

NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children Inc.

for parents, educators and others concerned with gifted children



Frequently asked questions about assessing giftedness

NSWAGTC does not make recommendations regarding specific cases. However, the following information is provided to assist parents make the best possible choice for their family. Experience at NSWAGTC reveals that parents who suspect their child may be gifted need to develop an understanding of issues related to identification, testing, and assessment of giftedness.

I think my child is gifted. Should I get my child assessed?

The answer to this question is individual to each family. However, before seeking an assessment, it is very important to consider why you want to have your child assessed. You should consider how the information obtained from the assessment would change or enhance the education of your child. Assessment of your child should provide additional information useful for educational planning or intervention, not just for labelling.

Some typical reasons for assessing a gifted child include:

- To assist with decisions about school placement and educational planning. For example, to gain early entry to school or access accelerated learning opportunities.
- To develop an understanding of a child's pattern of abilities and how these relate to educational or social settings.
- If a child loses interest in school, or begins to have academic or personal problems in the school setting.
- If a child experiences emotional or behavioural difficulties that need to be addressed.

Some gifted children also have disabilities that affect their school performance. Disabilities can mask giftedness, and vice versa. Sometimes only an in depth educational and psychological assessment can accurately identify a child who is gifted and learning disabled, and provide information that will lead to the development of appropriate interventions for the child.

When should my child be assessed?

The appropriate age to have your child assessed will depend on the individual needs of the child. Gifted children change and develop rapidly. Generally, it is recommended that you have your child assessed as close to the time you will need the assessment results as possible. Clinical experience suggests that assessment of children between 6 and 9 years will be most reliable and most predictive. However, assessments can be performed on children as young as 2 years if needed. For example, if you are considering early entry to school. Older gifted children can also be successfully assessed. However, they more readily reach the ceilings (upper limits) on the available tests and this may affect the assessment results.

What is the difference between testing and assessment?

Testing refers to the individual administration of a standardised test, such as an IQ test, according to very specific directions. Standardised tests provide scores that enable statistical comparison with children of the same age. Assessment includes testing, but goes well beyond it. As a parent, you should be wary of any professional who plans to assess your child without obtaining the child's history in regard to general development, education, health, social interactions and family interactions.

Your child's unique approach to the test situation will provide information about their response to challenge, level of anxiety, impulse control, persistence, and enthusiasm for learning. A full assessment attempts to look at the child from many different perspectives, and to integrate the information collected from testing and other methods into an accurate assessment of your child. The primary goal of assessment should be to make very specific educational and behavioural recommendations for both the school and the home environments.

What is the difference between achievement and ability testing?

In general, there are two types of standardised tests: achievement tests and ability (or aptitude) tests.

Achievement tests measure how well students have mastered subject and skill requirements at a particular grade level. The Year 3 and 5 Basic Skills Tests are examples of standardised achievement tests given to NSW students.

Ability tests measure cognitive skills, such as verbal, abstract, or numerical reasoning, and build a profile of individual strengths and weaknesses. IQ tests are examples of standardised ability tests.

In some cases, data from achievement tests is compared with abilities test data to determine if a student is performing at, above or below his or her ability level.

What should I know about IQ testing?

Typically a comprehensive assessment would include administration of an individual IQ test. The latest versions of the most commonly used IQ tests are: the Stanford-Binet Fifth Edition (SB5), the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), and the Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence Third Edition (WPPSI-III).

The time taken to administer an IQ test will depend on the individual needs of the child (from 1 to 2 hours). IQ tests consist of a series of subtests and do not merely produce one score. The subtests are designed to target different cognitive skills related to verbal and non-verbal processing skills as well as working memory. Subtest scores can be used to develop a profile of the child's strengths and weaknesses and may highlight areas that need to be further investigated.

IQ tests have been developed so that an IQ score from 90 to 110 is generally considered average, corresponding to roughly the middle 50 percent of the population. At the high end, 2-3 percent of the population will have IQ scores above 130. Psychologists report results of IQ testing using one or more of the following methods:

- As a qualitative range, using terms such as Average, High Average, or Superior.
- As a percentile rank. If the percentile rank were 97, for example, it would mean that the child scored higher than approximately 97 out of 100 children the same age.

