



***PreK and Gifted Education:
The Grayson School's Philosophy***

Young gifted children — even four- and five-year-olds — are often hungry to make sense of the world in ways we may not expect from most preschoolers and early elementary students. These children desire to exercise and expand their minds intellectually and creatively.

— Joan Franklin Smutny, Ph.D., and Sally Yahnke Walker, Ph.D.,
in *Teaching Gifted Children in Today's Preschool Classrooms* (2015)

The Grayson School, Pennsylvania's first and only independent school specifically designed to meet the needs of gifted learners, is applying to add Pre-Kindergarten to its Private Academic School License precisely because of the gifted children we currently serve in grades K-8. Those children, who thrive in an environment specifically designed to challenge them at their level and to teach them at an accelerated rate, of course have *come from somewhere*, and have not suddenly "become" gifted overnight just before beginning Kindergarten.

Rather, having been gifted since birth, they have been busily feeding their hungry minds — and, most likely, exhausting their parents — with their bottomless curiosity and thirst for novelty and for ever more knowledge. Our experience with the very youngest Kindergarten students has compelled us to seek a license to work with them even earlier so that their needs can be met in an environment equipped with teachers trained in gifted education who are attuned not only to their intellectual capabilities, but also to their unique social-emotional development. For these youngest learners, these two developmental trajectories are especially tightly-linked: their intellect is the "long pole in the tent" of their identities, even at a young age.

It is easy to imagine objections to any kind of academic curriculum for preschoolers: "These three- and four-year-olds are *little children*, first of all; how can they need the rigor or structure of a formal education until they are older?" "They're only *babies*! Shouldn't they just be playing and napping?"

While comments like this are common and even understandable, research confirms that the needs of gifted children are very different from the needs of typical children, and that



those differences exist from the very beginning of their lives. Indeed, our experience at Grayson confirms this understanding, perhaps most clearly with precisely the children at issue. In our Kindergarteners, it is evident from the very beginning of the school year that they are not only ready for, but hungry for, challenging intellectual engagement. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that their needs were radically different only a few months prior, when they left preschool.

What we at Grayson know to be true is that our gifted Kindergarten students indeed *do* “come from somewhere,” and they have specific, often-unaddressed needs that are not often met in a preschool environment designed for typical children. Grayson’s research-based programming and highly-trained teachers, staff, and administration are uniquely prepared to create for these very youngest children an environment which is supportive of their distinct social-emotional and intellectual development. This piece is designed to address common concerns about gifted education for preschool-aged children, and to describe the type of programming that Grayson has designed in response to psychological and educational research and to our own experience with young gifted children.

Is there such a thing as a gifted preschooler?

They can be rattling off the price of the green beans they notice from the seat of the shopping cart one minute and having a tantrum because their mother did not buy the cookies they wanted the next.

— Nancy B. Hertzog, Ph.D.,
in *Early Childhood Gifted Education* (2008)

To begin at the beginning, there are those who doubt the very existence of such a creature. Ask the parent of a child who is well ahead of developmental milestones, though, and you will quickly discover that, yes, they exist. In fact, “more than 80% of parents can identify their child’s giftedness by age 4 or 5,” according to Joan Franklin Smutny, Ph.D., in her book, *Teaching Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom*. Like all gifted children, they are by definition a very small proportion of the population (generally in the top 5% in intelligence). Preschoolers whose giftedness is identified are a rare breed even within that very small group, because they have not yet been to school and an educational professional is therefore not usually the one to call attention to their needs.

Instead, parents are generally the “canaries in the coal mine” for these children: they notice that their child can recognize and name all the letters; or knows all the shapes and colors; or can already count to 20 and knows basic addition — and they become aware that they have a child on their hands who is clearly outside the norm. A child who is reading, for example — truly reading, with comprehension — at age three, is clearly intellectually advanced well before he or she sits for an IQ test, and we at Grayson want to serve that considerable potential as soon as we can see it.



Can we actually identify them?

