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## PARENTING THE GIFTED

### PARENTING GIFTED CHILDREN: A THEORY OF RELATIVITY

*Sylvia Rimm, Ph.D.*

There is a quantity of gifted parenting "how-to" literature with some parenting advice that consistently emerges. Much of it could be summarized by these main statements:

1. **You can't love your child too much.**
2. **Praise and positive reinforcement are important for teaching and learning.**
3. **You should empower your child.**
4. **Parents should be advocates for their children's education.**
5. **Parents should not pressure their children by expecting them to work too hard.**
6. **Parents should do what they believe is in the child's best interest.**

All of this advice appears to be "good common sense." None of it would seem to cause problems. While some parents who follow these general guidelines find that their gifted children achieve well, feel good about themselves, and are successful in school and life, other parents who believe they are following similar guidelines find that their gifted children become underachievers. These latter children do not perform to their abilities in school. Some develop behavior problems and continuously argue with their teachers. They may be attention seekers who seem to be searching for a relentless amount of attention. Another group avoids effort and responsibility by making endless numbers of excuses. In adolescence, some are depressed, angry, rebellious, and cite their anger as justification for avoiding school responsibility.

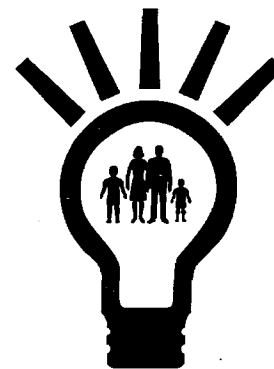
Paradoxically, the advice that comes to us from child-rearing literature has a positive impact on some gifted children and appears to have the opposite effect on others. How can following such apparently good advice have such negative impact on some gifted children? Perhaps the best way to describe what has gone wrong for gifted children who had the potential for achievement and who have become underachievers is that they have received "too much of a good thing." This can be explained by a "theory of relativity."

### Too Much of a Good Thing

Children who are loved by many adults, who are given extensive power, freedom, and praise by their parents, and who are the center of extreme attention usually feel happy and confident in that environment of specialness. Provided that an attention-centered environment continues, they continue to feel positive and good about

(See RIMM, p. 17)

# IMPRESSIONS FROM A SON AND HIS FATHER: THE DUKE UNIVERSITY TALENT IDENTIFICATION PROGRAM



*Charles and Gary Lavergne  
Cedar Park, Texas*

**Editor's note:**

Charles Lavergne is a freshman at Leander High School in Leander, Texas. While a seventh grader at Leander Junior High School, he participated in the Duke University Talent Identification Program. Gary Lavergne is a former high school social studies teacher, regional service center director, and state department official, and is currently the Assistant Director of Assessment Services for the Southwest Region of the American College Testing (ACT) Program, Inc.

**Gary:**

It started out simply. I returned home from one of the many trips I had made for ACT, and, as is my routine, headed for the mail that had accumulated during my absence. There was one piece from Leander Independent School District. The familiar envelope suggested that it would be a routine communication of the events of the semester or six weeks. This one was different. It was a letter from Charlie's seventh grade counselor, Sherrie Hastings. Charlie had qualified for the Duke University Talent Identification Program. Unlike most parents, I was already somewhat familiar with the Duke program; as an ACT employee, I had received a number of phone calls from parents, teachers, and counselors inquiring about how appropriate it was to administer a college admissions test to seventh graders.

**Charlie:**

I remember being called out of my Spanish class sometime in late 1990. I was thinking, actually hoping, that one of my parents had come by to sign me out of school early. Instead, Leander Junior High School's seventh grade guidance counselor, Ms. Hastings, met with me and a few other students. She handed a folder to each of us with information about a talent identification program sponsored by Duke University. We were all surprised at what was being explained to us. If we were to participate in this program, we were to take either the ACT or the SAT. Everyone present knew of the ACT and the SAT; we just never thought that we would take it as junior high students. We talked of which of the two tests we were going to take. For me there was not much of a choice; my dad works for ACT.

