

### Summary

Parenting a child with high learning potential can be daunting. When a young person knows more than most adults in some areas, caregivers can feel uncertain about how to 'parent' positively. However, although these young people may be advanced intellectually, in terms of life experience they are beginners and greatly in need of guidance in order to flourish.

This advice sheet uses the term 'parenting' to include all adults who care for a child, their wellbeing and mental stimulation. It gives guidelines for understanding the child in your care and their individual challenges, as well as areas of high learning potential. It also suggests positive discipline techniques and resources to allow the maturation of a resilient and well-balanced young person.

### Introduction

Children with high learning potential can struggle to fit in and make sense of a world that they understand on a different level to their peer group. Their path to young adulthood can be greatly smoothed by nurturing (yet authoritative) parenting that boosts their self-esteem, emotional literacy, social skills, resilience and cognitive development.

This kind of positive parenting also strengthens relationships with parents and educational providers and reduces the likelihood of criminal behaviour and mental health problems such as depression<sup>i</sup>. Additionally it has been shown to offset the potentially negative impact of significant family stress, upheaval or socio-economic problems<sup>ii</sup> and to arm children with such strong emotional resilience that they are not held back, as would have been expected, by health disadvantages or lack of opportunity<sup>iii</sup>.

### Positive Parenting Research

Studies of focused "Gifted and Talented 'Triple P' Positive Parenting Programs" have reported beneficial outcomes. It has been concluded that tailored behavioural parenting intervention is effective, acceptable and leads to reduced hyperactivity and fewer reported child behaviour problems. Significant improvements in parenting style were also indicated, including less permissiveness, harshness and verbosity when disciplining their child.<sup>iv</sup> Encouragingly, a positive approach to parenting seems to become second nature and beneficial changes were still evident at a 6-month review.<sup>v</sup>

Furthermore, the parents themselves benefited and de-stressed as an increase in parental confidence reduced their use of frustrating, ineffective discipline and rewarded them with children who encountered fewer emotional problems. In fact, the parents studied recorded that there was now less depression and stress, fewer conflicts over parenting and more relationship satisfaction.<sup>vi</sup>

### Parenting and High Learning Potential

There is no single template for parenting positively – and no standard profile that fits each child. However, certain characteristics occur frequently amongst high potential learners; understanding and identifying these in your individual child is a fundamental part of being their guide. See our advice sheets [PA102 Characteristics of Children with High Learning Potential](#) and [PA503 Behaviour of Young High Learning Potential Children](#) for more information.

Over time, supportive parenting techniques will become second nature as you build “the continual relationship of a parent(s) and a child or children that includes caring, teaching, leading, communicating, and providing for the needs of a child consistently and unconditionally”<sup>vii</sup>. A ‘developmental’ parenting style dovetails into this by providing affection, encouragement, responsiveness to a child’s cues and teaching through play and conversation<sup>viii</sup>, as does an element of ‘authoritative’ parenting through being assertive, but not intrusive; demanding, yet responsive; and consistent with appropriate discipline, not punishment<sup>ix</sup>. These principles apply to teenagers as much as toddlers, all of whom need to feel secure, loved, and empowered to overcome frustrations and reach their full potential.

It is important that all caregivers are adequately supported. Find your own support network; feeling that you are not alone is vital, whilst enhancing your confidence and fulfilment as a caregiver will also boost your positive parenting skills. Parents may find this support in the first weeks with their baby at a postnatal parenting group run by the NHS or the National Childbirth Trust group (NCT). Later, parent and toddler groups at a community centre, place of worship or council-run child centre may lead into home education networks, school social groups or membership of an organisation such as Potential Plus UK with ‘familiar faces’ both in person and online.

Underlying everything is the importance of being a positive role model. Monitor your own language, screen use, health habits, etc., and keep to any House Rules you may be starting to make together. This can be especially important when dealing with children with high learning potential, from whom respect is not always automatic (even for a parent, grandparent or teacher), but needs to be earned.

### Positive Parenting In More Depth

The following principles give parents guidance about positive parenting.

**Positive Reinforcement.** Give meaningful praise (specific praise related to your child’s efforts, for example “I am proud you gave it a go, even if you made mistakes/didn’t know how to do it’), thanks, a hug or extra privileges when you see kind acts, a decision to remain calm or an attempt to abide by the rules (even if it wasn’t possible for them to be entirely followed). This boosts self-esteem, optimism and makes future pro-social choices more likely.

**Notice the Small ‘Big’ Things.** Let them know you see even brief moments of tidying up, organising themselves or calmly trying to practise a skill. Is this their area of weakness? Then it is not a ‘small thing’...it’s a huge thing! Reward them with meaningful praise.