- As a range of scores (also referred to as confidence intervals). For example, a report might state that a child's IQ score fell in the range from 129-139.
- As a Full Scale IQ score.

No IQ score should be considered an exact measure of intellectual ability. There are many factors that might result in an individual score varying a little from one occasion to another on any test. These include anxiety, motivation, or rapport with the person administering the test. In addition, full-scale IQ scores may be lower for a gifted student who also has a learning disability. However, an experienced psychologist is likely to detect discrepancies in subtest results that may indicate further investigation is needed.

Although professionals in the field continue to debate the merits and limitations of IQ testing, IQ tests are generally a good overall predictor of the types of problem-solving and cognitive skills required for achievement in educational settings. However, IQ tests do not measure creativity, leadership, initiative, curiosity, commitment, artistic skill, musical talent, social skills, emotional wellbeing, or physical prowess.

Individuals with the same IQ score are still very different people, with different strengths and weaknesses, behaviours and personalities. A child's IQ score provides only one piece of information and should never be the sole basis used in determining giftedness. An IQ score alone does not determine a student's needs, an appropriate curriculum, or what program a school offers.

What is off-level testing?

Gifted children will develop or master a variety of skills or knowledge earlier than other children, or will develop skills or knowledge at a more advanced level than their age peers will. Assessment must adapt to this reality and off-level testing is one strategy for making this adaptation. For example, most children do not read before entering school so most assessments of preschool children do not routinely include reading. Some gifted preschool children do read early, and an adequate assessment of them should include measures of reading. The most important factor is not to make assumptions about the child's level of ability based upon age or upon grade, but rather to select test materials that will permit a young child to demonstrate high-level skills in a variety of areas.

Who can test my child?

In Australia, all psychologists are legally required to register with the Psychologist Registration Board in their State or Territory. Your child can be assessed by a fully registered psychologist or by a provisionally registered psychologist (sometimes called intern psychologist) who is under supervised practise.

NSW Psychologists Registration Board Phone: (02) 9219 0211

Membership of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) is not compulsory. However, to become a member of APS, a psychologist must continually meet professional development standards beyond the legally required registration. The APS provides a referral service to help you find a psychologist to suit your needs.

Australian Psychological Society Phone: 1800 333 497

School psychologists provide psychological services to school communities and support students who have been referred to them for assistance across a diverse range of issues. If your child attends a non-government school, you should check with your school whether you have access to school-based psychological services.

If your child attends a NSW government school, you will have access to school counselling services through the NSW Department of Education and Training. School counsellors are experienced teachers who have a degree in psychology and post-graduate qualifications in school counselling. They work with students of all ages, and their families, from pre-school to Year 12. District guidance officers also provide school counselling services and, in addition, co-ordinate a team of school counsellors. Every government school has access to a school counsellor or district guidance officer. School counsellors can provide assessment as well as support, information and advice to students, parents and teachers. However, school counsellors are not at every school every day. It is necessary for parents or carers to make an appointment by telephoning the school. In addition, priorities for the school counsellor's time will be determined, in consultation with the school counsellor, by the principal.

My child's school wants to arrange an assessment. Should I give permission?

Again, the answer to this question is individual to each family. However, no assessment of your child can be undertaken without your permission. Before giving permission for a school-based assessment, parents should weigh up the relative pros and cons of searching more broadly for an appropriate professional. A child cannot be assessed with the same individual IQ test within two years of a previous assessment (although it may be possible to assess a child with a different IQ test if needed). For this reason, it is essential that parents give careful consideration to the issues outlined in this document before giving permission for their child to be assessed.

As a parent, you have a right and a responsibility to contribute to decision-making processes that affect your child at school. When considering a school-based assessment, you need to be clear on what type of testing will be undertaken with your child, who will conduct the testing, and why your child is being tested. You also need to confirm how and when results will be reported to you as the parent, and how school staff will use the results to make meaningful changes for your child. You have the right to give or refuse permission for your child to be assessed.

What qualities should I look for in the professional assessing my child?

It is most important that both you and your child feel comfortable and can establish a rapport with the professional that will conduct the assessment. As a parent, when speaking to a professional for the first time, you should feel free to say that you think your child may be gifted. You should then hear a question like, "Why do you think that your child may be gifted? What does your child do that suggests this?" thus opening the door for a frank discussion of your child's development and history. Ideally, you will encounter a very knowledgeable professional who will conduct a comprehensive assessment of your child's abilities and make specific recommendations.

