

What is Child-Centered Gifted Education?

Child-Centered Gifted Consortium

Child-Centered Gifted Education – A Rationale

Historically, education has focused on society's expectations and needs. There is a body of knowledge and skills society expects all children to acquire, and children are measured against how successfully they manage to do so.

Child-centered education focuses on the needs of the child. It recognizes that each child is an individual, with individual and different capacities and needs. Child-centered education shapes its expectations to align with those individual differences. It acknowledges that children's education includes supporting their social, emotional, cultural, and ethical development.

Child-centered gifted education works within this framework to understand, acknowledge and respond to the different capacities and needs experienced by gifted children. It acknowledges that gifted children exist in every cultural and socio-economic group (Silverman & Davis, 2021). It seeks to create a place where gifted children from all backgrounds can be authentic, experience a sense of belonging, and develop their strengths.

What does the term *gifted* mean from a child-centered perspective?

A gifted child is a child who is born with a capacity for exceptional intensity of perception and response. This different inner reality creates a genuinely different developmental trajectory, influencing the child's intellectual, emotional, social, cultural and ethical growth. Such significant difference from the norm makes a child particularly vulnerable to social, emotional and educational harm unless teachers, parents and counselors are able to respond with informed understanding and skill, transforming school into an authentic, meaningful experience at all stages. Thus, properly nurtured, the gifted child's innate qualities and abilities catalyze their life visions as adults, shaping their mature contributions to society in their chosen fields.

Child-Centered Definitions of Giftedness

- *Giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences. (Roeper, 1982, p. 21)*
- *Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (Columbus Group, 1991; Neville, Piechowski, & Tolan, 2013)*
- *Giftedness is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding – a way of being quiveringly alive. (Piechowski, 1992, p. 181)*
- *Giftedness is grounded in the extraordinary intensity with which gifted individuals experience life. Such intensity makes possible the exceptional qualities and abilities which characterize giftedness. In childhood, such exceptional qualities and abilities profoundly shape the child's developmental and learning needs. In adolescence and adulthood, exceptional qualities and abilities can lead to a life vision, creating a sense of purpose larger than self: the ultimate outcome of a gifted life. (Cathcart, 2022)*

(This definition acknowledges the wisdom and guidance of the Māori people of Aotearoa New Zealand in recognizing the primacy of qualities in the expression of giftedness.)

Common Traits of a Gifted Child

Not all gifted children demonstrate all characteristics, but common traits include:

- Has asynchronous development.
- Demonstrates intensity in one or more of the following areas: emotional, intellectual, sensual, psychomotor, or imaginal.
- Shows early mastery of developmental milestones.
- Thinks deeply, with a strong *need* to ask questions, to know *why* and to seek meaning.
- Has a heightened sense of justice and fairness, with a strong awareness of ethical and moral issues.
- Is sensitive – physically or emotionally.
- Is drawn to complexity and to making the simple complex.
- Demonstrates advanced abstract reasoning ability.
- Readily makes connections between disparate subjects.

- Seeks precision in language and is drawn to verbal wordplay, humor and metaphor.
- Is resistant to repetition; seeks novelty.
- Prefers whole-to-part learning – needs to see the big picture before breaking it down.
- Capable of large, intuitive leaps and “Aha” learning experiences (may **not** need to follow the same steps to solve a math problem as more typically developing students).

Goals for Students in a Child-Centered Gifted Education Program

Students

- Understand that their value as people lies in who they are, not what they achieve.
- Seek fulfillment rather than success, through the development and use of their personal qualities and abilities.
- Learn to live in the world in a way that is compassionate and accepting of others but consistent with their own ethical standards.
- Experience a sense of belonging and contribute to the community, whether the community is defined as friends, family, neighborhood, country, or the global community.
- Develop emotional resilience, including the ability to persevere through challenges.
- Are aware of their unique natures and interconnectedness with all life.
- Navigate the world in a way they find satisfying and rewarding.
- Develop empathy for others and self.

