

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

Summary

High potential learners share some common characteristics that have been researched by Dr Linda Silverman of the Gifted Development Center in the USA. This advice sheet outlines these characteristics and the research, as well as providing explanations about the individual traits. It is aimed at teachers in early years' settings, primary and secondary schools, as well as lead teachers and senior leaders.

Introduction

All children are different, but it has been shown that many highly able young people share common characteristics because of their advanced thinking ability. Below is a list of the most common characteristics of high potential learners that has been drawn up through research by Dr Linda Silverman. Different young people with high ability will have a different mixture of these, but each should display a majority of them.

High Potential Learners:

- are able to learn quickly
- have a rich vocabulary
- have an excellent memory
- have a long attention span
- are early or avid readers
- persevere when interested
- have a wide range of interests
- are good at puzzles
- reason well (good thinkers)
- show ability with numbers
- show compassion
- are perfectionists
- are intense
- are morally sensitive
- have strong curiosity
- are emotionally sensitive (feelings hurt easily)
- have a high level of energy
- prefer older companions/adults
- have a quirky or grown-up sense of humour
- are concerned with justice and fairness
- tend to question authority
- have judgement mature for age at times
- are highly creative
- are keen observers
- have a vivid imagination

It is recognised that it is not always easy to support and challenge learners who display a number of the above characteristics. It is important to ensure provision is in place to challenge their areas of strength (for example, their ability to reason, to quickly pick up new concepts, to make connections, to understand and perform calculations), whilst at the same time supporting their other needs, which might include perfectionism, emotional intensity or high levels of energy.

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

Research

The Characteristics of Giftedness Scale was originally developed in 1973 by Dr Linda Silverman after 10 years of teaching and counselling experience with gifted children. The descriptors were selected to meet the following specific criteria:

- (a) representative of the majority of children tested;
- (b) applicable to a wide age range;
- (c) applicable to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds;
- (d) gender fair;
- (e) easily observed in the home environment;
- (f) brief and clearly worded for ease of interpretation by parents.

The number of characteristics has increased in various versions. An earlier version, called *The Silverman/Waters Checklist for Identifying Gifted Children*, consisting of 16 items, was copyrighted in 1984. Different versions have appeared in *Counseling the Gifted and Talented* (Silverman, 1993), in chapters, professional articles and newspaper articles.

In 1982, a detailed parent questionnaire was developed for research purposes, containing 60 directed questions and several open-ended questions. A number of studies followed on from this.

Karen Rogers, of the University of St. Thomas, conducted a study of 241 exceptionally gifted children (IQ scores 160+) tested at the Gifted Development Center between 1979 and 1995. The characteristics of giftedness endorsed by the parents were compiled as part of this study. The children ranged in age from 2.5 to 12.5 years. The sample consisted of 112 girls and 129 boys. Over 80% of the sample was reported to fit 20 of the 25 characteristics.

The following characteristics were endorsed by 90% of the parents of this group of exceptionally gifted children:

- Learns rapidly
- Extensive vocabulary
- Excellent memory
- Reasons well
- Strong curiosity
- Mature for age
- Good sense of humour
- Keen observation
- Compassion for others
- Vivid imagination
- Long attention span
- Ability with numbers
- Concern with justice, fairness
- Sensitivity
- Wide range of interests

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

The following characteristics were endorsed by 80% of the parents:

- Ability with puzzles
- High energy level
- Perfectionism
- Perseverance in interests
- Questions authority
- Avid reader
- Prefers older companions

Explanations

Learns Rapidly – High potential learners are able to learn rapidly and easily make connections, often jumping ahead of others. They often want to move on quickly and do not enjoy repetition.

Extensive Vocabulary – The majority of high potential learners begin talking early (before 12 months old) and progress quickly through the stages. They can use complex sentence structures and are naturally able to understand difficult words and use them in the correct context. Some high potential learners are more interested in numbers than words or have a particular learning difficulty such as dyslexia and do not excel in this area.

There are also a small percentage of high potential learners who are late talkers. These children are able to follow complex conversations and respond accordingly (although non-verbally). These children actually have an excellent understanding of language; but are not verbally expressive until much later than their peers.

