Being Bright Is Not Enough: Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children

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Do gifted children really have unusual social and emotional needs?
The Suggestion that High Ability Is Associated with Emotional or Social Difficulties Would Seem Counter-intuitive.

A generally accepted key facet of the construct of “intelligence” is that intelligence implies problem-solving abilities in various areas, and these problem-solving abilities most often include:

- Forethought
- Planning,
- Reasoning ability,
- Capacity to see cause-effect relations,
- Attention to details,
- Memory for relevant data
- A wide array of knowledge upon which the individual might draw
Historically, controversy has existed about whether intellectually gifted children and adults are prone to social and emotional problems.

- "Early ripe; early rot" and the classic Terman longitudinal studies.

- Hollingworth agreed, but noted that children of unusually high intelligence seemed more prone to certain types of problems

- "Optimum intelligence" range of about 120-145

- Most research concerning social and emotional needs of gifted children is based on gifted children who were identified as gifted in traditional ways and thus were children who showed unusual aptitude and performance in academic areas — i.e., children who were already functioning pretty well in school.
Two Fundamental Views on the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children

Literature concerning social-emotional needs of gifted children and adults can be grouped into two basic categories:

- One group of authors views gifted children as generally being able to fare quite well on their own, and gifted children with problems needing special interventions are seen as a relative minority.

- The other group of authors views gifted and talented persons as prone to problems and in need of special interventions to prevent or overcome their unique difficulties.
Endogenous versus Exogenous Sources of Problems Need to Be Considered

- Endogenous problems arise primarily from within the individual essentially regardless of environment; that is, endogenous problems stem from the very characteristics of the gifted child or adult.

- Exogenous problems arise, or are caused, primarily because of the interaction of the child or adult with the environmental setting (e.g., family or the cultural milieu).

- Most social and emotional problems are exogenous—a lack of fit of the child with the environment.

- But the exogenous situations and problems interact with the child’s innate characteristics.

- Some problems arise from the characteristics of gifted (endogenous), but most problems stem from the definition of gifted and the situations they find themselves in (exogenous).
Are Gifted Children the Ones Who Achieve in School?

Some are, but others do not do well in school, but yet they are still gifted.
Profiles of the Talented and Gifted
(Betts & Neihart, 2010)

- Type I, Successful: High achiever; does not take risks; accepts and conforms; is dependent; liked by teachers and parents.

- Type II, Creative: Questions system and challenges teacher; is direct; is creative; works when it seems appropriate; emotionally labile; may fail in school.

- Type III, Underground: Denies talent, resists challenges; unwilling to take risks; wants to belong socially; changes friends; drops gifted/advanced classes; seen as average.

- Type IV, At-Risk: Creates crises and disruptions; thrill seeking; has intermittent attendance; doesn’t complete tasks; pursues outside interests; seems “spaced out” in class; is burned out; is defensive and criticizes others.

- Type V, Twice/Multi Exceptional: Produces inconsistent work; disorganized; low academic self-concept; gifted and LD or ADHD, or handicapped; seems average or below average; prone to discouragement.

- Type VI, Autonomous: Self-confident; works independently; has appropriate social skills; sets own goals; follows through; is creative; stands up for convictions; willing to fail and learn from it.
Frequent Behaviors of Gifted Children

- Unusually large vocabularies
- Complex sentence structures
- Greater comprehension of language nuances
- Longer attention span, persistence
- Intensity of feelings and actions
- Wide range of interests
- Strong curiosity; limitless questions
- Like to experiment; puts ideas or things together in unusual ways
Frequent Behaviors of Gifted Children (continued)

- Learn basic skills quickly and with less practice than peers
- Largely self-taught reading and writing skills as pre-schoolers
- Unusually good memory; retain information
- Unusual sense of humor; may use puns
- Like to organize people and things, and typically devise complex games
- Imaginary playmates (as preschoolers)
Four Endogenous Factors Particularly Influence the Expression of Giftedness, as Well As Educational, Social, and Emotional Functioning

1. Level of Giftedness
2. Asynchronous Development
3. Thinking and Learning Styles
4. Dabrowski’s Overexcitabilities

The higher the child’s overall ability level, the more these factors influence the behaviors.
## Level of Giftedness