It is also important to choose a professional who has experience in working with and assessing gifted children. Many otherwise highly qualified psychologists have little or no experience testing gifted children. If there is insufficient understanding of the psychology of giftedness, some of the normal characteristics of giftedness – such as physical, emotional, and other sensitivities; fidgetiness and/or negativity when presented with routine tasks mastered long ago; unhappiness in the school setting; incisive use of logic; and a preference for older peers – may be misunderstood as criteria for diagnosing a disorder. Furthermore, investigation of possible learning disabilities in a gifted child requires extensive experience with a wide range of testing tools.

Parents may be able to gauge whether their child is likely to respond well to a specific psychologist if they speak briefly with the psychologist prior to making an appointment for the assessment. Referrals from other families whose children have been tested can also assist parents in locating a psychologist who has good rapport with gifted children. NSWAGTC can provide a referral list of psychologists experienced in assessment of gifted children to aid you in your search. However, we do not make recommendations for specific psychologists.

What questions should I ask before the assessment?

Depending on your situation, asking some of these questions may be appropriate:

- What services do you offer?
- What is your background in assessing children who may be intellectually advanced?
- What types of tests and assessments do you administer?
- How much will the assessment cost?
- Is a comprehensive written report included in the fee? If not, what is the additional cost for such a report?
- Will the written report include recommendations related to school?
- Is a follow-up session explaining the results to the parents included in the fee?

How should I prepare my child for an assessment?

The night before the assessment, you should ensure that your child gets well rested. In the morning, if possible, ensure your child eats a protein-based breakfast to help them maintain attention during the assessment.

You know best how to tell your child what to expect so that the assessment will be a pleasant and comfortable time. Some children need reassurance, while others do not. Most children like to know where they are going, and why, so it is wise to think through what you are going to tell them. However, it is best not to tell your child that the object of the visit is to “play” or to “take tests”. Your child should expect to be working with a person who likes children, who has interesting activities to do, some of which will involve talking and some of which will be more like puzzles and drawing. Your child should also know that some of the activities will be easy and some will be for older children, but that they are worth a good try to see how many of them they can do. When possible, it is better not to suggest to your child that the results of the test will make the difference in acceptance or non-acceptance into an educational program, as this can create undue pressure on the child. You should consult with the professional who will assess your child if you have any questions about what to tell your child about the assessment.

How do children react to being assessed?

Children generally enjoy the opportunity to interact with an attentive and encouraging adult. Most gifted children find the assessment experience challenging and interesting, rather than intimidating.

What should I expect once the assessment is completed?

When the testing session with your child has finished, the psychologist will usually schedule a follow-up consultation with you. The follow-up appointment for parents will normally take place after you have been provided with a comprehensive written report of the assessment. During the follow-up session, the psychologist will explain the results of the testing, including what the scores do – and don’t – mean. The psychologist will also

review any relevant observations of the child during the testing process, and discuss possible recommendations for home and school based on the results of the evaluation.

At this point, it is important to ensure that you take the time to ask whatever questions you need to in order to fully understand the implications of the assessment results. It is often the child's parents who must be resourceful and persistent in seeking meaningful educational opportunities for a gifted child. Being an effective advocate for your child means that you need to understand your child's pattern of abilities and how these relate to educational or social settings.

What is the best way to share results of an assessment with my child's school?

If your child's school arranged the assessment, school staff usually take the initiative to arrange a formal meeting with you to discuss the results.

If you have your child assessed privately, you will need to consider carefully if, when, and how to share the results with the school. Experience at NSWAGTC shows that schools have all kinds of reactions to private assessment. Some schools are grateful for the information, and use it immediately to make appropriate changes in a child's educational program or placement. Other schools may act as if they distrust outside information, or may look upon the information as a liability, not an asset. When and if you decide to share the assessment results with your child's school, one approach is to schedule a meeting that includes your child's teacher, principal, and gifted education specialist. That way, all three parties will hear the same information at the same time. Try to approach the meeting in a problem-solving, cooperative manner. Some families find it useful to share a copy of the written report with school staff ahead of the planned meeting.

This information was compiled in January 2007 from the following sources:

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