

# Beyond School Walls:

## What Parents Can Do to Widen the Horizons of Their Gifted Learners

By Joan Franklin Smutny

Parents of gifted children play a powerful role in expanding their world and helping them discover what they love. When gifted children have impassioned, open-minded, and creative family members, they are free to discover what they love and who they are as people.

For gifted learners, curiosity, passion, and interest are absolute *essentials*. Gifted children have a questing spirit; they live for discovery. You may even notice that when children find interesting problems to think about, they look different. There is palpable excitement, eagerness, a burning need to know, and a lively curiosity you can see in their eyes.

Parents often ask: “*What can I do that will make a difference?*” I encourage parents to begin by looking at themselves and their



homes as a rich resource for their gifted children.

### You and Your Home

Adults often say their fondest childhood memories are those of when their parents swept them along in some new adventure or explored a new curiosity. Moments when they felt excited, awed, fascinated, and even humored by shared experiences vividly stand out. Experiences when they learned new skills and knowledge—or the value of pa-

tience, skill, and problem-solving—meant the most.

For some children, including English Language Learners (ELLs), home is a doorway back to a familiar world—adorned with spicy cooking smells, richly colored fabrics, wall hangings, and instruments from their native countries.

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Published by



**Editor-in-Chief**  
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**Layout & Design**  
Hung Nguyen

*Parenting for High Potential* is published 8 times a year, 4 print issues and 4 digital issues, and is distributed as a membership benefit by the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC). The views expressed in the magazine are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of NAGC or its Board of Directors. Copyright © 2014, National Association for Gifted Children, 1331 H Street NW, Suite 1001, Washington, DC 20005. 202-785-4268. [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)

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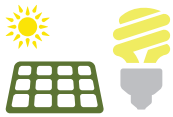



## Everyday Problem-Solving at Home

Author and teacher Harry Roman points out that parents don't have to create elaborate schemes for challenging their gifted children: "As parents, we must strive to involve our children in everyday things because not only will we teach them something useful and how to solve real problems...we will teach them how to be patient, caring, and memorable parents."<sup>1</sup>

Simple ways parents can challenge their high-ability children at home include:

- **Re-designing their room.** Have children participate in designing their rooms or other spaces where they work. They can create a 3D model of their room to develop their ideas, which integrates measurement, visual thinking, architecture, structural engineering, and estimation of costs. 
- **Designing the backyard.** Children can measure areas of backyard space and divide it into areas according to activity (e.g., play, gardening, bird feeding, shed, and outdoor furniture). Create a plan and break it down into small steps. 
- **Becoming chefs for a day or week.** Help children to plan a menu for a meal. They learn how to combine flavors, the fundamentals of food chemistry, and how to combine food ingredients. They can also create a restaurant-style menu by collecting samples and designing their own. 

- **Exploring vacations.** Vacations offer endless opportunities for children to exercise their minds. Let them plan parts of the trip, research accommodations, calculate travel costs, and determine not-to-miss sites on the way. This teaches planning, how to break big goals down into smaller steps, and map reading (promotes visual thinking). 
- **Saving energy.** Have children investigate ways to make the home more energy efficient, from blocking out air from drafty windows to installing energy efficient appliances to reducing the use of lights. They can explore solar applications for their home. Where might they work? What changes would have to be made to prepare for solar panels? Topics include engineering and conservation. 
- **Reducing waste.** Hold a family meeting about reducing waste. Create an understanding of the problems of waste through investigations. What happens to the recycling materials in your town, city, or rural area? Where do materials go from there and how does the recycling process work? Plan visits to recycling centers. This can be an eye-opening experience as children begin to appreciate the scope of the problem. Explore methods of recycling and garbage disposal, and speculate about reducing waste in the future. 






Some children love pouring through bird, plant, rock, insect, and butterfly books to figure out what they've seen outside. In one family, everyone adds to lists of species they've seen, draws them, and writes journal entries about their experiences. They have an extraordinarily rich record of their lives along coastlines, in mountainous regions, in the plains and along rivers—accompanied by sketches, photographs, maps, and poems.