Child-Centered Gifted Educators

- Recognize and celebrate the multifaceted, asynchronous, and diverse nature of gifted young people, as well as appreciating the vulnerability inherent in giftedness.
- Support the development and growth of the whole child – intellectual, academic, social, emotional and ethical.
- Empower gifted students to understand themselves in the context of their giftedness, and to develop their personal identities.
- Acknowledge that intellect and emotions are intertwined, and that thinking deeply and being intellectually challenged are emotional needs for gifted students.

- Respect students as co-creators of their own learning.
- Provide advanced, complex, challenging learning opportunities matched to the readiness and passions of gifted students.
- Foster an emotionally safe learning environment with intellectual peers.
- Adapt to the individual needs of each child.
- Understand that student learning and growth are grounded in relationships. Trusting partnerships between educators and students, as well as between educators and parents, allow students to take academic risks, stretch themselves in new ways, and experience support as they learn and grow.

The Child-Centered Gifted School/Program

- Identifies gifted students using a variety of qualitative and quantitative measures. The focus is on the child and on recognizing the child's gifted traits.
- Embraces best practices that support gifted students' intellectual, academic, social, emotional and ethical development.
- Focuses on empowering gifted students to become their own best selves as they develop. This perspective drives all programming and adaptive decisions including staffing, curriculum, assessment, instructional supports, social-emotional learning, classroom management, program evaluation, professional development, and all other elements of a program/school.
- Provides a safe place for gifted children to learn and grow with intellectual peers in an environment that encourages all children to fully embrace their unique selves.
 - Emphasizes the importance of community in the learning environment.
 - Prioritizes the development of trusting relationships between students, parents, and educators.
 - Creates strong lines of communication between home and school.
- Supports the complex, asynchronous development of each gifted student. Honors all of the ages and stages of a student's growth, and cares for students as they navigate the frustration that occurs when those ages and stages are in conflict with one another.
 - Recognizes and responds to the unique characteristics of gifted learners.
 - Supports all levels of each child's unique developmental trajectory and their being at many developmental ages at the same time.
 - Supports students as they navigate the complexity and intensity of their experience of the world.
- Provides appropriately challenging learning experiences grounded in the demonstrated

readiness of each child, aimed at stretching the child's thinking.

- Sets learning targets based on growth rather than pre-set benchmarks. Pre-and post-assessment along with ongoing close observation provide feedback that is used to set and evaluate effective goals.
- Values the learning process as much as learning products and performance.
- Supports student-driven inquiry – the questions are as important, and possibly more important, than the answers.
- Engages learners through authentic experiences, complex projects, hands-on activities, and personal reflection.
 - Celebrates the messiness of the learning process.
 - Gives students agency and choice.
 - Honors the range of talents, interests and experiences students bring to their learning.
 - Offers a menu of options for demonstrating mastery.
- Employs a strengths-based approach to teaching and learning, building on students' strengths and using strengths to address areas for growth.
 - Takes the ceiling off learning – opportunities are not limited by age or grade, but adapted for both the intellectual and developmental readiness of the student.
 - Is responsive to the asynchronous development of the gifted, recognizing that they operate on many levels at the same time. The developmental levels of a student must be considered in the creation and assessment of learning experiences. Students are likely to require advanced work and to fill gaps in learning at the same time.
- Cultivates social-emotional and ethical growth through practices that promote the development of empathy, respect for others, a growing understanding of the Self, and self-compassion.
 - Grounds the culture of the school and of each classroom in empathy, respect, responsibility, and compassion.
 - Facilitates the awareness and understanding of Self, including understanding of what it means, and does not mean, to be gifted.
 - Operates as a community of learners, students and adults, who recognize that everyone matters, and inspires the individual to experience a sense of belonging to the group.
 - Celebrates the varying perspectives and approaches that each student brings to the learning community.

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This document was created by the Child-Centered Gifted Consortium, an international group of educators who support child-centered schools, programs and services for gifted children.

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