

# **Performing Arts Instruction for Exceptionally and Profoundly Gifted Children**

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What special considerations do parents and educators need to make when planning performing arts instruction for exceptionally and profoundly gifted (hereafter referred to as eg/pg) children? Such children are marked by specific traits, about which parents and educators must be familiar in order to properly accommodate this special population.

Recent neurological research points to radical differences in the brains of exceptionally gifted children. In his paper, *The Gifted Brain*, Australian researcher, John Geake quotes Alexander, O'Boyle, and Benbow as saying, "...gifted subjects may have an unusually rapid and high level development of interhemispheric interactions...the area where structural and functional development are most closely related are the frontal lobes-gifted adolescents [13 years old] and college students [20 years old] have a similar level of brain maturation in these regions." (Geake, 2000)

Gifted education researchers and advocates bemoaned the shortcomings of gifted education instruction in most schools. Pull-outs, special classes, accommodations within grade level, and other half-hearted attempts at educating our country's brightest have failed to meet the needs of eg/pg children. These children are as different from mildly and

moderately gifted children as the profoundly retarded are from the mildly retarded (Silverman, 2002).

So, what type of educational approach do the experts recommend? An individualized curriculum that accommodates asynchrony (a trait common to eg/pg children, described as varying levels of proficiency and ability that may result in uneven academic and social development), and the child's specific strengths and weaknesses is touted as the best for our ablest learners. Tutorials, mentorships, and curricula tailored to meet the individual child's needs all benefit eg/pg children most. But, how can parents and educators translate such advice to performing arts instruction?

There are three key issues that are crucial to the successful integration of gifted education theory in arts instruction: affective, cognitive, and instructional. Through understanding these issues, parents and teachers may better help the eg/pg child maximize his performing arts potential and achieve his dreams.

### **Affective Issues Are Paramount**

Affective, or emotional issues reign supreme in the life of eg/pg children. Sometimes described as "skinless," most eg/pg people seem to feel things more intensely. An unusual insight into moral issues, an ability to empathize with others, and a high regard for beauty all combine to make eg/pg children highly sensitive.

Such sensitivity may also work against them when they intuitively understand what “perfect” should look like. Perfectionism, the double edged sword of giftedness, drives the eg/pg child to achieve, yet torments him when he doesn’t. Leading to feelings of failure, this inner locus of control may actually hold the child back when he doesn’t believe himself capable of attainment of the ideal. As one mother puts it, “They may see nothing between perfect and awful; the phrase, ‘I’ll never get it’ is a major part of their vocabularies...” (private communication, 2002)

The eg/pg child does so many things well, and with such little effort, that pushing through such inner conflict in order to persevere may prove too daunting. Parents and educators should teach eg/pg children that small “failures” are part of the process and perseverance produces big reward. Sometimes it helps for the child to witness a parent or other mentor struggling with a new task, stumbling and falling a bit while on the front end of the learning curve. Avoiding condescension, the adult can gently teach the child that everyone struggles with something, and there is no shame in not knowing how, not being perfect, or not achieving the first time around!

Researchers have given name to one of the most pronounced affective aspects of high-level giftedness. Originally theorized by the Polish psychiatrist/psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski and later modified by Michael Piechowski, PhD, overexcitabilities are a set of five functions that eg/pg possess to a pronounced degree. (Lind, 2000) Called overexcitabilities because they describe categories of stimuli that provoke disproportionate responses from eg/pg people, these categories include:

- Psychomotor: high energy, rapid speech, constant movement
- Sensual: sensitivity to sights, smells, tastes, textures, sounds, etc...
- Intellectual: inquisitive, voracious reading, theoretical thinking
- Imaginational: inventive, dreamy, metaphorical, creative
- Emotional: highly sensitive, intuitive, empathetic

How do these oversensitivities affect training in the performing arts? Highly imaginative cognitively advanced children may need to “see” themselves creating beauty with their music or dance. They may feel like failures when their practice sessions are “ugly” or awkward. These young musicians and dancers are quite likely to hold to an image of perfection derived from the work of more accomplished artists. In holding themselves to such exacting standards, they create inner conflict and angst.

The eg/pg theater student may strive to understand and internalize a play’s character and, thus, give it life. Without the proper coaching from a sensitive theater teacher or director, the student may feel a sense of vagueness, a colorless recitation when portraying a character’s role that leaves the student feeling disconnected from the character’s true nature. Such disconnection may elicit feelings of failure in the gifted theater student. Due to these subtle complexities, eg/pg child performers may be unsatisfied with their work, even when all around them praise and adore their accomplishments. (Sand, 2000)

These kids are often driven to excel. Many work tirelessly to master a domain, and parents may be hard pressed to keep up with them. (Sand, 2000) Intensity is a

characteristic closely associated with very high IQ, and eg/pg children may throw themselves into a production or program wholeheartedly. They can become deeply frustrated when directors or other participants do not share their pursuit of excellence.

