



# More than I.Q.:

## Choosing a School that Fits Your Child

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It's not just your child's IQ, or the label a school uses to describe its program, that will determine the right fit in choosing a school for your highly capable child. Your child's temperament and social-emotional needs are more important than his or her intellectual gifts and challenges - although the two areas of development are profoundly related.

The fact that somebody chose a particular school for their child, whether it's a local celebrity or your friend or co-worker, tells you very little about whether that is the right school for your child. Are your neighbor's kids like your child? Do they have the same strengths and challenges and learning styles?

Like everyone else, gifted children have a variety of temperaments, which affect their learning styles. Two aspects of temperament are key to finding an educational program in which your child will thrive.

### **Introversion and Extroversion**

Is your child more of an introvert or an extrovert? This isn't about your child being talkative or shy. Introverts can be complete chatterboxes when they're at home, or with one or two close friends, and extroverts can be slow to warm up (or shy) in new situations.

Introversion and extroversion have to do with how people get their energy: are they energized through being with a group of people (like me after four hours of teaching preschoolers - higher than a kite)? Or, are they energized through spending time alone or with a close friend, engaged in a favorite activity or simply thinking things through? Most people are some of both, but lean more in one direction; some people are extreme extroverts, almost always directed outside themselves, and some are extreme introverts, almost always directed inside themselves.

Most people are more extroverted, and virtually all teachers, particularly in the younger grades, are extroverts (we think nothing of singing and dancing and making fools of ourselves in front of a group of little ones). So, traditional classrooms have been set up for extroverts because that's what teachers are most familiar with. Extroverts can make themselves known in larger classes, and can thrive in traditional classrooms.

Introverts, however, have a huge need for smaller, more intimate classrooms, and have a greater need to stay in the same setting (with the same kids and teachers) for several years if possible. It can take introverts the whole school year to make a friend, so moving them from school to school each year denies them the opportunity to build friendships. I went to seven elementary schools, and because I'm an extrovert, I had a great time. But for my introverted sisters, moving schools was very difficult.

## Field Independence and Field Sensitivity

The second facet of your child's temperament that you need to consider as you look at schools is field independence versus field sensitivity. Field sensitivity and independence have to do with how people make decisions. Field sensitive people look to their surrounding environment: what are other people doing? What am I supposed to be doing? They are sensitive to the field. These are the children who love to be little helpers, who feel safe when they know what they are supposed to do, who love to be given guidance about the correct way to do things. When my daughter, a highly field independent child, was in kindergarten, she had a playdate at our house with a lovely little field sensitive girl. The two girls were coloring together and the friend, after using a green marker, raised her hand and asked me, "Can I use a red marker now?" She needed reassurance that she was doing the right thing.

Field independent people may be aware that the people around them are all headed in one direction, but that is less likely to influence their decision-making. The fact that the peer group, or teacher, or parent, is doing A, and wants the field independent child to also do A, has virtually no impact on the field independent child, who might choose to do A, or B, or Q, or 27. When we talk about people marching to a different drummer, those are field independents. They are non-conformists. They are self-directed. They challenge conventions.

My daughter had a friend in first grade who called her up one evening. I was thrilled, as a field sensitive person myself, for my daughter to be receiving her first phone call from a girlfriend. I listened as my child said, "Why? Why? Why? I don't know. Good-bye," and hung up the phone. I asked, "What was that all about?" and she said, "Julia wants us to wear our purple dresses tomorrow." "Oh," I said, springing into action, "Your purple dress is dirty. I can run a load right now." My daughter responded, "Why?" "Why wash your dress? Because it's dirty." "No, why does Julia want to wear the same dress as me? I don't get it." A field sensitive child would get it: it's fun to dress like our friends, it's fun to do what the rest of the group is doing. Not so for the field independent child: it can be painful to have to conform - everything inside screams, "I gotta be me!"

