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Frequently asked questions (FAQs) about giftedness in early childhood

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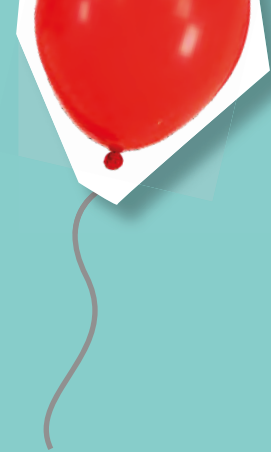
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Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

about giftedness in
early childhood





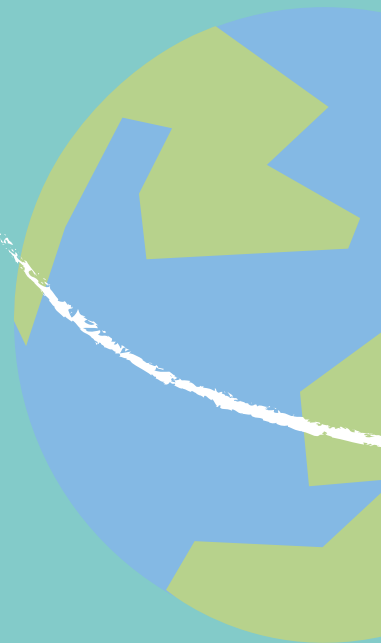
Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

about giftedness in early childhood

Published by the Karg Foundation

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Dear Reader,

Young children can do amazing things! Anyone who accompanies their educational development as an early childhood educator knows this. Yet all too often we tend to view the period between the ages of zero and six as primarily a time of childcare rather than a time of education. Even at an early age, children are able to display not only the richness of their abilities but also what they are capable of becoming. This clearly highlights the responsibilities of early childhood education centers (Kitas) in recognizing these characteristics and providing meaningful and well-planned guidance for the child's personality development. Intellectual development is one characteristic of a child's personality. Fostering this is also a part of the Kita's mission. We believe that this is true for all children, and especially for gifted children. Kitas must be able to meet the needs of these children as well.

For over 30 years, the Karg Foundation has focused on helping the gifted child in the German educational system. We are pleased to see that a growing number of Kitas view themselves as educational providers and are posing questions on how to deal with the intellectual potential of young children. The Karg Foundation would like to provide answers for interacting with gifted children between the ages of three and six years.

The FAQs are intended to help you understand early giftedness. Your fundamental questions such as "giftedness, high ability – what does this mean?" will be answered first. After this, we explain how you can identify young children between the ages of three and six years with high abilities. In the next section we address specific questions on where to find support, for example, through specialized guidance and counseling services. We conclude with information on how you can successfully promote giftedness and the gifted child in the Kita setting.

During the preparation of this Karg publication, we have drawn on the expertise of both the Karg Foundation team and our network of experts. The aim of this publication is to communicate to as many German early childhood educational institutions, Kita administrators, professional training institutions, and parents as possible that young children are capable of exceptional achievements and to illustrate how to recognize and nurture young children with high ability.

We hope that reading these pages is both enjoyable and informative for you!

Dr. Ingmar Ahl

Christine Koop

Dr. Nadine Seddig

Understanding

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Giftedness, high ability – what does this mean?

In everyday language, the terms “gifted” and “high ability” have many different meanings: They are used when a person performs exceptionally well, but also when a person is merely expected to perform exceptionally well based on his or her perceived potential. Sometimes, adults observe clear developmental advantages or capabilities that are not typical for the respective age group of young children and therefore presume that a child is gifted.

Scientifically, giftedness is understood as the performance-related development potential of a person. Of course, all people possess a certain degree of ability, and they can further develop this ability with the right support. However, in the strictest sense of the term, people are primarily described as gifted if they demonstrate a high or above-average potential for both achievement and advancement. In this sense, the term “gifted” refers to persons with a particularly high or significantly above-average potential for achievement.

For children between the ages of zero and six, it is not possible to precisely determine whether they display giftedness or high ability for a variety of reasons.

Therefore, it may be appropriate to refer to them as having an above average or significantly above average potential for achievement (*see pp. 14, 18, 25*).



What are the factors influencing giftedness?

In general, the term “high ability” refers to a person’s achievement-related development potential. It is important to note, however, that this potential for achievement cannot be reduced to any single characteristic of the person. Rather, giftedness is a profile of abilities and personality that is shaped by different characteristics of the person. For example, when someone is musically gifted, this ability is not only influenced by exceptional musicality, but also by a high degree of willingness to work hard when learning to play an instrument. A person’s unique ability can manifest itself in different areas, for example, in terms of high cognitive, linguistic, artistic-creative, or athletic abilities. Therefore, the question as to what constitutes the potential for exceptional achievement (i.e., giftedness and high ability) in a specific area must be answered separately for each area.

While the factors that constitute a high potential for achievement are subject to change, they depend both on a child’s age as well as on his or her general developmental status (e.g., in terms of personality traits) and on the extent to which a child’s potential for achievement has already evolved. In this respect, a child’s giftedness is an

expression of the developmental status of the child’s achievement potential at a given point in time, and this will evolve over time.

Favorable environmental factors and supportive settings, e.g., a nurturing home or the quality of educational activities provided at the Kita, are a prerequisite for the development of the child’s potential. In addition, the child also plays an active role in developing his or her individual abilities: Children can use the opportunities available to them to develop their potential, contribute to shaping these opportunities through their reactions to them, and demonstrate their own personal commitment to their abilities, e.g., by applying themselves or practicing their skills (*see pp. 62, 64, 68*).



What role does intelligence play?

