

Signs of Giftedness and Talents in Young Children

November 2025

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Author

C. June Maker, Ph.D., Litt.D.

Professor Emerita, The University of Arizona, USA

Published by:

King Abdulaziz and His Companions Foundation
for Giftedness and Creativity (Mawhiba)

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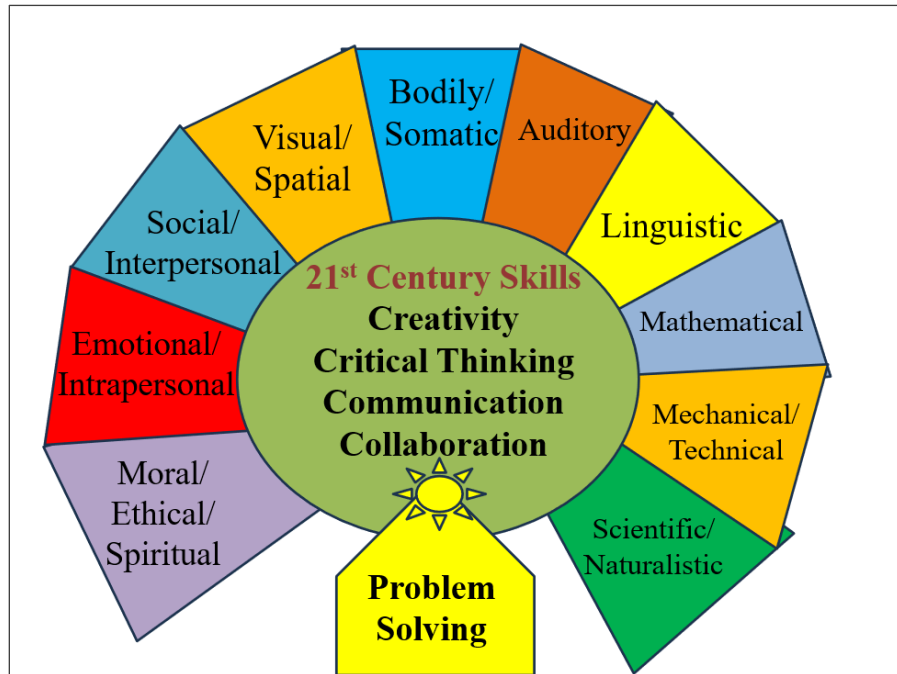
Professor Emerita, The University of Arizona, USA

Parents are the first adults who can recognize children's talents and giftedness. They can also be the best identifiers if they are open to seeing a variety of abilities and encouraging children to express these abilities. In one of my early experiences with parents and children, one mother insisted we were wrong about one of her children and right about the other one. In her opinion, we were "right" about the child who could read well, but "wrong" about the one who liked to work puzzles and draw. One evening, we organized a big "exploring center" in which parents could come with their children and participate in some of the activities and assessments we had designed. This mother followed her first daughter to the linguistic center and was pleased to see how her child responded. She then followed her second daughter to the spatial analytical center where children were working tangram puzzles. The mother tried to work one of the puzzles but could not. Her daughter solved that puzzle quickly and then several other more difficult ones. Mother came to me with tears in her eyes and said "You were right. She could work those puzzles and I couldn't! Her abilities are just different from what I expected." Parents and other family members need to expand their awareness of the different abilities children can have, competencies essential for the world of the future.

The Prism of Learning

Over the years of observing children and designing assessments of talents and giftedness, my colleagues and I have developed a framework for thinking about, observing, assessing, and developing talents. The model includes ten talents, all of which are ignited by problem solving and all of which include the essential skills considered important in the world of the 21st Century: creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. The framework and talents are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Talents and Skills Parents, Caregivers, Teachers, and Others Can Observe



In the following sections, readers will find a short description of each of the talents and a list of some behaviors that can be observed to indicate possible talent or giftedness in that area. Pictures of children exhibiting some of those qualities also are included in figures. The behaviors have been seen and documented by observers from many cultures, languages, countries, and types of experience (e.g., parents, grandparents, other caretakers, teachers, researchers in education of the gifted, and individuals who have special talents). The most recent project was conducted in the USA and the UAE. Assessments were field tested and implemented in both English and Arabic, with observers and language from the country and culture of the children being assessed.

