



INFANCY AND EARLY CHILDHOOD



A POSITION PAPER

The California Association for the Gifted (CAG) periodically publishes position papers that deal with issues, policies, and practices that have an impact on the education of gifted and talented students. All position papers approved by the CAG Board of Directors are consistent with the organization's philosophy and mission, and the current research in the field.

The position papers support the organization's belief in the value and uniqueness of all individuals, its respect for diversity present in our society, and its commitment to honoring the similarities and differences among all students. CAG encourages the provision of educational opportunities that are appropriate to challenge and nurture the growth of each child's potential. The organization is especially mindful of the need for advocacy for individuals who have developed or show the promise of developing intellectual abilities and talents at high levels.



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The period of infancy and early childhood, birth through 3-years-of-age, is the most critical time in the development of a child's potential. It is during this period that the structure and function of the brain is most malleable and appropriate stimulating experiences can have the greatest impact on forming the patterns and pathways that will provide the basis for all later development. Children move through several critical and sensitive periods during this time, including those related to visual acuity, language acquisition, and the development of intrinsic motivation and beliefs about themselves and their relationship to the world. Intrinsic motivation refers to the belief that they really matter and can affect what happens to them as opposed to the belief that everything just happens to them and they have no control. The development of this inner locus of control has been highly correlated with success in life. During this early period the basis for and the tools to support high levels of intelligence are established.

CAG encourages parents and teachers to learn about this period and its importance to the development of giftedness. Parents and family members need to take advantage of the young child's natural desire to play and to make learning activities fun and enjoyable. The environment established by the family needs to be responsive to the unique interests and attributes of the child. Each child will develop different abilities in unique patterns with a differing time schedule. Recognizing and honoring individual differences is important to optimizing the child's talents and abilities. A responsive environment would include a wide range and variety of opportunities and experiences that stimulate cognitive growth such as: encouragement of active exploration, provision of a variety of visual and sensory interactions, introduction of language patterns by reading to a child, playing word games, and talking and interacting with the child during all caregiving activities. Trips to the store and other normal activities can provide opportunities to engage the child in a wealth of stimulating cognitive experiences. Such experiences establish the neural platform in the brain that will support or limit future intellectual development.

This period is equally important to the emotional development of the child and the growth of confidence, risk-taking, and resilience that will support high levels of intelligence. Research emphasizes the importance of responding to a child's cues and levels of comfort or distress. Passive, externally motivated children can be the result of lack of attention to their emotional needs. As intelligence grows, so does the child's sensitivity and responsiveness to the environment. When involvement in metaphoric and creative thought and activity are encouraged sophisticated understandings will often be expressed. Gifted children characteristically explore issues of deep moral and ethical concerns or dilemmas far in advance of the expectations for their age. At such times, emotional safety and understanding are needed.



Care must be taken to match the level of development of the child with the early learning experiences provided by nursery and pre-schools the child may attend. During this early learning period children either progress or regress and cannot just maintain previous learning, therefore, stimulating environments that keep pace with the child's development are essential. The following recommendations are suggested for the curriculum offered to young children:

The curriculum should

- promote interactive learning and encourage the child's construction of knowledge.
- encourage active learning that encourages children to make meaningful choices.
- foster exploration and inquiry rather than focusing on the right answers or right ways to complete a task.
- lead to conceptual understanding by helping children construct their own understanding in meaningful contexts.
- encourage development of positive feelings toward learning while leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills.
- promote and encourage social interaction among children and adults.
- achieve integration of social, emotional, physical, and cognitive goals.

The California Association for the Gifted believes that by recognizing the importance of infancy and early childhood for developing the patterns and potential for high intelligence, parents and teachers will be able to support more children in realizing their abilities and interests, enjoy learning, and experience the joy and benefits of their healthy and growing minds.



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