

# PHP'S PARENTING FORUM



NAGC provides a Parent Resource Specialist service, whose role involves supporting parents and others who advocate for appropriate and challenging educational opportunities for high-potential children and youth. Our Parent Resource Specialist, Dr. Robin Schader, has agreed to expand her services to include a regular “question-and-answer” column for *Parenting for High Potential*.



Dr. Robin Schader

**Important Notice.** *Dr. Schader's services as NAGC's Parent Resource Specialist are designed to help readers find and understand general information on parenting high-ability children. The responses in this column (or on NAGC's website) contain advice and comments from individuals with training and experience in gifted education. Responses from the Parent Specialist, or other participating experts, are not intended to provide a basis for action in particular circumstances without consideration by a competent professional. By submitting your question for a response, you understand and agree that your question, and the Parent Specialist's answer, may be used by NAGC in print or on the NAGC website, although names and other obvious identifiers will be removed. Often the best way to resolve issues for your child is to talk with your child's teacher, school principal, pediatrician, or doctor. If you haven't already done so, we encourage you to investigate the resources available through your state or local gifted education organization. Contact information for NAGC state affiliates can be found on the NAGC website at: <http://www.nagc.org/> or by calling NAGC at (202) 785-4268. Submit your questions in an email, or as document attachment to an email, to: [parentspecialist@nagc.org](mailto:parentspecialist@nagc.org)*

## *Excerpts from Parent Email: Conversations and Questions*

- “My daughter is now in second grade. She is very bright and can do the work asked of her, but she will do just about anything other than her work. At home she'll pet the dog, get a drink, go to the bathroom. At school, the teacher says she'll look out the window, doodle on her paper, etc. I've tried setting a timer and offering incentives, but nothing seems to be effective. Her teachers and I are working on this together to try to get her moving. They say she can do any paper they give her, but she just doesn't seem motivated to get it done. What can we do?”
- “Teachers and administration in our son's school are mentioning a dual diagnosis of gifted and ADHD because of his bossiness, stubbornness, rigidity, impulsivity, and argumentativeness. I'm not sure why these characteristics are becoming more noticed. Are there ways to channel the behaviors in a positive way instead of punishing him? What kind of resources might we consider?”
- “I have a daughter who is very bright and seems to get bored very easily. I think she needs more challenging work. How can I help her learn more?”
- My fifth-grade son is having problems at school. He's been identified as a gifted child. In speaking with the school psychologist as well as a private psychologist regarding some of his behavioral issues, both of them agree that he is academically bored. What are some of the topics I should discuss with his school to keep him engaged?
- “My two children, ages 13 and 10, seem to be doing very well in school and they seem to be very well adjusted to life as gifted persons. My problem is personal. I don't really know how to deal with raising gifted children. I myself was not a great student... I can't keep up with all the questions and of course I can't answer half of their many questions. I feel very stupid sometimes and I am sure they sense that at times. What can I do?”

While the immediate concerns in these five excerpts appear to be quite different, each situation can benefit from meaningful conversation. The road to a workable solution often begins with the asking of good questions. What is really going on? If you can get beyond the surface of an issue, many creative ideas begin to appear. You'll also find that some of the best ideas for turning a situation around will come through teamwork with your child. Here are some ways to include him or her in the problem-solving process by asking and discussing questions that go beyond “How was school today?”

As a parent, you know you're walking a fine line when you want to know more than a child easily divulges. Just asking one question (“Was school fun?” or “Why didn't you turn in your homework?”) generally won't result in a useful answer. On the other hand, a series of questions can make a child feel as though he/she is being interrogated. To avoid this predicament, let your child know why you're asking, and how the answer can help both of you discover more.

## Include Your Child

Remember, children are an integral part of their own learning process. Yet, without open discussion, how can you invite and encourage your child's participation?

Don't wait for difficult times to sit down for a talk. Thoughtful conversation is a powerful way to consistently show you care. One middle-school child recently said to his counselor, "I don't want to be micro-managed by nosey parents who pressure me about what's happening at school, but if nobody asks, I feel overlooked and neglected. Everyone wants somebody to ask about them and really care."

Sparking a good conversation is not always easy. Have you ever watched a talented interviewer develop rapport with the person they're interviewing? They don't ask questions that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." It simply doesn't invite continued, mindful discussion. In general, it's a good idea to stay away from questions that can have a single word response unless that's all the conversation you want. As a contrast, try some open-ended questions that start with the words, "Tell me about..." You'll not only learn more, but you'll also be encouraging your child to carefully consider his or her thoughts and feelings.

Christina Wright, a contributor to the online Bank Street Forum, wrote, "It is a pleasure to try to answer a good question. A good question feels like someone has opened a door into an interesting room you have never visited. ... Learning to ask good questions takes practice. [Children] will respond positively to the respect and genuine interest that a good question conveys."

## Ask Good Questions

When working with gifted students, many of today's excellent teachers use ideas from inquiry-based learning along with higher-order thinking strategies. What does all that mean, and how can you use the same information at home? Inquiry-based learning is what most of us have practiced as parents, without giving it a formal name. As noted in the Chinese proverb "Tell me and I forget, show me and I remember, involve me and I understand," the foundation of inquiry-based learning is the active use of a child's questions and curiosities. An inquiring learner naturally looks for information by asking questions, gathering ideas, and then checking what is found for accuracy. This differs from traditional learning because the focus is not on regurgitating prepared answers. Instead students are offered a framework and focus for their questions, and they learn to look beyond the surface through questioning techniques. Children who are comfortable with inquiry-based learning can more easily find ways to circumvent boredom.

