



nace●essentials guide

Educating More Able Children: Guide for Parents and Carers

Guide 4

The Essential Guide for parents and
carers of more able learners

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Guide 4

The Essential Guide for parents and carers of more able learners

Introduction

Parents have a lasting impact on their children's lives. They can have the greatest influence on their achievement and success through providing early experiences which encourage children to enjoy and develop their learning. By exposing their children to new experiences, by engaging with them through talk and discussion, by giving them encouragement and support, parents enhance their children's ability to think creatively and critically, and stimulate their curiosity about the world.

Parental support is one of the most important factors in a child's success in school. Children whose parents are interested and involved in their education – for example, by supporting their learning at home and working with the school – do better academically and socially. This is true for all children, but parents sometimes find it difficult to know how to best support a child who has a special need or high ability. What they can do, however, makes a big difference, and this NACE Essential Guide will help them provide that support.

Being the parent or carer of a more able or exceptionally able child can be both a delight and a challenge. In some cases that challenge can last well into adolescence, when peer pressure, personal identity crises and an exceptional intellect or precocious talent can lead to tensions and conflict.

Living with an able child can raise many questions for parents and the rest of the family. A parent's responses to a child's exceptional needs will, to a large extent, depend on the parent's values, their own experiences of education, and what they believe about their own abilities. But it is important that parents and carers think through their response, in order to support their child to develop and express their ability, to find balance, emotional harmony and personal fulfillment – and to live as a child.

This NACE Essential Guide will provide answers to some of the most common questions about caring for and supporting a more able child:

- What does it mean to be “more able”?
- How do you know if you have a more able child?
- How do schools identify children with special abilities?
- What is the current approach to children with high ability?
- What should schools provide for more able children?
- What information about your child and the school's provision can you expect to be given?
- What questions could you ask of the school?
- How do you overcome barriers and difficulties?
- What can you do to help your child at home?

In addition, the guide includes useful sources for further information and advice, and a glossary of words frequently used when discussing the education of children with high ability.

What does it mean to be “more able” or “exceptionally able”?

NACE believes that many more children than are traditionally labelled as more able can benefit from opportunities which challenge and engage them, leading to raised achievement and greater expectations of themselves and their futures.

This section will help you understand what educators mean when they designate groups of children as “more able” or “exceptionally able,” and familiarise you with the range of terms often used to describe such children.

Not all schools or teachers use the same words to describe children with high ability. You may come across many different terms to describe children who have advanced or exceptional abilities. Some terms are used with the intention of distinguishing between different degrees of high ability or special talents, e.g. “able,” “very able,” “exceptionally able,” and some terms are used more indiscriminately. Some are used to avoid what might be perceived as an elitist way of describing children, and some are used to try to avoid excessive labelling.

Currently Ofsted uses the term “more able” in primary schools and “most able” in secondary schools to describe the majority of children who display abilities and talents in advance of their peers. For a small number of pupils, the term “exceptionally able” is used to describe those who have the capacity to achieve or perform at the very highest levels. The Welsh government uses the terminology “more able and talented” (MAT).

NACE uses “more able” and “exceptionally able” (see NACE website FAQs for more information). As a parent or carer, it is worth asking teachers to be clear about what they mean when they use particular terms to describe your child.

Definitions of children and young people with high ability have included those who have one or more abilities developed to a higher level significantly ahead of their year group, or the potential to develop these abilities.

These abilities might be within one or more areas, such as mathematics, English, science, history, sport, music, design or creative and performing arts. Some learners are more able across a great many subjects.

Some schools still distinguish between “more able” and “talented” (using terminology from previous government policies in this area), but this should not, and often does not, restrict a school’s approach. Some pupils will be capable of success across a wide range of abilities and school systems should not be a reason for limiting these achievements. Children also develop at different rates and may have strengths in some areas, and areas which need support and intervention to develop.

NACE believes that many more children than are traditionally labelled as more able can benefit from opportunities which challenge and engage them, leading to raised achievement and greater expectations of themselves and their futures.

