Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Learners: What are they and what to do?

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What comes to mind when you think about the social-emotional development of gifted learners?
Common socio-emotional characteristics of gifted found in literature

- Sense of justice, fair play, morality & spirituality
- Altruism & Idealism
- High levels of energy
- Early concern about death
- Strong attachments and commitments
- Heightened sensitivity and intensity
- Tendency toward introversion
- Perfectionistic
- Perseverance
- Need for mental stimulation
- Need for precision/logic/moral reasoning
- Nonconformity-questioning rules, authority

Emotional Needs of Gifted Learners

- Dealing with perfectionism
- Fear of failure
- Understanding giftedness
- Feelings of being different
- Need for risk taking
- Developing relationships & social skills
- Communication and effects of introversion
- High expectations of self and others
- Inner self; exploring experiences & feelings
- Sensitivity toward others; tolerance
# Relationship of affective characteristics to learning needs and suggested home interventions

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Learning Need</th>
<th>Suggested home interventions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Justice, fair play</td>
<td>Understanding of complexity of issues associated with justice</td>
<td>Discussion of bill of rights, reading newspaper</td>
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<td>Altruism</td>
<td>Opportunities to help others</td>
<td>Be responsible for younger siblings, service projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Humor</td>
<td>Appreciate various forms of humor</td>
<td>Exposure to humor genres</td>
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<td>Death/Mortality</td>
<td>Appreciation of Life Cycle</td>
<td>Family geneology, life cycle events</td>
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<td>Perfectionism</td>
<td>Acceptance of fallibility</td>
<td>Safe risk-taking, model mistakes</td>
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<td>High energy</td>
<td>Appropriate outlets for energy</td>
<td>Variety of experiences</td>
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<td>Aesthetic sensitivity</td>
<td>Development of observing or performing skills</td>
<td>Exposure/support in fine arts</td>
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Social/emotional definition of giftedness:

Giftedness is an asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity, rendering gifted learners vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

Morelock & Silverman
Asynchrony:

- Means out-of-sync
- Gifted child may experience asynchrony on several levels
  - Between intellectual abilities and physical abilities or affective abilities
  - Between chronological peers and mental age
  - Between giftedness in one area as opposed to others (math, music, etc.)
- Can create social and emotional vulnerabilities
- Most problematic between 4 and 9 years old
- The higher the IQ, the more acute the problem
- Particularly difficult with twice-exceptional
- Asynchrony = 8 year old body + 12 year old mind + 5 year old emotions
Just because their a child is labeled “gifted”, doesn’t mean that he/she....

• Is smart in every area
• Is mature
• Is able to work independently
• Is able to cope with multiple stressors
• Is able to make long-term goals
• Is able to multi-task
• Is organized
• Is able to make and keep friends
Common Areas of Psychological Vulnerability

- Idealism
- Perfectionism
- Peer Relations
- Depression
- Sensitivities and Excitabilities
Idealism and Sense of Justice

Positive
- Promotes the pursuit of fairness and a concern for world affairs
- Perceptive
- Insightful

Negative
- Can cause despair and depression
- Rigid judgment of themselves and others
- Frustration over inability to solve the problems of the world
- Search for truth, knowing the right answer, and being fair may supersede others’ needs
- May have unrealistic standards of truth and morality
- Unrealistic goals about the future
- May be confrontational and questioning authority
Perfectionism

Positive (Adaptive):
• Promotes drive for excellence
• Ability to produce excellent work
• A need for order and organization
• Self-acceptance of mistakes
• Use of positive coping strategies
• Absence of role models who emphasize doing one’s best

Negative (Maladaptive):
• Interferes with work due to fear of not meeting high expectations
• Can cause depression
• Self-esteem rises and falls with academic performance
• Poor risk-taker
• Procrastinates
• Doesn’t reward improvements
Perfectionism...cont.

....is holding very high standards for one’s performance

...can be a potent force capable of producing either intense frustration and paralysis

...or a potent positive force leading to intense satisfaction and creative contribution

NOBODY IS PERFECT
NOT EVEN THE ONES
WHO DO EVERYTHING
RIGHT
Perfectionism

• Unhealthy perfectionism has been associated with depression, anxiety, eating disorders, writer’s block, ...