**Support their Feelings.** Show empathy for their challenges, from toddler frustrations to teenage heartbreaks. Encourage emotional expression by giving them time, love, empathy and respect. This benefits a growing child’s temperament and emotional regulation and helps them to learn to focus, express themselves and modulate their emotions<sup>x</sup>. Get help for them if they seem to be struggling with mental health issues such as anxiety; see our advice sheet [PA606 Worry and Anxiety in High Learning Potential Children](#).

**Reassurance.** Make sure that your young person knows that they are loved, important, that they belong and that they hold a unique role in your family unit.

**No Nicknames.** Don't label your child with high learning potential as "The Smart One" – or "The Clumsy One". This is most likely to stress them out, cause them to adopt this as their identity, or even make them rebel.

**Easy Communication.** Your child should feel confident that they can hold open discussions with you, knowing that both of you commit to showing respect, sensitivity and a level of conversation and guidance that is appropriate to their level of maturity and developmental stage.

**Be Involved but Don't Stalk.** Prioritise quality family time and experiences. Use this time to keep up with your child's developing interests. Alongside this, support their path to independence by encouraging an appropriate level of autonomy, possibly guided by trusted members of their peer group, whilst still ensuring that you know where they are and what they are doing.

**Provide Empowering Alternatives.** Avoid simply saying 'no' and instead offer a choice of acceptable and attractive next steps to give your young person a sense of being in control. This encourages them to 'buy into' a course of action and thereby learn to make their own decisions – and their own mistakes. 'Failing' in a safe, family environment, provides a much-needed opportunity to learn, build resilience and try again. Unless the situation is dangerous, avoid rescuing them or fixing the problem. In this way, and by 'asking instead of telling', you are 'empowering instead of enabling' a child to grow rather than to remain dependent.

**Teach Discipline – Don't Enforce Punishment.** Clear boundaries are important, as are pre-agreed, non-violent sanctions for ignoring them. Discipline, while not being 'permissive' (i.e. not indulgent), should allow the child to learn for themselves and support a mutually respectful parent-child relationship that builds a child's self-esteem.

### Why Try This with Children with High Learning Potential?

Parenting positively in this way can bring great rewards with high learning potential children. By putting in the extra effort to understand their strengths, layers and needs, a deeper and more accurate understanding of their complexities will follow.

### Understand Your Child

- Understanding a child's disposition means having to talk, research and show your commitment to your child as you carry out a form of detective work together. Children who cannot help but need you to 'earn' their respect (a common trait with high potential learners) are more likely to respond well once they have observed all your hard work.
- Discovering a child's needs and the causes of difficult behaviour may not be an easy journey but will lead you to a place of knowledge from where you can act. Once you understand their abilities and disposition better, you may discover underlying issues which could be temporary or long-term, mental or physical and could require assessments by a range of professionals, including your GP, Potential Plus UK, an Assessment Unit for conditions such as autism or dyslexia, or an Occupational Therapist for physical or sensory issues. It is only in knowing your own child's profile that you can better match their needs and push for them to be able to access any relevant therapeutic services.
- With a better understanding of your child's abilities and difficulties, your responses become more accurate. For example, is a child who often breaks things just careless, or might there be an underlying issue like dyspraxia? Being annoyed with them for something that is 'in-

built' denies their sense of self. Instead, seeking guidance from an Occupational Therapist should help their 'clumsiness' while you firmly yet gently guide them to understand the value of money, the emotional attachment you had to the broken item or the practical reasons why your child might now miss out. If you have any concerns or even an actual diagnosis, overlay your new knowledge of, for example, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyspraxia or Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) onto your child's behaviours. See our fact sheet [F02 Asperger Syndrome \(High Functioning Autism\) and High Learning Potential](#).

### Address Your Concerns

- Do you worry that your child constantly fidgets or becomes distracted by the bright light, heat or movement of the sun? Many children with high learning potential have a sensory system that is 'more' or 'less' sensitive than average (known as Sensory Processing Disorder, SPD), possibly combined with an emotional system that is easily 'overexcited'. See our fact sheet [F05 Sensory Processing Disorder and High Learning Potential](#) and [PA610 Hypersensitivity \(Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities\)](#). It is important to understand and work around these strong influences when setting expectations and consequences.
- Is your child in trouble, dropping out or pretending not to understand just to 'fit in' with their peers? Consult our advice sheets [PA105 Profiles of High Learning Potential Children](#) and [PA515 to PA520](#), which are based on Dr George Betts and Dr Maureen Neihart's revised (2010) descriptions, and illustrate the associated feelings, behaviours and needs for home and school support.
- Learn about typical brain development stages in a young child or teenager and the behaviours (good, bad and possibly ill-advised) that are considered age-appropriate and to be expected. Carers of children with high learning potential are often so used to 'advanced' thinking that they can run the risk of being too quick to chastise behaviours that they don't realise are entirely age-appropriate and common within a peer group. High potential children often develop 'asynchronously' and so may be mature and advanced in some areas, yet function in others in a way that may simply be typical for a younger chronological age group. See our advice sheet [PA514 Asynchronous Development](#).