<b>FIELD INDEPENDENT STUDENTS</b>	<b>FIELD SENSITIVE STUDENTS</b>
<b>Learning Style:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn by breaking apart the information given by a teacher, then reforming the pieces of information into a new structure</li><li>• See and analyze the details</li><li>• Create their own structure for learning (don't use the teacher's methodology)</li><li>• Interested in the new and complex</li><li>• Learn by experimenting</li><li>• Solve problems in innovative ways</li><li>• Must be self-motivated to learn</li></ul>	<b>Learning Style:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learn whole pieces of information as presented by the teacher</li><li>• Categorize their learning in broad concepts; less observant of the details</li><li>• Use the teacher's structure to learn something new</li><li>• Interested in things they already know well, especially things that relate to their own lives</li><li>• Learn through practice and repetition</li><li>• Solve problems using methods taught to them</li><li>• Socially motivated to learn - want to learn what everyone else is learning</li></ul>

FIELD INDEPENDENT STUDENTS	FIELD SENSITIVE STUDENTS
<p><b>Social-Emotional Style:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not inclined to follow their peers</li> <li>• Peer pressure or a teacher’s disapproval may affect them emotionally, but won’t necessarily change their actions</li> <li>• Less responsive to rewards or punishments; create their own goals for learning</li> <li>• Behavior goals should emphasize cooperation, not obedience to a group norm</li> <li>• May need direct instruction in social skills</li> </ul>	<p><b>Social-Emotional Style:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enjoy doing what everyone else is doing</li> <li>• Highly sensitive to peer pressure or a teacher’s criticism</li> <li>• Need to be praised, encouraged, and verbally supported</li> <li>• Behavior goals should emphasize helping the group and the teacher</li> <li>• Usually pick up social cues and skills on their own</li> </ul>
<p><b>Educational Motivators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Independent achievement (resent group grades for group projects)</li> <li>• Independent and self-chosen projects</li> <li>• New and/or complex learning</li> <li>• Freedom to create their own structure for learning</li> </ul>	<p><b>Educational Motivators</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear structure and directions</li> <li>• Small group/cooperative learning</li> <li>• Relating material to child’s own life</li> <li>• Helping the teacher and other children</li> <li>• External rewards</li> </ul>

Teachers have field independent and field sensitive styles, too, of course. When a teacher’s style does not match a student’s, the child’s learning may be hindered. However, several studies (see Ramirez and Castaneda) have shown that teachers who study different cognitive styles can meet the needs of, or bridge the gap with, children whose learning styles differ from their own. Other research adds that this “bridging” is easier for teachers who are neither extremely field independent nor extremely field sensitive (see Kirton).

### Combining the Temperaments

Here’s what it looks like in a regular classroom. The field-sensitive, extroverted teacher calls out a question: “What is the capital of Washington?” The gifted field-sensitive extroverted child calls out the answer, “Olympia!” and the teacher smiles. The gifted field-sensitive introverted child knows the answer, but would never dream of calling it out. It’s ok, though - the teacher has seen this child’s written work and assumes this child knows the answer but is just too shy to say it, and that’s fine. The gifted field-independent extrovert, meanwhile, has heard the field-sensitive extrovert’s response, but can see a few ways that answer could differ: “Well, it could be Washington D.C., if you mean the national capital. Or, it could mean Seattle if you mean the population capital. Or it could mean Mt. Rainier if you mean the top, or highest point in the state. Or it could mean W.” The teacher, depending on her energy level, either thinks, “How clever,” or thinks, “Why can’t that child ever just give a simple answer!” The gifted field-independent introvert does not respond. And because on written work the field-independent introvert gives quirky, unexpected answers to “simple” questions, the teacher assumes this child doesn’t understand, or doesn’t try - certainly not that this is a highly gifted individual whose thinking is way beyond reciting the capital of Washington.

Various studies have found that among the general population, the vast majority of people are extroverts, while among the gifted population, the trend is reversed: around 75 percent are more introverted. According to other studies, a strong majority of the general population tends to be field sensitive, while around 60 percent of the gifted population tends to be field independent. This does not mean all gifted people are field-independent introverts - gifted people can, in fact, be in any of these categories.

I'll use my own family as an example. I have three sisters. All four of us were in public school gifted programs, growing up in California. (One program, as I remember it, consisted of all the gifted children trooping out of our regular classrooms on Friday afternoons to go to an empty classroom, where the district's gifted resource teacher met us with his guitar, and we'd all sing Kum-Bah-Yah and do an art project.) I'm obviously a field-sensitive extrovert. My older sister is a field-independent introvert (she works in neurology where her patients are, for the most part, unconscious - it's a perfect job for her). My next youngest sister is a field-independent total extrovert - the funniest person I know. And my youngest sister is a field-sensitive introvert - an extremely loyal friend.