When talking about giftedness, we are often referring to people with exceptionally high cognitive abilities. Also in scientific discourse, in terms of relevant personal characteristics, high general intelligence is considered a significant prerequisite for exceptional achievement, especially in academic domains.

Conventional definitions explain giftedness as an exceptionally high manifestation of intelligence, measured by standardized intelligence tests and represented by the intelligence quotient (IQ). For example, an IQ score that is two standard deviations above the mean of the comparison group (e.g., a 10-year-old child compared to a representative group of 10-year-old children) is considered gifted. This is equivalent to an IQ of 130 or higher.

In practice, cut-off values should not be interpreted too rigidly. There are no substantial differences between a person with an IQ of 125 and a person with an IQ of 134 in their level of intelligence. Thus, minimal differences in IQ do not add substantial value to the question of the appropriate level of support to be provided.

That being said, high intelligence generally has a favorable influence on the development of skills in very

different areas on the whole, and not simply in terms of the development of thinking ability in classic academic domains such as mathematics or the natural sciences. It is considered to be an indicator of general learning ability. The ability to grasp things quickly, to remember things easily, and to think logically and deductively are all valuable prerequisites for exceptional performance in any field of learning (*see pp. 32, 34, 48*).



What specific features are important to consider for preschool-age children?

The development of same-age children can vary greatly, especially at a very young age. Accordingly, the time windows considered “normal” for the successful completion of certain developmental stages are broad. It is not advisable to label very young children as “gifted” in terms of a stable characteristic or trait. Otherwise, there is a risk of overburdening children with unrealistic expectations of their (cognitive) performance.

The early development of a child in one or more areas can also be an expression of a temporal developmental advantage in comparison to his or her peers. Thus, it is very important to continuously monitor and assess the development of a child’s abilities over a longer period of time. This is the best approach to assessing whether a child is gifted or talented in terms of his or her exceptional potential for achievement.

Furthermore, a young child’s developmental trajectory is strongly dependent on the specific environmental conditions in which he or she is growing up. This also applies to the development of high abilities. This development often depends on whether children are given oppor-

tunities to explore their individual abilities in various ways and, with the right motivation, whether they are also given opportunities to benefit from individual support for their specific interests. In other words, encouraging and supporting children according to their individual ability level is very important for gaining a better understanding of their achievement potential. This should be seen as an important part of a process-based giftedness assessment and not the complete opposite approach, where giftedness assessment is a prerequisite for any type of individualized support (*see pp. 20, 25, 64*).

It is not advisable to label very young children as “gifted” in terms of a stable characteristic or trait.

Is giftedness hereditary?

The development of high ability is influenced both by characteristics of the child (including genetic predispositions and aptitudes) and by environmental factors. Giftedness is therefore always subject to genetic influences, although these influences are not exclusive. This is especially true for specific academic abilities, where high intelligence plays a significant role: Differences in intelligence are largely determined genetically (approx. 40 to 60%), although environmental factors also make an important contribution to explaining them.

The long-running controversy about whether genetic or environmental factors are more relevant for intelligence has made it clear that the extent of their respective influence varies over the life course. Typically, the younger children are, the greater the influence of environmental factors on their development. One reason for this is that some genetically predisposed abilities are only activated by environmental factors. This is why high-quality and stimulating educational programs are extremely important, even at an early age and especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In this context, the interaction of genetic and environmental factors is not a passive process. As children

grow older, and later also as adults, they actively contribute to shaping their own environments: For example, they choose friends who have similar interests or abilities, or they select recreational activities or school programs that allow them to pursue specific interests. In doing so, they are actively influencing their own (informal) learning opportunities (*see pp. 12, 18*).



Is giftedness related to gender or ethnicity?

In principle, all children can demonstrate high ability, regardless of their social or cultural background or their gender. In reality, however, a disproportionately large number of children from educationally advantaged and/or higher income families without a migration background are found in programs for gifted children. In addition, gifted girls are less likely to be identified than gifted boys. There are many reasons for this. The subjective attributions and different expectations of parents and educators play a significant role. In many cases, children from educationally disadvantaged or low-income families, as well as children with a migration background, are considered to be less likely to succeed, in some cases despite comparable or better performance than their peers. In particular, limited language skills can lead to an underestimation of cognitive abilities. Outstanding academic achievement by girls is more frequently attributed to hard work and effort than is the case with boys, who are more likely to be seen as possessing a special talent for comparable achievements. Furthermore, gifted boys who do not feel sufficiently challenged are more likely than girls to exhibit problematic behavior.

As a result, boys are more often referred to counseling centers and thus more often identified as being gifted (see pp. 10, 14).



Why is it important to identify the unique abilities of children at an early age?

Giftedness is influenced by various factors and is defined in terms of the interaction between the individual's characteristics and his or her environment. The development and evolution of outstanding achievement potential is also influenced by learning processes. The development of very young children is particularly very dependent on the specific environmental conditions, learning opportunities, and stimuli with which they grow up. This is why it is important to observe children from an early age, focusing on their strengths and providing them with a variety of opportunities to try out new things in many different areas. This allows children to discover their "passions" and adult caregivers to support the unique strengths of the children in their development by providing them with specific opportunities for learning.

Early childhood education plays an important role in two ways: it can help to identify and effectively promote children's abilities and, if necessary, it can compensate for adverse effects related to the children's backgrounds. Focusing on the individual resources of each child helps to recognize and promote the potential and abilities

of all children, regardless of their gender and background. Therefore, the observation and documentation of children's development should not only include possible developmental delays, but also identify the children's unique strengths and talents. Quality pedagogical activities that foster these strengths as well as the children's own interests and enthusiasm, create the basis for their appreciation of their own abilities, high intrinsic motivation to learn, and ultimately for the development of their own unique potential for achievement (*see pp. 18, 25, 28*).