• Linked with underachievement, academic procrastination, and career failure

• Some researchers suggest perfectionism results as a result of a focus on performance as opposed to learning

• Others speculate that the media promotes perfectionism, peers and teachers pressure student to be the best.
Recommendations

• Understand that wanting to achieve and having a drive to excel is not in and of itself unhealthy

• Help gifted students take pleasure in accomplishments

• See setbacks as learning opportunities

• Praise students’ efforts and determination as opposed to their being “smart” or “talented”

• Encourage them to challenge their efforts into their passion as opposed to trying to do everything well

• Help them set priorities and value relaxation
Peer Relationships

• Research indicates gifted children are well-liked and popular with peers

• Gifted adolescents often value their giftedness but understand it can result in social pressures

• However, profoundly gifted have great difficulty finding true peers unless they are radically accelerated – social acceptability much greater problem for them
Recommendations

- Parents should be careful not to stress popularity and social success
- Parents should support child’s talent but not add to pressures
- Point out that competitive forms of friendships end at graduation for most people – point out awards ahead
- Arrange for gifted children to spend time with like-minded peer – assemble a gifted cohort (Saturday and summer programs, special classes, debate teams, intellectual and creative teams and gifted-peer discussion groups)
- Model, demonstrate, and practice pro-social behaviors.
- Provide opportunities to practice social skills
**Sensitivities and Excitabilities**

- Feeling everything more deeply than others

- Emotionally intense gifted children often experience intense inner conflict, self-criticism, anxiety, and feelings of inferiority due to not living up to self or others expectation levels
  - Pressure to be the smartest
  - Pressure to be different
  - Pressure to be popular
  - Pressure to be loyal
Depression

- Asynchronous development – at risk for existential depression (struggling with meaning of life)

- Perfectionism – is associated in the clinical literature with depression
  - Perceived pressures with feelings of inadequacy may contribute to fear of failure and negative self-evaluation

- Social isolation – associated with depressed mood
  - Has been noted among highly gifted who are not radically accelerated
  - Important to distinguish between loneliness and solitude (only loneliness correlates with depression)

- Sensitivity – speculated to increase suffering from social injustices, personal losses, slights, and perceived rejection
Protective Factors

• Some characteristics common among gifted students have also been cited as protective factors against psychological vulnerabilities
  
  o High intelligence
  o Problem-solving abilities
  o Advanced social skills
  o Androgyny
  o Advanced moral reasoning

• Gifted may be exposed to higher levels of stress, but personal characteristics may serve as a buffer
Strategies for addressing S/E needs

- Focus on the effort; not on the outcome
- Incorporate affective components into the curriculum
- Counseling
- Incorporate a multiple component approach between student, home, school
- Be responsive, not controlling
- Don’t dismiss intense feelings or reactions
- Educate yourself
- Provide time with intellectual peers
- Prize the characteristics of the individual, not just accomplishments
- Don’t confuse intellect with ability in other areas
- Provide models of risk taking & coping with mistakes
For More Information

- Guiding the Gifted Child: A Practical Source for Parents and Teachers (James T. Webb, Elizabeth A. Meckstroth, Stephanie S. Tolan)

- Raisin’ Brains: Surviving My Smart Family (Karen L. J. Isaacson)
For More Information

• Smart Girls: A New Psychology of Girls, Women and Giftedness (Barbara Kerr)

• Re-forming Gifted Children: Matching the Program to the Child (Karen B. Rogers)
Books on the Social/Emotional Development of Gifted

- *Some of My Best Friends Are Books*, J. W. Halstead
- *Smart Girls and Smart Boys*, B. Kerr
- *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*, S. Rimm
- *Guiding the Gifted Child: A practical source for parents and teachers*, Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan
- *Counseling the Gifted & Talented*, L. Silverman
- *Social-Emotional Currriculum*, J. VanTassel-Baska, Cross & Olenchak
- *Growing Gifted Kids*, J. Delisle
Internet Sites

- National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) - www.nagc.org
- Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) - www.sengifted.org
- Hoagie’s – www.hoagiesgifted.org
- Great Potential Press - www.giftedbooks.com
- Free Spirit Publishing - www.freespirit.com
- National Research Center on Gifted - http://nrcgt.org/
- AGATE - www.agateneuwyork.org
- Davidson Institute - www.davidsongifted.org