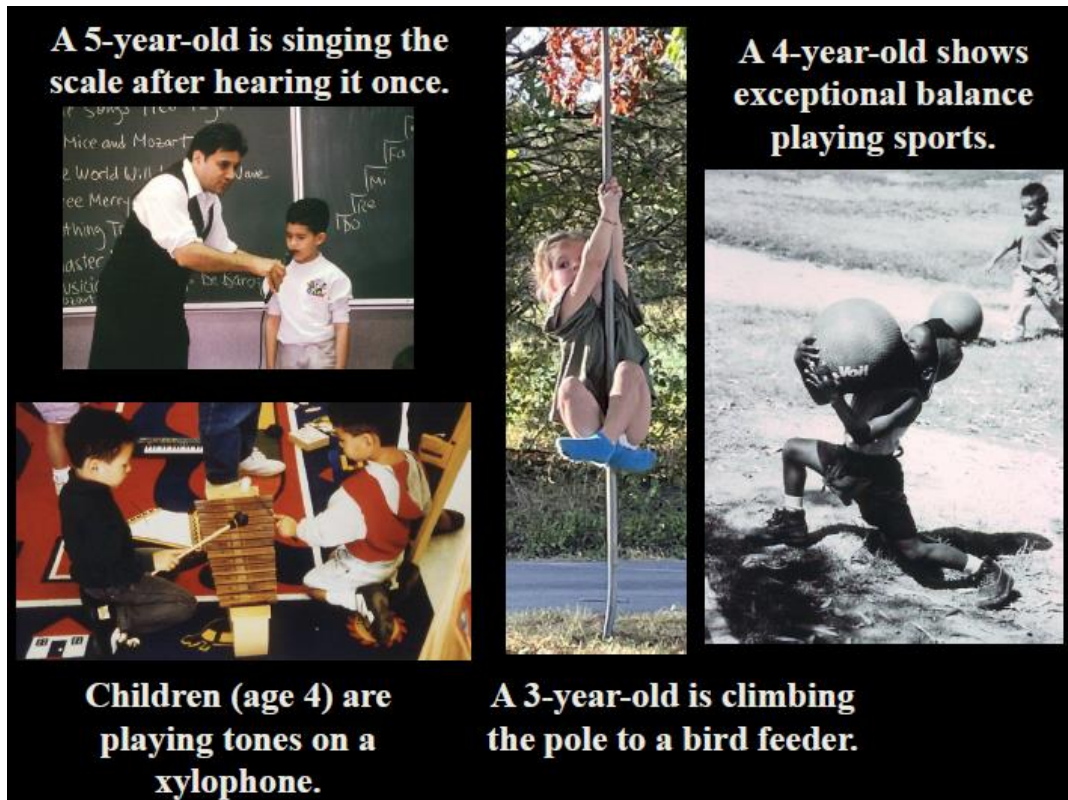
Auditory/Sound Talents

Auditory/Sound abilities are skills in hearing, producing, and using sounds in different ways. Figure 2 shows young children with auditory/sound and bodily/somatic talents. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Keeps a steady beat;
- Recognizes and imitates a pattern of beats;
- Remembers high, medium, and low tones;
- Creates patterns of beats and tones;
- Puts together rhythms and tones to create songs and chants; and
- Sings songs using the melody of the song (may make up own words to the melody).

Remembering and producing beats, tones, melodies, and rhythms after hearing them only once is a higher level of all these abilities. If this includes also remembering the words, this is an integration of auditory and linguistic talents. Auditory/Sound abilities can be observed while the child is singing, playing an instrument, reproducing sounds from the environment, reciting the Qu'ran, or other similar situations.