**Ruf (2003)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Levels of Giftedness</th>
<th>Approximate Score Range</th>
<th>Descriptive Designation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level One</td>
<td>117 - 129</td>
<td>Moderately Gifted 120-124/Gifted 125-129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Two</td>
<td>125 - 135</td>
<td>Highly Gifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Three</td>
<td>130 - 140</td>
<td>Exceptionally Gifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Four</td>
<td>135 - 141</td>
<td>Exceptionally to Profoundly Gifted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level Five</td>
<td>141+</td>
<td>Exceptionally to Profoundly Gifted</td>
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</tbody>
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Asynchronous Development
Learning/Thinking Styles

Auditory-Sequential
◆ Prefers verbal explanations; uses language to remember
◆ Processes information sequentially; deals with one task at a time
◆ Produces ideas logically; prefers analyzing activities
◆ Prefers concrete thinking tasks; likes structured experiences
◆ Prefers proper working materials and proper settings for working
◆ Prefers to learn facts and details
◆ Approaches problems seriously

Visual-Spatial
◆ Prefers visual explanations; uses images to remember
◆ Processes information holistically; deals with several tasks at a time
◆ Produces ideas intuitively; prefers synthesizing activities
◆ Prefers abstract thinking tasks; likes open, fluid experiences
◆ Improvises with materials available; creates own structure
◆ Prefers to gain general overview
◆ Approaches problems playfully
Dabrowski
Overexcitabilities

- **Intellectual**  (Avid Reading, Curiosity, Asking Probing Questions, Concentration, Problem Solving, Introspection, Theoretical Thinking)

- **Imaginational**  (Fantasy Play, Animistic and Imaginative Thinking, Vivid Visual Recall, Daydreaming, Love of Drama, Use of Metaphor)

- **Emotional**  (Unusual Sensitivity and Responses; Concern for Others, Timidity and Shyness, Fear and Anxiety, Difficulty Adjusting to New Environments, Intensity of Feeling)

- **Psychomotor**  (Marked Enthusiasm, Rapid Speech, Compulsive Chattering; Surplus of Energy, Nervous Habits, Impulsive Actions)

- **Sensual**  (Heightened Awareness of Senses; Sensory Pleasures, Appreciation of Sensory Aspects of Experiences, Avoidance of Overstimulation)
Characteristic Strengths Can Create Problems

- Acquires information quickly vs. impatient with slowness of others
- Inquisitive attitude vs. asks embarrassing questions; strong willed
- Seeks systems and strives for order vs. seen as bossy or domineering
- Creative and inventive vs. may disrupt plans of others
- Intense concentration vs. resists interruption; seen as stubborn
- High energy vs. frustrated with inactivity
- Diverse interests vs. seen as scattered
- Strong sense of humor vs. humor may disrupt classroom or work
- Keen observer vs. sees inconsistencies and may become disillusioned
Although High Ability Is a Benefit Overall, Some Problems Are More Frequent

- Boredom (a low-grade anger, with hurt underneath)
- Impatience
- Underachievement
- Peer issues
- Sibling rivalry
- Power struggles with parents and teachers
- Feelings of loneliness
- Idealism and cynicism; excessive self-criticism
- Stress and perfectionism; avoidance of risk-taking
- Others have unrealistic expectations about them; multipotentiality
- Their judgment lags behind their intellectual abilities
- Misdiagnosis and overlooked dual diagnoses
- Health and behavioral problems
  - Learning disabilities (asynchronous; “twice-exceptional”) (Wormald, 2015)
  - Asthma (Winer, 1997)
  - Allergies (Winner, 1997)
  - Eating Disorders (Kerr & Kurpius, 2004)
  - Alcohol consumption (Kanazawa & Hellberg, 2010) & illegal drug use (White & Batty, 2012)
- Existential depression

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The identification criteria used by schools (often in combination) indicates that:

- 14 of the 21 (67%) used school grades
- 14 of the 21 (67%) used teacher nomination
- 14 of the 21 (67%) used psychological tests
- 14 of the 21 (67%) used parent nomination
- 13 of the 21 (62%) used expert nomination
- 13 of the 21 (62%) used self-made criteria
- 12 of the 21 (57%) used nomination by third party (elementary teacher; other adults)
- 11 of the 21 (52%) used self-nomination
- 10 of the 21 (48%) used school external achievement (competitions)
- 9 of the 21 (43%) used achievement tests

There is no perfect system for identifying gifted children.