Gifted people can be in any of these categories, however the most highly gifted people tend to be field-independent introverts. They almost have to be: their thinking is so far from the norm. And if you're thinking, well, that means you're probably not highly gifted, Ren, you're right. At one school we attended, the psychologist tested my older sister and me individually, then brought us together to tell us the results. He explained that my sister was a super-genius (which was an older label for highly gifted), whereas I was a sub-genius (or, merely gifted). For years that was the big put-down from my sister: "Oh, you wouldn't understand - you're only a sub-genius."

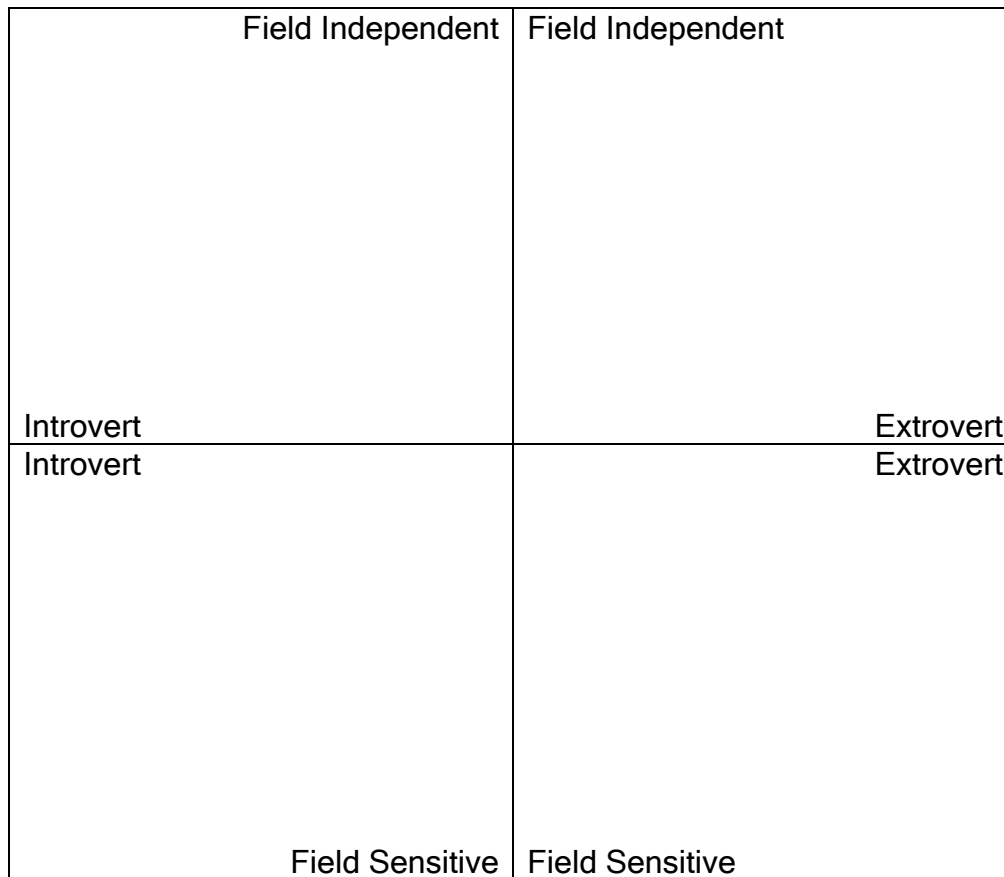
We know that the majority of people, including the vast majority of preschool and primary teachers, are field sensitive and extroverted, so most regular classrooms are geared toward field-sensitive extroverts. If your gifted child is a **field-sensitive extrovert**, you have a lot of options: a regular public school classroom, or a regular class with a pull-out gifted program for some extra challenge, or any traditional classroom (such as traditional academic or Montessori, or most faith-based schools) will be geared towards your child's temperament. These are the kids whom teachers relate to easily - they actively participate in class and want to do what the teacher asks. Of course, these kids can also excel in non-traditional classrooms, although some of them prefer a high level of structure - it just depends on the child.