The most important step is not to make assumptions about the child's level of accomplishment based upon age or upon grade, but rather select test materials that will permit a young child to demonstrate high-level skills in a variety of areas.

— Julia B. Osborn, Ph.D., neuropsychologist
from "Assessing Gifted Children," in *Understanding Our Gifted* (1998)

At Grayson, we often jokingly remark that perhaps the best place to find gifted preschoolers is the grocery store: they are the ones reading all the signs, or talking about prices and money, or asking why the strawberries come from Colombia (and where is Colombia, anyway? and how do they get here? and do they have to go to the airport like we do? and does that mean that the strawberries speak Spanish? etc.). A review of the literature yields the following characteristics of gifted children of preschool age: alertness in infancy; faster pace in reaching developmental milestones; interest in the alphabet and symbols; early language development, including advanced vocabulary and complex speech patterns; intense curiosity; sustained attention; abstract thinking; excellent memory; early reading; early development of empathy; emotional intensity/sensitivity; and a mature sense of humor.

While these characteristics are undoubtedly useful in identifying these children, there are also actually formal psychometric instruments which can be used to measure intelligence even in the very young. Perhaps the most commonly used IQ test is the Wechsler Preschool & Primary Scales of Intelligence (WPPSI), which is designed and normed for children ages 2.5 to 7.6 years old and has been in use for 50 years, but the Stanford-Binet V, Woodcock-Johnson IV, and other tests are also used for children as young as 2, so there are reliable, valid ways to measure intelligence in children of preschool age. Such measurements will be part of the multiple criteria in Grayson's admissions process.

What do they need from school?

Highly gifted minds can consume large amounts of information in one gulp, and they thrive on complexity. Giving these children simple bits of information is like feeding an elephant one blade of grass at a time — he will starve before he even realizes that anyone is trying to feed him.

— Stephanie S. Tolan,
Newbery-Award-winning author and advocate for gifted children

Preschoolers who are gifted need many of the same things that typical preschoolers need from their first experiences with school: time to play, to rest, to read, and to explore. At Grayson, we know that at 3 and 4 years old, what they really need to learn from preschool is not just curriculum. They need to learn how to play with others, to share, to be part of a



group, to wait their turn, and to be a friend. Our preschool program is centered on these principles — every day, there is time for playing indoors and out; for dressing up and for sitting quietly with a book; for getting dirty and for learning to clean up; for running around and for napping; for fingerpainting and for fingerplays.

What is different about Grayson’s preschool program is that we *also* offer those things that gifted children need, scaled-down to a preschooler’s level and with an awareness of their stamina: instruction on their level, at their pace; opportunities to explore topics of interest in depth; social-emotional support; teachers who have training specifically about young gifted children; intellectual and social peers; and flexibility in what and how they learn.

What we offer them that is perhaps most valuable — and most difficult for these extraordinary children to find — is a school where their passion for learning is accepted and valued, right from the beginning. Our experience with Kindergarteners has reinforced what we know about gifted children generally: just because they are small does not mean they cannot ask complex questions, think deeply, and put their considerable intellectual gifts to work as they explore their world.

Very young gifted students need opportunities to experience acceptance, growth, and challenge; to appreciate the work and ideas of others; and to get feedback from peers and adults. They need to be able to express their thoughts, wrestle with big ideas, and problem-solve. They especially need to learn that it is okay — and, in fact, desirable — to take risks and to fail, because that is when we learn something new...and when we learn to regroup and try again. In fact, preschoolers, perhaps by virtue of being not terribly far removed from their days of falling down while learning how to walk, can be far more resilient in the face of initial failure than much older children. It is a benefit of early gifted education that this innate resilience and fearlessness can be an intrinsic part of their foundational, initial experience of school.

PreK at The Grayson School

Typically, young gifted students come to us already knowing a great deal. Yet, regardless of their advanced knowledge, they enter our classrooms with intellectual and emotional needs that are universal: to be recognized, to be accepted, and to experience the challenge and joy of learning. To meet these children’s needs, we need a curriculum that offers developmentally appropriate opportunities for challenge, discovery, mastery of new skills, and sharing of new knowledge.