**Gary:**

As a high school teacher and administrator, I had much experience preparing 11th and 12th graders for the rigors of the ACT Assessment. In Louisiana,

my native state, the ACT is the dominant college admissions and placement instrument. At home here in Texas, I get to observe the same phenomenon for both the ACT and the SAT. It is not uncommon for college-bound high school juniors and seniors to experience anxiety and state emphatically that the ACT/SAT is the "hardest thing" they have ever had to deal with.

Throughout the United States, high school counselors deal with parents who insist that their elementary and junior high children are ready to tackle the ACT. This has made me hypersensitive to pushing young children into a strenuous assessment experience. As an institution, ACT has long been concerned about students being encouraged to take the ACT at an early age. Indeed, one of the reasons ACT developed the PLAN Assessment (formerly the P-ACT+) was for tenth graders to experience the kind of testing situation that they will later face with the ACT. But PLAN is appropriately easier and shorter—it is for tenth graders.

Now, I was dealing with my own son and whether he should attempt an assessment instrument designed for college-bound high school seniors. There was no question in my own mind that Charlie was gifted and talented, but that was not enough.

**Charlie:**

I celebrated my thirteenth birthday between the time the Duke application was mailed and the date I was scheduled to take the ACT. I was nervous, but I reacted to the test like I did any other standardized test—with a calm exterior. My dad stressed the importance of treating this like all other experiences, by preparing myself and being familiar with what it was that I would be expected to do. He gave me the same booklet that any high school student can get free when they take the ACT. It had a retired

(See LAVERGNE, p. 9)

**LAVERGNE***continued from page 8*

ACT in it as a sample. We reviewed a few questions together and I went over a few by myself, but for the most part I trusted my instincts, as I had taken several standardized tests before and had never used any kind of preparation technique. The booklet, however, was very useful in helping me learn what to expect.

**Gary:**

This is the first time I have ever heard Charlie say he was nervous about *anything*.

**Charlie:**

My dad took me to Round Rock High School very early one Saturday morning. As we stepped into the main building, my first thoughts were that RRHS was an extremely large building. I was also surprised at the number of students who were there to take the ACT, and how large they were; it was easy to find a few other seventh graders. Luckily, a friend of mine named Seth was assigned to the same classroom as I was. I was still a bit nervous and tried not to show it. I simply relaxed and did my best. My dad took great pains to assure me that I really had nothing to lose. He said I should view this experience as a chance to meet a challenge. Anyway, the high schoolers were as nervous as I was, maybe more so.

English and math were the first two of the four tests we took that morning. After the math test there was a short break. During the break, I commented to Seth that the math section was easy.

**Gary:**

How unexpected! It has been my experience that most high school students, far more experienced in mathematics, find the math test the most difficult section of the ACT.

**Charlie:**

My only regret was that I took too long on the reading test. In retrospect, I realize that I spent too much time debating with myself over the alternatives and not enough time answering and moving on. I didn't finish that section, which is not a good strategy for taking the ACT. As my dad told me while we were preparing, the ACT score is based solely on the number of correct answers; there is no added penalty for an incorrect answer and, hence, no penalty for guessing. When time expired, I still had a number of questions I did not even get to. The science reasoning test was very

challenging, but I did not find any one of the four tests to be much harder than any of the rest.

I am fifteen now and a freshman at Leander High School. There are two certificates on my bedroom wall from Duke University—one is for participating in the program, and the other is for the mathematics score which qualified me for state recognition. The experience was a good one for me, mostly because my dad encouraged me to relax and just do my best for its own sake.

**Gary:**

I must admit that in addition to the concerns I have already stated, I feared that this whole episode was going to become more important to me than Charlie. On occasion, when speaking to parents who are pushing their very young children into taking the ACT or the SAT, I get the impression that it is the parents who feel the need to prove something. While well-meaning, this can nonetheless be destructive.