Recognizing

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“An early, strong interest in a specific area on the part of a child can, by its very nature, point to a high aptitude in that area.”



Which characteristics/traits indicate the presence of giftedness?

The extent to which young children possess the potential for high achievement can be observed above all in their extreme curiosity, desire to explore, focused search for information and, at the same time, ability to grasp new information quickly. Since most preschool-age children explore their environment with interest, observations of the extent, depth, and quality of children’s engagement with new content are of primary importance: Gifted children show a profound and ongoing interest in learning along with an ability to grasp things very quickly, a high capacity for learning, an exceptional memory, and the ability to acquire new skills quickly.

They often also show a high level of effort and perseverance as they try to acquire knowledge or new skills. From a developmental perspective, specific, focused interests tend to be rare in preschool-age children. An early, strong interest in a specific area on the part of a child can, by its very nature, point to a high aptitude in that area (see pp. 12, 26, 28).

Can signs of high cognitive ability be detected in early childhood?

An inquisitive mind and a persistent desire to learn new things, a remarkably good memory, an ability to understand new concepts quickly by applying familiar principles, and a very extensive and differentiated vocabulary at an early age may be the first indications of a child's higher cognitive ability. Care should be taken, however, not to draw premature conclusions from such observations: Prognoses on further development are all the more uncertain the younger a child is. Furthermore, these observations only provide indications of a child's general learning ability and disregard other personality traits and environmental characteristics that are relevant for the development of talents and abilities. Many parents have reported unusual behaviors in their children, such as a low need for sleep and a high sensitivity to sensory stimuli (sensory impressions) in infancy, which they view retrospectively as the first indicators of their children's later identified giftedness. This may well be true in some cases, but these experiences cannot be generalized or applied to all gifted children (*see pp. 8, 14, 25*).



How can giftedness be recognized in the Kita?

Identifying giftedness should be understood as a process. This is especially true for young children. Distinguishing characteristics of high-ability children are, among other things, an eagerness to learn, a quick grasp of new things, a considerable willingness to make an effort, and a strong ability to learn as well as a fast learning pace. Therefore, observing and documenting children's activities and learning are particularly useful ways of establishing giftedness at an early stage. These observations should be made over time, using process-oriented observation methods (e.g., the "Learning Stories" approach or the "Leuven Scale of Involvement"), and they should be reviewed on a regular basis.

Additional assessment tools can be used, particularly for preschool-age children, to assess a child's developmental or learning status in relation to his or her social comparison group (e.g., peers) or to a specific developmental or skill area (e.g., language development).

The advantages of observation and documentation procedures are that they not only serve to assess children's learning, they also contribute to improving the quality of pedagogical work by facilitating educational decision

making on a methodologically sound basis and by serving as a useful framework for reflection. Thus, they not only assist in the observation and evaluation of children's specific skills and abilities, they also search for answers concerning favorable environmental variables to promote young children's learning potentials. In addition, it is possible to include the child's perspective by sharing the observation findings with the child and reflecting on them together (*see pp. 25, 30, 38*).



When is psychodiagnostic assessment recommended?

Psychological assessment is only useful if there is a specific question that can be answered by means of psychological testing. Only under these conditions can the appropriate assessment tools be selected and the child's results in the tests be meaningfully evaluated in terms of the pending decision or question.

For example, if the question of early school enrollment or skipping the first grade for direct placement in the second grade arises, psychological testing is useful and supports the decision-making process. An intelligence test can be used to compare a child's cognitive development with that of his or her age group and, by means of an ability profile, helps to clarify whether the child is equally well developed in all the cognitive subskills that are necessary for coping with challenges at school.

Psychological assessment can also be used to evaluate other characteristics of the child (e.g., attention, concentration, anxiety) or the experience of his or her social relationships (family, peers, Kita).

However, the question of how to provide individual support in the daily Kita routine can hardly be answered by means of psychological assessment. To determine the

individual learning needs and interests of a child and to react to them appropriately in the Kita, methods of observation and documentation can be used (*see pp. 32, 34, 36*).



At what age can children take intelligence tests?

Tests are available for the assessment of cognitive development for all age groups. There are numerous tests available that are especially designed to diagnose developmental delays at an early stage. They provide a comprehensive assessment of motor, cognitive, and language development starting as early as infancy. Since these tests focus on identifying developmental problems that require intervention, they are generally not designed to identify high ability in young children.

In principle, intelligence tests may be given to children as young as two and a half years of age, which means that it is possible to assess cognitive performance at this age. However, there is a risk that the stability of the intelligence measurement and its predictive power is reduced when the child is tested at a very early age. As a result, only very limited conclusions can be drawn about later developmental processes on the basis of a single test. Experts therefore recommend that intelligence tests should not be used to diagnose giftedness before the age of four, but preferably from the age of five onward or shortly before the transition to school. Testing from this age onward provides more reliable results. Nevertheless, long-term

prognoses can only be made to a limited extent even at this age. Intelligence testing at this age can, however, provide valuable information for specific diagnostic questions, e. g., on the timing of school entry. Methods facilitating the compilation of an ability profile, mapping the child's individual abilities in a variety of areas, are especially useful for gaining an impression of his or her individual strengths and weaknesses (*see pp. 12, 30, 34*).



Who is qualified to perform an intelligence assessment?

