

Outliers

Linda Silverman

“The school psychologist stopped testing after our child scored high enough to get into the gifted program.” “We have been told that it doesn’t matter how high a child’s IQ score is, since there aren’t any programs in our school for highly gifted children.” “I don’t want to know my child’s IQ.” “High IQ scores aren’t important; they don’t make people more successful.” “There aren’t enough exceptionally gifted kids to worry about.” “What are the benefits of taking another IQ test? We know our child is gifted. Isn’t that enough?”

I have heard comments such as these for decades, and each time I cringe. Who cares about the outliers? We do. It matters if a child is 2, 3, 4, or 5 standard deviations (SD) below the norm. And it matters if a child is 2, 3, 4, or 5 SD above the norm. Life experience differs dramatically as one veers further and further from the norm. It is important to be equipped with knowledge of the actual range of your child’s abilities in order to make wise decisions about schools, grade placement, where to pursue friends. It helps to understand the chasm between your child’s development and the development of age peers, as well as the real discrepancies between your child’s strengths and weaknesses. You know where to look for resources and support in your journey.

In the Dark Ages before Internet, parents would tell me that they went to the library to find books to help them understand their difficult child. They “happened upon” a book on giftedness, saw their child described on the pages, and burst into tears. Finding out that their child was gifted was an earth-shaking revelation that put all the pieces into place and sent them in a new direction. It was life changing. Now that information about giftedness is readily available on the Internet, and there are more programs for the gifted, discovering that a child is gifted may not be such a surprise. Is this enough to know?

If you attend meetings of a gifted advocacy group and they don’t seem to be talking about your child, or you attend a state or national conference on the gifted and they don’t seem to be talking about your child, or your child doesn’t appear to be learning anything new in school, despite the school’s attempts at differentiation, or your child just doesn’t fit in—even in the gifted program, or the only friends your child has are several years older, you need to know what you are dealing with. You need more information.

There are opportunities for children in the 145+ IQ range: schools, special programs, scholarships. There is support available for families of children in the 160+ IQ range. As much as we hear IQ tests put down, they have greater predictive validity than any other psychological measure. They open doors. Educators are more willing to make exceptions to their strict policy prohibiting acceleration when they see in black and white how exceptional this child really is. Assessing the full strengths of your child’s abilities provides access to parent support groups who understand what you are going through, who can share resources with you, and who have the wisdom that comes from experience with rare children. If you listen to those who have never encountered a child like yours, what clarity can they bring to your unique situation?

Aside from these practical concerns, “I don’t want to know” is like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. If you had a child with any other type of special need, you would want to be

informed. You would feel you had the responsibility to learn as much as you could so that you could do the best job you are capable of doing to meet your child's needs.

I believe that psychology has a responsibility to highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted children. It is essential for science to know that these outliers exist. They challenge our fundamental conceptions regarding the limits of human intelligence.

And I believe that at some time in the course of your child's life, it will be healing to know the full extent of his or her differences. It will put all the pieces together and put a positive spin on experiences that may be confusing and upsetting. "Why can't I connect with other kids? What's wrong with me?"

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to get estimates of the full strength of the abilities of outliers. They can only be measured on obsolete instruments designed to measure abstract conceptual reasoning. Today, tests are designed to measure many disparate abilities and processing skills to serve different populations. Outliers are a very small market. But collecting data on an obsolete test, with scores that ranged up to 250+ IQ, did convince a major test publisher to create extended norms beyond 160.

For all these reasons, we continue to offer a very outdated, above-level scale as a supplementary test for children who top out on the newer tests. We believe you have the right to know just how gifted your child is. This information could be life changing.