “Gifted” Label
Burden or Blessing?

An Imperfect System





GIFTEDNESS 101



Actually, it would probably be more accurate to write about Giftedness 701, since the topic is complex enough to warrant a graduate-level course versus a first year-level one. To begin with, there are countless definitions of the word *gifted* out there. The US government has a definition of giftedness, as do almost every state and many other countries. Most definitions are similar in that they speak to giftedness as being in specific content areas—for example, being gifted in mathematics or science—or having greater overall intellectual capacity than others of the same age. Think of this latter definition as meaning that if your brain were a bucket, it would hold more water than would the buckets of most of your classmates.

But those are only two of the too-many-to-name interpretations of giftedness. Others have come and gone over the past centuries—yes, centuries—and have ranged from stingy (less than 1 percent of people qualifying as gifted) to generous, in which upwards of 20 percent of any population might be considered gifted at any one time. The term *gifted* itself doesn't seem to have a specific person you can point to and say, "Ha! So *you're* the culprit who gave us this label!" However, Lewis Terman, who helped develop an early IQ test—the Stanford-Binet—in the early 1900s, is considered a grandfather of the gifted movement. (He was also a eugenicist who favored

“‘Gifted’ can’t really be defined, in my opinion. It means something slightly different to everyone, with gifted people being even more diverse in their definitions than anyone else.”

—Noah, 16



the idea of crafting what he considered a “better” human race through “selective and restrictive breeding,” based partly on information like IQ.) After testing thousands of kids, he came up with all manner of disrespectful and ableist terms to describe kids who scored very low—he labeled them “idiots,” “morons,” and “imbeciles.” And for those who scored an IQ of 140 or higher where the average score is 100—he called them “geniuses.” Through Terman’s continued work over subsequent decades (yes, decades) with the 1,528 “geniuses” he had identified, the term *gifted* came into use. It’s stuck with us ever since, like it or not.

In looking over the many definitions of giftedness that have been espoused since Terman’s time, they mostly fall into one of two camps:

- ★ giftedness is *something you do*
- ★ giftedness is *someone you are*

To the something-you-do proponents, giftedness is pretty much synonymous with achievement and production. They would say that your giftedness isn’t real unless you can prove it by writing a symphony, recalculating pi, inventing a nonpolluting car, or writing a best-selling series of books about an inspiring character named Captain Underpants. To these people, giftedness is truly an expression of advanced talents in almost any human endeavor; thus, you can be a gifted athlete or dancer as much as you can be a gifted poet or neurologist. The one thing you *cannot* be in the eyes of the something-you-do crowd is an underachiever—you know, the smart kid who does not succeed in school due either to personal choice or to circumstances beyond their control, such as poverty,

bigotry, or abuse. To those who hold the belief that giftedness can only be displayed by one’s actions, the term “gifted underachiever” is a contradiction in terms.

The someone-you-are adherents are a subtler, less judgmental crowd. They believe giftedness is a set of inborn traits that allow you to experience the world with greater depth and increased awareness and sensitivity. Thus, when most people

THE SURVEY SAYS . . .

37% of respondents want to know why it’s important to talk about giftedness.

38% want to know how to explain giftedness to friends.

32% want to know why some gifted students do poorly in school.

One of the first incidences of highly capable children being singled out for their abilities was in Constantinople in the 15th century. There, a palace school was created to educate boys, regardless of social class, if they met the admission qualifications: good looks, strength, and intelligence. These boys were groomed to be warriors, political leaders, and fathers, as it was thought that both inborn traits and learned talents would ensure success for these lucky few.

see yellow, you see goldenrod; things aren't dark blue, they're sapphire; and fuchsia is different from pink. The someone-you-are gifted individuals have an uncanny ability to note inconsistencies in logic; they tend to appreciate sarcasm and irony (although others may never understand their jokes); and they are often the first ones to spot dishonesty or hypocrisy. From this vantage point, giftedness is not linked directly to academic achievement or life success, but to the inner workings of your mind. Should you choose to share these unusual insights and abilities through your work and play, so much the better. However, if your giftedness never manifests itself into anything that distinguishes you by your notable accomplishments, *you are still gifted*. In essence, giftedness is simply a part of your innate structure, regardless of whether you express your giftedness through high achievement, creative endeavors, or traditionally defined forms of success.

A Definition

Rather than spend time and space highlighting more of the many definitions of giftedness, we'll present you with our favorite interpretation of this sometimes-confusing, confounding word. It was penned by Dr. Annemarie Roeper, a Holocaust survivor, educator, parent, and worldwide phenom who worked with and studied gifted children for more than 70 years. She and her husband, George, established The Roeper School in Michigan in 1941; it remains today as one of gifted education's premiere institutions serving children from nursery school through high school. Here's Dr. Roeper's vivid conception of a word that causes such confusion:

*Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.**

*Roeper, Annemarie. "How the Gifted Cope with Their Emotions." *Roeper Review* 5, no. 2 (1982): 21. doi.org/10.1080/02783198209552672.