Diagnostic testing should only be carried out by psychologists or other qualified professionals (e.g., psychotherapists, special education teachers) who have the necessary skills to analyze and interpret the results: Knowing how to calculate the overall score of a test is not enough. The person in charge of testing must also be able to interpret the result profiles and evaluate the significance of the results according to the test's underlying scientific quality criteria. Test results should not be interpreted only in terms of the specific diagnostic question, they must also be clearly explained to and provided in writing to the person seeking advice. Furthermore, the test results must be compared to other diagnostic findings (e.g., observations made in the Kita or in the family setting). Providing guidance on appropriate steps to be taken in light of the specific questions addressed by testing should also be part of the interpretation and evaluation of psychological testing (*see pp. 30, 48*).

“Knowing how to calculate the overall score of a test is not enough.”



Are there differences between psychological tests and pedagogical observation and documentation methods?

Observation is used to document the development of children. The primary aim is to generate ideas to provide individualized support for children. These procedures focus on children's strengths, their current learning interests and, above all, their sense of well-being, thus facilitating ability-oriented support for all children. This does not include an evaluation of a child's developmental status.

Kitas also often employ questionnaires to evaluate young children's development. Similar to medical check-ups, these serve to provide an overall assessment of a child's cognitive, linguistic, motor, and social-emotional developmental status. Most importantly, they are used to identify children with significant developmental challenges so that appropriate diagnosis and treatment by qualified therapists (e.g., speech and language therapists) can be recommended.

The purpose of standardized developmental diagnostic tests is to provide an in-depth assessment of a specific issue. They typically measure clearly delineated develop-

mental characteristics and compare the individual child's performance with the performance of a representative group of peers. Compared to developmental screenings, standardized developmental diagnostic tests are typically constructed following stringent scientific standards to reduce errors in measurement and observation wherever possible. As a result, they provide a more objective and reliable indication as to whether the characteristic being assessed is within the range judged to be age-appropriate for a given child (*see pp. 30, 38, 40*).



Can developmental questionnaires be used to identify gifted children?

Many developmental screening instruments used by Kitas to assess children's developmental status were specifically developed to identify children with significant developmental delays or risks. As a result, these instruments become increasingly inadequate to discriminate in the upper proficiency ranges even though they discriminate very well in the lower ranges. When a child successfully completes all the tasks and meets all developmental milestones typical for his or her age group, this accomplishment does not necessarily indicate an exceptionally high ability level; rather, this is an indication of the child's "completely normal" age-appropriate development. Such instruments are generally unsuitable for identifying high ability with certainty. However, results that are clearly above average can be considered a good reason to closely observe whether a child's development is stimulated or challenged by the pedagogical activities offered by the Kita and whether further assessment (e.g., intelligence tests) is indicated (*see pp. 28, 30, 40*).



Are observation and documentation procedures suitable for diagnosing giftedness?

Procedures of observation and documentation can support a process-oriented approach to assessing giftedness. They can provide, for example, important indications of characteristics associated with high cognitive ability, such as motivational aspects, learning interests, and learning engagement. The purpose which the observation is to serve is always the basis for selecting the appropriate procedure. The first step in providing support for gifted children is to identify their unique interests and preferences and, in a second step, to evaluate the child's current developmental status and his or her specific abilities. Finally, in a third step, the child is offered an appropriate educational program, and the effectiveness of this program is monitored and evaluated.

For the first and third steps, approaches such as "Learning Stories" or the "Leuven Scale of Involvement" that observe and document children's participation as well as the extent and depth of their learning interests are particularly suitable. These primarily assess the motivation and participation of children.

To assess whether a child has exceptional abilities as well as specific interests, it is necessary to make use of additional procedures that can measure the growth of a child's competencies in different areas, qualitatively as well as over time.

The *KOMPIK Observation Form* (www.kompik.de/kompik.html) serves here as an example. For exceptional abilities in highly specific areas (e.g., high aptitude in music or sports), cooperation with other institutions may be appropriate (see pp. 28, 30, 38).



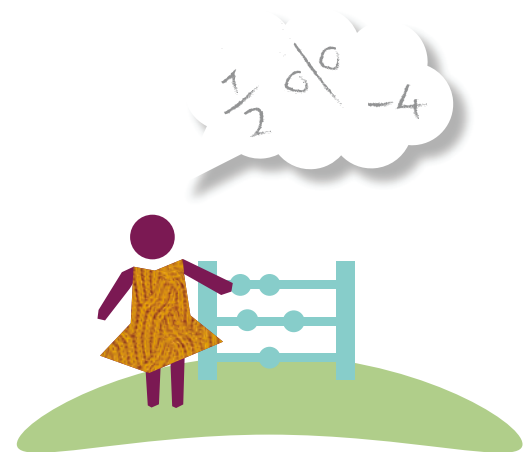
How relevant are early reading and mathematics skills for diagnosing children with high cognitive ability?

In the self-help literature, one often finds statements to the effect that gifted children acquire their reading and arithmetic skills at a very early age. Does this allow us to conclude that early reading and arithmetic skills indicate exceptionally high cognitive ability?

Even during the Kita years, many children show an interest in symbols, numbers, and letters. This is not at all unusual. Whether their preoccupation with them is indicative of high ability depends, in part, on the level of proficiency attained by the child and on how these competencies were acquired.

Reading texts independently and comprehending them is qualitatively different from simply recognizing frequently seen words (e.g., bus stops on the daily bus routes or the names on doorbells). Can a child apply the principles of addition to problems in everyday life, or has the child memorized the “solutions” as a result of frequent playful repetition (“two plus two is four”)? Also, how much systematic instruction has the child received? In general,

the more self-motivated a child is to engage in reading and arithmetic, and the less pedagogical guidance he or she has received in acquiring these skills, the more likely it is that above-average intellectual abilities can be inferred from the child’s achieved proficiency level (*see pp. 54, 72*).