Excellent Memory – Many high potential learners have excellent memories. They are able to remember facts after being told only once or twice. They can remember the way to places they have been to only a few times. Some high potential learners have very good detailed memories about things that happened when they were very young. They may not have such a good memory for instructions they are given as their minds can get distracted before they carry them out!

Reasons Well – High potential learners are able to reason well in discussions and decision-making. Although their decisions and viewpoint may not always agree with those around them, there is often a logical thought process leading to them.

Strong Curiosity (asking questions) – As high potential learners have an inbuilt capacity to learn quickly and a good memory, they want to know as much as they can about many things. This means they ask many questions about things around them or related to one another.

Mature for Age – Their advanced thinking skills and perception means that high potential learners

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

may seem mature for their age. However, there are also times when high potential learners appear to behave immaturely as well. This is very common and further advice on this topic can be found in the advice sheet *S502 Asynchronous Development of High Potential Learners*.

Good Sense of Humour – High potential learners often have a well-developed sense of humour for their age. They are able to see irony in things and sometimes have a quirky viewpoint. They may develop the use of sarcasm and witty banter far earlier than their peers and this can sometimes lead to difficulties with friendships. Although adults will be able to appreciate and understand a high potential learner's highly developed sense of humour, other children might not get the joke at all.

Keen Observation – High potential learners often pick up a lot of information from the world around them and their excellent memory means that much of this information is stored, leading to great observational ability and quick learning.

Compassion for Others – Many high potential learners have great compassion for other people and are very perceptive to other people's feelings. This can cause them to become upset at times when confronted with suffering.

Vivid Imagination – Whilst most children are imaginative, many high potential learners have a vivid imagination, having pretend friends and creating characters for cuddly toys, although their imagination may be limited to a particular area of interest. They can invent complex, imaginative games that other children of the same age find difficult to follow.

Long Attention Span – High potential learners are generally able to concentrate on areas of interest for long periods of time. They may have difficulty concentrating fully on something they find tedious and may look as if they are not paying attention (daydreaming or fidgeting); although if asked they can often repeat what is being said. Because their minds work quickly they may seem to flit from one subject to another, although these may be logically connected in their thought process. As high potential learners tend to learn quickly, they do not need much repetition and this can cause them to become frustrated when asked to do more of the same.

Ability with Numbers – High potential learners often have ability with numbers well beyond their age group. They can find it easy to grasp the abstract ideas in mathematics and can relate knowledge to new situations. However, it should be noted that some high potential learners are more interested in words and language or artistic pursuits than numbers and hence do not excel in mathematics. Indeed, some high potential learners may have a particular learning difficulty with maths (dyscalculia) and may require additional support to gain confidence in the subject.

Concern with Justice and Fairness – High potential learners often appear to be overly concerned with justice and fairness. They understand the need for rules and they often hear the rule and

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

adhere to it. They can get very upset when others are not sticking to the rules. This can sometimes become a problem during play times at school as other children may in fact enjoy breaking rules and pushing boundaries away from the restrictions of the classroom. Younger high potential learners may require pastoral support to understand that not everyone shares their diligent observance of rules and that sometimes during play, it is ok to bend the rules as long as nobody gets hurt (either emotionally and physically).

Sensitivity – Many high potential learners are emotionally sensitive, causing them to become angry through frustration, upset over ‘silly’ things or overly scared. Some high potential learners are also sensitive to loud noises, have a heightened sense of smell, taste or touch which can cause them distress.

Wide Range of Interests – Many high potential learners are interested in a variety of subjects; they soak up information and their knowledge and understanding of the world is exceptional from an early age. They are often passionate about certain subjects, some of which are temporary and that they will learn about deeply for a short period and others that they will follow throughout life.

Ability with Puzzles – High potential learners are normally very good at problem solving. This shows itself from a young age with the ability to complete jigsaw puzzles beyond those recommended for their age. Often they need less prompting than other children and are able to work independently on puzzles that interest them, be they word-based, number-based or logic-based.

