

Parents: How to raise a creative genius

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(CNN) -- When Gavin Ovsak started multiplying double-digit numbers in his head in kindergarten, his mother, Cathy, was astonished.

"We were like, where did that come from? When did they cover that today?" said his mother, who lives in Hopkins, Minnesota.

Today, Gavin is a 16-year-old award-winning inventor who's finishing up applications for two prestigious science competitions. His entry is the [Circuit-Hat Accessibility Device](#), an electronic hat that allows disabled people to use a computer without a mouse. When he's not working on these kinds of projects, he's performing improv comedy, leading a robotics team and heading his school's foreign exchange club -- and, of course, homework.

What motivates this passion for learning, and achievement? Gavin says that he has a natural drive to challenge himself and help people through technology, but his parents have also opened his world with opportunities to excel.

BLOG: [Read more about Gavin's device, the CHAD](#)

Gavin is one of five highly talented, self-motivated kids CNN spoke with whose parents have worked hard to encourage the thirst for knowledge, the love of a good challenge and the idea that anything is possible if you put your mind to it.

Sparking curiosity

Exposure to creative pursuits early in life is key to helping children get motivated to do creative things themselves, said [Shelley Carson](#), a psychologist at Harvard University and author of "Your Creative Brain: Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life."

That's how Jolisa Brown, 11, whom her parents call a "superbrain," got into music. Her father, Delongelo Brown, began bringing Jolisa and her brother into his home music studio as babies. Jolisa developed a passion for singing and wants to be the head of a music company one day, having learned about her father's experiences in a band.

"It was hearing what he did and hearing how much he loved it [that] inspired me and made me want to do the same thing," said Jolisa, of Atlanta, Georgia.

Parents should encourage their children to ask questions like "why" and "what if," rather than stifling those inquiries, Carson said.

"When they explore the environment, if they're rewarded for that, that encourages that behavior and they're more likely to do that in the future," she said.

Jolisa, one of two students to have earned straight A's at her school every quarter,

has an inexhaustible love of reading; without prodding, she will read books faster than her parents can afford to buy new ones. But they also join in -- right now, she and her mother are reading "Outcasts United," about a refugee soccer team, together.

"I think that the best part of it all [reading] is, it can put you in another environment and tell you about something that you may not think of on your own. It can give you experiences that you may not be able to obtain yourself," Jolisa said.

Setting up challenges

Once a child shows a love of learning, it's important to make sure that he or she gets intellectually stimulated in school, parents say.

For Gavin, that meant agreeing with his school to let him skip third grade, and working with teachers to find an appropriate curriculum. Gavin proved he could learn math and science on a level far above his age, and his school let him take those advanced classes. Now, he's enrolled in public high school but takes all of his classes at the University of Minnesota.

It was harder to find a stimulating environment for Mohammed Memphis, of Atlanta; he's 11 and has already attended five different schools. The public charter school that he and Jolisa attend, part of a nationwide network of college preparatory schools called [Knowledge is Power Program \(KIPP\)](#), is in a neighborhood where only 11 percent of adults over age 25 graduated from college. (In Gavin's school's ZIP code, it's 56 percent.)

Mohammed's mother, Fatimah Memphis, who is a college graduate, found out about KIPP STRIVE Academy from a grocery store flier, but it turned out to be the best opportunity so far. The school, with rigorous homework and a 7:30-a.m.-to-5-p.m. schedule, has led Memphis to become a talented debater and soccer player.

Lack of structure at previous schools concerned his mother. Mohammed felt that teachers focused on the students who needed more help than he did. Before, his only conception of "debate" was "two people arguing about a random issue"; now, he's an award-winner.

Gavin and Mohammed are smart kids growing up in very different circumstances, but their parents share a dedication to giving their children the tools they need to thrive and making sure their educational needs are met.

"They always tell me, they're like, 'The best revenge is success,' " Mohammed said of his parents. "People try to stop you from doing things, there are going to be people in life who are going to make a dent in your path, and you just have to keep pushing."

Being open-minded

Parents should observe and cheer on their children, but should not be attached to outcomes, said said Robyn McKay, a psychologist and creativity researcher at Arizona State University. Some kids will rebel and drop an activity if they believe their parents have too many expectations about it.

"My advice to parents who have a child who does have that passionate interest is to roll with it, to be curious and interested about the child's interest and to do some research to find teachers and lessons and activities that support your child's talent," she said.

What motivates a child to be creative is a combination of heredity and unique characteristics of the individual, McKay said.

Sometimes, the result is that the children have talents and passions that don't match those of their parents. Parents should be open-minded and encouraging about what genuinely interests the child, rather than try to push in a different direction, she said.

Neither Rik Middleton nor his wife, Denise, is athletic or a martial artist or serious dancer. But their 13-year-old daughter, McKenna, is preparing for the Los Angeles Marathon and has a second-degree black belt in tae kwon do; her twin sister, Taylor, has been dancing since age 3.

The Glendale, California, twins are all-stars in different ways. Taylor won a science award from her school; McKenna finds passion in math and English. And the twins' guiding principle from their parents, which has carried them through numerous activities, is: "If you're going to start something, you have to finish it."

Making 'teaching moments'

The Middletons and the Browns live on opposite coasts and attend different kinds of public schools, but the phrase "teaching moment" comes up for both families.

For mother Alysia Brown, that means using everyday circumstances to talk about broader issues. Jolisa's brother plays football, and his mother uses that to have conversations about statistics and sports journalism.

The Middleton twins remember how their father would buy them a pack of M&Ms and ask them to separate the candies by colors, which helped them distinguish individual colors.

A bigger teaching opportunity came at age 4½, when the Middleton family moved into a new house and the girls wanted to build a restaurant in back. That sounded like a large undertaking for children, but their parents didn't dismiss the idea outright. Instead, they used it as a way to teach their children about running a business.

McKenna, Taylor and their older sister staged the first "Sisters Café" eight years ago. It was a one-night cabaret, where they could showcase their performance talents and serve food. It became a yearly, and then biannual, event until August, when the sisters decided they wanted this to be the final performance. Sixty people turned up.

"I've learned that when the girls say that they want to do something like build a restaurant in my backyard, I just kind of stand back, support them and watch, because it's amazing what they can accomplish," Rik Middleton said.