“Pity the test doesn’t measure all her skills....”
Identification Usually Focuses on Intelligence, but Does Intelligence Predict Eminence or Stellar Achievement?

- Intelligence, in general, predicts academic achievement – but not life achievement

- Life achievement is more a matter of “deliberate practice” that enhances myelin connections (Coyle, 2009) and amount of practice (10 years or 10,000 hours) to be an expert. (Ericsson, 1996)

- Genetics effects differ depending on environment. (Nisbett, 2009)
  - Effect is about 10% genetic in poor families
  - About 50% genetic in more enriched settings

- Although a certain amount of innate ability seems necessary, the biggest single factor appears to be motivation, which Ellen Winner (2009) called a “rage to master.”

- In other words, the social and emotional aspects, combined with opportunity, result in brain changes and skill development.
This Leads Us to Answer an Important Question.

As teachers and parents, what are we preparing them for?

Are we:

- preparing gifted children for college and career
- preparing them for life?
- or all of these?
How much should our emphasis be on grades, education, and acquiring knowledge?

And how much should be on motivation, caring, values, and excitement about learning?
What is it that we should be nurturing?
Do we want our gifted children to just reflect our values and dreams?
Academics and motivation?
Life skills, values, flexibility, and balance?
All of these?
If so, how?
What a tremendous responsibility!
In *A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Teens*, Lisa Rivero Writes:

- “... should college prep really be a full-time vocation? Young people, especially gifted teenagers who feel pressured to fulfill their potential sooner rather than later, often say that they have little time for reflection, for imagination and personal discovery, for leisurely reading or sleeping in or even long family vacations...all of which cut into their college prep career.”

(A Parent’s Guide to Gifted Teens, p. 72)

- And in her blog she writes, “What happens to high achievers when the vehicle for their success—school and its rules and structure—is no longer there?”

(www.blogger.com/profile/09864490380365807023)
Ten+ year follow-up study of 322 Presidential Scholars (1964-1968)

- All were in top one-half of 1% of National Merit Scholars; 77% ranked first in high school class
- 62% held offices in student organizations; 51% had received one or more awards for leadership
- 97% were college graduates; 61% had graduate degrees; 89% had received one or more awards in college
- 55% changed majors; 33% changed majors two or more times
- 29% doubted they had made the correct career decision
- 23% had received special awards since graduating
- 67% reported no participation in organized activities ("lack of time; no interest")
Presidential Scholars Research—
Typical Comments

“Achievement and recognition were everything when I was a Presidential Scholar. Now I'm more concerned with personal satisfaction. If something that pleases me earns me compliments or other recognition, I'm grateful, but I won't compromise values or give up personal time to do anything which has as its purpose to gain recognition by others.”

“Much of my difficulty in the job-career area comes from (1) school, school, school—when I was little, what I wanted to be when I grew up was to go to college and (2) my great diversity of interests. It's a hard thing for those of us who were crammed with so many expectations to even know where we stand after ten years. Now it's time to try new ways.”

“I have become very cynical about the meaning of life. I don't think it's possible to be happy without drugging oneself in one way or another. To live intensely in pleasure and pain seems the best possible goal.”
In her study of 81 valedictorians, Karen Arnold found that academic success does not necessarily translate into career success or personal fulfillment.

“Valedictorians leave high school at the top. Most continue to stellar academic performance in college. Yet their career attainment varies considerably. And even though most are strong occupational achievers, the great majority...do not appear headed for the very top of adult achievement success,” (Lives of Promise, p. 287)

“The most outstanding career achievers...are those who have found deep intrinsic meaning in learning and work.” (Lives of Promise, p. 288)

Comments of Valedictorians after Ten Years

▶ “Your whole life you’ve been told, you go to high school, you go to college. And then once you get out of college, you’ve not given as much direction anymore. You know, there’s no purpose in life anymore. What should you do after you graduate from college? You accomplished everything that everyone told you you should.” (Lives of Promise, p. 287)