### Natural World

Families who enjoy the outdoors, for example, can make a regular practice of activities around bird and plant study. Ideas include:

- **Nature as your palette.** Take walks every day and gather bits of the natural world—acorns, sticks, and leaves. Mention the names of different trees, flowers, and birds.  When returning home, your collections can become material for something you create—a painting (gluing what you've collected on to construction paper), a science display, or a sculpture.
- **Gardening and plant life.** Teach about the plants in your garden and offer each of your children a section to create their own gardens. Have them research types of plants most suitable for your climate and environment, discuss plants,  look at garden magazines, create designs, and experiment. Visit botanical gardens, neighborhood nurseries, and ecology centers to learn about native grasses and what it takes to have native grasses on your land. Through this process, children learn about photosynthesis, the chemical components of different soils, and what different plant types need to thrive.
- **Volunteering.** Most children are born enthusiasts of animals and nature. By volunteering with their children—walking dogs, visiting a cat shelter, or removing invasive plants at a nature center—parents help them learn how to care for animals and plants. Children can also learn about the biology of different animals and the ecological system of local forests and water systems. 

### The Reading Life

Parents need to make literacy a part of their home. They can read everything in their environment with their children—be it retail circulars, the names of train stations, or traffic signs. Set aside times each week to read different kinds of texts—short stories, cartoons, poems, raps, and memoirs.



Most children have access to public libraries that provide books, magazines, DVDs, and Internet connections. At reading events, children become aware of reading as a social experience: something to be shared and even performed. They learn that words come alive on the page when they speak, interpret, and embody them. Having a close relationship with the local library is especially vital for gifted English Language Learners, whatever their proficiency level may be.

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## home is a place of discovery

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Consider these daily or weekly reading practices to further your child's creative potential:

- **Storytelling.** Have children record family stories heard in either yours or a relative's home. Have them write about events they remember. Activities may include: sketching and writing each part of the story; dramatizing the story; choosing a special word describing the person or story; writing the word (in both English and native tongue (ELL applicable); and creating a short poem.
- **Specialized professions.** Inspire children to learn words in specialized fields such as auto mechanics, ornithology and botany.
- **Collages.** Help children use collage as a medium for exploring language and meaning, especially by incorporating foreign and English text and images from different magazines. Both ELL and non-ELL children can select their country of origin, write words on the collage that express their personal feelings and thoughts about their home country, and write a letter to their country and the people they miss.
- **Journaling.** Get notebooks for children to use as private journals. At regular times each week, have them write or draw about



things they saw, heard, and did. If they resist, help them find a more creative approach. Children can write upside down, or draw outside while sitting on a rock. They can draw on colored tissue paper. They can draw little creatures around the words they write. The journals are *theirs* alone.

### Music and Art

According to writer, teacher, and publisher Maurice Fisher, "Gifted students

must learn to squeeze as much music and art into their lives as possible to counter the many useless and insipid experiences they will encounter throughout life."<sup>2</sup>

For greater learning exposure, parents should take advantage of opportunities in their immediate community and nearby, such as:

- **Performing arts concerts.** A well-rounded exposure to the arts is highly important for gifted children as it develops their sensitivity and openness to their own and others' cultures. Explore all types of music—classical, contemporary, jazz, blues, folk, roots, rock, and rap. Dance options include ballet, jazz, tap, modern,



## open to the possibilities



Photo by Della Rollins

Canadian inventor **Edén Full** has a newspaper artist for a father who made her feel she could achieve anything if she put forth the effort. He opened her mind to many possibilities, at one point sharing pictures of people making robots and space shuttles. In 5th grade, she designed and built a solar car, that propelled itself on the sun's energy, for a science project. By secondary school, Edén would sometimes become so involved in her experiments that she could not stop. "My parents would call in sick for me, so I could stay home from high school and work," she said. "Teachers didn't understand what I was doing."

By 2010, she was bringing a prototype of her solar panel rotating system called the SunSaluter to Kenya and working with local villagers. With adjustments to its simple design, villagers can now charge their own batteries, use their own lanterns, and experience the benefits of a limitless energy source. Materials come from local, renewable resources that enable the people to assemble and maintain them without requiring outside technical expertise. Edén Full's SunSaluter provides a vision for what future technologies might look like for the world.