**Field-sensitive introverts** can also do well in regular classrooms, if the class size is small. Class size is vital for introverts - they're not going to speak up in a group and it can be hard for them to make their needs or gifts known. It's also important for introverts to be able to stay in the same school, or even the same class, for several years if possible. Changing schools takes away their chance to build friendships. Montessori and other multi-age traditional classrooms can be great for these kids.

**Field-independent extroverts** can do fine in larger classes, and can sometimes charm regular classroom teachers into adapting the curriculum for them. But because their thinking is so independent compared with the average child, they often excel in either a progressive, individualized, inquiry-based program, such as an independent gifted school, or even in homeschooling with lots of group activities - since they can make and keep friends relatively easily.

The majority of gifted children are in the last category: **field-independent introverts**. Large classes don't work as well for them. They're not going to be the squeaky wheel and make their needs known. A traditional lock-step curriculum isn't going to work for them. They already know most of it. What works for gifted field-independent introverts is an individualized curriculum in a more intimate setting - at its most extreme, that means homeschooling. Fortunately, we have other options in Seattle and on the Eastside. Some field-independent introverts are so far from the norm that the public school highly gifted programs will create a radically accelerated program to meet their needs. And we have several independent progressive gifted schools that were founded for children like this.

## Plot Your Child's Temperament on this Continuum



### Finding the Right School

Let me get up on my soapbox, just for a moment, concerning your child's early schooling. We have a belief in middle class America that if your child is having a lousy year in school, you should make him or her tough it out - it builds character. I disagree. Especially if we're talking about a child under the age of 8, subjecting a child to a long-term situation where the child hates going to school will result in long-term lost learning. If you've tried making changes by talking with the teacher and administrators, and your child is still miserable, consider pulling your child out of school. If you can transfer to a different classroom or find a different school, great. If not, homeschool for the rest of the year. There's a difference between a child not being fully challenged (for example, in a regular classroom), and a child being miserable (which can happen in any classroom: regular or gifted, public or independent school). A child can have a good-enough year even if she is not fully challenged. But a child will waste a year, possibly setting her back for several years, if she is miserable at school. OK, that's my soapbox.

As you consider educational programs for your child, the label (such as "gifted") is less important than the program philosophy. Individual gifted children have thrived educationally in developmental (or "free" learning), traditional academic, progressive gifted, faith based, Waldorf and Montessori programs, as well as homeschooling and unschooling ... any educational program you can name. Individual gifted children have also struggled in those same programs when the teaching style and curriculum did not fit their temperament and learning style, or when their families had reservations about the program.

Whether a highly capable child will thrive better in a traditional or a progressive program depends on several factors, the least important being the child's IQ score. Both structured/traditional and constructivist/progressive/inquiry-based classrooms have explicit routines and behavior guidelines. The difference is in how children are expected to learn.

In traditional classrooms, teachers (or heads of schools or school boards) have pre-determined the content children should learn, and in most cases when and how they should learn it (typically through repetition). Some structured classrooms emphasize hands-on learning, with children actively engaged instead of passively memorizing information. Still, the content and methodology of learning are set by the adults.

In an inquiry-based classroom, teachers have broad curriculum goals including specific content, but they believe children learn best when they can find their own path. Children are expected to construct their own learning through experiences and direct instruction provided in the classroom. Some children may need repetition, some may need peer-learning, some may need to go off on a tangent, then circle back to understand the big ideas.

There is no perfect school - your goal is to find a good match for your child's learning style, where your child will be both nurtured and challenged. You'll look at many factors besides teaching philosophy in choosing a school, including:

- location
- tuition costs and financial aid
- safety and ambience at the school
- diversity
- physical education and the school's outdoor environment
- the arts, enrichment, and foreign language offerings
- faith-based versus secular education
- the needs of the other children in your family, and
- your own educational philosophy: are you more comfortable with a traditional or progressive program?

Most children are quite resilient and adaptable, especially as they gain self-control and move past the primary grades. This means you do not have to find a school that is a "perfect fit" for your child. Just like with parenting, a good enough school, with support and supplementing at home, truly can be good enough. If your first choice school does not have an opening, is too expensive or too far away, or would create undue stress for your family, it would be better to choose a "good enough" program which would create less stress for your family. Your family will have a much greater influence than a particular school program on your child's life-long learning.

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