

Testing Your Gifted Child: A Springboard for Effective Advocacy

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For the rare gifted student whose educational needs have been met, individual assessment may not be a priority. However, for the vast majority who remain in inadequate programs, testing can be a potent ally. It can address parental concerns and bolster advocacy efforts when the curriculum is restrictive and gifted accommodations are sparse. A professional evaluation documents cognitive strengths, assesses academic achievement, and recommends specific strategies to meet a child's needs. It can support the need for advanced work and less drill and practice.

A thorough assessment incorporates test results, the tester's observations of the child, developmental information from the parents, and sometimes input from teachers. Intelligence tests explore cognitive abilities, which suggest how quickly a child will master concepts and advance through a curriculum. They examine reasoning, language, and processing skills; shed light on attention span and learning style; and offer objective insight into the child's ability profile. Achievement tests evaluate the student's academic progress and help ascertain whether he or she is in the appropriate grade and/or classes. Both types of test are used to determine what accommodations are needed at school.

Limited funding generally confines gifted assessment to IQ screening instruments administered by teachers or gifted program personnel rather than school psychologists. Used for admitting children into gifted programs, these assessments lack in-depth diagnostic capability. They are often administered in groups and thus do not allow for individual observation of a child's approach to tasks.

Private Testing versus Testing at School

If the school agrees to provide testing, it may yield critical information that is not otherwise available. However, schools often use such information only to determine whether a child can enter a program or have access to certain school options. Many parents who can afford it prefer independent testing by a professional who will evaluate their child's needs more broadly and consider a variety of educational possibilities, not just those offered by a particular school. Such a tester serves as an advocate, recommending ways to meet the child's needs. Additionally, private test results remain the property of the parents, who can decide what to do with them, whereas tests taken at school remain a part of the child's permanent record.

How to Choose a Private Tester

Parents should seek out a tester—a licensed psychologist, certified school psychologist, or tester working under their supervision—who enjoys gifted children and has tested many of them. Such a person knows how to recognize the reflective child who needs extra time to hone answers, how to support the perfectionist who is not used to making mistakes, and how to help the active child maintain focus with a fast presentation and opportunities to move around. Good rapport is critical for eliciting the child's best performance. Furthermore, someone who appreciates the curiosity, sensitivity, and humor of these children can make the testing session immensely satisfying.

Likewise, an experienced report writer knows how to emphasize the child's strengths in order to access gifted accommodations. Most testers document deficits to obtain interventions. Even when a gifted child has relative weaknesses, the report must recommend a two-pronged approach in which the child's strengths are supported and then additional modifications for weaknesses are made—without creating concern that the child shouldn't be in the gifted program.

Costs and What's Provided

The cost of assessment is based on the time it takes to test the child one-on-one, score (largely by hand) the answers, interpret the results, and write a report that reflects the child's ability profile. An IQ test and an achievement test (a combination frequently requested) usually take four or more hours to administer, but testers then spend far longer writing the report.

The report should include the child's developmental history, a clear description of each test given, an interpretation of the results, a description of the child's behavior during the test, a summary, and recommendations for what should be done at school and at home to support the child.

Questions to Ask

A post-test consultation is a good opportunity to ask specific questions about the testing, the interpretation of the scores, and educational options for the coming year. Testers of the gifted can suggest resources and perhaps help with advocacy after testing such as conferring with a teacher or principal about special provisions. The tester and parents (joined by the child if he or she is older) can discuss their concerns and decide on school recommendations to include in the final report.

Test Choices

Individual Intelligence (IQ) Tests

Most gifted assessment begins with an individual intelligence test that the child's school knows and accepts. Because several common tests have been revised since 2002, parents should request the latest editions (except in the case of the Stanford-Binet L-M; see table 1). Experienced testers should be able to suggest a test that can document both a child's strengths and any relative weaknesses that may require accommodations. However, much remains to be learned about this new generation of tests. Research is clarifying which tests are best under various circumstances and which portions are preferable for the gifted, and new scoring options are being devised. Parents need to be aware of these developments, because some testers may not be.

For example, gifted children are best identified by reasoning tasks (verbal, spatial, mathematical), and many score lower in processing skills, such as visual-motor speed (they may be reflective and perfectionistic) or short-term auditory memory (their memory for meaningful material may be much better than for nonmeaningful). But because the popular WISC-IV has doubled its emphasis on processing skills in the full-scale IQ (FSIQ), some clearly gifted reasoners earn FSIQ scores below the gifted range. Testers must be aware that when reasoning and processing scores differ by too much, the FSIQ is noninterpretable and a general ability index (GAI), based on the reasoning portions of the test, may be the best global estimate of ability.