Figure 2: Examples of Young Children Demonstrating Auditory/Sound and Bodily/Somatic Talents



Bodily/Somatic Talent

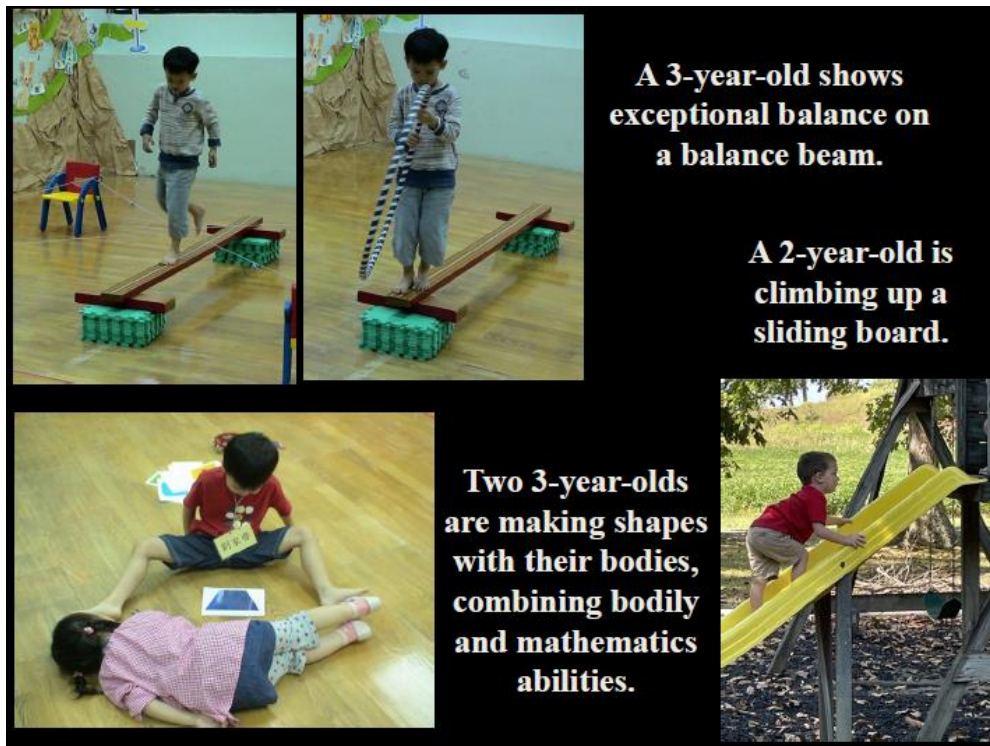
Bodily/Somatic abilities include large muscle movement, small muscle movement, touch, taste, and smell. Figure 3 shows children with bodily/somatic talent expressed in different ways and bodily/somatic combined with mathematical abilities. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Balances easily on one foot or walking on a balance beam, including when still, carrying something, or moving arms;
- Imitates series of movements accurately after watching them, including creating dances to music;

- Creates own movements and expressions that tell a story (e.g., acting) or illustrate words or ideas;
- Plays sports with proficiency in controlling balls, bats, own body, and other equipment;
- Identifies food or other things by their smell or flavor; and
- Identifies objects by touching rather than seeing them.

These abilities can be observed in a variety of settings, including during make-believe play, playing games with others, and playing organized sports. High levels in sports include winning games and competitions, while high levels in other areas include creating and enacting dances and performances.

