



Information Sheet 3

Are we asking the right questions?

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Young intellectually gifted children are those who are significantly outperforming their age peers in some area of development. In the case of preschool aged children, they might have advanced language, numeracy skills, or they might even be beginning to read. On the whole teachers tend to be pretty ambivalent about gifted children, some will even tell you they don't exist. Most of society believes that these children can make it on their own and that by the time they make it into school any advanced development will have evened out and the other children will "catch up". But don't all children deserve to have their needs met in the classroom and to be stretched and encouraged regardless of their abilities? So what can early childhood teachers do with young gifted children?

Dr Walsh's research has investigated the effectiveness of one possible strategy – the use of higher order questioning. We know that asking higher order questions – those that require abstract thinking works well for older gifted children, but we also know that in the prior school setting very few teachers actually use much higher order thinking. One study found that up to 95% of questions asked by early childhood teachers were lower level questions, or even non-questions – such as "Would you like to tidy up now?"

Dr Walsh wanted to know what would happen when we asked higher order questions to very bright children. The children who took part in the study all fell in the top 2% in cognitive ability. Children were read storybooks over a period of several months and their responses to lower order questions and higher order questions were analysed. Lower order questions are those that have a single correct response and can be answered by reading the story or looking at the pictures, such as "How did Cinderella get the ball?" Higher order questions are those that rely on abstract thinking and can't be answered by recalling the story of Cinderella, for example, "What would happen if we all had a fairy godmother?"

What was found for this sample of gifted preschoolers was that the linguistic complexity of their responses, on the whole, improved when they were asked the more challenging questions – not only were their answers longer, but they used language constructions more typical of older children, in some case up to 3 years in advance of their current level.

What was also interesting was that when the children were asked lower level questions, then their responses were much simpler. This might seem obvious, but if you consider that most preschool teachers rely on lower level questioning, is it any wonder that many teachers claim never to have seen a young gifted child? Simply put, if you aren't asking the right questions then you aren't going to see the children who can think more abstractly.

So where to from here? The reality is that most teacher trainees have less than one hour of exposure to issues related to giftedness in their training. And if we don't know what to look for, then we can't cater for gifted children, so teacher training is the key to unlocking hidden potential.