How do you know if you have a very able child?

This section will help you to recognise what may be the signs of high or exceptional ability in your child.

With very young children in particular, it is difficult to assess high ability and certainly unwise to label them as “gifted.” Many factors are at play which may disguise advanced abilities or lead to premature judgements about talents and abilities which may not in the end materialise. Children may also exhibit special abilities in one or more areas – and not just in the traditional academic disciplines.

However, parents and carers who are aware of some of the signs of potential exceptional talents and ability will feel more able to encourage, nurture and react appropriately to those signs – but always treading cautiously with regard to “giftedness” in young children.

What are some common signs of advanced development in young children?

The following characteristics (taken from a number of research reviews) are not necessarily proof of high ability, but they may alert parents and carers to the need to enquire further.

An able child may:

- Be a good reader;
- Be very articulate or verbally fluent for his/her age;
- Give quick verbal responses (which can appear cheeky);
- Have a wide general knowledge;
- Learn quickly;
- Be interested in topics which one might associate with an older child;
- Communicate well with adults – often better than with their peer group;
- Have a range of interests, some of which are almost obsessions;
- Show unusual and original responses to problem-solving activities;
- Prefer oral to written activities;
- Be logical;
- Be self-taught in his/her own interest areas;
- Have an ability to work things out in his/her head very quickly;
- Have a good memory;
- Be artistic and/or musical;
- Excel at sport;
- Have strong views and opinions;
- Have a lively and original imagination/sense of humour;
- Be very sensitive and aware;
- Focus on his/her own interests rather than on what is being taught;
- Be socially adept;
- Appear arrogant or socially inept;
- Be easily bored by what they perceive as routine tasks;
- Show a strong sense of leadership.

Louise Porter, who has researched and written widely about more able young people, suggests that observation of some of the following areas may allow parents and carers to make tentative judgements about a child's potential:

- Thinking skills, e.g. developing faster than would be expected of children at that age; quick and accurate recall; understanding of abstract concepts;
- Motor abilities, e.g. early awareness of left and right; ability to put together new or difficult puzzles; ability to make interesting shapes or patterns;
- Speech/language skills, e.g. early comprehension; ability to modify language as appropriate; advanced vocabulary;
- Social skills, e.g. bringing their experience to their play; leadership skills; early interest in social issues;
- Emotional and behavioural characteristics, e.g. very sensitive, intense and responsive; perfectionist; non-conformity.

Why ability is not enough

Success in school and in life is not down to ability alone. Likewise, personal fulfilment and professional success are rarely due to one factor alone. We know that self-confidence and self-belief, determination, willingness to work hard and personal motivation are very important. Opportunities to find out what you're good at, to know what future opportunities are open to you, and the encouragement and support of others are also vital. Parents and carers can provide some if not all of these.

Success emerges from a constellation of:

- Opportunity
- Ability in specific areas
- General intellectual ability
- Positive external factors, e.g. family, school
- Persistence
- Self-esteem and self-belief.



Research converges on the conclusion that, while people do differ in talent and ability, great accomplishment is typically the result of years of passion and dedication, and not something that flows naturally from a "gift".

The research of Carol Dweck, a US professor of psychology, indicates that one's own attitudes towards "ability" and "effort" can influence achievement. She observes:

- Many people assume that possessing high ability – along with confidence in that ability – is a recipe for success.
- Praising children's innate abilities reinforces this mindset, which can in fact prevent them from living up to their potential.

In one study, several hundred secondary students were given 10 problems, on which most did fairly well. Some were praised for their "intelligence," while others were commended for their effort – "That is a good score; you must have worked really hard." The children praised for their intelligence shied away from more challenging assignments, while those praised for their effort did not lose confidence when faced with harder questions from which they would learn.

Studies show that teaching children to have a "growth mindset" which encourages a focus on effort rather than on intelligence or talent, can help their development as high achievers in school and in life.