Figure 3: A Boy with Exceptional Balance, One with Strength and Courage, and Children Combining Bodily and Mathematical Talents



Emotional/Intrapersonal Talent

Emotional/Intrapersonal abilities are the skills people need to understand themselves and manage their emotions. Figure 4 shows young children who understood, expressed, and managed their emotions effectively. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Identifies own emotions and explains why he or she feels that way;
- Emotions identified are consistent with behavior and bodily expressions;
- Manages feelings in ways usually seen in more mature people;

- Recognizes the emotions of others and identifies possible reasons for their feelings; and
- Manages emotions in ways that are not hurtful to others or him/herself.

These behaviors can be observed in many situations involving family members, friends, and others. If a child needs to be disciplined, this is an opportunity to ask about feelings, reasons for feelings, and ways to manage those feelings in positive ways. Be sure to ask in a way that the child feels free to tell what is happening within him/herself. Be open to hearing what the child has to say rather than trying to elicit the answer you want to hear.

Figure 4: Examples of Young Children Showing Emotional/Intrapersonal, and Moral/Ethical Talents



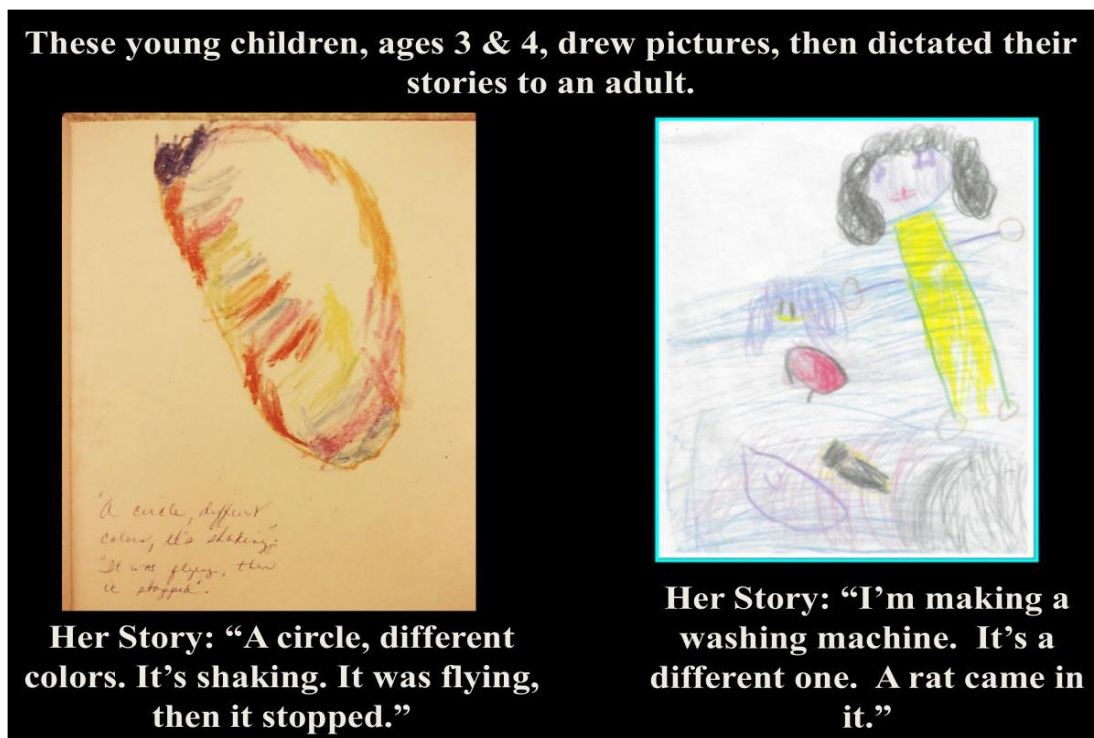
Linguistic Talent

Linguistic ability is skill in using words. It is the talent most often recognized as a sign of giftedness, but is only one of many ways to be gifted. Figure 5 has examples of drawings and stories told by young children with linguistic talent. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Begins to speak at an earlier age than most children (e.g., making complete sentences before walking);
- Knows the meanings of words, especially those not often used by others;

- Uses sophisticated vocabulary rather than what is common (e.g., using the word “forest” rather than “a lot of trees”);
- Uses colorful or unusual adjectives or adverbs (e.g., using the word “transparent” rather than “clear,” “difficult” rather than “hard”);
- When telling stories, changes voice to show different characters in the story; and
- Creates original stories, jokes, poems, and rhymes.