In other words, giftedness is a mix of “something you are” and “something you do.” A good example of this definition of giftedness is 17-year-old Nicole, whose mom tells this story about her daughter as a youngster: “When Nicole was five, she played soccer for the first time. I noticed that whenever she had practice, she did not pay attention to the ball *at all*. One day I said to her, ‘Nicole, you don’t seem to like soccer and it’s okay if you don’t want to play. But what exactly are you looking at when you are supposed to be paying attention to the ball and, instead, are getting hit by it?’

“‘Oh,’ she replied, ‘I’ve been studying the geese formations. They seem to be in the wrong formations and I was wondering if it was some sort of danger signal and why are they doing this? I don’t want them to go the wrong way for the winter. I’m worried about them.’”

Obviously, Nicole had capabilities, insights, and sensitivities far in advance of her young age—the someone-you-are aspect of giftedness. Yet she also possessed a keen knowledge of geese formations that few kindergarten kids would grasp—the something-you-do component of giftedness. (Not to mention the fact that alongside these qualities, she also had empathy—she was worried for the geese and cared about their well-being.) We’ll build on this combined definition of giftedness throughout the book, as we discuss how giftedness is a lifelong attribute that doesn’t vanish when your formal education ends—that’s right, there are such people as gifted adults! And we’ll focus on how giftedness is not limited to intellectual pursuits, but often impacts other aspects of your life—the social, emotional, and philosophical parts of you.

GIFTED VS. TALENTED

You might often hear the terms *gifted* and *talented* grouped together or abbreviated as *GT*. Is there a difference between being gifted and being talented? Well, that depends on who you ask. It used to be widely thought that *giftedness* referred to high performance or potential in academic and/or intellectual areas, while *talent* meant superior ability in visual or performing arts or athletics. Over time, some people have come to use the terms interchangeably, and have also expanded the idea of talent beyond arts and sports to include ability in areas as wide-ranging as cooking, carpentry, and crocheting. Other people stick with the distinction of *gifted* referring to intellectual competencies and *talented* referring to artistic and athletic endeavors. This book is mainly focused on the idea of academic giftedness, but for convenience, we’ll simply use *gifted* to encompass all forms of gifts and talents.

The Gifted Label: Burden or Blessing?

Every gifted person we know enjoys the benefits of being intelligent. They like being able to grasp difficult concepts, the constant flow of ideas that come so fast and furious they think their brain is dancing, and the ability to discern that virtually everything in life contains nuance, gray areas, and multiple points of view. Yet some gifted teens bristle at the label.

For some gifted teens, the worst thing about the label is the inner and external pressures they feel when there seem to be only two levels of performance: perfection or failure. (To read more about perfectionist thinking, see chapter 5.)

For others, it is the absence of clarity the label provides, which goes back to the lack of consensus about what the term *gifted* really means. And to quite a few, the label feels elitist and exclusionary, implying that people without the label are somehow “less than” and *ungifted*.

We really wish a better, universal term were in use, but nothing else we’ve tried seems to work, “Smart” is too limiting, “genius” is too pompous, and “special” is just a cop-out. And

in our many years of experience grappling with this terminology issue, we’ve found one thing to be true: more often than not, gifted teens *tolerate* the gifted label more than they embrace it. Consider the birthmark on your right shoulder or that cowlick at your temple that always messes up a perfect hair day. The less emphasis you place on these realities, the happier you tend to be. It’s the same thing with the label of gifted. It feels less onerous when you simply don’t dwell on it too much.

So, instead of focusing on the term “gifted” itself, try thinking of the many advantages that the label can provide. For example:

- ★ You may have access to challenging programs, classes, and educational opportunities.

“I always hated the term ‘gifted.’ I mean, I was always more or less set apart from the other kids in school, and being labeled gifted just made it worse. It gave them one more thing to tease me about.”
—Mei, 19

“I’m not sure if I agree with using the term ‘gifted,’ because aren’t other people blessed with ‘gifts’ that are not necessarily a smart mind?” —Peter, 16




- ★ You may be given more responsibilities and freedoms by adults, who assume your intelligence will guide you toward making wise decisions.
- ★ You have the ability to tackle and surmount many types of academic challenges or problems that others may struggle with.
- ★ You may run into adults who are gifted themselves and who take you under their wings as mentors, teachers, or friends in relationships built on mutual respect.
- ★ You have numerous options open to you when it comes to selecting a possible job or career, as your interests and abilities may cover many diverse topics.

Of course, you can choose to dwell on the disadvantages that you may sometimes encounter—the unrealistic expectations, the schoolwork that can be mind-numbingly dull, the teasing and lack of friends who understand and accept you—but focusing on the negative is a great way to stifle your overall development and sense of self-worth. When you focus on the downsides, zeroing in on what's *not* working or who's *not* there, you paint yourself into a

corner. If nothing else, we hope the remainder of this book gives you both the fortitude and techniques for grasping the richness of your life as a gifted person, despite the occasional discomfort that the label might bring.

So, is the label of gifted a burden or a blessing? Neither.

It is simply an invented term that seeks to encapsulate your complex self in a one-word descriptor. Issues are bound to arise when something so multifaceted—you—is distilled down to one six-letter word.