How do schools identify children with high ability?

It is up to individual schools to decide how best to identify their more able learners. This is a complex matter and very much a whole-school issue, which should be discussed and agreed by staff.

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It is important to use a range of methods which look beyond test results and teacher assessment to identify the more able. The main point is to provide sufficient opportunities for more able children to reveal their abilities.

The majority of schools use some or all of the following:

- Nomination of pupils by their teachers through professional judgement;
- Checklists of general or subject-specific criteria indicating high ability;
- Testing of attainment and ability;
- Assessment of children's work;
- Information provided informally by pupils about other pupils;
- Discussions with children;
- Information from parents;
- Referrals from other sources, e.g. sports coaches, local clubs etc.



Current approaches to educating children with high ability

NACE Challenge Development Programme

Produced by the National Association for Able Children in Education (NACE), the NACE Challenge Development Programme gives schools a structure to help them meet the needs of more able learners. Many schools also choose to apply formally to gain the NACE Challenge Award. This award recognises that the school has developed high-quality provision for more able learners, who achieve well as a result. The award is given after a rigorous assessment process, conducted by an external assessor against the criteria of the NACE Challenge Framework and an audit day in the school.

The education of children deemed to have exceptional abilities and talents is not a simple matter. In the last few years, more attention has been given to these children, alongside a greater acceptance that so-called “inclusive education” really should include all children. There is growing evidence that paying attention in schools to the educational and social needs of more able learners has a “rising tide” effect on the achievement of all children – in other words, it is good for everyone to increase the opportunities for all children to show what they can do when they are really challenged.

National policy for the education of more able learners has been through a number of iterations in the last few years. This includes a period when high ability was very much a formal policy focus. Currently attention to the more able is integrated within the broader school improvement and raising achievement drive, reforms to curriculum, assessment and accountability within the Ofsted Inspection Framework requirements, and school performance data. Inspectors are now asked to scrutinise and report on the quality of schools’ provision and outcomes for more able pupils.

Many schools have a policy for addressing the needs of their more able learners, increasingly through an approach of trying to ensure challenge for all pupils within the curriculum offer, day-to-day teaching and extracurricular and enrichment activities. Some schools are also using tools such as the NACE Challenge Framework to review and improve their provision, while a small but growing number of primary and secondary schools have gained the NACE Challenge Award as a kitemark of the quality of their provision for more able learners.

There is no national requirement for a register of more able pupils, although national datasets make reference to a specific cohort of “high attainers.” Neither is there a specified “official” terminology, although Ofsted tends to refer to “more able pupils” in the primary phase and “most able” in the secondary phase. NACE uses the terminology “more able” for such pupils in both phases.

Most schools nominate a member of staff to take lead responsibility for the education of more able learners. Where they don’t, the main thing is that the school monitors the progress and well-being of this group of children. Again, this is good practice rather than a national policy.

NACE strongly recommends that a member of the school’s senior leadership team takes overall responsibility for the education of the more able. In addition, the appointment of a lead practitioner or coordinator enhances the school’s capacity to develop outstanding practice and provision for the more able.

The lack of a lead practitioner or coordinator does not mean that schools do not make good provision for able pupils. However, schools are encouraged to have a named person with responsibility or oversight for pupils with high ability. In some cases, schools will have a named governor for overseeing and monitoring the school’s policy for more able learners.

What should schools provide for children with high ability?

There are three key areas in which schools should concentrate their support for very able children – the quality of teaching and learning in class, educational opportunities provided beyond the classroom, and attention to the social and emotional welfare of the child. These are the kinds of things you would and should expect to see in these areas:

In the everyday classroom

Tasks and activities which “extend” or “enrich” your child’s learning; some choice by the child over what they do; marking and assessment which helps the child to improve to the level expected; appropriate homework; challenging options, including subject choices in secondary school. First and foremost, high-quality teaching and resources.