One mom tells, “ Our twelve-year-old profoundly gifted daughter is an actress. She has developed not only her ‘chops,’ but also a sense of responsibility to each production. As a result, she was extremely troubled when she landed in a youth production whose director was far too casual, missing appointments, rushing through rehearsals, and treating the production as ‘just a kid’s show.’ Two weeks into rehearsals, after great soul-searching, for the first time ever, she decided to drop out of the show.”

How can parents and teachers shore up the child’s flagging spirits? Adults need to allay the child’s sense of distress and encourage him to persevere. Of course, eg/pg children have an aversion to bribery, so parents and teachers will need to avoid ploys and bribes as motivators. Instead, a simple acknowledgement of the child’s dilemma serves as a validation of the importance of the child’s work. Beyond understanding, the savvy parent or educator will need to strive to give the child whatever instruction is needed in order to help the child reach his internal ideal.

My very visual-spatial daughter, now nine, began taking ballet lessons in September. She started with a ballet I class in order to learn the five basic positions, the correct posture, and foundational ballet terminology. Within two months she was begging me to teach her how to execute more advanced movements such as turns and leaps. While she did not yet

posses the muscle memory for correct body placement for such turns, she intellectually grasped the sequential movements needed for execution. After I showed her how to do the turns, she spent a day practicing. Within a short time she was crying with frustration. She had seen the older dancers in their rehearsals and knew that her pirouettes did not look like theirs.

With occasional instruction from me, Scarlet learned to feel her body in space as it turned. She taught herself to sense a correct placement for her ribcage, her head, and her shoulders. She “felt” it when she was leaning too far back. She worked a little each day to achieve the mastery of the turn, and within a week was performing serviceable pirouettes similar to those taught to level III students. By January, Scarlet was taking the ballet III class, her technique almost indistinguishable from that of the students who have been dancing for three years.

### **Accelerate, Accelerate, Accelerate**

Educating eg/pg children is a process fraught with complexities at every turn. Parents and teachers alike shudder at the thought of acceleration. Concerns about social fit, academic holes in skill mastery, and scheduling conflicts arise any time acceleration is suggested. Yet, research proves again and again the value of acceleration for eg/pg children (Gross, 1994)

The eg/pg child may have unusual expectations regarding the level of depth and intention required of him. One of the hallmarks of the exceptionally and profoundly gifted child is

a propensity toward creating elaborate mental scenarios for all interactions requiring the creation and development of plot and relationships for characters. When integrated in a classroom of less gifted students, the eg/pg child may expect to bring such complexities to the fore, and find himself thwarted by the other children's inability to engage in the dynamic.

The highly focused eg/pg child may find himself frustrated with age-segregated drama classes. An older class may be the perfect fit for a child who wants to engage in meaningful theater work. Classes for children two to eight years older will not only provide intellectual stimulation, but dedicated students who match the intensity and intention of the younger eg/pg child.

Last fall, my middle son, Antony, at age eleven, began taking a weekly theater/voice class for 9-12 year-olds. Within several weeks he came home from class depressed and frustrated. After one month, he came home each week crying. The other students often talked, laughed, and played with one another during class. Antony found their boisterous behavior disconcerting as he envisioned serious theater instruction and meaningful student interaction as the purpose for attending. He wanted to get down to the business of acting.

Thankfully, both his theater and voice teachers saw that he was more serious and focused than the first-level students, and they promoted him to the next level. Surrounded by students as old as fourteen, Antony began to enjoy his class. Finding his talents and

intention matched by those of some other students, Antony brought his considerable ability to focus to bear on his problem of singing off-key. Within a month he had trained his ear to “hear” the notes properly and he then began working on finer aspects of singing such as volume and annunciation. Now, four months later, the class is working on two plays and is learning how to harmonize.

One mother of a profoundly gifted twelve-year-old, now an honors university sophomore, says that she has found boredom and frustration to be the two primary obstacles to her son’s success with his instrument, the violin. A well-chosen acceleration may salvage a frustrated gifted child’s momentum. Without such intervention, many eg/pg children lose interest in the craft and never try again.

### **Choosing the Right Instructor**

Performing arts instruction must meet the eg/pg child’s cognitive-ability level. Finding such instruction can be tricky for subjects that involve sequential repetitive skill mastery. Since music, voice, and dance instruction is best presented in a manner that trains the student to develop muscle memory, repetition is necessary. How can a teacher meet the eg/pg child’s need for intellectual challenge while simultaneously ensuring that proper technique is acquired?

The famous violin pedagogue, Dorothy DeLay, teacher to such virtuoso performers as Itzhak Perlman, Midori, and Sarah Chang, instinctively adopted a teaching technique that brought out each student’s personal best. Writing about DeLay’s remarkable legacy,

Barbara Sand describes a pedagogy perfectly tailored to the needs of eg/pg children, “DeLay is basically in the business of teaching her pupils how to think, and to trust their ability to do so effectively. This is a much more difficult undertaking than telling them to copy what she does, or to repeat a passage over and over until it-at least in theory-gets better.” (Sand, 2000)

In her book, Teaching Genius: Dorothy DeLay and the Making of a Musician, Sand writes, “To DeLay, learning and thinking are inextricably connected, and the core of her philosophy lies in continually challenging her students to look for their own answers. This requires tremendous imagination on the part of a teacher, because what may serve as a catalyst to understanding for one student may be a turn-off for another.” (Sand, 2000)

Professional instruction may be found through a conservatory, a performing arts school, a local college or university, and even private instruction. Some parents look for teachers who are, themselves, eg/pg (DeLay’s IQ is reported to be 180, as measured by the Stanford Binet L-M, making her profoundly gifted). Sometimes professional concert performers have a facility with teaching and may demonstrate their highly professional standards by accepting only very talented students. One particularly frustrated mother found the perfect violin teacher, a Julliard graduate and recorded international concert violinist, for her profoundly gifted eleven-year-old son through a recommendation from a university music department. In months, the young man accomplished more with his new teacher than he had in six years with previous teachers.