At the heart of the issue is the out-of-level approach of assessing gifted and talented students. For seventh graders, the ACT/SAT portion of the Duke University Talent Search is *dramatically* out-of-level. Less dramatic out-of-level examples would include the ACT and SAT for juniors, the PSAT for sophomores, and PLAN for freshmen. Parents and teachers should engage in intense soul-searching before encouraging their children to engage in dramatic out-of-level assessments. One of my colleagues in ACT's Austin office faced a similar decision as to whether her son should participate in the Duke program. Together, they decided that he should not, and I respect and admire that. Before endorsing Charlie's participation in the Duke program, I asked myself a few questions. This is the advice I give my fellow parents:

**1. Is there a reason for this?**

What will this do *for* the student? Participation in any program should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. At the time, I was unsure about whether a school-based gifted and talented program was appropriate for Charlie; this in part was going to help me decide.

**2. Will the test scores mean something, and will we get more than just a set of test scores?**

(See LAVERGNE, p. 11)

## A RESPONSE TO *IMPRESSIONS FROM A SON AND FATHER*

Micheal F. Sayler, Ph. D.  
University of North Texas

**Editor's note:** Dr. Sayler is a member of the TAGT Editorial Board.

I'd like to thank Charlie and Gary Lavergne for their dialogue reviewing the talent search process. Too often, students and parents are sent a letter announcing the talent search, but little rationale or follow-up is provided to help them make good decisions before and after the test is given. The conversation between Charlie and his father helps all parents and students who consider participating in a talent search see that they are not alone in their interests, need for understanding, and apprehension.

There are several points made by Mr. Lavergne that need response and clarification. He sees the off-level testing offered by the regional talent searches as sometimes being a response to pushy parents who wish to achieve some greater degree of recognition for themselves from the performance of their talented children. While this may happen at times, the vast majority of parents are trying to help their talented children find appropriate academic opportunities. Talent searches provide a way to find appropriate programs and opportunities for their child and to demonstrate to recalcitrant schools that the talents the parents have observed for many years are real. Unfortunately, schools often write parents off as being pushy or not really understanding what a good job the system does with its most talented students. Too many schools feel confident that they are already meeting the academic needs of their talented students. Parents, on the other hand, are frustrated by classes that are not meeting the academic needs of their children. They seldom receive recognition for their eleven or twelve years of observation and experiences with their talented child. Regional talent searches, of which the Duke Talent Identification Program is but one, provide the only opportunity for many families to illustrate the profound needs of their children.

The tests taken in talent searches are not an end in themselves; the point is not who can score the highest. They are a means of illustrating a student's current level of verbal, mathematical, or other academic functioning. The certificates students receive and the practice experience of taking the test before eleventh or twelfth grade are the least important aspects of these off-level testing opportunities. Their primary function is to more clearly identify high levels of talent.

Tremendous opportunities exist for participants in talent searches. Many Saturday, summer, and special school opportunities have been designed for these talented students. For example, over 250 pages of programs and

resources are listed in the *1993 Educational Opportunity Guide* published by the Duke Talent Identification Program. This guide is provided to all seventh graders participating in the 1993 Duke University talent search. The range of programs and classes is astounding: accelerated mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, literary analysis, study of classics, psychology, foreign languages, computer science, and much more. Students attending these programs meet other talented children with whom they often form lasting friendships.

What about students who do not make the highest scores on the SAT and ACT? Does this mean the child is not talented? Absolutely not! All participants in the talent search are in the top three percent of seventh graders nationally. The off-level SAT or ACT helps distinguish among the high levels of talent possessed by the students. Students not scoring at the top of the SAT or ACT often need modifications to the regular curriculum.