Beyond the classroom

You should expect the school to offer extracurricular activities for more able learners and opportunities to experience learning they may not be able to have in school, e.g. masterclasses, competitions. The school should also be able to point you in the direction of further resources and opportunities for children.

Social and emotional support

Most schools are sensitive to the social and emotional needs of children and have well-developed support systems in place, but sometimes more able children need particular types of support and attention. Discuss with your child’s teacher what they can do, if you have any concerns.



How to work with your child's school

What information can you expect from the school?

All parents should expect to know from their child's school how well s/he is progressing. You should expect the school to let you know if it thinks your child has exceptional ability in one or more areas, what they can be expected to achieve, and what the school will do to support their progress. Now that National Curriculum levels are no longer used, it is important that parents understand what terminology is being used by schools to express progress and attainment (e.g. "exceeding expectations," "higher achievement" in national tests).

Most schools will have a policy outlining how they identify and cater for more able learners. It is not a requirement for a school to have such a policy, but it is considered good practice. As a parent, you are entitled to view school policies – they are public documents. Some schools have produced written guidance for parents in the form of a pamphlet, though again this is not a requirement. Other schools have information in their school brochure or on their website.

Ofsted reports are a useful source of information about a school and will often specifically mention "more able" in primary schools and "most able" in secondary schools. The school's prospectus and/or annual report should contain information about its approach to more able pupils.

Schools should share with parents what terms they use to talk about very able pupils, what they mean by the terms they use, and how they identify the children they believe may be more able, gifted or talented.

The most important thing, of course, is what schools then do to support those children.

What questions could you ask of the school?

Any concerns or worries that you may have about your child's progress at school should in the first instance be directed to the class teacher. You may wish to approach this sensitive matter by, for example, saying what the concern is, being prepared to say what changes you have noticed, trying to be objective, and ascertaining what steps the school will take and what you can do.

If the school does not provide you with all the information you think you need about your child, you might want to use the following suggestions for a conversation with the school, or when you are at a parents' session.

Do you operate any form of setting, special grouping or acceleration (moving more quickly through classes) for very able children?

How well can I expect my child to do?

How is my child's progress being monitored?

What will be different about the kind of work you might expect my child to do?

How can I help?

Do you think my child has exceptional abilities or talent?

I think my child has exceptional abilities – how can I expect the school to support my daughter/son/us?

How is my child doing against national benchmarks?

How will you keep me informed about my child's progress?

What further advice and guidance is available for parents/carers?

What advice and guidance is available to more able learners about subject options, examinations and careers?

Overcoming obstacles and difficulties

The table below shows some of the biggest obstacles parents and carers may face when communicating effectively with their child's school, and ways in which these can be overcome.

| Obstacle | Possible solution |
|--|--|
| Differences in opinion about your child's ability | Give specific examples of what your child can do (unaided), and ask the school to say how well they think the child is doing against national norms. Ask for specific examples of the work your child is expected to do. Ask for a second opinion if necessary. |
| Lack of knowledge and understanding about the school system | Consult the Department for Education website for parents, local library, find out if the school has a parents' forum. Talk to other parents, talk to sixth-formers or children of friends. |
| Difficulty in visiting the school because of work or childcare commitments | The school should be able to offer you alternative appointments, email contact or sometimes a home visit. |
| Anxiety about contacting or visiting the school, for example because of your own school experience | See above. You could also take a friend with you to the school, see a named teacher you know, meet outside school, or attend a school social event where you can "blend in." Prepare what you want to say and to get out of a meeting with teachers. Try to see beyond your own personal experience. |
| Language barriers | Contact the local community association to see what translation/interpretation services are available. Many councils and schools offer literature in community languages. |
| Different cultural norms and expectations | Discuss with a senior staff member to share any concerns, ask why certain things are done in school, try to be open to new ideas. |

How to help and support your child outside of school

The biggest contribution a parent can make to their child's education is to be interested in and appreciate what they are doing, know what they are interested in, and support them in what they do.