— Smutny & Walker (2015)

At Grayson, we understand that 3- and 4-year-olds are by nature ready for exciting new adventures; in fact, getting to start school is *one* of those adventures. We have designed a program intended to capitalize on the energy and enthusiasm for exploration that these young children have for learning, and to nurture the extraordinary intellectual potential



that sets them apart, even at this young age. Such an ambitious plan requires mindful attention to both free play and learning, and to both social-emotional and cognitive development. These children will move through typical milestones, but they can also learn at a remarkable pace that they find exhilarating.

Engaging their natural zeal for exploration is the central focus of our program: like preschoolers everywhere, they will plant seeds and talk about water and sunlight — but at Grayson, they may also hear words like “photosynthesis” because it’s so fun to say (especially with what remains of a toddler lisp) and makes them feel very grown-up, indeed. Similarly, like their chronological peers in other preschools, they will learn about habits that are important for a healthy body — but they may also see germs under an ultraviolet light after talking about the importance of hand-washing. These lessons are not wildly different from other preschools; they are just deeper and more enriched to support their advanced verbal skills and analytical thinking.

Preschool at Grayson will look at first glance much like preschool everywhere; it is only by sitting down and listening to the level of conversation and discussion in the classroom that a visitor might notice something exceptional at play. In the end, the gifted education that Grayson has designed for preschoolers never loses sight of two things: first, they are 3- and 4-year-old children. And second, in the words of Del Siegle, past President of NAGC,

Every child deserves to learn something new every day.



References and Resources

If you are interested in more information about very young gifted children, here is a sampling of some of the research-based sources that we have found to be helpful in understanding their unique intellectual and social-emotional characteristics.

Books

Ann Gadzikowski, *Challenging Exceptionally Bright Children in Early Childhood Classrooms* (2013), National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and Redleaf Press.

Nancy B. Herzog, Ph.D, *Early Childhood Gifted Education* (2008), Prufrock Press.

Miraca U. M. Gross, Ph.D., *Exceptionally Gifted Children* (2004), Routledge Press.

Sylvia G. Feinburg, Ed.D., & Mary Mindess, Ed.M., *Eliciting Children's Full Potential* (2004), Brooks Cole Publishing Company.

Joan Franklin Smutny, Ph.D., Sally Yahnke Walker, Ph.D., & Elizabeth Meckstroth, Ph.D., *Teaching Gifted Children in the Regular Classroom* (1997), Free Spirit Publishing.

Articles

"Assessing Gifted Children" by Julia B. Osborn, Ph.D., in *Understanding Our Gifted* (Winter 1998), pp. 9-12.

"Characteristics of Gifted Preschool Children" by Ann E. Lupkowski, Ph.D., presented at the 63rd Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children in Anaheim, California (April 1985).

"Early Enrichment for Young Gifted Children" by Keri M. Guilbault, Ed.D., on [Maryland Coalition for Gifted and Talented Education \(MCGATE\) website](#), posted March 20, 2012).

"Small Poppies: Highly Gifted Children in the Early Years" by Miraca U. M. Gross, Ph.D., in *Roepers Review*, (Vol. 21, No. 3) pp. 207-214.

"Stuck in Another Dimension: The Exceptionally Gifted Child in School" by Stephanie S. Tolan, in *Gifted Child Today* (Nov-Dec 1985), also available online [here](#).

"The Importance of Being Early: A Case for Preschool Enrichment" by Ken McCluskey, Ph.D., in *Parenting for High Potential*, a publication from The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), pp. 8-13. Available [here](#).



Online resources

[The Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning](#) at Vanderbilt University (CSEFEL).

[The National Association for Gifted Children](#) (NAGC), especially these pieces:

- [Position Statement on Early Childhood Learning](#) (2006)
- [Pre-School and Kindergarten Programs](#)
- [Young and Bright Children](#)

[Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted](#) (SENG)

[Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education](#) (PAGE)

[The Davidson Institute](#)