

# A brilliant challenge

Lyn Kendall's new book provides invaluable advice for parents of gifted children, from recognising their talents to then nurturing their abilities – and overcoming challenges along the way. Report by **Brian Page**

**L**yn Kendall remembers quite clearly the first time she discovered the path that would lead to her spending 40 years as a psychologist and educator specialising in the teaching of gifted children. Having recognised early that she herself was “a square peg” struggling to fit into the round holes of childhood life, she also began to notice how her classmates would come to her to when they were bored – she was the one who would think up interesting games and activities for her friends.

When she was old enough she would often be sent to help other children with their reading. And she then also discovered another “square peg” in the shape of her younger cousin David.

Even as a baby, David showed signs of the boredom often associated with bright children in search of stimulation. Lyn would crumple up a ball of paper so he could explore its texture with his little hands.

“Once he learned to talk, he would tell me with great enthusiasm about the inventions and machines he was designing in his mind.”

Shortly after beginning school, David started refusing to read. “When I arrived to babysit I’d find the books the school had sent home lying untouched on the table. In hindsight I suspect that this refusal stemmed

from boredom as he already knew how to read them perfectly well.”

Lyn then hit on a solution. “We’d read the books backwards or read across both pages at once, playing with the words themselves to make them fun again. In a way David was my first gifted student.”

He was to be very far from the last. Over those four decades, Lyn has taught hundreds of bright sparks – as well as helping parents and educators understand more fully the needs of gifted children.

She has lectured at universities, advised local authorities, created specialised teaching materials for Gifted and Talented co-ordinators, ran countless workshops and set up summer schools and become a “go to” authority for media outlets, having worked on programmes like Victoria Derbyshire and This Morning. And, perhaps most famously, she appears regularly on Channel 4’s Child Genius shows.

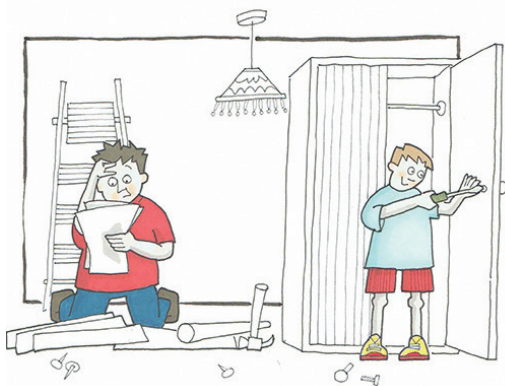
Who, then, is better equipped to produce a book for parents and teachers on the joys and travails of raising gifted children?

*A Brilliant IQ: Gift or Challenge*, co-authored with Chris Allcock, is an inspiring blend of sound advice on issues ranging from initially recognising gifted children, through helping them to cope with early life social and physical challenges to finding the best way to support them at home and at school.

It’s written in a clear, jargon free, simple and sensible manner – with lots of case study examples to support the points that she and Chris Allcock cover.

For instance, Lyn tells the story of how her own son as a toddler gave up drawing because he could not get down accurately on paper the photographic image of a car that was in his head.

In fact, many gifted children hold themselves to impossible high standards and become hugely frustrated when they can’t match the images in their minds to the real world results of their efforts.





Mensa member Lyn Kendall is a psychologist and educator who works with British Mensa as the society's Gifted Child Consultant. She has over 40 years experience working with children of all ages and intellects, focusing mainly on the fields of Special Education Needs and Gifted and Talented Education. She provides advice and support for parents and professionals and is a production team member on the Channel 4 series *Child Genius*.

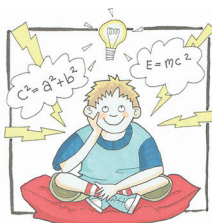
Co-writer Chris Allcock is a professional writer and games designer. He joined Mensa at the age of seven and says co-authoring the book presented him with the opportunity to share the perspective of someone who overcame many of the same challenges other gifted youngsters face today.

They also understand real world events, such as war and famine, and can become acutely upset at not being able to do anything to help the victims.

It's important, Lyn says, that parents understand issues like these and find ways to deal with them. In her son's case, for instance, they took him to the National Gallery where they visited the abstract art section.


Her son was fascinated by the work on show – and even more so in learning how much people were prepared to pay for them. "That got my son thinking and eventually he started drawing again."

In another example Lyn tells of showing children films of babies trying to begin walking. They laughed heartily each time the baby fell down. Now imagine, the children were told, what would happen if those babies just stopped trying to walk because it was too hard... Children, gifted children in particular, need to learn the values of resilience, Lyn says: "All children need to develop resilience. A high IQ is not a passport to guaranteed success. The important thing about helping



a child to become resilient is that it should be done in a supportive way and with a level of humour. Mensa members can be very hard on themselves and set themselves impossibly high standards. High standards in themselves are not a bad thing. Dealing with the fallout of not achieving those standards or failing to understand that it's okay to work at different levels

depending on the circumstances can be devastating. "In my workshops, if I hear a child say, 'Oh no! I've made a mistake' or 'my writing looks messy', the first question I ask is, 'is the queen coming to visit your house today?'" This often causes much hilarity, and we go on to talk about how it's okay to make mistakes and that not every piece of work has to be 'best'.

"If we can support younger children to develop a well-rounded personality, then half of the battle is already won. Parents and teachers don't always understand the pitfalls of focusing solely on the child's intellect. Being able to understand something is not the same as being able to cope with it emotionally." 

"I come across many Mensa level adults who have become totally overwhelmed by their understanding of a situation but feel hopeless at their seeming inability to affect it."

It's also important, she adds, that teachers and parents praise all aspects of a youngster's personality – praise for who they are as well as what they can do.

