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Challenging the Advanced Student

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The Breadth vs. Depth Dilemma

There are two ways in which an advanced student can be encouraged. The first approach is to accelerate learning, and the second is to deepen the learning. Each option has its benefits and supporters, and since every child is different, no single option will work for every situation. Parents usually know their child best and are in the best position to make the right decision regarding educational approach.

If a curriculum is designed with flexibility at its core, choosing either option is possible. In the acceleration model, parents might choose to have their child work at a different grade level in a single subject, or condense two years of work into a single year. For example, a sixth grade student might take a full year to complete sixth grade material in English, social studies, and science, but work through sixth grade math by mid-year, and jump into seventh grade math right away, completing that by year's end.

There are concerns, however, in allowing a child to advance far above grade level. The first is that the content itself will be aimed at an older audience and may not be appropriate for a younger student. It is not a question of comprehension, but of developmental appropriateness—a fifth grader may be able to intellectually grasp teen level material regarding diverse topics such as the atrocities of war or the psychology of interpersonal relationships, but on an emotional or personal level, the treatment of these topics might be disturbing or meaningless to a ten-year-old. In addition, just because a student can read and comprehend advanced work doesn't automatically mean the child will be able to respond to it in a mature, complex way.

The second concern regarding acceleration is that often students will rejoin their peers in later grades, and if the accelerated student is suddenly in a classroom with a social atmosphere several years ahead of her, difficulties can arise. This is sometimes what happens when accelerated 16-year-olds are thrown in with college students. Again, this is not a merely a question of intellect; education encompasses far more than that. The ability to work successfully within a group of colleagues is just as important as the ability to succeed on your own.

Making the Most of Your Child's Gifts

Finding ways to enrich the student's exploration of grade level material results in a more complete, nuanced understanding of the material and often helps the student create relevant connections across disciplines. For instance, when studying the discovery of electricity in science, your student might also write (and perform!) a speech announcing Thomas Edison's newly patented light bulb. Your student could list ways in which electricity changed life in the late 1800s, and draw sketches of some of Edison's other inventions. He might find out which of his ancestors would have been alive when electricity became widespread, and write about what that might have been like for them.

Math could be worked into the lesson by having your student calculate the additional number of hours worked per year after electric lighting lengthened the work day, or estimate the increase in factory output with longer hours versus the additional expense of electricity. This multi-disciplinary approach encourages a flexibility of thought and develops creative problem-solving skills.

Project-based learning also gives advanced students the chance to explore a subject from many different angles. Experiential learning combines practical knowledge with academic study, yielding a richly layered understanding. Giving students the chance to develop long-term projects—such as building and installing bat houses, and then studying the bat population and its influence on the ecosystem—also helps sustain their engagement over time, which gives them more opportunities for mature thought and individual interpretation of the material.

Regardless of which opportunities a parent offers, there is an innate human need to explore the world and challenge oneself. This inner drive, paired with the many options available to the homeschooling parent, practically guarantees that a gifted child is bound to soar.