Guiding

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What are the questions and issues motivating parents to seek guidance?

Many questions arise for parents when their child displays signs of giftedness. Research indicates that parents primarily would like to know if their child is indeed gifted and where they can go to have their child tested. They are also interested in learning more about how their child can be encouraged or supported adequately, and whether the support their child receives in the Kita setting and at home is sufficient. Parents also seek advice on specific concerns they have about their child, such as parenting issues, aggressive behavior, or psychosomatic symptoms.

Parents are often initially unsettled by their child's presumed or confirmed giftedness. They may encounter critical questions in their immediate social environment. They must not only come to terms with the idea of giftedness and their own impressions of gifted people, but also with the preconceptions of others. They ask themselves how they can best provide support for their child without overwhelming him or her. The child's strong desire for cognitive stimulation can also lead to parental exhaustion,

especially if there is more than one (highly) gifted child in the family. All of these concerns may motivate parents to seek professional counseling.

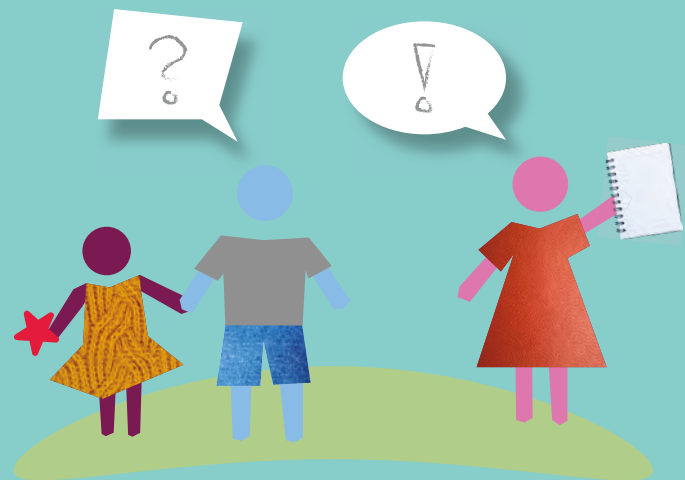
It is important that parents find someone to talk to who will answer their questions about giftedness in a compassionate manner and with profound expertise. Only in this way can parents express their concerns and ask questions in an atmosphere of trust. Particularly for pre-school children, providing informative counseling to parents is often all that is needed in the beginning, unless there are specific problems that have prompted them to seek advice. These problems may require professional psychological counseling (*see pp. 48, 51*).



Who offers professional counseling?

Professional counseling is offered by a number of different institutions. There are consultation services that offer specialized counseling on giftedness and other services that offer counseling on a wide range of potential challenges and also provide support for issues surrounding the developmental characteristics of a child. The first type includes specialized counseling centers for the gifted that are run by public, university, or private organizations. Another type is the parenting resource centers (Erziehungsberatungsstellen), where the focus is on providing guidance to parents, for example, with parenting issues. In cases where early school enrollment of the child is under consideration, the school psychology counseling services can also provide valuable support.

Finally, there are also professional consultation services where early childhood educators can find information on how to work with young gifted children on a daily basis. Some German federal states — in conjunction with their education and development plans — offer consultation services for this purpose. In some cases, the early childhood education organizations also offer these services as part of their staff support structures (see pp. 30, 34).



“Early childhood educators can help parents find the counseling services that are most appropriate for their needs.”



Which considerations are important when choosing professional counseling?

The extent to which counseling is experienced as helpful or not depends on how well the counseling that is offered addresses the specific concern of the client. For this reason, it is important to first consider the intended outcome of the consultation.

For advice on problems in the family environment or on parenting issues, parents should turn to parenting resource centers (Erziehungsberatungsstellen). If they are looking for information or help with educational matters, specialized counseling centers for gifted children (Begabungspsychologische Beratungsstellen) or school psychology services (Schulpsychologie) can probably provide more assistance, particularly because they are more experienced in diagnosing giftedness. Early childhood educators can help parents find the counseling services that are most appropriate for their needs. It is important that parents and their concerns are taken seriously and that questions about possible giftedness are not dismissed as a “luxury problem.” Regular networking between the Kitas and the local counseling centers ensures that parents are provided with more reliable information and are directed to the most suitable contact persons for each individual case (*see pp. 34, 48*).

What can parents do if their child no longer wants to go to the Kita?

There are various reasons for a child's persistent unwillingness or even refusal to go to the Kita. Perhaps the child is experiencing ongoing conflicts with other children, does not feel sufficiently challenged by the educational activities, or simply cannot find a compatible child who shares his or her same interests and learning needs. There are also other conceivable reasons that are not primarily related to the presence of a specific ability, for example, as a result of stressful family situations.

This is why it is important for parents and childcare educators to work together whenever possible to help pinpoint the underlying issues. For example, they can ask for support from counseling centers, which can offer an objective outside perspective to help identify the origins of the problem, trace its development, and work out possible solutions.

It is important to note that young children are only able to reflect on and express the causes of their problems in a rather basic way. They should not be forced to talk about "the problem". That being said, it is very important to involve children in the discussion, ask them about their

wishes and points of view, and take them seriously. In addition, the Kita should monitor the child more closely to find out about the things the child enjoys, who he or she likes to be with, and which activities he or she particularly engages in, so that these experiences and activities can be intentionally offered to the child (*see pp. 64, 74, 76*).



What considerations are important for the transition from the Kita setting to elementary school?

Children with a high cognitive ability learn easily and quickly and often show an interest in reading, writing, and arithmetic at an early age. Thus, the question of the “right” time to start school arises more frequently for these children than for their same-age peers.

