



# Exploring THE Community

## SEEKING OPPORTUNITIES AND BUILDING SUPPORT

### Community involvement

Many students who are gifted have special learning needs that can be met through involvement in the community. The term *community* encompasses a wide range of settings, from the neighbour next door, to local clubs and organizations, to the Internet with its global information exchange. Specific examples of different types of community involvement are discussed below.

### Mentors

Is your child passionately interested in a particular subject or occupation? If so, consider arranging a mentorship. Mentorships are more common for middle and high school students. Although there are exceptions, generally younger children who are gifted tend to be interested in many things and less inclined to focus on one particular topic for an extended period of time.

Whether your child has an interest in art, science, technology, politics, nature or literary pursuits, look for a person with special expertise in that area, such as a local talent or a retired specialist. A mentor needs to be sensitive to your child's abilities and learning style and enthusiastic about the subject your daughter or son will be exploring.

To find a mentor, talk to your friends, other parents of children who are gifted, teachers, universities, business people, members of professional associations and people in local arts groups. Where you look depends on the subject your child is interested in. It is not always easy to find a suitable mentor. You may have to be creative in your search. If your child's unique area of interest just cannot be found within your local community, try the Internet. International Telementor programs are available to connect children with mentors across the globe.

Parent and child must both feel comfortable with the mentor. If you have misgivings, trust them. If your child does not take to the mentor or if they don't seem to make a good match, do not try to force the relationship. Keep looking.

The mentor must be willing to follow the child's interests and support their talents. There is no set sequence or program of study in a mentorship. The goal is to support what the child wants to learn and do.

When you are considering this kind of one-on-one arrangement, you, your child and the potential mentor need to talk about how the two will work together. Be sure to involve your child both in the planning stages and after the mentorship gets going. It is important that your child feel free to say, "I don't want to go in this direction. I'm more interested in this."

Once your daughter or son begins working with the mentor, be flexible about how long the arrangement may last. If your child is enjoying the experience, keep the arrangement going for as long as your child wants. Feel free to end it whenever your child loses interest or moves on to another passion.

### Locally sponsored programs

Many service organizations sponsor national and international student exchanges, and a wide variety of other programs for youth. For example, the Mr. Speakers Alberta Youth forum sponsors Grade 10 youth with an interest in politics to represent their constituencies in a two-day youth forum. Students representing MLAs from across the province learn the basics of parliamentary procedure and conduct a youth parliament session at the Alberta Legislature. Your local Chamber of Commerce will have a directory of all service clubs in your area.

### Contests and competitions

Talented youth are often motivated to enter contests sponsored by the local business community, media, school or youth organizations. Everyone needs a forum to showcase his or her talent and a locally-sponsored contest can be a source of motivation and inspiration.

There are a variety of sources for appropriate contests. A few suggestions include:

- Alberta Learning in partnership with the National Geographic Society has recently made the National Geographic Web site, [www.nationalgeographic.com/education/](http://www.nationalgeographic.com/education/), available to all Alberta schools. Included on that site are numerous opportunities for individual challenge activities, as well as parent and student resources and contests such as the National Geographic Bee.
- The Math Council of the Alberta Teachers' Association sponsors several mathematics contests for students at various levels. Your

local school will have specific information on academic contests.

- Alberta Children's Services sponsors Great Kids Awards for children and youth between the ages of five and 18 who contribute in a positive way to their schools, communities and families.

### Camps

There are camps for children of all ages, focusing on science, writing, art, sports, nature and just about any other interest your child may have. Each year the Alberta Associations for Bright Children compiles information for interested families regarding weekend and summer camps for youth.

### Clubs

Becoming a member of any club with a special focus not only develops your child's skills in that area of interest but may also let him or her build lasting friendships. Through organizations such as Guides and Scouts, 4H clubs, Junior Forest Wardens and other community-oriented service clubs, youth can learn the importance of community service and develop leadership skills that will serve them throughout their lives. Youth organizations also offer the opportunity for children to engage in provincial, national and international meetings.

If your child has an avid interest and there is no local organization available, encourage him or her to start a new club or group. Often a teacher, parent or community expert in the field may be willing to help out. The possibilities are limited only by a child's imagination. Following are some examples of student-initiated clubs:

- Chess Club
- Astronomy Club
- Poetry Club
- Art Club
- Dinosaur Club
- Antique Auto Club.

School is not the only venue for clubs—many groups are community-based. Rock bands and other musical groups are often the outcome of like-minded youth who find one another through a common passion for music.

## Community theatre

Opportunities to participate in community theatre are available across the province from small rural communities to large urban centres. Whether your child dreams of starring on Broadway, writing the next theatrical hit, or is more interested in the technical aspects of theatre, community theatre provides a range of opportunities. If your child needs a mentor in the performing arts, community theatre may be the venue where you will find one. Community theatre relies on volunteering so it can become a family affair with a role for every member, either backstage or on the stage.

## Athletics

If your child is interested in joining a sports team, almost every sport has a local organization available. Many talented athletes find the outlet they need within the school as a member of a team sport. If your child has advanced skills and teams are usually picked according to age, talk to the coaches and see if your child can move up a level. As with any talent, supporting your child's sport may require substantial time associated with individual or team practice, and may become a long-term family commitment.

## Work experience

Optional courses in the senior high program include Career and Technology Studies (CTS). The CTS courses may be locally developed and may include work experience and independent study courses. Check with the school guidance counsellor: this may be your child's opportunity to work for the local newspaper, architect or veterinarian to see what it is really like, while earning required credits for senior high school completion at the same time.

## Parent support groups

Find out if support groups for parents organize special events for children who are gifted in your community. For example, some local Associations for Bright Children (ABC) offer Super Saturday programs for children.

## How much community involvement is appropriate?

Most young children cannot handle more than one or two outside commitments a week. Older children may be able to balance several community-oriented interests. However, as every child is unique, there is no standard rule that is best for all. The child's age, parents' ability to allocate the time, financial considerations, and other siblings' extra-curricular activities all impact on the activity level and choices for children who are gifted. Also, the interests of the child need to be weighed with the best interest of all family members.

Many children who are gifted become interested in everything and want to do it all. In and out of school, you may have a child whose interest is piqued for the short term, only to find that halfway through a project they no longer have the motivation to continue. Yet, many parents believe that the commitment to stay involved in an activity for at least a school year is just as important as which specific activity the child chooses.

If you have a child who wants to do it all, he or she may need help in setting priorities and committing to one or two activities over a year. The process of listing all possibilities, determining what is reasonable and assisting your child in making good choices while allowing him or her to try a variety of activities will be as important as what he or she chooses to do. Many children who are gifted will try something different each year before settling on a longer-term commitment to an area of interest.

How can I help to inform parents and others in the community about gifted education?

Talk to your child's teacher about offering information sessions on gifted education for parents. Some school divisions offer combined events for parents and educators, either as evening, weekend or summer sessions. Involving all partners in education helps to develop good communication between home and school.

Ask your child's teacher or administrator who might be available to speak on the topic of gifted education, either within your school or in the larger school community. For example, you may wish to bring a speaker into a school council meeting. You might partner with a community organization to sponsor a speaker on the topic of gifted education for local parents, educators and community members.

Look for parent education opportunities with the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia. Visit [www.arpdc.ab.ca](http://www.arpdc.ab.ca) to link to events in your region.