

# Helping Kids Find Passion and Purpose

## Using Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligence



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Given the popularity of books, seminars and workshops on the importance of finding the activities and interests that not only provide a sense of personal success and accomplishment, but infuse daily life with meaning, there's no doubt that most people believe in what educator Joseph Campbell calls "following your bliss" and best-selling author Rick Warren refers to as a "purpose-driven life". Few would argue with the idea that discovering and using the unique set of talents and aptitudes each individual possesses is essential to well-being.

### Helping Children Explore Purpose and Passion

In a results-oriented, fast-paced, choice-rich world, identifying and living a blissful, purposeful life however can be challenging. And for parents and teachers, encouraging children to cultivate pursuits about which they are passionate yet that are also productive, personally meaningful and of service to others can be an even more difficult task. It takes a delicate balance of observation and guidance. A multitude of educational models and theories abound to assess and develop potential, but one Harvard professor has developed an easily understandable starting point that may help parents navigate these tricky choices.

### Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences

[Howard Gardner](#) developed his theory of multiple intelligences in 1983, and the tenth edition of his groundbreaking book *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* was issued by Basic Books in 1993. Applications of his idea that there are skills and aptitudes that traditional IQ tests fail to accurately measure have been incorporated into many curriculums and programs around the country. Reviewing Gardner's expanded categories of intelligence may help parents understand not only their children's unique potential for processing information in specific ways, but could possibly assist in building confidence by identifying natural abilities and interests that should be encouraged, and allocating time and energy accordingly.

## Types of Intelligence

Gardner initially identified seven categories of intelligence:

- Linguistic – Talented at reading, writing and speaking. Common professions: writers, public speakers, journalists and comedians.
- Logical-Mathematical – Skilled at reasoning, calculations and logical systematic problem-solving. Common professions: lawyers, engineers, research scientists, accountants, and economists.
- Visual-Spatial – Aptitude for visualization and seeing possibilities in the mind's eye. Common professions: designers, architects, planners, sailors, artists, photographers, professional drivers and drafters.
- Musical – Able to make or compose music, sing well, keep rhythm, understand and appreciate music. Common professions: musicians, recording engineers and composers.
- Bodily-Kinesthetic – Proficient use of the body to create products, express ideas and solve problems. Common professions: athletes, dancers, actors, and anyone “good with their hands” like crafters and builders.
- Interpersonal (Social) – Capable of working very effectively with others, relating to people, recognizing traits in others and showing empathy and understanding. Common professions: teachers, therapists, politicians, religious leaders and sales people.
- Intrapersonal – Acutely aware of one's own personal strengths and weaknesses, feelings, behaviors, goals and accomplishments. Common professions: present in most highly successful people.

## More Types of Intelligence?

Gardner subsequently added an eighth intelligence and discussed, but ultimately rejected a ninth and tenth type of intelligence in his book *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century* from Basic Books, 2000. He invites readers to examine his criteria and decide for themselves:

- Naturalist – Can discern patterns and process information applicable to the natural world and use the ability productively. Common professions: farmers, environmentalists, biologists, zoologists, gardeners, botanists and conservationists.
- Existential/Spiritual – Talented at capturing and pondering the fundamental questions of existence. Common professions: ministers, counselors, philosophers.
- Moral – Easily recognizes the existence of ethical, sacred and humanitarian issues and is committed to reflecting on them. Common professions: co-exists in many areas

## Expanding the Meaning of Intelligence

Gardner suggests taking a multiple intelligence “[inventory](#)” and observing children in a number of settings and situations where they can demonstrate the range of their intelligences in as natural a fashion as possible. He is quick to point out that assessing intelligence should be restricted to the processing of “contents of the world” and not confused with “personality, motivation, will, attention, character, creativity or other valued human capacities.” He also warns against using an assessment for labeling or restricting exploration. But he and many others believe that expanding the image of what it means to be “intelligent” is

a valuable tool for supporting children's growth and development, particularly in a world that often narrowly defines intelligence within a linguistic and logical-mathematical framework.

By carefully observing children in light of Gardner's theory, it is possible to determine what activities will reinforce their natural abilities and know when to let their curiosities and passing interests simply play themselves out. The power of understanding how to guide them in this way can contribute immensely to building self-esteem and help them along the road to ultimately "following their bliss" and leading more purposeful and satisfying lives.

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