Source: Cotney, C. (2012, September/October). Edén Full is saving the world without a degree. *Sierra*. <http://vault.sierraclub.org/sierra/201209/cool-schools/cool-schools-drop-out-eden-full-sunsaluter.aspx>

## knowledge is power



Photo by Russell Watkins/Department for International Development

Seventeen-year-old **Malala Yousafzai** of Pakistan, the youngest Nobel Prize Winner, suffered at the hands of Taliban gunmen on her way to school in 2012. Fortunately, Malala's voice was not silenced despite significant injury. Malala has continued to advocate for the education of girls, giving a speech at the United Nations in June 2013. As she pointed out, knowledge is a power far greater than a gun. Malala did not achieve this on her own. She has always credited her father as the source of her inspiration, strength, and courage. Ziauddin, her father, a poet and education activist himself, has always stood proudly by her side. "I never tried to clip the wings of my daughter who was meant to fly high in the sky," her father says.

Source: Kakar, A. H. (2013, November 5). The wind beneath her wings: A look at the family behind Malala. *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*. <http://www.rferl.org/content/pakistan-gandhara-malala-family/25159006.html>

and mime. Incorporate classical plays and operas, musicals, improvisation, and international perspectives into the mix. If money is tight, there are free and low-budget performances off the beaten path. Open air concerts in the warmer months are the norm in many areas.

- **Studios or after-school programs.** Studios and after-school workshops offer classes in the arts and other subjects. For ELLs, volunteers who speak their language (often parents) can assist the teacher or act as translators. For gifted children from other countries, an art studio or computer lab can be a quiet place where they can imagine and invent.
- **Art museums.** Most art museums have activity areas for children of all ages. Parents should prepare for the trip by exploring

the options with their children first. If the trip involves specific exhibits, parents can help children learn about the artists and art movements in advance, including *pointillism*, *surrealism*, and *abstract impressionism*. At home after the trip, children can create their own art project in a particular style; compose a poem; or write about a figure in a painting.

- **Historical houses, sites, museums.** Whether near the home or on vacation, gifted children love anything that brings history alive for them. Again, preparation makes the experience more meaningful. Have children think of questions they can ask the guide. Plan follow-up activities, similar to those mentioned above.
- **Community centers.** Community centers provide a variety of offerings. If children are already skilled in a particular area, parents might negotiate with the teacher to see if they can try a higher level. Parents can participate by volunteering or by sharing resources and materials.



### Protecting from the Pressure to Conform

As parents, we have the important job of helping our children navigate the world and learn how to integrate into society. At the same time, children depend on us to defend what is unique and special about them.

Most importantly, a nurturing home and family allows the individuality of gifted children to emerge naturally. By



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## home is a place of discovery

Our role is to help them face whatever saboteurs stand in their way and to encourage the emergence of their unique self—their inner greatness as the people they are.

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supporting the creative needs and interests of the family, the home becomes a more vibrant place and everyone feels it. Regardless of their experiences at school, gifted children need a treasured place where they feel safe and can thrive as living, breathing learners.

No message could be more important than conveying to your child that it's normal and right to pursue what they love. No message better safeguards the dreams and aspirations of impressionable children from the conforming forces of society. ♡

### Author's Note

**Joan Franklin Smutny** is founder and director of The Center for Gifted and welcomes thousands of gifted children to year-round programs. She teaches creative writing to young students, as well as gifted education courses to graduate students at the university level. Joan has authored, co-authored, and edited many articles and books on gifted education for teachers and parents, and is editor of the *Illinois Association for Gifted Children Journal*, contributing editor of *Understanding our Gifted*, and a regular contributor to *Gifted Education Communicator*, *Parenting for High Potential*, and *Gifted Education Press Quar-*

*terly*. Joan received the NAGC Distinguished Service Award for her outstanding contribution to the field of gifted education, and the E. Paul Torrance Award in Creativity, also presented by NAGC.

### Resources

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Roman, H. (2013). Creative problem solving in the home of the gifted and talented, *Illinois Association for Gifted Children Journal*, pp. 72–78.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, M. D. (2013). Educating gifted students effectively in the home: Ten themes & variations, *Illinois Association for the Gifted Journal*, pp. 62–71.