Critical thinking requires advanced questioning skills. As noted in Richard Paul's 1993 book *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*, the role of the adult is to let students find ways to "travel to a viable desti-

nation" of their own design. For a useful table of question categories and examples based on Paul's work, go to: <http://www-ed.fnal.gov/trc/tutorial/taxonomy.html>

The article "The Art of Questioning" by Dennis Palmer Wolf not only discusses the use of different types of questions, but also explains why and how students and parents will benefit from mastering this important ability. <http://www.exploratorium.edu/IFI/resources/workshops/artofquestioning.html>

You will find more information about inquiry-based learning along with ways to create opportunities for useful discussion in the article "The Art of Asking Good Questions" from the YouthLearn Initiative at the Educational Development Center. <http://www.youthlearn.org/learning/teaching/questions.asp>

## Establish a Framework for Ongoing Discussions

Many gifted children and adults love to voice their opinion, and will back up their views with numerous (often infuriatingly correct) examples. They are also quick to point out illogical reasoning in others, and they may be less tolerant of differing positions and differing abilities. It's important that we help our children develop an understanding of the value others bring. For example, being smart doesn't necessarily translate into being a better person. Lessons such as this are more effectively learned if the child figures it out him/herself. So, how can you invite questions and conversation to encourage such insight?

Talking can easily lead to "arguing," as noted in one of the above excerpts. Here's a way to consciously encourage the healthy development of those natural debating skills. When my children were young, we kept a digital kitchen timer handy in the car (to make use of the "little" time going to classes, the store, practices, etc.). As issues arose (both in personal life and in the news), we would open an impromptu mini-debate. With three minutes for each side, pro and con, followed by a one-minute rebuttal opportunity for both, we could work up quite a discussion in less than 10 minutes start to finish. The rule was made that when the last person spoke, the conversation about that topic was done for the time being: no winner, no loser. This difficult but important rule allows breathing space. One other caveat: the pro and con side was decided by the flip of a coin. When you let chance decide the position you must represent, you'll find that just as often as not, you must present an argument counter to your own current belief: an excellent way to learn to think about an issue from a completely different perspective. It calls for creativity, inventiveness, and problem solving. For example, when the no smoking in restaurants law was on the ballot in California, we had one of our car-debates. One had to take the side of "wait, smokers shouldn't be discriminated against" and the other argued for clean air in closed rooms. Over the years, we worked our way through topics such as

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Another striking similarity in the research arose from the in-depth interviews. We noted that the women tended to have an international component in their backgrounds. We referred to it as global awareness. In some cases the women were from various countries around the world, but in others, the girls merely visited other countries, traveled through culturally different areas of the United States, or had a deep understanding of other cultures. We came to believe that an aspect of MIT's mission appears to involve education for the betterment of the planet, which was reflected as each successive interviewee offered her international connection.

We noted, however, an application of this global awareness that had implication for intellectual development. We concluded that global awareness provided an expanded playground for their talents and dreams. In other words, these young women were not limited in their thinking about their careers or applications for their academics. They knew a vast world beyond their town line. Learning held more interest when it had more application.

One young interviewee had dreams of building bridges between the islands of Japan after a visit there with her family. Another wanted to give voice to African animals of the wild by building natural environments for their protection, including educational facilities to support community awareness of the plight of these hunted species. The inspiration came from family visits

to zoos in the U.S. and in Europe. These are no small dreams and are not limited to the vicinity of their upbringing. The goal of college was not to get a good job but, rather, to use that education as a foundation for a positive impact on the planet and in so doing, experience a productive life.

Dreams rise to the level of exposure, and families of MIT women exposed their daughters to the planet. They provided exposure to ideas and environments, encouraged global dreams, and thus gave their daughters a rich medium for the development of their talents and passions.

When a purposeful home life and the development of a sturdy work ethic as a foundation are combined with the cope and conquer skills needed to confidently confront new challenges, both personal and academic, and an invitation to the world is offered as an avenue for skills and talents, it is no wonder how these girls arrived on the doorstep of the "Infinite Corridor" at MIT with a book bag logo that read "Yes, You Can!"

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shoplifting, cheating on tests, reading at the dinner table, larger allowances, later bedtimes, etc. Sometimes it was tough, sometimes witty and fun. The bottom line is that a strategy like this encourages conversation, offers all parties a chance to see things from another side, and opens the door for later questions.

For more ideas, read "Teach Your Child to Think and Make Parenting Fun Again" by Richard A. Shade and Patti Garrett from the March 2001 issue of *Parenting for High Potential*: <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1078>

There's a lot to learn when we talk together about substantive ideas and really listen to what we hear. You'll find that by practicing discussion and questioning skills you can build a strong framework for easy, frequent conversations that will benefit your family throughout the years.

"The important thing is not to stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reasons for existing. One cannot help but be in awe when he contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality."

Edmund Burke

"The test of a good teacher is not how many questions he can ask his pupils that they will answer readily, but how many questions he inspires them to ask him which he finds it hard to answer."

Alice Wellington Rollins