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My Son Is A ‘Gifted Child.’ Here’s Why Raising Him Has Been Anything But Easy.



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The author’s son.

We knew pretty early on that our son was a little different. At a young age, he’d go up to other kids on the playground and speak in proper sentences: “Hi, nice to meet you. I’m 18 months. How old are you?” By age 3, he understood multiplication and division. By age 4, he was writing stories and reading books. One day he came home from preschool raving about the “delicious cylinder-shaped snack.” (It was a tortilla wrap, we finally figured out.)

“He must be gifted!” friends with older kids said now and then, but we never even said the word. *Gifted* sounded so pretentious, so ridiculous ... so not us. All three of our kids seemed bright, and our son — the middle child — was just an early bloomer, we figured.

At the end of the first week of first grade, he said fiercely, “I hate this school.”

As the months crawled by, first grade just got worse. He raged about his coloring homework. He complained that he was only allowed to check out “easy books” in the library. He begged us to give him

hard math problems. On weekends, he assigned himself research essays about weird topics that intrigued him: cloud computing, Buckingham Palace guards, Alcatraz.

He complained daily about the class-wide punishments. “Why should *I* get in trouble,” he’d ask us angrily, “when *I* didn’t do anything wrong?” He was so unhappy. “First grade is even easier than kindergarten!” he told us through tears. “And my teacher is always *yelling* at us.” He began faking sick on a regular basis in a bid to stay home from school.

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He’s 8 now, in third grade, but when I picture my son, this is still what I see: He’s 6 years old, his small shoulders hunched, blinking back tears as we walk out of that school. He looks helpless and hopeless. That first grade year will never leave me.

We asked his first-grade teacher if she’d meet with us, but she said she’d prefer to communicate via email. I sent her a heartfelt and carefully worded email detailing my concerns: how he found the work so easy, how he was worried the class was falling behind, how he disliked the class-wide punishments.

Her responses were brief, peppered with quotation marks: He seems to be quite “sensitive,” she wrote. He seems to be internalizing classroom discussions, feeling like he’s “in trouble” when I have to have “a talk” with the class.

I asked about the possibility of more challenging work. She called me on the phone and admitted she knew the work was too easy and said she was doing what she could with limited time and resources. “I can’t meet his needs,” she said. “There’s no way our curriculum could meet his needs.”

Out of school, he was generally happy. We had a running joke about how he was a 40-year-old man trapped in a little boy’s body.

Mingled with that miserable first-grade year are so many sweet and funny memories: After losing a tooth, he wrote a long and virtually flawless missive that began: “Dear Toof Fairy, I’m sorry to say I swallowed

my toof.” He wondered aloud why the female principal of his school wasn’t called a “*princess-ibal*” and then explained to us the Latin word *princeps* after he looked it up.

At the children’s museum, he draped accessories atop the giant checkers pieces, modifying the game so he could challenge us to chess instead. He asked the barber to give him a haircut that would make him look “mature.”

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But first grade remained a daily nightmare.

In hopes of shedding some light on his needs and our schooling options, we took him to a psychologist. The result: He was gifted — very gifted.

This is the point in our story when the eye-rolling starts. Yes, my kid is gifted. Am I bragging? No. Do I think he’s more special than other kids? No. Do I even like the word gifted? Not particularly.

Giftedness is nothing to be proud of — and it’s nothing we caused. It just means my son is wired differently. It’s an inherent trait, a *special need* actually, that comes with a whole host of worries.

For one thing, my son is intensely emotional and sensitive. When the teacher said, “Someone stole the math blocks off my desk, and we will all suffer the loss,” most first-graders said, “It wasn’t me” and moved on.

My kid agonized for days and one night at bedtime whispered, “Mommy? Does suffering physically hurt? Or did my teacher pick an inaccurate word?”

He has a strong sense of justice and fairness. When a lunchroom supervisor had all the kids at the cafeteria table lay their heads down for a moment as punishment for being noisy, most kids complied and moved on. My son complained that night at dinner that it was “incredibly degrading.”

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Like around 1 in 5 gifted kids, my son struggles with perfectionism. He can't stand doing something if he knows he won't do it perfectly.

He also struggles with asynchronous development — which means while he may have understood logarithms in first grade, he could barely tie his shoes and he still put his pants on backward sometimes.

He feels different and, like he's said, "kind of like an alien." He sometimes gets along better with adults than he does with kids. I've seen the awkward interactions firsthand: My son's idea of a conversation starter is often something like, "Did you ever notice that the word *repetition* has repetition in it? It repeats the letters t-i," but not all little boys want to talk about that stuff.

He tends to take the weight of the world on his shoulders. He worries about people who don't have enough to eat or access to clean water, feeling like these world crises are his problems to solve. His first-grade teacher promised to sponsor a well in a third-world country if the class improved their behavior, and he agonized daily over the prospect of failing. "When my class is disrespectful," he said, "we are literally taking away those kids' chance at clean water."

He doesn't hold in his feelings. When something in his life goes wrong, the shockwaves of misery reverberate through our entire family — and it's an understatement to say that first grade was going wrong.

That first-grade year just kept getting worse. The gifted program coordinator told us we were "asking for special treatment" when we begged for enrichment, subject acceleration, *something*. The principal looked at me blankly as I explained that my son was regularly trying to make himself vomit to stay home from school. "He seems fine at school," she said finally. "Maybe it's something at home that's making him unhappy."

We were done. We knew we couldn't stay at that school. But what were we supposed to do? Home schooling was not an appealing option. The private gifted school the psychologist recommended was an hour away (and tuition was \$25,000 *per year!*).

Our salvation came in an unlikely form: a terrific public school with an excellent gifted program in a little city 15 miles from home. By some miracle, they had room for out-of-district students. Though we spend more time driving, and life is more hectic, I'm relieved my son no longer hates school.

He's in third grade now, 8 years old ("If you turned my age sideways, I'd be *infinite!*" he said recently) and happier than he's ever been. The work is challenging. There are no class-wide punishments. His current teacher is one of his favorite people in the world, and we've had nothing but good experiences with the entire staff (not to mention zero awkward meetings!). The school is incredibly welcoming, and the principal is friendly and caring.

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But still I struggle with good old parent guilt: Are we doing enough? Providing ample stimulation and the right opportunities? Some gifted kids my son's age take college-level classes, compete in high-stakes academic competitions and make the news for their research projects; mine plays Minecraft and rides bikes after school.

The gifted-kid journey is also a lonely one. I can't exactly talk about our struggles. Complaining that my kid is smart? Ha. Bemoaning the lack of local chess teams for 8-year-olds? Right. I've seen the memes, I've read the message-board comments, and I'm already well-aware that many people see the parents of gifted kids as "special snowflakes."

The thing is, none of us chose this. When a friend told me her daughter missed the cutoff for the gifted program by a few points, it was all I could do not to say, "Lucky you!"

We found out recently that both of our other children are also gifted — though their giftedness is not quite as "in your face" as our middle son's. They're happy, thankfully. They're thriving at school and finding regular classwork challenging enough. But I worry about the future. When I considered the realities of having three gifted kids rather than one, all I could think was, *Is this what parenting is going to be like for us? Advocating for harder work? Attending stressful meetings at their schools? Worrying we're not doing enough?*

I adore my son, and I wouldn't change anything about him. I want him to be happy, to love life, to feel fulfilled. He is an amazing kid; I can't wait to watch him grow into an amazing adult. But I'm not going to pretend it's easy having a gifted kid.