

“Barbara [Cooper, author of the following two articles,] wrote *I never wanted to be one of THOSE moms* for a world-wide forum, and received more than a few negative responses. Barbara learned quickly that discussing our gifted kids in "public" is taboo. As a result, she wrote this apology to the forum. And thankfully, during the same period, she found the gifted forums, a home, and a place where it is OK to talk about our gifted kids.” (Hoagies Gifted Education Page)

Article 1

So, the thing is...

I never wanted to be one of THOSE moms.

by Barbara Cooper

In August, Ana will start Kindergarten. We've attended Kindergarten Round-up, (which is what we call Kindergarten registration here in Austin) and we've signed her up and decided that she will indeed be starting school at the public school by our house.

The decision probably doesn't seem very momentous but it was preceded by an almost full-scale nervous breakdown on my part.

I don't want to sound like one of those horrible stage mothers – frankly, I was in denial about all this. But my oldest daughter is a pretty special child. I mean, ALL children are special but she's special in a quantifiable way. Ana taught herself to read at age three and now, at age five, reads and writes fluently. She's doing simple algebraic equations and spouting the multiplication tables. She understands fractions. She read *The Hobbit* last year – and there just aren't that many four-year-olds who are interested in *The Hobbit*. She loves opera. On Easter, Ana held up a plastic egg and said, “Mom, listen.” and she shook it. “This one's as empty as Jesus' tomb.” That's her sense of humor. We are not the kind of parents who would send our kid to college at age ten, but she IS that kind of kid.

Still, I had observed Ana at play dates and parties and she didn't seem out of place to me. She seemed to be developing social skills at the same rate as the rest of her friends (i.e. not at all.) I knew she was very bright but I reached the conclusion that she wasn't so out of step with her peers.

Then, a few months ago, I substituted in Ana's classroom. I led the children through an exercise which required them to write their names on the back of a piece of white paper, cut out four shapes from a piece of red paper, paste the shapes in the form of a rabbit on the white sheet and write “red rabbit” underneath it.

It took Ana about six minutes to complete.

It didn't even engage her whole mind. She did it like a chore and then off she went to make math worksheets for her friends. The other kids were struggling with cutting out the shapes and with writing those R's and Ana just dashed it off and went on about her business.

I can't explain the feeling I had. It was like I was this nice placid cow that had suddenly given birth to a flamingo. I had to confront my own limitations: I don't know anything about flamingos!

I felt simply awed by the responsibility I'd been given for this kid. I set about learning everything in the world I could about flamingos – er – gifted children. I found myself talking to everyone who would listen to me. My neighbor is a child psychologist and has navigated the options for schooling her gifted daughter. She fed me names of parents dealing with the system and professionals with whom it was helpful to speak. She saved articles for me about gifted kids (my favorite title: "Help, My Child is Gifted!") and allowed me to vent about how overwhelmed I was feeling. It's like my friend Winter said, "These decisions just seem so huge."

Ana, naturally, picked up on my stress. She's a sensitive kid. I was completely out of control and hyper-emotional and spent too much time staring at her with tears in my eyes, so she took a red crayon to the banister. (My kids need me to be their stability and if I am acting like some deranged version of quicksand, they founder.)

I did learn something: I learned is that there is no good solution for kids like Ana. Our school system is designed for "average" children and I have yet to meet one! The more people I've talked to, the more I've realized that Ana isn't so uncommon. Oh, sure, she's uncommon in that her cognitive ability is so far advanced but I've met many kids who have gifts in one area or another. Or, the opposite – kids who have one or more areas where they are challenged. I've learned that sometimes the two go hand-in-hand. Sometimes children are "twice exceptional." They can be both gifted AND learning disabled, which means simply that they don't learn in a standard linear fashion. The real problem is that our school system is designed for some mythical "average" child and I'm not sure such a child even exists.

In Texas, and in most of the rest of the country, there seems to be this growing movement to standardize education. It seems that every year, there is another test to assess a child's educational progress. I can only shake my head, especially as the age for such tests continues to get younger. I think our state is trying to mandate a result that, in the end, can only be achieved by committed and creative teachers teaching in such an accessible way that all students grasp the lessons.

I think we need to take the burden of discipline and reporting and politics off of teachers and allow them to actually TEACH. To build depth into their programs so that the tops of their classes are challenged at the same time as those who learn in a different or slower manner. There is a lot to be said for the old-fashioned schoolhouse where all grades

were combined and children learned according to their ability and with the help of the other students.

I hope that if you are in the midst of a similar struggle over what to do with your children, you will find comfort from what I have learned.

1) In dealing with a child who is outside the norm, (and I've learned this is almost every child) you can choose to nurture the cognitive side of your child's development or the emotional/social side. I am choosing the emotional/social side for a variety of reasons. (I'd be glad to go into detail but this column is already too long.) Ana will go to school with her chronological peers (at least for this year) and I am convinced she will gain valuable knowledge in how to negotiate a bureaucracy and how to communicate with friends on different levels. She'll get supplemental academics, should that be needed, at home.

2) Although I felt as much stress as anyone trying to decide what the best course of action is for his/her child, I've decided that these decisions aren't really so huge. If something you've chosen isn't working out, you can CHANGE YOUR MIND. Your local school district is no match for a parent with vision. You are not dropping your child into school and then abandoning her for the rest of her school years – you are by her side every single day. There are a million creative ways to educate your child – combining home-schooling with formal classroom, space camp, school abroad – a million options. Most teachers are dedicated and resourceful people who really want to help your kid reach his/her potential.