If the child is enrolled in school too early, he or she may not yet have the necessary social-emotional skills to cope successfully with the new situation. If children enter school too late, they are at risk of being insufficiently challenged right from the start. This is why parents, Kitas, and primary schools should focus the same amount of attention on the school transition process for gifted children as they do for children with developmental delays.

It is therefore important that the Kitas and primary schools share information about children’s learning and developmental histories, as well as about their interests and needs. It is essential that parents are fully involved in this process and that they consent to this exchange of information. Ultimately, it is the parents who make the final deci-

sion about the timing of their child’s enrollment in school, and their involvement in the consultations is unquestionable. The wishes of the child should not be disregarded either, because only if the child wants to begin school will he or she be able to adapt easily to the new environment.

For a successful transition to primary school, it is important that teachers take a child’s existing knowledge, acquired skills, and high motivation to learn into account during early classroom instruction. Otherwise, there is a risk of boredom and understimulation at school, with consequences for learning motivation, emotional well-being, and academic achievement. This can, in the long term, lead to a child’s underachievement (i.e., a permanent decline in learning and performance) in school.

High-ability children can particularly benefit from educational approaches that include a flexible entry phase. In this approach, children in the first two grades attend classes together and are able to progress through them flexibly over a period of one to three years. Teachers have more flexibility to individualize children’s education than in age-grouped, single-grade classes, and they can better respond to the learning pace differences of their students. This approach, therefore, may provide an alternative to the early enrollment of children in school (*see pp. 56, 58, 72*).



What factors play an important role in early school enrollment?

In specific circumstances, early enrollment or placement into grade two may be an effective intervention for high-ability children. Even for these children, however, the transition to primary school is accompanied by a number of developmental tasks, and these should be carefully monitored and, if necessary, specific support should also be provided.

It is important that the child can meet the cognitive demands of school. Accordingly, if the age of the child is clearly lower than the typical age of first-year school children, he or she should possess above-average intellectual abilities. Although it is not always necessary for the child to take an intelligence test, such a test can be included as an important part of the decision-making process.

Furthermore, it is necessary to assess whether the child is socially and emotionally ready to start school. This includes determining the child's self-control and self-regulation abilities as well as his or her social skills, such as assertiveness.

The success of early school placement depends on an optimistic and open-minded approach taken by the child, the parents, and the child's new teacher. Engaging in con-

structive communication about the child's strengths and individual needs helps to plan the transition process better and provide support as needed. It is also important to inform both the children and parents thoroughly in advance about the new expectations and — especially in the case of early entry into grade 2 — to prepare them accordingly.

Consulting a counseling center can be advisable from several points of view. Counselors can adopt a neutral position both in the decision-making process and in accompanying early school enrollment and, when opinions are divided, they can function as a mediator to ensure the best interests of the child. Furthermore, counselors have considerable experience with and knowledge gained from similar cases, and they are well aware of the formal regulations of the individual federal states regarding early school enrollment. These qualities create a certain atmosphere of confidence for all involved parties (*see pp. 54, 58, 74*).



Does early school enrollment have a negative impact on children's later development?

Most scientific studies examining precisely this question have been able to show that the positive aspects of early school enrollment for children with high cognitive ability outweigh the negative aspects. Compared to children who started school at the regular enrollment time, early enrollment did not have more negative effects — neither on social and emotional development nor on academic performance. However, children with average cognitive abilities experienced more negative effects when they were enrolled in school early compared to their peers who began school as scheduled.

Early enrollment of gifted children is considered to be the most important strategy to prevent them from being underchallenged from the beginning of their school career. Besides, it is important to bear in mind that skipping a grade level at a later stage may potentially be more stressful for the child (e.g., due to having “special status” in the new class or having to settle into a new group of classmates again).

The decision to enroll a child in school early should not be made solely on the basis of the child's cognitive

developmental status. Other relevant factors should be taken into account, including the child's social-emotional functioning as well as the general attitudes held by the child, his or her parents, and the prospective teacher regarding the early placement of the child in school (*see pp. 54, 56*).



Supporting

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What can Kitas do to encourage and support gifted children?

Fostering and providing encouragement to young gifted children in the Kita is based on the principles of individualized support. Individualized support is an overarching term for all actions on the part of early childhood educators with the goal of encouraging and supporting each individual child in his or her development and learning, while taking into account the unique characteristics of the child and his or her life situation. This includes discovering the child's potential and identifying his or her learning needs using early learning diagnostic assessment. Further measures involve creating both the learning environment and the learning processes together with the child so that he or she can learn and grow in the best possible way in accordance with his or her educational and developmental level. Individualized support provides the necessary framework to allow children to develop their abilities.

In terms of the promotion of giftedness, individualized support is naturally also applied by early childhood educators for the identification and further development of gifted children. Accordingly, supporting the develop-

ment of children with high ability is not an isolated educational method or specific didactical approach, but rather a way of responding to the diverse abilities that children bring with them in a pedagogically appropriate way.

Supporting gifted children means helping them to discover their full potential and to develop their talents. In this sense, gifted education requires an awareness of specific learning needs of individual children with high abilities and actively taking these needs into account when planning the learning environment and providing learning and developmental support. The focus is always on a positive and healthy development of the child's personality: Children are thus able to become aware of their own talents and abilities and to develop a positive self-image (see pp. 64, 68, 70).



Do gifted children require special programs and activities?

The most important requirement for supporting children with high ability is already met if their enthusiasm for learning has not been discouraged. When educators consistently apply the principles of individualized support with all children, they learn to articulate their learning needs and they are helped to become increasingly self-reflective and self-directed in their learning. This is an important basis for an in-depth involvement with topics and interests, which is characteristic of gifted children.