"It's very easy when you see a child reading Dickens at four years old to make those skills the focus of your praise or attention. I remember that I used to take my son into one shop where the owner would say, 'if you can tell me what eight times seven is, I'll give you a lollipop'. Other children were given the same treat for standing nicely or remembering to say please.

"Bright people tend to be over-thinkers. If this is a regular occurrence, the child gets a very clear message. People like you and praise you for being clever. Our little over-thinker then starts to worry that if they make an error, people will stop liking them. I'm not saying don't praise their skills, what I'm saying is, remember to praise all of their positive qualities."

Another valuable piece of advice for parents comes with the suggestion that they should not fall into the trap of placing the gifted child at the centre of the family but that parents should also make time for their partner, themselves and other members of the family. Do many parents fall into this trap of placing the gifted child before all others?

"Most parents I come across have a very well-balanced and sensible approach to raising their children. Others mistake the idea of a 'child-centred' environment to mean that the child must be at the centre of the family. This approach not only puts enormous pressure on the child but can jeopardise the relationship between the adults. If the child can learn that they are one of a family team, they will develop a much more well-rounded social self, a secure identity and be better placed to 'fit in' at school and work. They will also understand that there are others there to support them in times of crisis."

Talking about family matters prompted me to ask about 'pushy parents' – Lyn doesn't seem to think there are

## Some common ways to recognise a gifted child

They have an unusual capacity for remembering things

They start reading at an early age

The pass intellectual milestones early

They have unusual hobbies and in-depth knowledge

They have a developed sense of humour

They hold themselves to impossible standards

They like to be in control

They prefer adults, or solitude, to other children

They are quick learners

They're aware of world events

They love to talk...

And to ask questions



actually that many of them.

"I believe that the parents of our bright sparks can often be viewed unfairly by others. Unless you've had one that gets themselves up early so they can watch Open University lectures, teaches themselves to write, in secret so you won't be cross with them, or begs you to give them some long division sums before bed because their brain is too awake, you cannot hope to know what these parents go through.

"The number of times I was asked

'how do you get Chris to do all of this?' drove me to despair. I didn't 'get him' to do anything. Finding ways of stopping him and encouraging him to relax was much more difficult. There are, of course, pushy parents. They tend to be those who use hot-housing techniques and use the child to gain attention or success for themselves."

In terms of schooling when talking about the 'one size fits all' approach to education in the book, Lyn makes a good defence of teachers who, she says, are willing to help if they can but "just lack the time, knowledge and resources". What, I asked did she think could be done

## How a Mensa meeting led to the four rules of success

In the book *A Brilliant IQ*, Lyn explains how a Mensa meeting led her to creating four rules for success...

"Slightly over a decade ago I was asked to speak at British Mensa's Annual Gathering, being held in Chester that year, on the subject of giftedness. The audience was made up of Mensans of all ages and from all walks of life. I gave a very early version of the presentation I use in today's seminars then left some time at the end for questions and discussion. The conversation came round to higher education and I

asked the group – roughly 50 people – how many of them had been to university. All of them raised their hands.

"Next I asked how many of the group had finished university, coming away with a qualification. This time around fewer than half of them raised their hands. I was astounded to think that institutions that were supposedly meant to nourish and grow the talents of our brightest individuals were failing to create meaningful connections with those who had potential to excel, and wanted to know why.

"As our discussion continued, four main causes began to present themselves as answers.

What I learned on that day, followed by research and additional reading I undertook as a result of the experience, formed the basis for what I call my Four Rules of Success.

- Learn how to study
- Learn how to fail
- Learn how to be well rounded
- Learn how to mix with other bright people."

You can find out more about these rules in the book...

### Lyn's advice on what to do if you think you have a gifted child

"Parents often start to suspect their child is of high ability when they first mix with other children. There are books and web pages, such as the Mensa website, that will provide checklists. The only way to be sure is to have the child assessed by a suitably qualified psychologist or assessor. A common question is, 'what's the best age for my child to be assessed?' While I will assess two and three-year-olds, parents should remember that at this age their self-regulation is still developing. If they're not in the mood to co-operate that's a lot of money you've just wasted. A pre-school assessment can be useful for the receiving school and a back-up for parents so many will wait until the child is nearer school age before having them assessed."

to manage their expectations of what any school can, or will, offer, particularly in these difficult times."

One of the aspects of the book that struck me, I say, is that much of the advice and experience put together by Lyn and Chris could be applied to all parents and children, not just gifted children. Would she agree?

"Much of the advice in the book would also be suitable for all parents. As Chris and I say in the chapter on parenting, young parents are facing bigger challenges than ever before. In terms of child rearing, the support network of family and neighbours has gone as people move away to work. The pressure on them to be perfect parents is huge. Equally, in a technologically advanced society, the need for workers to have an increasingly high level of education and well developed social skills is paramount.

"Our book focuses on 'giftedness' because this is an area that continues to be neglected no matter which government is in power. We've both managed to navigate our way through some very difficult periods and we hope that our words can make the road a little smoother for those to come."

*A Brilliant IQ: Gift or Challenge* by Lyn Kendall and Chris Allcock is published by Brilliant Publications [www.brilliantpublications.co.uk](http://www.brilliantpublications.co.uk) and available at the normal outlets

to change this? "The key word for schools is flexibility. I'm not a great fan of accelerating children wholesale because it can raise as many problems as it solves, but if you've got a child who is working three years above their classmates in maths, where is the harm in them joining a higher year group for their maths lessons? Nobody objects if a child who is struggling to read is taken out for additional tuition. Equally, parents need