High Energy Level – Some high potential learners have a high energy level from a very young age. This can impact upon sleep patterns from birth. As toddlers, children with high energy levels can be difficult to handle and are constantly on the go. Children with high energy levels need a lot of physical exercise and may learn better outdoors or after exercise. Having high energy can mean that a child fidgets and finds it difficult to sit still, except when they are fully engaged in a task.

Perfectionist – Some high potential learners have a tendency towards perfectionism, and for some this can mean they have a fear of failure resulting in them not wanting to try new things if they think their performance may fall short of perfection. High potential learners can be very self-critical or become emotional if things don’t go well in their eyes (even if others feel they did what was expected of them). For more information on this topic, please refer to the advice sheet *S503 Perfectionism and High Potential Learners*.

Passionate about Interests – Whilst high potential learners may not always appear to be paying close attention, there are often very passionate in their chosen areas of interest. This can cause problems in school as they can become upset when an adult tries to get them to move on from their preferred tasks. This kind of intensity can be difficult for others to cope with but there are

obvious advantages for the child as they get older and are able to focus intently on their areas of interest.

Questions Authority – Many high potential learners question authority and feel it is their right to do so because they spot mistakes or feel they know better. Unfortunately, their manner can sometimes seem arrogant to figures of authority. For the learner, respect is not gained merely by being an adult, it needs to be earned. Adults can earn respect by listening to the young person and acting fairly. It may take time for a high potential learner to respect an adult; but at the same time, it is important for adults to reinforce the importance of following instructions set out as a persistent failure to do so may well result in disciplinary measures.

Avid Reader – Many high potential learners learn to read easily (some very early) and enjoy different kinds of books to entertain them (imaginative fiction) and extend their learning (topic and non-fiction books). Many enjoy poetry because of the play with words and sounds and the different ways of making sense of the world. High potential learners often progress very quickly from picture books and devour all kinds of reading material. Some high potential learners learn to read easily but enjoy a more limited range of material, for example only reading non-fiction for learning about particular topics. Some may have a learning difficulty that prevents them from reading easily, such as dyslexia.

Prefers Older Companions – Many, but by no means all, high potential learners have difficulty finding friends within their age group. Many prefer the company of older children and adults to bounce their ideas off and play games with, especially in the younger years. This is often because they think in complex ways and are interested in different things to children of the same age.

Further Information

S105 Checklist of Characteristics of High Potential Learners	High potential learners share some common characteristics that have been researched by Dr Linda Silverman of the Gifted Development Center in the USA. This checklist builds on the information provided in <i>S104 Characteristics of High Potential Learners</i> . It is aimed lead teachers and class teachers in all school phases. The checklist is meant as one of the tools in a school's kit when considering how to identify their high potential learners.
S102 Identification of High Potential Learners: Sources of Information	This advice sheet provides teachers and others within the education environment with information about the strengths and limitations of a variety of different sources of evidence that can be used to identify high potential learners.
S502 Asynchronous Development in High Potential Learners	Asynchronous development, whereby a learner appears to be 'wise beyond their years' but in many ways is still very immature, has been described as the defining characteristic of exceptionally high potential learners. This advice sheet explores the issues

Characteristics of High Potential Learners

	relating to asynchronous development in high potential learners and provides useful strategies and guidance to teachers on how to support learners who are developing asynchronously.
http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/	The Gifted Development Center website, giving information about the development of the above set of characteristics.
<i>The Guide to High Learning Potential for Schools</i> by Potential Plus UK	A booklet compiled by parents of high potential learners involved with Potential Plus UK to provide information and guidance for schools.
<i>Gifted Children: A Guide for Parents and Professionals</i> by Kate Distin	The authors give an insight into what is 'normal' for gifted children, acknowledge the difficulties they experience, and offer pointers for parents on how to support them at home, in the interaction with siblings and other family members, and at school.

Potential Plus UK Date of Issue: June 2018
 Potential Plus UK Planned Review Date: June 2121

To give feedback on this advice sheet, please go to: www.surveymonkey.com/s/advicesheetfeedback