▶ “Since high school, I had a general direction that I lived by, certain rules that all I had to do was do them: go to school, classes, do what they tell you to do. I did that well, I functioned well within that environment. But it didn’t create much of an individuality or creativity within myself. I never really explored what I really wanted--what did I really want in life?” (Lives of Promise, p. 42)
Blog Comments: “Factors that gifted children need to become successful and happy as adults”
Roya Klingner, Bavarian Gifted Child Society

- Money, motivation, mentor.
- Resilience, reflectiveness, tenacity.
- Vision, flexibility, emotional insight, and good management of same.
- Understanding.
- Self-awareness, understanding of giftedness, finding a like-minded/supportive and gifted life partner, the confidence to be different (and be happy about being different), the ability to “opt out” from the majority, resilience, determination, soul-affirming work, peace and tranquility and nature
- Educational challenges, peer group, resilience, motivation, home support, opportunities to develop talent, recognition, acceptance.
- Being validated and valued for who they are and the skills/contributions they share.
- Someone who was significant in their lives—a path changer or path enabler.
One of the bloggers (Albert Ziegler) pointed out, however, that:

“The question is comparable to the question, ‘What are the two most important spices to cook a wonderful dish?’ There is no answer to the question.... (It) depends on the dish you want to cook.”

It depends upon how you define success, and it can be more than academic degrees.
WOW, VERY IMPRESSIVE!

THANKS, I STARTED COLLECTING DIPLOMAS WHEN I WAS SEVEN.
Success Implies Values and Existential Issues

Some of these basic existential issues are:

- What is the meaning of life?
- What is success?
- What gives my life meaning?
- What is transient and unimportant vs. what is truly important?
- How can I best survive and thrive in this sometimes crazy world?
What do gifted children need?

In my opinion, there are clear needs in six areas to help gifted children obtain success, and all involve social or emotional aspects.

1. School educational climate
2. Home and cultural environment
3. Understanding myths about gifted children
4. Matching educational programs to the child
5. Twice Exceptional gifted (2e)
6. Educating health care and counseling professionals
Need # 1
A School Educational Climate that Understands and Supports Gifted Education

- Education systems in most countries contain a widespread bias against special programs for talented children (except in sports).

- The curriculum can be a barrier because it generally is lock-step where every child is expected to learn the same material at approximately the same age.

- Educational systems too often focus on basic minimal levels of competence and achievement.

- Socialization is too often seen as more important than academic achievement.

- Most eminent and successful adults received educational programs very different than those currently offered in most schools.
Need # 2:
A Nurturing Home and Cultural Environment

- Our world is perilously drifting into an anti-intellectual mode with emphasis of mediocrity and conformity.

- Much ignorance and misinformation still exists about talented, able learners.

- Parents of gifted children are often criticized as exaggerating or being pushy.

- Parents are extremely important, but seldom are included by schools.

- Parents of gifted children have very few resources for information about characteristics of gifted children or alternatives to promote their development.

- Parents and other family members often unintentionally punish a child for being gifted, talented, or creative by using “killer statements.”
“Killer Statements” that Hinder Communication, Relationships, and Motivation

- Do you have to be creative with everything? Can’t you just do things like everyone else?
- For someone so smart, you sure are dumb! You have no common sense at all!
- Your idea isn’t new, you know. It was discovered a long time ago.
- You’re always daydreaming, or thinking of yourself or your projects—never what you are supposed to be doing! Stop living in a dream. Be like the rest of the world!
- You’re no different than anyone else, so stop asking for exceptions!
- Why do you always have to be so intense and sensitive all the time?
Lessons From People Who Became Eminent

From *Cradles of Eminence: Childhoods of More Than 700 Famous Men and Women* (Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel, & Hansen, 2003)

- Homes usually were full of books and stimulating conversation.
- Parents, particularly mothers, were highly involved in the lives of their children, even dominating.
- Their families valued learning, and the children loved learning.
- However, as children, most of them disliked school and schoolteachers.
People Who Became Eminent

Findings from *Cradles of Eminence* (continued)

