

# Characteristics of High Potential Learners

## A practical guide for parents and educators

This appendix offers a non-diagnostic, observation-based list of traits often seen in high potential and gifted learners. It recognises that potential does not always present in traditional or easily measurable ways. These characteristics may emerge differently depending on age, context, neurodivergence, trauma history, or identity development. The list is divided into two parts for easy use: one section for parents and carers, and one for educators.

### For Parents and Carers

Children often show potential through behaviour that may appear intense, contradictory, or hard to manage. Trust your instincts when you see traits that don't fit the norm but feel significant.

#### Observable Traits at Home:

- Uses complex language or expresses nuanced ideas at a young age
- Asks deep, often philosophical questions ("What is time?" "Why do people lie?")
- Shows a strong sense of fairness or emotional injustice
- Expresses intense feelings or reactions to sensory input (e.g. smells, fabrics, sounds)
- Has an unusually vivid imagination or imaginary friends
- Becomes easily bored with repetitive or routine tasks
- Demonstrates independence in thinking and decision-making
- May struggle with transitions, sleep, or perfectionism
- Forms strong attachments to topics, ideas, or hobbies ("topic obsessions")
- Shows signs of gender identity exploration or non-conforming self-expression that seem linked to deeper emotional insight or social mismatch
- Enjoys spending time with older children or adults more than same-age peers
- Displays humour, irony, or sarcasm beyond their years
- May experience intense frustration when others don't "see" what they see

#### Supportive Actions for Parents:

- Validate their emotional experiences, even when intense
- Share interests and provide access to resources (books, tools, mentors)
- Advocate for flexible learning where appropriate
- Collaborate with teachers using specific examples from home life

### For Educators

High potential learners may present in unexpected ways in a classroom. Some are high achievers. Others are disengaged, masking, or disruptive. Behavioural issues can mask extraordinary potential when misinterpreted.

#### Classroom Observations:

- • Rapid acquisition of new concepts without repeated instruction
- • Makes unusual or abstract connections between ideas
- • Displays frustration or boredom with standard pacing or low-complexity tasks
- • May be disruptive, withdrawn, sarcastic, or argumentative when unchallenged
- • Highly curious, sometimes fixated on one topic or big idea
- • Demonstrates asynchronous development (advanced intellectually, younger socially or emotionally)
- • Deep empathy or concern for ethical issues or suffering of others
- • Overreacts to perceived injustice or contradiction
- • Independent in thought; may resist rules if they don't see the logic
- • Perfectionist tendencies; may fear failure or be reluctant to start tasks
- • May display gender fluidity or identity-focused behaviour that connects with broader social, emotional, or intellectual self-expression
- • May be labelled as inattentive or “difficult” while showing strong potential in hands-on, design, or discussion-based work
- • Participates actively when challenged, but disengages in low-rigor environments

### Educator Tips:

- • Look beyond grades and compliance, observe how the student thinks
- • Consider the function of the behaviour: is it masking? Is it protest?
- • Provide scaffolding for self-regulation and peer interaction
- • Use interest-based inquiry or flexible assessment to reveal potential
- • Engage families in conversation, they may have seen things you haven't

### Twice-Exceptional Considerations:

Both parents and educators should be mindful of students who demonstrate extraordinary strengths alongside specific learning difficulties. These students may:

- • Show wide variability between verbal and written output
- • Score poorly on standardised assessments but excel in discussion
- • Avoid tasks that expose their area of weakness
- • Experience emotional or social distress related to their learning profile
- • Require multi-modal learning, assistive technology, and emotional support