The reality is that we're all given these special kids and we have to make some decisions, within the current system, to help our kids find success. The system exists so that you can USE it – MOLD it – to meet your child's needs.

This is probably NOT what the administrators of our school district were hoping to hear.

No doubt I will be branded 'one of THOSE moms.'

Editor's Note: But wait - there's more! After Barbara posted this heartfelt essay on a world-wide forum (not a gifted forum), she received more than a few responses... making her feel the need to send [The Apology](#). Read on...

Another note: Ana completed Kindergarten in June, 2004, and will be starting first grade this fall. She had a terrific year, thanks to the differentiation of Ms. "Walks-on-water"... but that's a subject for another column.

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Barbara Cooper is the mother of Ana (5) and Hurricane Jane (2.5). She lives in Austin, Texas and still knows next to nothing about flamingos.

Article 2

So, the thing is... I am sorry.

by Barbara Cooper

This morning, Jane and I were drawing with chalk on the driveway. She wanted me to draw a picture of poison ivy. (I know, I know, that's a strange request. But my girls play this game where I draw a picture of poison ivy and then they run away, in mock horror.) So, I obliged by drawing three leaves and a stem and Jane came over, scrunched up her face and said, "No! That's CORN!" She was very disappointed. So, then I drew her a picture of corn so she could see how I draw corn. "Oh," she said. And then she kind of patted me on the shoulder sympathetically and asked if we could go run through the sprinklers.

This small exchange mirrored what's going on in my life this week. This week I sent a column that, although entirely sincere, was not very sensitive and not very well written. I am embarrassed and I owe my readers an apology.

After the column came out, I received two "unsubscribes" from long-term readers. One of the readers was someone with whom I've had a lot of conversations and someone whom I really respect, both as a mother and as a follower of my column who really thinks about the things I write. I was stunned and (I promise I don't do this to every unsubscribe I get) asked her if she would mind giving me some feedback.

This morning, I received her response and it really resonated with me. I thank her for spending the time to educate me. Here's an excerpt:

"To begin with, I want to say that I know that there are people/children who are gifted. I believe that God made us all different, with different abilities and intellect. I work with exceptionally brilliant adults (my term, not theirs!), and my daughter (who's in kindergarten) has a little friend who I am guessing is gifted. And your Ana certainly seems gifted as well. I am also aware that you and your family will face certain challenges with her giftedness, as do parents with kids that have other special needs. No objections here.

"But I believe when a parent declares to the general public that her child is gifted, one must use care. The very concept and term "gifted," implies that the child is better than average, more advanced, more special. It compares the gifted child against the non-gifted child. And this is where you may find yourself in a touchy area. Your article not only declared Ana gifted but gave many examples of just how exceptional she is. Okay, I do understand a parent's pride.

"But I think that you went too far when you gave even one more example...the story about how Ana completed her task in minutes where the other kids were still working away, and how the task didn't even engage Ana's mind fully. You compared your exceptionally intelligent daughter to all of her less intelligent peers. Ouch!!! I am the

parent of one of those kids who was still working away at that table! I have to say that my daughter is "average." (Now, of course, she is not average, she's 5 1/2 and going to be a Supreme Court Justice, or a cheerleader... but this is another story!)

"To further complicate matters, you went on to criticize the public school system because the curriculum is geared toward the average kid. To me, you have implied that the school system will not be able reach your gifted child because it is focused on reaching the average kid. As in the average kids will be somehow holding the gifted kids back. Ouch! Ouch!

"Barb, you had some real thought provoking points at the end of your article. There is a huge, ongoing debate regarding education and funding and the allocation of assets for special needs kids (at all ends of the spectrum and in between.) But you have drawn some sweeping conclusions and Ana has not even started school yet.

I know that you will have challenges. We all do in one form or another. All I can recommend is that you use care with this topic. When it comes to the topic of giftedness, be aware that it provokes a comparison of children, and you can potentially be going down a slippery slope with the mama-bears of the of the world."

I really appreciate this thoughtful feedback. I was honestly surprised by what offended her, but I think she's right: this isn't the forum for using my personal observations to illustrate this particular issue. I've been so immersed in this issue that I just wasn't sensitive at all to how I sounded to other people. When I used the word "gifted," I was using it as a technical term. I wasn't even thinking of it in its literal sense. I sincerely apologize for being so incredibly insensitive.

I struggled a lot with the column before I sent it. It had been almost four weeks since my last column and I decided that I needed to write about this issue in order to move past it and get onto other things. I should have written it all out (my first draft was almost 2,000 words!) and then just put it away. It's a ticklish subject and I'm not an expert in it by any means.

I was trying to reassure my friends and readers who are struggling with similar issues and I ended up sounding boastful and like I had everything all figured out. I don't have everything figured out, by any means, and I am sorry to come across that way. I never meant to sound like I thought that my children are in some way superior. I do not feel that way and regret immensely that I gave that impression. As a writer who did not communicate what I intended, I take full responsibility.

I thank my readers for always being so forthright and willing to help me understand when they feel I'm off-base. My critic did re-subscribe and I'm glad. I need readers who will call me on my pretensions.

My fellow writer and friend Carol Ann wrote me a note last night and said, "Maybe you should do a letter on apology. I did one for last Mothers Day, about the singer in the little

town at the church service. The singer was so awful that even he knew it, and at the end, he simply said, "I'm sorry."

So, the thing is... I'm sorry.

Editor's note: Ana completed Kindergarten in June, 2004, and will be starting first grade this fall. She had a terrific year, thanks to the differentiation of Ms. "Walks-on-water"... but that's a subject for another column.

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