Figure 5: Examples of Drawings and Stories Dictated by Young Children with Linguistic Talent



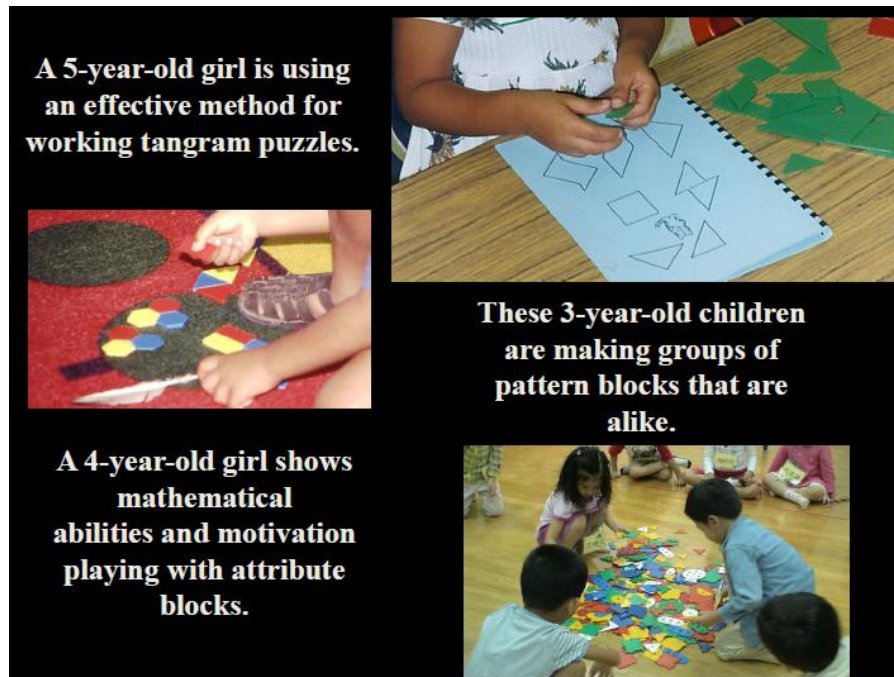
Mathematical Talent

Mathematical abilities include understanding and logic in using visual models, numbers, mathematical symbols, and objects to communicate relationships and ideas. Figure 6 has examples of young children who are showing mathematical talents and motivation using attribute blocks, Tangrams, and pattern blocks. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Works difficult puzzles with materials that have no models to follow such as Tangrams or Pattern Blocks;
- Works difficult math problems such as multiplication, division, and fractions rather than simple addition and subtraction;

- Creates many ways to make a certain number, such as 8 (e.g., 4+4, 3+5, 10-2, 13-8, a word problem, or a graph);
- Notices many characteristics of materials similar to attribute blocks (e.g., shape, color, thickness, size) and makes groups use many characteristics and more than one characteristic in a group; and
- Counts backward and forward, including counting by tens.

Figure 6: Examples of Young Children Showing Mathematical Motivation, Effective Strategies, and Talents



