

Connecting

for high potential • • • • • Winter 2008



NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

Topic for this month: “How can I find appropriate, challenging resources for a child who is reading far above grade-level?”

Gifted children present special challenges when it comes to finding appropriate reading materials. The standard “rules” of age and ability level don’t apply because these students are a jumble of maturity, curiosity, achievement, awareness, and sensitivity. Just because they can read far beyond their years doesn’t necessarily mean they have the sophistication to deal with topics addressed in books for older readers. What do teachers and parents need to think about when looking for resources?

A Teacher’s View

For the past five years, our school has pushed to improve reading scores on state tests. All our professional development has focused on helping struggling students perform at grade-level. We’ve worked with experts to select literature for each grade that builds on needed knowledge and skills, but if that’s all they get, then most of my best readers will be bored to tears.

These youngsters score well enough on the tests so it’s hard to say there’s anything wrong. Many of my colleagues act like I’m looking for trouble by even talking about finding “challenging” reading. Why add work? Even some of the parents of the brightest kids don’t make a fuss as long as their child brings home high scores. Other parents just want “harder” books. What options are there?

A Parent’s View

Our daughter was reading little books on her own by the time she turned 4, and then it wasn’t long before she began to devour shelves and shelves of books at the library. We noticed she really took the stories to heart. Something sad would affect her for days, even giving her bad dreams.

Real problems didn’t surface until this year. She’s 12, the youngest in her class, a loner, plus she’s extra sensitive. Now she’s choosing books I know will really upset her. I don’t want to imply she can’t read a certain book – censorship isn’t my goal – but I don’t want her to deal with such mature topics before she needs to. There must be ways to find other good books that are inviting. I will try talking with her teacher but what else can I do?

Formulas used to calculate the reading levels of text rely on the length of words, sentences, and paragraphs, and sometimes the sophistication of included vocabulary. These numbers offer general guidance about the challenge level of the language in a book, but they can fail to describe the complexity of ideas or the intricacy of new concepts that should be understood by the reader to fully engage in the meaning of a text.

It is important to recognize how books energize learners and serve to open worlds of ideas, for the type of reading that leads to a rich, full life is about much more than de-coding, speed, and comprehension (things a gifted reader may easily demonstrate). Reading is also about the excitement of exploring ideas – with the excitement and mystery of choosing the hardest book imaginable and then stretching one’s mind. Reading offers a chance to ponder and absorb the information, at one’s own pace, without having someone always “explain” or “simplify” the meaning. Gifted children should be invited to explore; however, this doesn’t mean turning a child loose. Finding resources that fit the complexities of a gifted student takes thoughtful planning and cooperation between parent, teacher, and ultimately, the child.



Please copy and share this with other parents and teachers in your community who may find this useful.

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Note: The full articles cited in this issue of *Connecting for High Potential* (CHP) can be accessed on the CHP Resource Page www.nagc.org/chp.aspx

1. Growing a love of reading for advanced readers

AT SCHOOL

- Often elementary school libraries do not contain books with reading levels above 5th or 6th grade – a limiting factor for gifted readers. Suggest a policy that encourages inter-library loans between secondary and elementary schools. Also, consider supplementing your classroom collection with resources from the local public library, an easy way to increase challenging choices for talented readers.
- The questions you ask when discussing literature shape the way students interact with any text. Thinking about plot, character development, or other literary elements, encourages students to look beyond the “one right answer” and to engage in critical thinking about literature. For examples of discussion questions, check out www.gifted.uconn.edu/semr/Bookmarks.pdf.

AT HOME

- *Younger children:* The focus of reading at home should include sharing regular time together, reading stories aloud. But, don't stop when your child becomes an independent reader. All ages and all stages can join in enjoying the rhythm of words. For book ideas and inspiration you might adapt in your community, look at Read Aloud America at: <http://www.readaloudamerica.org>.
- *Older readers:* Bring people together to discuss books. Consider establishing a family or neighborhood group where parents and children can talk about their impressions together. This can be an excellent way for gifted students to develop “interest peers.” Look for suggestions in The Kids Book Club Book or check the experiences of The Reading Maniacs at: <http://www.kidsfirstsoccer.com/bookclub.html>.

2. Working with High Sensitivities

AT SCHOOL

- Unfortunately, there is no easy method to gauge a youngster's emotional readiness for a work of literature. Give parents information about using books, and book selections, so they can support their child at home, as well as give you insight into how their child is reacting.
- Classic literature can ratchet up the challenge level for readers when there are concerns about mature themes and language. Find other ideas in *Some of My Best Friends are Books* (Halstead).

AT HOME

- The Polish psychologist, Dabrowski, wrote that some gifted children experience life with unusual intensity. They might react to situations with stronger and/or longer reactions than expected. Carefully selected books have been found to help children deal with difficult times – building problem-solving skills, emotional awareness, pro-social behavior, interpersonal relations, and working through moral dilemmas. Read more at: www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=1219.

3. Learning to be a Discriminating Reader

AT SCHOOL

- In many cases, students—even talented readers—take a haphazard approach to selecting reading material. Modeling a variety of strategies for selecting engaging books is a simple step you can take to foster enjoyment. For more, read *Making the Match* by Teri Lesesne.
- When talented readers spend their school days breezing through unchallenging texts, they rarely encounter the unfamiliar vocabulary or complex ideas that inspire growth. Look at non-fiction, biography, and other genres for more inspiration. You can access a number of suggestions at: www.reading.org/resources/tools/choices_teachers.html

AT HOME

- Don't be afraid to try titles that are a stretch, both cognitively and emotionally, for that's how minds grow. Parents who read with their child (either by pre-reading, or reading the same book at the same time) can help interpret and re-frame possible difficult situations, as well as talk through any confusion that might come from challenging, even unsettling reading.
- What makes award-winning fiction and non-fiction? How can one develop a critical eye for quality? The American Library Association website maintains lists of award-winning books categorized into age groups at: www.ilovelibraries.org/booklovers/awardwinningbooks/awardinfo.cfm.

When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.

~Maya Angelou~

This issue of *Connecting for High Potential* was compiled by Robin Schader, NAGC Parent Resource Advisor, and Jeff Danielian, Teacher Resource Specialist.