Given that high-ability children often seek more advanced learning opportunities (compared to their peers), it is essential that educators remain open to exploring new learning experiences as well as the children's own ideas. Furthermore, certain methods accommodate children's high motivation to deepen their knowledge such as project work, as well as exploring real-life topics and authentic issues or places (e.g., visiting museums or working with artists). Such activities, however, do not have to be offered exclusively to gifted children. In principle, all children attending the Kita can benefit from the specific interests of an individual child (*see pp. 66, 74, 80*).



Why are project-based activities particularly suitable for supporting children with high ability?

Project-based learning is particularly well suited for providing shared learning experiences for children with different learning requirements and abilities. For gifted children, working in projects meets their needs for independent learning with a strong level of involvement, but also their intense desire to deepen their knowledge. In addition, participating in cooperative projects encourages children to take responsibility for the process and to negotiate their learning paths with each other (and with the adults who are involved as well).

Certain conditions must be met when using projects to satisfy the learning needs of high-ability children: Project activities focus primarily on topics that are particularly interesting to the children. This means that they are involved in both choosing the topic and planning the project. Projects are open-ended, and there is always a risk of failure, a fact that children find motivating. Ideas for projects very often arise from everyday situations, which

stimulates children's learning enthusiasm and learning behavior in particular. Projects should therefore be compatible with the children's interests and existing knowledge. This allows the children to contribute their own expertise and ensures that each child's interests and strengths are integrated into the overall project structure. It is important that children are largely free to decide on the content, working methods, and resources they will use in their project. It is the responsibility of the educators to deliberately encourage children's thinking and cognitive processes via an interactive dialog with the children, for example, by asking the "right" questions and reflecting on the learning that is taking place, which helps to draw children's attention to the learning experience (*see pp. 64, 68, 70*).



Is it necessary to have specific spaces and equipment for providing individualized support for gifted children?

Fostering giftedness in the Kita setting must be guided by the principles of individualized support. Thus, the requirements in terms of space and equipment should be in line with these principles: The interior layout should provide opportunities to encourage each child to learn in many different ways and to support them in pursuing their own specific interests and also to encourage them to learn independently. Gifted children particularly benefit from this kind of room design due to their strong drive for self-regulated learning. Early childhood educators, by the same token, need adequate space to work with children in small groups but also to work one-on-one with a specific child. In many early childhood education centers, spaces that are structured according to a specific focus, e.g., experiential learning areas or thematically oriented rooms, have proven to be valuable.

It is not necessary to purchase specific resources and supplies or to introduce specialized activities for “very clever children” except in direct response to the actual

interests or specific abilities of one or more children. It makes more sense to respond to the current interests of the children and to involve them in making decisions about which materials, games, etc. are to be purchased (see pp. 62, 64, 80).



Are there special skills that early childhood educators should have for supporting children with high ability?

There are two essential prerequisites that educational professionals should fulfill to meet the demands of working with gifted children: First, educators should recognize that there are many different types of abilities and that, in this sense, high ability is a facet of both heterogeneity and “normality”. They should be able to appreciate and support children as individuals and view themselves as learning companions. It is important that early childhood educators talk to children about their interests, their well-being, and their points of view and take these into account in daily routines and activities, thereby making no distinctions between the children. We often speak of adopting a dialog-based stance in this context. Finally, supporting high-ability children also requires the willingness to provide opportunities for each child to perform at his or her own learning level, to enable the child to reach the next milestone in his or her development, and to treat the child with respect and appreciation as a person and for his or her abilities.

Second, educators also require extensive knowledge on aspects of giftedness and on specific issues related to the identification and support of high-ability children in early childhood. This knowledge will enable them to recognize special abilities, to classify their own observations, to systematically test diagnostic hypotheses, and to derive suitable measures to support the individual child. In addition, they also need to know who can provide them with expert advice when necessary as well as where or to whom they can refer parents who are seeking advice (*see pp 48, 62*).



What to do with a child who has already begun to read or do math even before starting school?

There should be no limitations placed on children's curiosity and eagerness to learn. If children are motivated to learn about reading, writing, numbers, or arithmetic, they should not be discouraged to do so. Rather, educators and parents should provide appropriate support to encourage the child's curiosity. Of course, this does not mean that the child should be taught reading or arithmetic in a systematic way. Nevertheless, the child's learning needs should be addressed and relevant learning materials (e.g., Montessori materials, books for beginning readers, alphabet boards) or learning opportunities should be offered.

During the transition from the Kita to elementary school, specific attention must be focused on the level of a child's acquired basic cultural tools (i.e., the competences by which children can participate in a culture that help them to organize the world in which they live). The parents, Kitas, and elementary schools should be aware of and carefully assess the child's individual learning level in terms of the demands of school to prevent long-term

underachievement from the very beginning of the child's school career. The underlying principle is that children's learning should not primarily be adapted to the limitations of the educational system, but that learning opportunities should be provided to match the child's abilities. Consequently, if a child enrolled in school already possesses skills in reading, writing, or arithmetic, then the school is also responsible for ensuring that the child receives the appropriate continued support (*see pp. 42, 66, 74*).



What can be done to ensure that gifted children are sufficiently challenged in daily Kita activities?

It is unlikely that children will be permanently underchallenged at the Kita if they are given individualized support that reflects their interests, needs, and strengths. The more familiar the educators are with a child, the more effectively they can encourage the child in his or her personal curiosity, inquisitiveness, or interest in learning by providing relevant educational activities. Occasional moments or situations where children are less challenged do not usually pose a serious threat to their development. It is important that the children make the basic discovery that their needs are also attended to.