- Parents held strong opinions about controversial subjects.
- These children learned to think and express themselves clearly.
- All had learned to be persistent in pursuing their own visions and goals.
- Parents often were pressured by others to have their children conform to mediocrity.
- Many had difficult childhoods (which may have been a spark).
  - Poverty
  - Broken homes
  - Physical handicaps
  - Parental dissatisfaction
  - Controlling or rejecting parents
Need # 3
Parents, Educators, and Policy Makers Must Understand Myths about Gifted Children

- High ability in one area means that they will have equally high abilities in other areas.
- The “regular” educational system will typically meet their needs.
- They can succeed without special help because they already have so much talent.
- They are not aware of being different unless someone points it out to them.
- They always will show their abilities in school and will want to emphasize them.
- They enjoy serving as “models” and “examples” for other children.
- They only live up to their potential if adults constantly push them.
- Their emotional maturity is at the same level as their intellectual ability.
- They are easy to parent, and families always value their special abilities.
- They are no different from other children because all children are gifted.
Need # 4
Flexible Educational Placement Approaches

- Teachers need information about characteristics of gifted children and about how to match the education program to the child.
- Schools need appropriate educational placements that are diverse and flexible.
- Administrative support and flexibility are vital.
- Schools and parents should work together to nurture the gifted child.
- Counseling for gifted, talented, and creative students is very helpful.
- Because of the diversity of gifted children, many options are usually needed. Appropriate educational placements must be diverse.
- Acceleration and enrichment are usually both needed.
- Schools should offer differentiated educational experiences by matching the program to the child so that it:
  1. provides for continual academic progress
  2. remediates any academic weaknesses
  3. provides for socialization
  4. enhances psychological adjustment
Remember that there are domains within each general area of giftedness, and children are not equally gifted across those domains.

The brighter the child is overall, the greater the likelihood of unequal ability and proficiency across the domain areas (asynchronous development).

This implies a need for educators to match the child’s competence with the challenge in that domain.

In addition to supporting domains, school systems and educators must meet special needs that arise from other factors—level of ability, personality, twice-exceptional, cultural aspects, etc.
Need # 5
Recognition of the Special Issues of Twice Exceptional Gifted

- Gifted children have a higher incidence of:
  - Learning disabilities (asynchronous; “twice-exceptional”) (Wormald, 2015)
  - Asthma (Winer, 1997)
  - Allergies (Winner, 1997)
  - Eating Disorders (Kerr & Kurpius, 2004)
  - Alcohol consumption (Kanazawa & Hellberg, 2010)
  - Existential depression (Webb, 2014)

- Gifted children who are twice-exceptional (2e) should not have their giftedness neglected.

- Gifted children who are 2e are likely to underachieve and have emotional issues.

- Schools must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate both areas of need.
Need # 6
Knowledgeable Health Care and Counseling Professionals

- Few health care or counseling professionals receive training about gifted children.
- There is widespread misdiagnosis of gifted children.
- Asynchronous development may require special educational accommodations.
- Need to consider Dabrowski’s concepts of “positive disintegration” and “overexcitabilities.”
- Professionals need to treat gifted children with intellectual respect.
- Parents should inquire about the professional’s past training and experience in working with gifted children and their families.
Yes, Gifted Children **Do** Have Special Needs! Being Bright Is Not Enough

- They are exceptional, but with different levels in different areas.
- Their behaviors often require special understanding.
- They need appropriate differentiation (and often special) educational placements.
- Their social and emotional needs require understanding and special approaches in:
  - Understanding their intensity and sensitivity
  - Peer relation issues
  - Sibling issues
  - Motivation and Underachievement
  - Perfectionism
  - Communication issues
  - Discipline and self-discipline
  - Creativity and questioning of traditions
  - Idealism and depression
  - Career guidance
  - Feeling that they are connected with the world
Recommended Readings


- *How to Parent So Children Will Learn.* (Rimm, 2008).


- *Living with Intensity* (Daniels & Piechowski, 2009).


Recommended Readings


- *Re-Forming Gifted Education: How Parents and Teachers Can Match the Program to the Child* (Rogers, 2002).

- *Smart Boys: Talent, Manhood, and the Search for Meaning* (Kerr and Cohn, 2001).


- *What Educators Can Learn from Gifted Adults.*
  www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10023.aspx (Kaufmann, 1992).

- *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades (and What You Can Do about It).* (Rimm, 2008).