



For fun, Robert likes "playing math."

## Raising Robert+

When your kid is a square peg, you need to find a square hole **BY RACHEL WAUGH**

Recently my son won the weekly math competition at school. The question was, "What place in the Fibonacci series does the seventh root of the number 1,522,435,234,375 hold?"\* It's the kind of question that makes most grown-ups hyperventilate, but Robert, 6, did it on the bus that morning for fun. Since that Friday was also pajama day, he received his prize (a book of math puzzles) wearing his Curious George pj's.

Prompted by this and other feats, Rob's math teacher, Sandy, decided to introduce him to *her* math teacher, Dr. Halloran. We met in Sandy's classroom, ducking a suspended icosahedron. Dr. Halloran looks like Santa in a suit and cowboy boots. "Robert, tell me about limits," he asked—referring to the calculus term, not behavior.

After a few preliminary calculations, Rob and the professor were on a roll. When ►►



Dr. Halloran proved that 1 is the same as 0.9 vinculum, Rob said, "Huh? Yes. Yes!" and clapped his hands in glee.

Nothing beats seeing your kid having fun. Especially when it looked for a while like that wasn't in the cards. Rob goes to a school for gifted kids now, but getting him there was a bit of a journey. For more than a year my husband Greg and I checked out every school within commuting distance of our New York City home—nothing seemed like a good fit. We tried homeschooling for a while, then decided we had to look further afield. It finally took a major upheaval—a move to a different state—before we found the right place for our son.

We suspected he was way ahead of the curve before he was even 2. At 18 months, Rob toddled over to the stove. "No, no! Too hot!" I shouted and then noticed that he had turned off the burner just in time to prevent the pasta from boiling over. Lucky coincidence, I thought. My husband thought maybe Rob was trying to help. Then again, Greg was also convinced our son showed signs of being a future major league pitcher. A few weeks later, Rob picked up his dad's cell phone and

after playing with it for a few minutes, figured out how to change the ring tone. Next he found a screwdriver and tried to remove the back of the TV set. It was all adding up to something exciting, and a little bit scary.

Like his friends, Rob had an alphabet poster in his play area. He adored Elmo, and savored every one of Cookie Monster's "letters of the day." By 2, he was reading. From the beginning, his favorite topic was space. He progressed quickly from his sticky, battered boardbook of *Goodnight Moon* to, at 3, with my help, perusing NASA's website. He learned the names of Pluto's moons. "Would you like to visit space someday?" I asked him. "Mom, we're already in space," he pointed out. At 4 he was doing fractions over breakfast.

That year we, like all our peers in parenting, were searching for the right school for our incoming kindergartners. Rob is young for his school year, and small for his age. His pre-K teacher was concerned that he wouldn't be ready for kindergarten. Resisting the push for ever-earlier academics, she was adamant that kids focus on play and personal skills. "We're working on having him hang up his coat and put things away after he's done

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## Rise to the Challenge

### Embrace your square peg.

Respect your child's need to learn—holding her back will only make her frustrated, angry, even depressed. Learn about giftedness and be ready to advocate for your kid. She may need a TAG (talented and gifted) program, differentiated school work, or possibly be skipped a grade or two. If you feel like you're asking for spe-

cial treatment, remember that all kids need an appropriately challenging education.

**Finding "true peers" for your child may be difficult.** Cast your net wide and broaden your definition of what constitutes a friend. Older kids or adults who share your child's interests can provide important intellectual companionship. Friends of the

same age may be better matches emotionally and socially. If you can find a balance, your child should flourish.

**Never forget that your baby genius is first and foremost a baby.** Even if your kid can read the *New York Times* at age 4, it doesn't mean she should. Cuddles, goofy games, blowing bubbles, and boundaries are just

as important to a gifted preschooler as to one who is developing at a more typical pace.

**Connect with other parents of gifted kids.** Surf the web to connect: At [hoagiesgifted.org](http://hoagiesgifted.org), you'll find everything from online support groups to the latest on IQ testing—as well as links to just about every other site you'll ever need.

## How Gifted Kids Get That Way

Smart babies are born bright, having inherited more-than-average amounts of gray matter—parents and kids are rarely more than 10 IQ points apart. But genes alone don't account for intelligence.

Areas of gray matter—the information processing centers of the brain—are connected by networks of axons, called white matter. Generally, the more connections there are, the more efficiently the existing gray matter can be employed to solve problems and generate ideas. These connections are created and reinforced by experience. As neuroscientists like to say, cells “that fire together, wire together.”