As the parent of a talented ninth grader who participated in a talent search, I have seen many positive benefits of his participation several years ago. He went to special programs for several summers, one year completing algebra 1 in a three-week session. This has allowed him to take geometry as an eighth grader, algebra 2 as a ninth grader, compete with and win numerous competitions as part of his high school UIL team, be selected as one of 36 students in Texas to represent the state at the national American Regional Math League completions this summer, and to be selected for a special summer technology training program for teachers and students through the Professional Development Center at the University of North Texas and the Denton public school system. I am convinced that had he not had high SAT scores as a sixth and seventh grader, and had we not as parents been advocates for modifications to his junior high schedule, few or none of these opportunities would have come his way.

So yes, Gary, there are appropriate and necessary reasons for participating in a talent search. I only wish more of our fellow parents would consider the talent search option for their children. I further hope more schools will explain the talent search and its benefits and limitations, and then follow up the testing with specific, targeted advice, and help in interpreting test results. The overriding goal of participation in a talent search should be to better meet the educational needs of the child. ■


## MR. LAVERGNE'S RESPONSE

**W**hen I approached Charlie with the idea of writing about our experiences with the Duke Talent Search, I asked him to think of what he wanted readers to do as a result of reading our article. Of course, I asked myself that very same question. My answer was that it is important for parents and their talented children to have reasons for deciding to participate in programs like the Duke University Talent Search. Dr. Sayler has provided us with one blueprint for the utility of talent search programs. He has also succeeded in illustrating the very advice I give. For his gifted and talented son he showed that 1) there was a reason for participating, 2) the test was more than just numbers, 3) his son took a test that gave information that grade level assessments would not likely give, and 4) the experience was not an end in itself. These were the same conclusions I reached before allowing Charlie to decide to participate. It should be remembered that Charlie did participate, and our dialogue was a chronicle of our personal concerns and not a case against talent searches or out-of-level testing.

Moreover, Dr. Sayler and I are in agreement on a number of other salient issues. Too often, there is little rationale or follow-up by the schools or the parents. I said that "On

occasion...parents feel the need to prove something." Dr. Sayler said that "While this may happen at times..." We are saying the same thing. There are other such instances. For example, Dr. Sayler correctly points out that the off-level use of the ACT helps to distinguish among high levels of talent. That is precisely the "ceiling effect" to which I referred.

Our exchange of ideas on this issue reflects not genuine disagreement but a passionate emphasis on our individual concerns. I do not think, and never wrote, that talent searches are the result of pushy parents and that all parents are pushy. It is as a parent that I am a member of TAGT. Neither will I contend that Dr. Sayler believes that all schools "write off" parents. I do believe that Dr. Sayler wants what is best for his son and for all other kids as well, as do we all.

My objective was to encourage TAGT members to think about this issue, and for parents and students to have reasons for such serious decisions. Anyone who reads these pages thoughtfully will certainly do that. For that, Charlie and I are grateful to Dr. Sayler and publicly extend our thanks for making our article such a success. 

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### LAVERGNE

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The ACT Assessment is a powerful guidance tool which features an interest inventory, student-identified needs, and many other useful pieces of information, as well as an academic assessment.

### 3. Will we get something that grade-level assessments won't give us?

The Duke University program has a screening process whereby students must score in the 97th percentile or better in verbal or mathematical reasoning areas of nationally-normed grade-level achievement, aptitude, or mental ability measures. On those measures, for very high-scoring students, there is the strong possibility that the "ceiling effect" has occurred. Many of these students have reached the ceiling of the grading system of the school; for them, the "all A" honor roll is now routine. For some students, an out-of-level assessment may not only be appropriate, but advisable.

### 4. Most importantly, what will this do to the student?

How will a "poor" performance affect a student who has always "topped off" most tests, and will a truly admirable performance become a launch pad for overconfidence or even conceit?

When the time came to decide, I was convinced that Charlie could handle himself quite well, which is to say that, as far as I was concerned, the decision was his. I always had the impression that he was easygoing about most things, and his "Well, OK" reply reinforced that notion. I was to learn much: Charlie was nervous; math was easy; and the fact that the Round Rock High School is a very large building impressed him. Maybe the Duke program taught me something as well! 