



# The Conundrum of High Expectations

How to navigate expectations for your gifted child when faced with astonishing potential

By Gail Post, Ph.D.

**O**ur gifted children exude potential wherever they go. Creative, intense, inquisitive, insightful, and smart beyond their years. Given this potential, how do we grapple with *our* expectations for them?

What *should* we expect from our child? How much should we push them to achieve? Will our involvement and encouragement propel them to excel, or will it backfire?

## The Role of Expectations

Expectations set a framework for values that children can understand and likely will internalize. All families hold basic expectations. Examples might include truthfulness, family loyalty, manners, a work ethic, cultural practices, and compassion toward those less fortunate. When we hold positive, realistic, and *appropriately* high expectations for our child, it lays the groundwork for their own path toward internalizing values related to responsibility and achievement.

Expectations also boost a child's self-esteem. They see that we trust them and feel good about themselves when they meet

expectations, such as completing a difficult task or behaving responsibly. They might complain about mowing the lawn or babysitting their younger brother, but entrusting them with these tasks builds confidence. When children are encouraged to tackle challenging (although not *overly* difficult) demands, they often rise to meet these challenges. And if they feel free to fail and recover, to learn from experience, and do not internalize shame when there are setbacks, they build resilience and the confidence to try again.

## So ... what might go wrong?

Most gifted kids want to excel, but anxiety, perfectionism, poor executive functioning skills (such as organization, planning, time management, or study skills), or social pressure interfere. They are often well aware of their abilities and potential, and notice how much their learning trajectory differs from that of their same-age peers. Even when parents or teachers do not apply pressure, many gifted children are consumed with being the best. Some are driven to repeatedly prove their giftedness through awards and



## Parent Self-Awareness Inventory

- How does my child's giftedness affect my expectations for them?
- What comments from professionals (such as teachers and pediatricians) or advice from friends, family, books, articles, and social media have influenced my expectations?
- How do my childhood or young-adult experiences associated with achievements and giftedness influence my expectations?
- How much of my self-esteem and confidence is tied to my child's accomplishments?
- Am I expecting too much, given their abilities, drive, and interests ... *or not enough?*

top grades. Many of them also expect all schoolwork to be easy and interpret any need for help as confirmation that they are no longer gifted.

Furthermore, every gifted child, family, and school environment is different. Each child is navigating their unique emotional needs, family and social interactions, expectations from their school and community, and often, a painful awareness of their very human limitations. And signs of asynchronous development (where emotional maturity lags behind cognitive abilities) or twice-exceptional conditions (with a competing diagnosis that complicates their academic or emotional adjustment) create additional challenges. Given these considerations, it is hard to know whether our expectations will help or hinder their progress.

As parents, we also come with our own set of expectations. Most of us expect our children to learn from our values, behave appropriately, do reasonably well in school, and exert effort when required. We also may be influenced by family-of-origin beliefs, peer pressure, our own unmet needs associated with our education or career, and worries about how encouraging our child might be perceived by others. For example, in an online survey of parenting concerns and attitudes among 428 parents of gifted children,<sup>1</sup> 90% indicated feeling a daunting level of responsibility to help their child find a meaningful education “a lot” or “always,



and 52% reported worrying “a lot” or “always” about how much to push their child.

### How Parents Can Navigate Their Expectations

There are several ways parents can assess and navigate expectations in supporting their gifted child.

#### Attuning to Your Child's Needs

Problems are more likely to occur when we are out of sync with what our child needs. Of course, we are not mind readers, and sometimes it will be hit or miss. But we know our child best and are tasked with paying close attention to whether our involvement is necessary, when to insist upon cooperation, and when to back off.

Decisions and expectations may depend upon our child's mood and frustration tolerance at any given moment, along with their developmental level and age. What we might expect from a 5-year-old differs from expectations for a 15-year-old. Staying attuned to our child's level of emotional reactivity, the situations that spark anger, negativity, or fear, and their typical response to challenges or demands can inform our decisions. Do they get angry and give up easily? Are they driven to the point of exhaustion? Are they overly cautious and timid? Do they behave impulsively or rebel under pressure?

We know that our gifted child's passion for learning sparks their engagement. But not all learning is fun, and noticing what motivates them when the task is aversive or boring is helpful. Do they procrastinate and avoid challenging work? Does fear of failure or embarrassment thwart their motivation? Are they overthinkers who dissect every detail at length? Do they struggle with deficits in executive functioning skills? We can support their efforts when we recognize which strategies work best given the above considerations.

#### Awareness of Our Own Needs

While our ambitions and worries stem from a genuine love and concern for our child, we also may be influenced by our personal insecurities, unmet needs from our own childhood, feelings about our career path, or pressure from other adults on how to parent.

Given the baggage we may bring to our role as parents, a compassionate and attuned understanding of our own needs and influences is essential.<sup>2</sup> This includes a keen awareness of our motivations, an understanding of how we respond to others' opinions, and how we manage our emotions when stressed.

### Understanding Our Role

Encouragement, limit-setting, and guidance are essential components of parenting, particularly when our children struggle. Almost all children fall behind at some point, whether in math, meeting deadlines, or doing their chores. When we create an expectation that our child should accomplish something they are capable of achieving, it tells them we respect their abilities and potential. When the bar is set too high, though, or when failure is not an option, a child might feel pressured to perform beyond their capabilities. Consider the following:

- **How important is the immediate task?** Some tasks are more important than others and may warrant our involvement and encouragement. For example, submitting a college scholarship application by the deadline may be more critical than completing a fifth-grade book report. Our child's age, temperament, and emotional adjustment need to be considered along with the significance of the immediate goals.
- **Does my involvement help or hinder their progress?** Sometimes kids get stuck. We are there to guide them, and sometimes, intervene by providing support or goal setting. We know our child best and learn over time what approaches might work (e.g., gentle encouragement, incentives, humor, firm limits, or working on a step-by-step plan), and which will backfire. While some grumbling is expected, concerning reactions include rebellion, anxiety, hopelessness, or depression.
- **What is the long-term impact of my involvement?** We don't have a crystal ball; however, we need to consider both the current and long-term impact of our expectations and involvement. We might believe that applying pressure and setting exceptionally high expectations "builds character" and instills habits that lead to further success. Some children will rise to a challenge, benefit from this approach, and as adults, feel grateful they were pushed to achieve. Others, though, may become insecure, anxious, or perfectionistic. They also might learn to avoid risks, or conversely, rely on us too much.
- **What must I avoid?** Excessive pressure to achieve implies there is only one path to success, mistakes are never permitted, and accomplishments are more important than effort. Regardless of our frustration, it is essential to avoid coercive, shaming, or retaliatory strategies. Harsh criticism, physical punishment, or conveying our profound disappointment can leave our child distressed, anxious, and bitter.<sup>3</sup>



Our children need to know that we trust them and have faith in their capabilities. We might also share some of our own disappointments or struggles, along with how we eventually overcame them.

Working alongside our children when they need support and taking into account their strengths and struggles conveys our love, respect, and an attunement to who they are. A compassionate understanding of *our* own emotions and expectations will support and guide us as we navigate this complicated path. 💡

### Author's Note

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Post, G. (2022). *The gifted parenting journey: A guide to self-discovery and support for families of gifted children*. Gifted Unlimited.

<sup>2</sup> Seigel, D. J., & Hartzell, M. (2013). *Parenting from the inside out*. TarcherPerigee.

<sup>3</sup> Nelson, J. (2006). *Positive discipline: The classic guide to helping children develop self-discipline, responsibility, cooperation, and problem-solving skills*. Ballantine Books.