Gifted kids tend to be highly curious, and, without realizing it (at least at first) actively work at increasing their white matter. Psychologist Ellen Winner has identified a “rage to master” which drives them to spend hours practicing the piano, reading, or doing math problems. This stimulation creates new neural pathways, which in turn bring more of their extensive gray matter into play.

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using them,” she told me.

Rob couldn't open his lunch box or wipe his own bottom. He identified with Winnie the Pooh. He was deeply asynchronous—a 4-year-old with the intellectual age of a teenager. Couldn't we just put the academics on hold and let him play? “What makes you happy?” his teacher asked him. “Playing math,” he replied.

Initially, I felt confident about Rob's education. What school wouldn't welcome such a student? But as the tours wore on, my optimism wore off. I knew if he had to start with the alphabet again he'd be gnawing on the furniture. And the principals I spoke to were either incredulous about Rob's abilities or just plain unenthusiastic about accommodating him. One told me bluntly “This is not the right school for your child. You need to take him elsewhere.” The only viable “elsewhere” I found was home.

Perhaps it shouldn't have come as such a surprise that most schools aren't right for Rob. Deborah Ruf, author of *Losing our Minds: Gifted Children Left Behind*, estimates that preschoolers who can read, write, and do fractions are one in 250,000—in other words, four in a million.

On the other hand he's just a kid. It hurt to have him rejected by, of all people, kindergarten teachers. Now I was on my own—a reluctant homeschooler. While other moms were buying cute lunch boxes, I had to teach myself long division with decimals.

It took about six weeks for me to pass on to Rob all the science I've ever learned (apart from reproductive). Between you and me, I know more about astrology than astronomy. Math makes my eyelids sweat. And Rob missed being around other kindergarteners.

“Mom, am I weird?” Rob asked me the October he turned 5. “Are there any other

kids like me?” I felt a cold wave of total powerlessness, followed immediately by the conviction that I couldn't let it sink me. “You're not weird,” I told him firmly. “You're unusual. And that's cool. There are other kids like you and we are going to find some.”

I read everything I could about gifted kids, and surfed the Internet looking for other parents in the same boat. I read that gifted kids who are allowed to learn at their own pace have an easier time socially. Also—and this added urgency to my quest—the early school years are a crucial time for kids' sense of social identity. In other words, it's key at this age to feel part of a group.

I finally found a school, albeit in another state, where the dean read Rob's screenplay, *Pooh in Space*, with a look of amusement rather than dread. The dean assured us that at her school, individualized instruction is not only possible, it's the policy. With about as much hesitation as desert nomads who've spotted an oasis, we moved. (It helped that post-September 11, my husband was more than happy to get us out of New York.) As a transplanted city kid, Rob loved our new house, complete with yard and swing set (“Look, Dad! It comes with a playground”). He had, however, become wary of the whole “going-to-school” thing. It took experiencing his first day, spent reading about hibernation and pretending to be a bear, before he was sold.

Rob's new school attracts an eccentric bunch of variously gifted kids who share a passion for the sciences. (Hey, if everyone's a nerd, then no one's a nerd, right?) He starts each day by taking 10th-grade geometry with three eighth graders. One of a pair of 13-year-old 6-foot-plus twins lifts him up so he can write the date on the board. Today's the 22nd. “That's the square root of 484!” yells Rob like he's struck gold. After math, Twin

Number Two flies the “little super pirate” back to his first-grade class. At recess he plays family with the first-grade girls, or zombie tag with the boys. He’s learned to tie his shoelaces.

“Know what? Know what, Mom?”

“What?”

“You can make a Thanksgiving turkey by drawing around your hand! Watch.”

“Wow! Do you like your school, Honey?”

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“I get to make turkeys and do math. It suits me.” And it suits me too.

For his sixth birthday, Rob had a pirate party. His guests, decked out in stripes, eye-

patches and plumes, and ranging in age from 3 to 13, showed up fully armed. For one sunny fall afternoon, a happy battle raged in our backyard. Miraculously, no one was hurt. The pirates demanded cake. Tucking into his slice, Rob sat next to me on the porch steps and sighed with satisfaction, “Mom, don’t you wish you were me?” I will him to fill up on happy days like these. I count on them to act as ballast, to keep him steady when he has to navigate rough seas ahead. With college classes looming closer than puberty, we are facing some uncharted territory. ●●

\*In case you were wondering, the answer is 10.



Rachel Waugh doesn’t answer math questions on her blog, [secretuniverse.blogspot.com](http://secretuniverse.blogspot.com). She saves those for Robert.

# 1/2H Bottom



overmatter

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