### Generate Fewer Misunderstandings

- Disorganisation and repeatedly failing to carry out commitments may appear to show a blatant disrespect. However, it may actually indicate difficulties with the part of the brain responsible for helping to plan, be organised and remember instructions. High potential learners can often be challenged by a poor memory in this way, whereas they may recall factual information unusually well; see our advice sheet [PA522 Executive Function Skills](#). Instead of becoming frustrated, investigate executive functioning and use techniques such as timetables, to-do lists and setting a regular daily bath time/homework slot/cleaning-out-the-pet hour.
- Have clear rules for all. Because most children with high learning potential have a strong sense of 'right and wrong', invite them to compose House Rules with you. This means that they can be worded in line with your child's value system – or, if necessary, explained to them with calm facts as to why things have to be a certain way; outlining the consequences of a breakdown in agreements generally. (Never tell them "because I say so") Everyone

must follow the parts of the agreement that apply to them; this demonstrates how we obey the wider rules of society and have consequences for ill-thought-out actions. Do not try to protect them from this important life lesson; to make ‘empty threats’ will quickly lead to disrespect from a child with high learning potential and endlessly test your resolve and boundaries.

- Move from Telling to Asking. It has been shown that rather than being ‘nagged at’ or told what to do, children with high learning potential respond better to ‘curiosity questions’ that invite thinking skills and cooperation<sup>xi</sup>. For example, instead of “Don’t forget your coat/ sunscreen/ book/ snack”, try “What are you taking so that you won’t get cold/ sunburned/ bored/ hungry?”. Instead of “Hurry up!”, try “What is next on your morning routine chart?”

### Positive Discipline

Positive discipline aims to allow your child to take responsibility and learn for themselves the consequences of their own actions. This must not be confused with punishment. Positive discipline has rules and expectations, (backed up by pre-agreed consequences for breaking these), but is always carried out in a manner that is non-violent, solution-focused, respectful and based on child-development principles.<sup>xii</sup> Experts J Nelson and C Erwin explain that “Positive Discipline is built on teaching, understanding, encouraging, and communicating – not punishing. Punishment is intended to make children “pay” for what they have done. Discipline is designed to help children learn from what they have done.”<sup>xiii</sup>

Such disciplining must always support your long-term parenting goals and be unwaveringly firm, yet respectful and kind. Yes, there are consequences, but you must avoid shouting, using anger or making threats, as much as being permissive or giving them that one last chance.

**‘Walk the Talk’.** Children learn by ‘modelling’ the behaviours of their primary caregivers. Therefore, abide by the rules, and show kindness and respect even when you are cross or upset and you will teach your child how to cope in a similar manner. Ensure your child feels respected, validated in their disappointment and capable of making the right decisions in future.

**Be Consistent.** Enforce the boundaries that have been set, so that young minds that tend to look for every tiny loophole will meet with reliable consequences. In this way you will earn their respect as well as encouraging them to make careful decisions in the future – which, in turn, develops their cognitive thinking skills.

**Learning for Themselves.** Remember, discipline is a teaching and learning experience, not a punitive ‘blaming and shaming’. You are guiding your child to begin to appreciate for themselves the negative outcomes from their undesirable choices. If you need them, appropriate, pre-agreed consequences will most likely involve the addition or removal of something. For example, the addition of a chore (like cleaning up after themselves) or waiting 5 extra minutes until the TV or computer goes on. Or the loss of a privilege, sticker chart star, pocket money, internet access or reduced time following their current passion – be that football or the periodic table!

**Perfectionistic Outbursts.** It can be hugely frustrating and genuinely frightening for children with high learning potential when they come up against a task that they cannot do perfectly first time. This could be anything from an intellectual challenge to a physical one that requires them to develop their fine motor skills (e.g. threading a needle, clicking a cursor at an exact point). Try to

recognise what is behind an outburst; instead of disciplining them, it may be more appropriate to work on that skill, offer reassurance and actively help them to build a 'growth mindset'. See our advice sheet, [PA604 Perfectionism and High Learning Potential Children](#) and blog [10 Questions about Mindset and High Learning Potential](#).