Table 1 lists frequently used individual IQ tests, the age ranges for which they are designed, and factors to consider when using them to test the gifted. *Empowering Gifted Minds: Educational Advocacy That Works*, by Barbara Jackson Gilman with Quinn O'Leary (DeLeon, 2003), offers more information about the testing process and advocacy.

Table 1 Individual IQ tests

Test	Ages appropriate for (years.months)	Gifted testing considerations
Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, 4th ed. (WISC-IV)	6.0 through 16.11 (for gifted, use WAIS-III at 16)	Often requested by schools. Strong diagnostic test. Excellent verbal/visual-spatial balance, plus processing speed and memory. "Ceiling" extended since prior editions. GAI may need to be calculated instead of FSIQ.
Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, 3rd ed. (WAIS-III)	16.0 through adult	Strong adult test. Verbal/visual-spatial balance, plus memory and processing speed. Used to document the need for accommodations when deficits exist.
Wechsler Preschool and Primary Scale of Intelligence, 3rd ed. (WPPSI-III)	2.6 through 7.3, using forms for ages 2-3 and 4+ (use WISC-IV at 6)	Strong, child-friendly, early test of verbal/visual reasoning, some fine-motor skills, and general language use. Useful for gifted school/program entrance.
Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, 5th ed. (SB5)	2.0 through adult	Strong test of math and visual-spatial reasoning (verbal abstract reasoning is limited), plus memory. A score of 120+ (not 130) on Verbal or Nonverbal indicates giftedness. Consider scoring options: Rasch Ratio, Composite Roid Gifted, and Nonverbal Composites. Pair with SBL-M for better verbal coverage.
Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale—Form L-M	2.0 through 9+ (for assessment of highly gifted)	Excellent older reasoning test with less emphasis on processing skills. Used as a retest to differentiate higher levels of giftedness following high scores on another test. Features a ratio-based metric and very high scoring ceiling when used with younger children.
Differential Ability Scales (DAS)	6.0 through 17.11	Offers verbal, nonverbal, and spatial IQ scores and untimed spatial reasoning. Has a fairly high ceiling. Use the WAIS-III to document learning disabilities for ages 16–17.
Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Cognitive Ability (WJ III Cog)	2.0 through adult	Diagnostically useful with gifted/learning-disabled children. Emphasizes processing skills heavily. Gifted children may earn lower scores.
Naglieri Nonverbal Abilities Test (NNAT)	5.0 through 17.11	Test of visual abstract reasoning and pattern recognition. Useful (as are Ravens and UNIT) for children with visual-spatial strengths, culturally diverse backgrounds, hearing deficits, speech/language issues, or limited English. Avoid as sole test where high verbal abilities exist. A Wechsler is preferable.
Ravens Progressive Matrices: Coloured, Standard, Advanced	5.0 through adult	Strong nonverbal test of visual abstract reasoning and pattern recognition. See Naglieri.
Universal Nonverbal Intelligence Test (UNIT)	5.0 through 17.11	Features nonverbal instructions. See Naglieri.

Individual Achievement Tests

Individual achievement tests determine how advanced a child is in academic subject areas such as reading, math, writing, and spelling. Unlike grade-based tests, such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills, the California Achievement Test, and Terra Nova, individual achievement tests sample knowledge over many grade levels. They demonstrate what a child has already mastered and what he or she is ready to learn, which can be helpful for determining the type of work the child should be doing at school. These tests provide grade-equivalent scores, essential documentation when acceleration is being considered. All have norms for ages 6 and up, and they may also have norms for younger children. Ask the tester, as these norms vary by subtest (see table 2). Appropriate learning, which may require access to advanced instruction, should lead to achievement scores that approach IQ scores. When the scores are close, students are usually challenged and happy.

Table 2 Individual achievement tests

Test	Gifted testing considerations
Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement (WJ III Ach.)	Graduate school scoring ceiling is useful for teenagers and highly gifted individuals. Fluency tests (timed tests of simple reading, math, and writing) are less relevant unless accommodations for slow processing speed are needed.
Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, 2nd ed. (WIAT II)	Offers correlation with Wechsler IQ tests.
(WIAT-II) Kaufman Test of Educational Normative Update (K-TEA/NU) Achievement	Offers both brief and comprehensive forms.

Assessment Results

The benefits of testing become clear when the parents share the report with a child's school. A professional's evaluation now documents the child's needs and prescribes accommodations. The appropriate change, whether accelerated math, the hiring of a writing mentor, a full-grade skip, or enrollment in college classes during high school, is supported by the assessment. Testing provides unusual insight into the complex cognitive abilities of gifted children and ways to support them. Assessment tempers our conjectures with empirical analysis and allows us to arrive at meaningful conclusions about the needs of these children. Confident because we are able to substantiate our requests of teachers and school administrators, we become empowered, effective advocates.— *Barbara Jackson Gilman is associate director of the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado. She has extensive experience testing gifted children and making educational recommendations for them.*