“Gifted’ is something that is used very lightly around me. I’m called ‘smart,’ ‘talented,’ and ‘bright,’ but it’s very few times that someone refers to me as gifted. It’s a touchy subject, really.” —Gwendolyn, 13

DO YOU DISLIKE THE TERM *GIFTED*?

Can you think of a better term to use instead? If so, email us; we’d love to hear your ideas. Maybe you can get your term to go viral and catch on among your friends and in your school . . . and perhaps even among teachers, researchers, and authors (like us!).

Maddening Myths

Just as there are dueling definitions of giftedness, there are many stubborn misconceptions about what it means to be gifted. Here are 10 of the most common myths we've encountered over the years:

MYTH #1: Gifted kids have it made and will succeed in life no matter what. They don't need any special help in school or anywhere else.

FACT: Everyone needs encouragement—and help—to make the most of their abilities and succeed in life. In fact, many gifted teens experience intense emotions, perfectionism, and other traits that can sometimes make success a struggle. And, like everyone else, they want these needs and challenges to be taken seriously.

MYTH #2: Gifted teens should love school, get high grades, and greet each new school day with enthusiasm.

FACT: Most schools are geared for typical learners, not gifted learners, which makes it hard for gifted students to get excited about going. Some of the most talented students actually choose to drop out of school altogether, while others purposefully fail due to frustration and disappointment with the insufficient education they're receiving.

MYTH #3: Behind every gifted kid is a supportive parent encouraging them to always do better.

FACT: Just because a person is gifted does not mean they have supportive or encouraging parents. Family dynamics are always complex, and every situation is distinct.

MYTH #4: Gifted people are good at everything they do.

FACT: Some gifted students are good at many things; others are exceptionally able at only a few things. The bottom line is that in some areas, gifted teens need to put forth effort and they may struggle just like everyone else.

MYTH #5: Teachers love to have gifted students in their classes.

FACT: Some do, some don't. Certain teachers feel uncomfortable with gifted students and get defensive or feel inadequate when they suspect their students know more than they do, while other teachers love the fact that gifted kids challenge their ideas and opinions.

MYTH #6: If gifted students are grouped together, they will become snobbish and elitist.

FACT: Some will, most won't. What's especially pernicious about this myth is that some adults use it to rationalize decisions about not allowing gifted students to work or study together or not providing them with opportunities that meet their learning needs.

MYTH #7: Gifted kids have trouble adjusting to school and forming friendships.

FACT: Some do, some don't—just like other kids.

MYTH #8: Gifted students don't know they're "different" unless someone tells them.

FACT: Most gifted kids don't need to be identified or labeled before they know they're not quite like their age peers. When they talk about topics their classmates don't get, or tell jokes that only adults understand, gifted kids realize pretty quickly that they are operating on a higher level than many others around them.

MYTH #9: Gifted teens are equally mature in all areas—academic, physical, social, and emotional.

FACT: That would be convenient, but it's not a reasonable expectation. Human development is not so precise that all areas of ourselves grow at the same rate. On the other hand, it's not fair to assume that just because someone is advanced intellectually, they will lag behind in other areas.

MYTH #10: Gifted people are commonplace in some cultures and groups, but rare in others.

FACT: Giftedness knows no boundaries of gender, race, religion, socioeconomic status, sexuality, learning preferences, or physical ability. Equal numbers of gifted people exist among all cultures and groups, as you will see in the following section.

As you read these myths, which ones sounded like things you'd heard before—from teachers, counselors, friends, parents . . . or even yourself? While you might not be able to convince everyone that these ideas are more fiction

than fact, when you encounter someone who believes one of these myths, consider asking a simple question: “Why do you think that’s true?” It may or may not change their mind, but it could lead to an interesting conversation about how individualistic each gifted person is, and how these myths lead to more misunderstanding of gifted teens.

“What are the differences in the gifted programs in schools across the US and in other countries?”

—Brady, 16



Giftedness Around the Globe

While giftedness exists everywhere around the world, people from various countries, cultures, ethnicities, and backgrounds may view it differently. Purdue University professor Jean Sunde Peterson interviewed a large group of US classroom teachers about what they valued most and looked for in gifted students. Here are her findings:

- ★ Dominant-culture (mainly White) classroom teachers valued individual, competitive, conspicuous achievement—looking for verbal assertiveness, “standing out,” and a strong work ethic in the classroom.
- ★ Latino teachers valued arts as a means of expression and saw personal humility as a prized virtue.
- ★ Black teachers valued service to community and personal hard work.
- ★ Native American teachers declined to identify anyone as gifted, since they did not believe in standing out as a singular individual.
- ★ Recent Asian immigrants valued adaptability.
- ★ Overall, most non-White cultures valued wisdom over knowledge.

Keep in mind, of course, that within any group of people, anywhere, there are many subgroups whose views may not correspond with the findings listed above. Also, you might find it interesting that some but not all people value a

“I’m British. We’re all gifted where I come from. After all, we have Isaac Newton, the BBC, Monty Python, and pubs as a result of our brilliance.”

—Richard, 16