**Managing Anger.** Perfectionism is not the only cause of angry outbursts and sometimes the trigger is unacceptable – and so is the ensuing rage. Remember that they are always learning from you, so firmly and kindly go down to their eye level and remind them that to show this kind of behaviour goes against the expectations you have of each other. Even if you don't agree with their complaint, it is important to validate their feelings and encourage them to find words to describe what they are going through. Help them to take some calming breaths and maybe a sip of water. To impose any active consequences while they are angry will not be effective discipline and is likely to escalate the situation, so this should only be considered once they, and you, are composed. While destructive behaviour is not acceptable, pushing themselves to calm down and communicate with you may be a great step deserving of reward.

**'Positive Time-Out'.** Suitable even for teens, this is not a punishment, but simply removes them from an aggravating situation. Allowing young people time to calm down, helps them to realise that their own choices have caused an undesirable outcome and to develop their cognitive thinking by planning better ways of reacting next time.

**Keep Calm and Carry On.** If you are being pushed to your limit, calmly but firmly tell your child you are upset and need a few moments alone. Briefly remove yourself – take a positive time-out – and take some deep-down breaths. Focus on your longer-term aim to parent thoughtfully and to model the positive behaviours you wish to see in the young person you are guiding, then return to your child and respectfully validate their feelings while repeating your expectations.

**Safety Check.** Is the young person going through a difficult time? Faced with significant stressors such as a bereavement or relationship breakdown, it is important to get the right support for everyone affected. Their behaviour should still be acceptable, although possibly the standard could be slightly relaxed. Carefully handled, the negative effects of family conflict, breakdown and separation can be minimised, and badmouthing avoided, to help protect your child from turning against him/herself<sup>xiv</sup>.

### Remain a Positive Parent

Remember that you are a role model. Take care of your mental and physical health and make time to relax so that your resilience remains topped up. See the blogs from our HLP Parenting series [Wellbeing for Carers](#), [Understand your Challenges](#) and ["Can't Cope?" – Try Nurturing a Growth Mindset](#).

Self-care will not only help you, but also form the foundation of an excellent role model for your child.

## Further Information

<i>Gifted Children</i> edited by Kate Distin	A favourite amongst parents of high potential learners, <i>Gifted Children</i> explores the strengths and characteristics of gifted children, including those with special needs, and addresses some of the challenges that they may face.
<i>Parenting Gifted Children 101: An Introduction to Gifted Kids and Their Needs</i> by Tracy Inman	Many topics are covered, including gifted myths, educational research and social and emotional issues. There is some US bias; however, with over 50 contributors, their insights are directly relevant and rare to find.
<i>NSPCC Positive Parenting 'Need To Know' Guide.</i> (Free download from <a href="https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/leaflets/positive-parenting">https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/leaflets/positive-parenting</a> .)	A great overview booklet. Free to download and gives tips on how to set boundaries and build positive relationships with the children in your care.
<i>Positive Parenting Workbook: An Interactive Guide for Strengthening Emotional Connection</i> by Rebecca Earnes	An excellent all-in-one book. An explanation of positive parenting combined with exercises to focus you on your individual journey 'raising emotionally healthy children'.
<i>Positive Discipline in Everyday Parenting</i> by Joan Durrant. (Free from the Save The Children resource centre at <a href="https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/positive-discipline-everyday-parenting-pdep-fourth-edition">https://resourcecentre.savethechildren.net/library/positive-discipline-everyday-parenting-pdep-fourth-edition</a> ).	Written by an expert in the field, this detailed, free book, mixes thought-provoking worksheets with easy-to-read information spanning toddlers to teens.
<i>Positive Discipline A-Z: 1001 Solutions to Everyday Parenting Problems</i> by Jane Nelson, H Stephen Glenn & Lynn Lott.	This is a great companion to help you think on your feet. A factual first section followed by an A to Z of everything from 'Angry or Aggressive Child'...to 'Zits'!
<i>Self-Compassion for Parents: Nurture Your Child by Caring for Yourself</i> by Susan Pollak.	Rich with beneficial ideas, this self-care book comes with free audio downloads for individual exploration and 'audio practice'.
<i>Grandparenting With Love &amp; Logic: Practical Solutions to Today's Grandparenting Challenges</i> by Foster Cline, & Jim Fay	Part of the 'With Love & Logic' series, this unusual book fills a gap for families where grandparents take on a significant part of the childcare.
<i>Understanding Your Child's Sensory Signals: A Practical Daily Use Handbook for Parents and Teachers</i> by Angie Voss.	For over 200 behaviours you may see as 'strange' or 'over-reactions' in your child, this book explains the sensory signals being sent and suggests practical ways to help – because even positive discipline would be inappropriate here. A handy, quick-reference guide, whether you are just taking an interest, or your high potential learner has a diagnosis of Sensory Processing Disorder or Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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To give feedback on this advice sheet, please go to: [www.surveymonkey.com/s/advice-sheet-feedback](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/advice-sheet-feedback)

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