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The joys of testing

Testing gifted children is both an art and a science.

The “science” requires a thorough understanding of the test, how to accurately interpret the results and provide meaningful recommendations. Psychometric tests of intelligence must follow set guidelines and administration protocol in order to be valid and reliable measures.

The “art” of assessment is to do with performance – that of the examiner, not the child! As testing often has no real meaning for children, it is imperative that examiners spend sufficient time making them feel comfortable and prepared to have a go. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of testing gifted children is the initial establishment of rapport. They are unlikely to give their best unless they trust and respect the examiner and do not feel patronised or exposed in any way. During the assessment, the use of humour and negotiation may also be necessary to engage and motivate the child.

Most examiners who use IQ tests see children of all different levels of ability and school counsellors tend to see children of average to below average ability more often. It should be noted that within psychology degrees, there is no special training on how to assess or counsel gifted individuals. Extensive experience with this population provides a greater understanding of their distinctive needs that require a nuanced approach.

Gifted children often present with specific characteristics/qualities that can have an impact on their test performance. These include: perfectionism, reflective and divergent thinking, sense of humour, over-intellectualisation, masking, issues with motivation, intensity, sensitivity, just to name a few. Examiners who are unfamiliar with these traits may misinterpret responses. For instance, they may perceive a shrug as an indication of ignorance, rather than a reluctance to take risks or a lack of motivation to persist with a boring task. Many young children respond well to the use of humour, pretend play and role-play, such that they can indicate their answers in a more creative way (e.g., using a soft toy for nonverbal responses). Gifted teenagers who may be withdrawn, sullen and even defiant may lack motivation, which can significantly affect their scores.

One of the joys of working with this population is the occasion on which the child experiences, maybe for the first time, challenging material that stretches them to their limits – the astonishment and delight that this creates is evident in their demeanour and often in their behaviour after having left the test environment.

Once the assessment is complete and the report has been received, independent of whether academic interventions are implemented, we have a strong sense of satisfaction as having been able to help the parents better understand the complex needs of their child. In fact, it is often the validation of the parents’ own gut feeling regarding their child that is the most significant and rewarding outcome of the entire assessment process.