This does not mean that you have to be an expert in all school subjects or that you need to be "on their case" all the time. Gentle encouragement, interested questioning, concern when you feel there is a problem, and a habit of showing curiosity about the world yourself are all very important. Talking with and listening to your child are among the most important factors in the development of language.

The following are suggestions which can be very effective, and which you might want to consider, given your knowledge of your own child.

Developing language

Read with your children, and to them, as often as possible, even if they are already good readers. Able children enjoy learning new words – so have a new word of the day or week at home. Puzzles, crosswords, logic games, word games, card games and board games all help to develop thinking skills and social interaction. Or try learning a whole new language together.

Extending knowledge of the world and encouraging discussion

Talk through your day and your child's day, and encourage active family discussions. Discuss the news and introduce an interesting fact or topic of the week. Give children a broad range of experiences, e.g. visiting exhibitions, listening to music, eating different food.

Developing a range of skills and a balanced perspective

Do not always focus on your child's obvious skills – encourage them to sample new activities. Encourage physical activity to develop coordination and general fitness. Praise and value effort and persistence, not just achievement.

Sometimes the most effective support a parent can provide may be to limit the number of engagements and formal activities their child is exposed to, in order to ensure s/he has the space and free time in which to play, experiment and develop hobbies and interests of his/her own. It is also important to complement what is done at school, and not simply replicate what goes on in school.

“Parental involvement in the form of ‘at-home good parenting’ has a significant positive effect on children’s achievement and adjustment... In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of school.”

Professor Charles Desforges

Sporting, creative and musical talents

Children who have talents and interests which require them to undertake frequent practice, compete and participate on a very regular basis, inevitably have to juggle these with school demands. Parents can work with the school to plan how best to manage these tensions without compromising their child's hopes of academic success.

It is important that all options are kept open for more able children, so that they can make appropriate and realistic choices about their future. Sometimes schools may not be aware that a pupil has a demanding out-of-school interest, so communication is important between teachers, parents and the child.



Social and emotional needs

Parents and carers know that children are first and foremost children in all respects. This means that they have the social and emotional needs of children. More able children need what other children need, but there may also be some areas in which they can benefit from particular attention, care or support.

The following advice is based on research into the social and emotional needs of more able learners:

- All children, including the more able, have a unique profile of talents, abilities, strengths and relative weaknesses.
- All children, including the more able, need to develop self-esteem and confidence, to be given praise and encouragement. Children need to know that parents are proud of who they are and not what they achieve. Their ability should not become the centre of the relationship between parent and child.
- Children need to be allowed to fail and make mistakes, and to develop strategies to cope with not getting it right all the time.
- More able children can sometimes be self-absorbed, and may need to be encouraged by parents to appreciate and listen to the views of others and learn to interact with others.
- It is important to be aware of the needs and talents of other children in the family.

More able children need what other children need, but there may also be some areas in which they can benefit from particular attention, care or support.

Different ages, different needs

| Age range | Needs | Challenges |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Very young children | A balance of stimulation, play, enjoyment, independence and safe parameters. No fixed judgements about “giftedness”. The ideas and information they encounter must be suitable for their stage of emotional growth. | The advanced development of some children – for example in language and reasoning, and in particular interests – may lead to isolation from peers. Parents may need to help their child to form and manage friendships. Children may be demanding and sensitive “beyond their years”; parenting will require firm but loving management. |
| Primary-age children | Like all children, very able young ones need to feel safe, valued and loved – and able to give love. At this age they will spend much more time in school, therefore parents need to work with teachers to support progress and confidence building. | Parents whose child’s development is unusual may be unsure how to provide for their needs or manage their relationship. |
| Older children/ adolescents | This age-group needs a balance of challenge (and chivvying), support, trust, space and freedom to develop their own individuality and direction. | Adolescents may be caught between their developing sense of self, the pressure of peers, and the emotional and physical demands of growing up. They may also be subject to negative views of academic success or “not cool to be bright” syndrome. Sometimes children who seemed destined for great success do not always fulfil an earlier promise, or may not be willing to expend the amount of effort and commitment needed to be outstanding. |

Listening to your child

Responding is one thing, but listening is vitally important if parents and children are to learn from one another – that means children listening, as well as parents!