It is possible, however, that the activities offered at the Kita are not adequately matched to the child's abilities and potential, resulting in a situation where the child is not sufficiently challenged. It is therefore essential to follow up on any signs of boredom or reluctance on the part of the child to go to the Kita. Some children are not able to articulate their boredom and display inappropriate behavior instead (e.g., clownish behavior, aggression to-

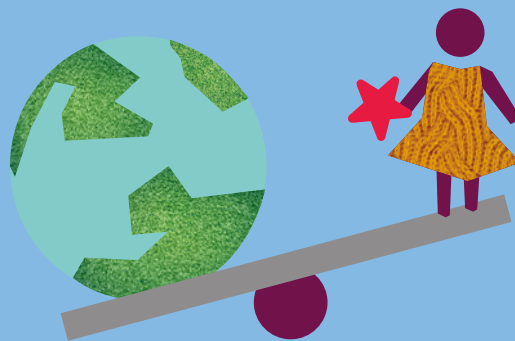
ward other children, or withdrawal). When this happens, parents and educators need to agree on additional options for support, e.g., early school enrollment or enrollment in supplementary enrichment courses outside the Kita (see pp. 54, 70, 80).



Why do gifted children avoid certain Kita activities?

There are many different reasons why a child may avoid certain activities. Educators will need to determine whether a child is avoiding an activity because of his or her high ability, or whether there are other underlying reasons for this. They should begin by observing the child and taking an interest in his or her point of view. Practical responses can then be derived from the information that is gathered. Possible explanations include boredom and inadequate stimulation, but can also be due to other reasons outside of the Kita setting. It is equally possible that a child only ever wants to be in one specific room because he or she has a special affinity for the person in charge there – or avoids a room altogether for the opposite reason. Other possible reasons are conflicts with other children or simply a lack of a suitable partner to play with. High-ability children are also sometimes prone to perfectionism. Sometimes children will refuse to participate in an activity if they think they cannot do it completely or if they cannot do it very well. In such cases, it is important to approach the situation in a sensitive and open manner and to find out what underlying concerns are motivating the child (*see pp. 52, 74, 78*).

“Sometimes children will refuse to participate in an activity if they think they cannot do it completely or if they cannot do it very well.”



What can be done to help young children who put too much pressure on themselves?

Sometimes high-ability children feel that they have to do everything perfectly. When faced with certain types of challenges, they often experience feelings of failure or avoid certain activities from the outset. For these children, finding an appropriate way of dealing with their own demands on their learning and performance behavior is an important developmental task. Initially, it is advisable to communicate with the parents to mutually reflect on any family experiences that may have led to the child's behavior. The standards children set for themselves are often linked to their family attitudes toward achievement and learning. In cases where a child is struggling due to his or her own self-imposed demands, it is important to support both the parents and the child to help ease these pressures. Both parents and educators can also model constructive ways for children to deal with their own weaknesses or mistakes. In addition, educators can discuss learning processes with the child (e.g., by working together on portfolios) to give him or her a sense of the fact that learning is an ongoing process.

At the same time, it also makes sense to provide children with adequate opportunities in their daily educa-

tional routine or at home to participate in activities that allow them to experience themselves as competent, that they enjoy doing, and that encourage their personal development, thereby strengthening their feelings of self-efficacy as well as facilitating the emergence of a positive self-concept. The activities that provide children with these experiences are diverse (e.g., physical activity, creativity, art, music, science, or experiential education) (*see pp. 48, 76*).



Are there other kinds of support (besides those offered at the Kita) available for children with high ability?

Overall, there is a wide selection of available recreational and developmental activities for young children. Thus, the possibility principally exists for children of this age to explore a variety of activities to help them identify and pursue their special interests (e.g., in music and sports). Specific programs and activities targeting young children with high abilities are, however, rare. Some communities may provide so-called children's academies or other courses for young children. Many museums, theaters, and concert halls also offer programs and activities for Kita children.

The most important general consideration, however, is whether or not the child actually wants to participate in any additional activities after spending the day at the Kita. The child must be actively involved in this decision. Certainly, the length of time spent at the Kita each day also plays a role in determining whether or not further activities should be planned for the child. Too many activities — even well-intentioned ones — can overwhelm

children or even hinder them from finding out where their own specific interests lie.

Decisions for participation in extra activities outside the setting of early childhood education should also be guided by the principles of individualized support, which takes the child's interests and needs into account (*see pp. 66, 74*).



What aspects should be considered for supporting the social integration of high ability children into the Kita group environment?

The majority of preschool-age children with high cognitive ability are very well integrated into their social network and peer groups, and they make friends just like the other children. Gifted children are often equipped with special social skills (e.g., conflict mediation skills or the ability to defend their interests to educators), which make them popular partners during playtime. They are also often valued for their imaginative and original ideas for play.

Mixed-age Kita groups are particularly advantageous for children with high cognitive ability. These provide them with the opportunity to socialize with older children who may have more similar ideas for play or interests than their same-age peers.

There can be many reasons why a child does not seem to be well integrated into the Kita group, actively withdraws, or is often alone. Among the possible causes could be that the child's interests and needs are not being adequately addressed in the daily routine and activities of

the Kita. Another reason may be conflicts and frequent misunderstandings with other children or recent or long-lasting family problems. If the condition is persistent and the child is visibly distressed, both the parents and the Kita team should take actions to help the child regain a sense of well-being. It may be necessary to seek the advice of other qualified professionals for this purpose. In some cases, changing to a different early childhood education center may be necessary (*see pp. 48, 52*).

Gifted children are often equipped with special social skills, which make them popular partners during playtime.

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