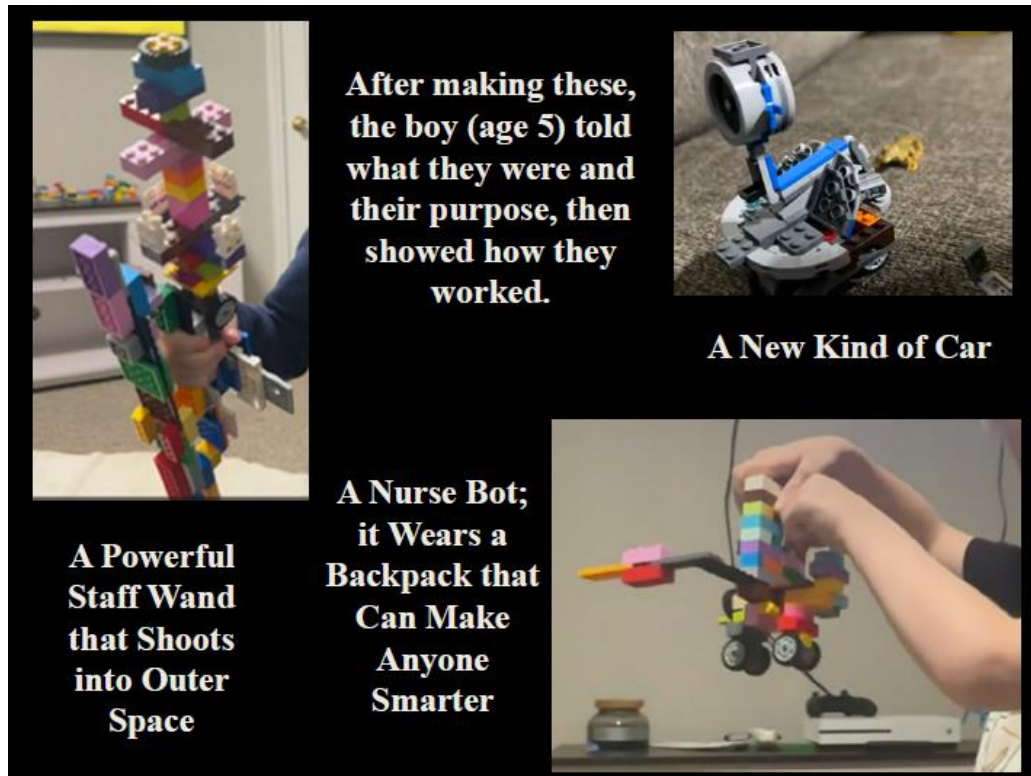
Mechanical/Technical Talent

Mechanical/Technical abilities include understanding, creating, and repairing machines or other tools that help people go places or do things. This includes understanding how forces work to make things move, such as angles, speed, electricity, and batteries. Figure 7 shows examples of creative mechanical/technical products made by a young boy with exceptional mechanical/technical talent. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Creates things that move using materials such as Legos without following a pattern or instructions;
- Makes things move using height and speed such as when making marble runs;
- Creates many different original or complex mechanical constructions that function as designed; and

- Shows understanding of how gears work to make things move.

Figure 7: Constructions Made by a Young Boy with Exceptional Mechanical/Technical Talent



Moral/Ethical/Spiritual Talent

Moral/Ethical/Spiritual abilities include understanding and behaving according to universal ethical principles such as not stealing, being honest, respecting and caring for the environment, and treating others as you would like to be treated. Love, compassion, and kindness toward others are important components of these principles. Moral/Ethical/Spiritual ability is not connected to any religion, but instead has a focus on moral and ethical principles accepted across all religions. Spiritual can be removed from the title if use of the word presents a problem. Figure 4 includes a drawing by a young girl with exceptional moral/ethical talent, and some of the pictures of children with scientific/naturalistic motivation and talent also show caring for others and the environment. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Treats adults and other children with kindness (e.g., sharing toys, helping others);
- Shows appreciation for what others do for him/her;
- Talks about honesty, fairness, sharing, and correcting harmful behavior;
- Distinguishes between “good people” and “bad people” using ethical principles;

- Tries to resolve conflicts and arguments between people; and
- Wants to give away toys or other things to children who do not have much money.