Children need respect: respect for their uniqueness, respect for their opinions and ideas. Children also need to know that their uniqueness is cherished and that they are appreciated just for being themselves.

Advice to parents from children

A project on exceptionally able children involving NACE researchers asked students what advice they would give to their parents/carers.

A supportive parent is one who:

- Trusts our judgements and lets us make our own decisions
- Doesn't try to push us in the "right" direction
- Doesn't put too much pressure on us
- Recognises our need for our own space
- Makes time to listen and to talk
- Doesn't compare us with our siblings or friends, and treats us as an individual
- Is supportive and encourages us
- Allows us free time to do our own thing
- Takes an interest in our work and hobbies
- Tries to help when needed
- Tries to keep us motivated
- Recognises and values our abilities
- Can't predict our future!



Glossary

As in all professions, education abounds with jargon – usually (but not always!) useful to those who work in education, but often off-putting and impenetrable to those who don't, including parents.

The kind of language used to describe different aspects of learning for different kinds of pupils is worth knowing, as it enables parents to ask the kinds of questions they need to – and to decode the responses.

The following glossary covers the most common terminology in use.

Accelerated learning (or acceleration)

This may involve increasing the pace of learning or moving faster through curriculum content. Pupils may, for example, cover Key Stage 3 in two years rather than three; they may also, in some instances, take examinations earlier than usual or move into an older age group for one or more subjects.

Attainment

Standards achieved against objectively defined levels of performance e.g. SATs, GCSEs.

Achievement

Knowledge, skills and understanding gained through learning and attitudes, values and other aspects of personal development.

Assessment for learning

This means giving ongoing – or formative – assessment to improve pupils' understanding and the quality of their work, based on how well they are doing in a particular aspect of work or a task. This may happen in class through discussions or through written comments on work. It contrasts with "summative assessment", which is applied at the end of a significant period of learning or schooling (e.g. GCSEs) and gives an indication of performance against national or "normative" criteria.

Differentiation

This means a teacher differing or adapting learning objectives, tasks, the level of support or resources and/or the assessment given to a pupil to reflect perceived needs/ability.

Extended learning (or extension work)

Extended learning means deeper learning, more complex in content, concepts or tasks (not more of the same). Extension may involve, for example, approaches which prioritise high-level reasoning, problem-solving and critical thinking. Extension will also involve dealing with advanced subject knowledge and ideas.

Enriched learning (or enrichment)

This involves additional, broader and qualitatively different learning which may include greater depth or complexity. It may involve learning with experts in the field (i.e. through "masterclasses"), learning in real situations, and/or learning in a different context from that of school.

Cognitive ability tests (CATs)

Cognitive ability tests assess a range of reasoning skills, covering verbal reasoning, quantitative reasoning and non-verbal reasoning.

Verbal reasoning assesses reasoning processes using the medium of words (e.g. opposites, relationships, deduction and categorization). It is not an assessment of reasoning with words, nor wider language skills such as speaking, listening or writing. Quantitative tests follow the same process, using numbers in place of words. Non-verbal tests look at reasoning processes using shapes and figures.

A mean average of 120 plus (or such a score in any one of the three tested categories) is a high score and will indicate a child who is in the upper quartile of ability. Tests of course are only one indicator, and may be flawed for a number of reasons.

Learning objectives

The knowledge and skills the teacher wishes pupils to acquire in a lesson or series of lessons. Learning outcomes are what the pupil will be able to do as a result of the learning.



Series Editor

Hilary Lowe

Hilary Lowe has written, advised and presented widely on the education of more able pupils. She led a major national professional development programme for Gifted and Talented Coordinators and has designed national training and guidance materials. She is currently an Education Adviser with NACE.



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