Describing the frustrating job of finding appropriate instruction for her son, she said, “My son couldn't stand repetitive drills. He would not do what previous instructors asked him to do because they would not explain why it was important and how it fit with the gestalt of playing the instrument. Granted, at eleven, he is older now and able to tolerate more than when he was four, but the approach he requires from a teacher is basically the same.”

She continues, “His teacher understands how he learns, how he needs to see for himself that something is necessary before he will make the changes that she has requested, that it does, indeed, make it easier to play. She is empathetic to those needs and is patient when working with them. She gives him a variety of material to work on that all achieves the same goal. She points out how the patterns of scales will show up time and again in works he will play and to know those patterns by heart will make sight reading so much easier. He now works on his scales regularly because he has seen this to be true.” (private communication, 2001)

We learned the importance of finding the right instructor through hardship. Octavian began taking classical guitar lessons when he was twelve. His teacher, a local musician and college guitar instructor, came highly recommended. His reputation as an amazing musician convinced me of his ability as an instructor and I eagerly signed Octavian up for his first month's lessons.

Quickly, we found his personality and style to be incompatible with Octavian's. Not only was he too dry, but he could not seem to grasp the fact that Octavian needed something more stimulating than the simple little exercises given him. Within two weeks my son no longer wanted to continue his lessons. By month's end, we decided to terminate the association.

In spite of telling the instructor about Octavian's academic acceleration, he did not seem to understand that happy-face stickers applied to my son's completed weekly practice sheets only demoralized Octavian. The eg/pg child's aversion to coercion and bribery was clearly evidenced by Octavian's distress.

Within the year, Octavian began taking private lessons with the classical guitar instructor at the College of William and Mary. As a matriculating student, Octavian was required to practice daily, attend master classes and local classical guitar concerts, and gain the mastery of specific songs in his college level repertoire. The instructor introduced music theory immediately. He expected Octavian to begin reading music with no delay.

Octavian blossomed into a competent—indeed, inspired musician almost overnight. Within a month he was able to read simple music and within three he could sight read almost anything haltingly. The addition of music theory to the physical repetition of daily practice challenged Octavian intellectually.

At some point in the evolution of their instruction, some eg/pg gifted children may face the crucial nexus point of choosing between two teachers within a certain discipline. Many choose the instructor who is exacting, demanding, challenging, or especially thorough. One mom tells, “Zoe, an eleven-year-old profoundly gifted singer, reported that an acquaintance had switched music teachers in disgust. The child had told Zoe that all she wanted to do was sing and the discarded teacher ‘wasted’ lesson time on ‘boring stuff’ like preventive medicine (how to keep the voice healthy and avoid polyps), vocal production, and anatomy. Zoe was stunned – she sees all that ‘boring stuff’ as crucial information for a serious singer.”(private communication, 2002)

Parents have reported their children abandoning beloved teachers who showered them with praise to work with task-masters intent upon achievement of skill mastery, flawless technical execution, and contemplation of the subtleties of theory and interpretation. Really good instructors recognize when a student is ready to move on to a more skilled instructor, and may assist the family in finding a new teacher.

The switch to more technically challenging instructors may require greater sacrifices of parents, both in time and money. Juggling schedules to accommodate frequent practices, concerts, competitions, auditions, and rehearsals is only part of the sacrifice parents will make for their child. Financially, these needs can become overwhelming. Costumes, performance fees, new instruments, travel expenses, tuition, and other costs tax family budgets when gifted children become immersed in the pursuit of a craft. (Sloane, 1985)

In spite of such challenges, families find their lives enriched by their commitment to the child's discipline. Once again, the nature vs. nurture dialectic requires parents and educators to find ways to facilitate the appropriate instruction of the performing eg/pg child while respecting the child's learning style and personality.

### **Conclusion**

These children possess amazing gifts and abilities. Those gifts and abilities provide the blueprint for their future successes. It is our job, as parents and teachers, to help them fashion for themselves the tools they need to realize their goals and maximize their potential. We can only do this if we understand their needs and strive to meet those needs.

Utilizing solid gifted education research, some of which has existed since the 1920's, parents and teachers can deal with the affective, cognitive, and instructional issues of education for eg/pg children. Applying this advice to performing arts instruction, we find a myriad of ways to facilitate the dreams of eg/pg children poised to achieve. With the right instructor to show them how to attain their goals and a supportive family environment, nothing can stop these amazing kids from achieving.

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