Scientific/Naturalistic Talent

Scientific/Naturalistic abilities are skills in observing the characteristics of living and non-living natural things, identifying them, classifying them, and understanding how they are connected. Figure 8 shows young children who are very interested in living things, including two who are helping their father (social/interpersonal and moral/ethical) remove debris after he pruned a tree. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Notices characteristics of different kinds of plants and living creatures (e.g., different flowers or leaves on plants, differences between insects and birds or between birds and mammals such as cats and dogs);
- Enjoys being outside in natural settings;
- Can tell the differences in sounds made by different living things;
- Enjoys collecting leaves, insects, rocks, and other living and non-living things;
- Knows which living and non-living things live in different environments (e.g., ocean, forest, beach, desert);
- Can explain why certain living and non-living things live in the environments where they are found; and
- Can explain why and how people and animals are alike.

Figure 8: Examples of Young Children with Scientific/Naturalistic and Social/Interpersonal Talents and Motivation



Social/Interpersonal Talent

Social/Interpersonal abilities are the skills we need to be friends and work with other people. Children with social/interpersonal skills notice how other people are feeling, understand or try to understand why they feel that way, and accept differences in people. They can work well with others, get along with brothers and sisters, and often have many friends. Figure 9 shows young children working and playing together, demonstrating their social/interpersonal talents and moral/ethical abilities. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Makes positive comments about others;
- Tries to cooperate with others, including those who are different or might be difficult;
- Can identify own behavior when participating in a group;
- Can identify alternative ways to interact if having problems with others;
- Tries to resolve conflicts involving others;
- Makes friends easily, including with strangers and children from other cultures; and
- Prefers to interact with others when in a group rather than focusing on a phone or iPad.

Figure 9: Examples of Young Children with Social/Interpersonal Talent and Motivation

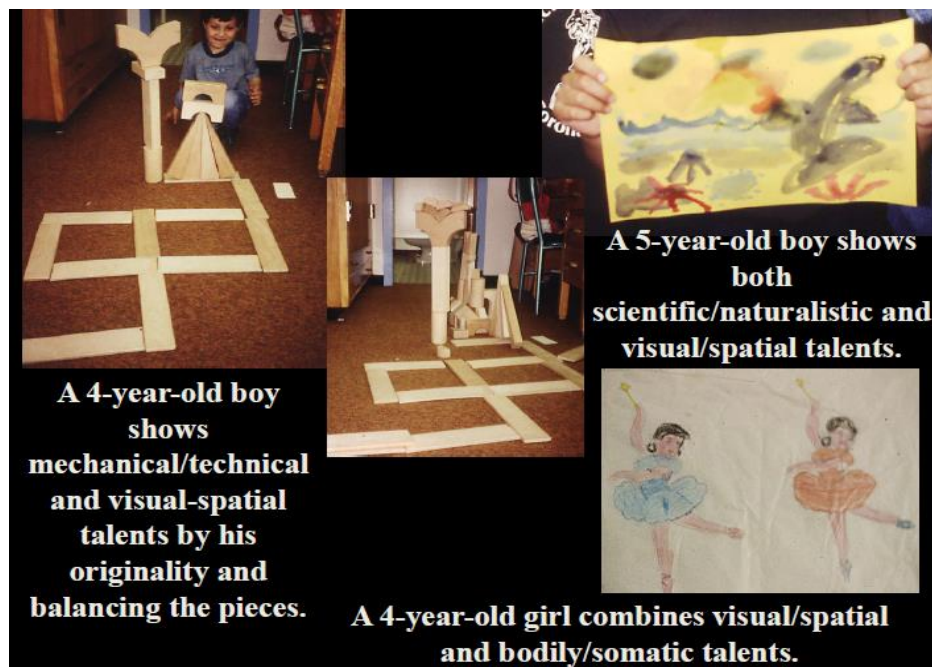


Visual/Spatial Talent

Visual/Spatial abilities are skills in seeing shapes, colors, and objects through physical eyes as well as seeing images clearly in one's mind. Being able to re-create these images is part of this ability, along with the capability to recognize how something has been transformed into something else. Creating new two-dimensional or three-dimensional images that communicate an idea or a process is a form of this ability. These talents often are combined with other abilities. Figure 10 shows products made by young children with visual/spatial talents combined with other talents. Figure 5 also shows how visual/spatial abilities are combined with linguistic talents. Here are some behaviors parents and caregivers can observe:

- Identifies colors, shapes, and objects;
- Re-creates an image using a different form (e.g., making a 3-D form from a picture or drawing);
- Creates new constructions or drawings from images in her/his mind;
- Creates original constructions or drawings that are visually appealing;
- Creates visual products that are humorous; and
- Notices subtle differences such as color, size, shape, and function.

Figure 10: Examples of Products Created by Young Children with Visual/Spatial Talent Combined with Other Talents



Motivation

The desire to engage in certain types of activities often is just as important as the abilities themselves. If a child is not interested in a certain talent area, he or she will not continue to develop that ability, especially when tasks become more difficult, but if interested and motivated, will appreciate the challenge of those that are more complex. During our research, observers have identified indicators of interest and motivation that can be seen in all talent areas and at all developmental stages. The young boy in Figure 8 definitely is motivated to learn about fish, and the young boy who created the well-balanced construction in Figure 10 is motivated to create a tower that stands and holds other blocks! Here are some examples of behaviors indicating motivation and interest:

- Focuses on a task or activity for an extended period of time;
- Shows or verbally expresses enjoyment;
- Asks to do it again or continue;
- When in a store, asks for materials related to that talent area (e.g., visual arts materials, mechanical/technical materials, books and word games, math games and hands-on materials);
- Persists on difficult tasks or activities; and
- Follows through to completion.

Final Thoughts

All of us have some things we do well and some things we do not do so well. They can be called strengths and weaknesses, or when at a higher or lower level, can be called talents or giftedness and challenges or disabilities. All children, no matter how many weaknesses or disabilities they have, can develop their strengths and talents if parents, caregivers, and teachers **focus** on what they **can** do rather than on what they **cannot** do! Certainly, everyone needs to help children develop ways to improve their weaknesses; however, the focus of attention needs to be on encouraging children to express their talents and providing ways to nurture their abilities.

During many years of working with children with disabilities and those with exceptional talents, I have learned that often children develop their own ways to combine talents, including melding strengths and weaknesses. Researchers also have found that when the emphasis is on weaknesses, children tend to develop a “flat” profile with weaknesses improving but with decreases in strengths. On the other hand, when the emphasis is on strengths, the entire profile goes up! Often-observed combinations are visual/spatial with linguistic, mathematical, mechanical/technical, scientific/naturalistic, and emotional/intrapersonal. Figure 10 has examples of visual/spatial products combined with other talents.

The young boy whose mechanical/technical constructions are shown in Figure 7 has five diagnosed disabilities, including legal blindness. Clearly, he is gifted in mechanical/technical

ability. His mother has provided him with many different types of construction materials and encouraged him to experiment freely with the parts and how they go together. He also has a high level of talent in linguistic ability. Some of the examples given in the list of linguistic behaviors are from his vocabulary. For example, when his mother wore her new glasses, he was sitting on her lap. He looked at her and said, "Mommie, your new glasses are transparent!" She appreciates his use of words and encourages him to use different ones. His most recent joke is "What building has the most stories?" Most of us think of all the tall buildings we know and try to remember which is the tallest. His answer: "The library!" Another joke shows his scientific/naturalist understanding combined with his humor and linguistic talent: "Why did the clam scream in pain? (laughing) Because he pulled a "mussel"! One of the most important things his mother has done is tell him every day: "You are my best friend, and I will always love you."

Acceptance, love, encouragement, open-mindedness, laughing at their jokes, and willingness to help are important keys to recognizing and nurturing giftedness and talent in young children.