



## Tips for selecting the right counselor or therapist for your gifted child

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When should one seek counseling? Is it worth it? How do I find a counselor/therapist? Such questions often are asked by parents of gifted and talented children. Here are some helpful tips.

Preventive guidance is the best policy, and the most helpful counseling often comes through talking with other parents of gifted children. Parents worry whether their child's experiences are normal, whether they, as parents, are providing adequate stimulation, about how to react to the exhausting intensity which their child shows, about how to avoid the power struggles, and so on. Gifted children often do not fit the developmental norms published in the parenting handbooks; they tend to reach developmental stages earlier and more intensely than other children.

Parenting a gifted child can be a very lonely experience unless one seeks out other parents. Sometimes this can be done informally just by meeting other parents of gifted children in your school district or neighborhood. Sometimes it can be done via the Internet through TAGFAM or other similar online discussion groups. Perhaps the most helpful are the SENG-Model support groups where parents share common experiences as well as "parenting recipes" under the guidance of trained facilitators. Information about how to set up such groups can be found in *Gifted Parent Groups: The SENG Model* (Webb & DeVries, 1993)

Preventive guidance also comes from books written specifically about the social and emotional needs of gifted children. There are several excellent resources to guide parents of gifted children, such as Judy Halsted's, *Some of My Best Friends Are Books* (1994). Ask other parents, check with your librarian or bookstore, or search the Internet or Amazon.com®.

Even with these resources, parenting gifted children often is a challenge, and emotions and interpersonal interactions are not only intense but also are continually changing. When is professional assessment and guidance needed? If a problem, such as anxiety, sadness, depression, or poor interpersonal relations continues for longer than a few weeks, it would be worthwhile to consider professional consultation. Even if the problems turn out to be minor ones, you will at least have received reassurance and some guidance.

Some families have decided to have a family psychologist in the same way that they have a family physician—someone they can go to regularly for checkups or for assistance if things seem not to be going well. I have often recommended this, particularly to parents of highly or profoundly gifted children, not only because their intensity and sensitivity are so much greater than even that of other gifted children, but also because these children tend to be more asynchronous in their development, and therefore even more of a puzzlement to those around them.

Some parents are concerned about the cost. A thorough professional may take several hours over two or three appointments to get to know your child and to understand your child's environment. The cost, perhaps \$400 to \$900, may seem high. However consider what you would pay for a thorough dental examination with x-rays, or to have your child's teeth straightened. Most parents say that a psychological consultation, including testing, is very helpful not only because of specific recommendations they receive, but also because the assessment results provide a yardstick with which to gauge the severity of the problems and to assess what is reasonable to expect of the child. Certainly, many sources, including the 1995 Consumer Reports study, have confirmed the effectiveness of counseling.

Regrettably, it likely will be difficult to find a counselor or therapist who is knowledgeable about gifted and talented children. Few psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers or counselors have received training in the social and emotional needs of gifted and talented children. They, like many others, often believe that giftedness is only an asset, and that high ability seldom is associated with problems.

So how do you find a psychologist or counselor? I would suggest that you shop around. Ask other parents of gifted children for their recommendations or if they know counselors who have been helpful to them. Most often these other parents are quite happy to share their information and experiences, and many of them will have sought professional help somewhere along the way. As a colleague of mine once said, "There are two kinds of people. Those with problems, and those you don't know well enough yet to know what their problems are."



Perhaps you aren't able to locate parents who can recommend a qualified professional. If you can find a well-trained counselor or psychologist who is open to learning about gifted children, that usually is sufficient. Ask the counselor or therapist about his or her experience and background with gifted children and their families. Then, ascertain if the counselor or therapist is open to learning about this area by consulting with colleagues or reading a few publications. You might mention continuing education programs for psychologists, like those that SENG will offer, about the social and emotional needs of gifted children and their families.

You—the parents—may have to educate the professional about the characteristics and needs of gifted children, and you may even have to supply the professional with reprints of articles or suggest books to read. For example, you may point out to the psychologist or psychiatrist that the book, *Guiding The Gifted Child* (Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982), was recognized by the American Psychological Association Foundation, or give the counselor copies of several ERIC Digest articles on the social and emotional needs of gifted children or copies of downloads from websites such as [www.SENGifted.org](http://www.SENGifted.org) or [www.hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org).

Once you find a professional, enter counseling on a trial basis to see if the counselor's approach and style fit with your needs. Sometimes a very competent psychologist may have a personal style that simply doesn't fit with yours. If you are uncomfortable with the initial findings and recommendations, consider getting a second opinion. Second opinions have been accepted for a long time in medicine, and they are increasingly accepted in psychology and education.

How do you tell your child that you are going to see a counselor? Most often I suggest that you describe the consultation as a professional "look see" to get help in planning so that family and school experiences are as enjoyable as they can be. Generally you will want to suggest to the child that the consultation will be a family endeavor. You may say that you are going to get family consultation to help you be better parents. You don't want to suggest that the child is a "problem" which the counselor will "fix." Perhaps you can talk to the professional ahead of time to get suggestions for your particular situation concerning the best way to approach your child.

What can you expect? Probably the counselor or therapist will want the parents, as well as the child, to fill out questionnaires or brief psychological tests to help get an understanding of the family setting. The counselor will probably want to see the parents and the child together, then the child alone, and then the parents alone. The counselor may want to talk to the teacher, or even do a school visit for observation. A psychologist may wish to talk to the child's pediatrician. The psychologist may want to do formal testing of intellect, achievement, and emotional functioning. All of this will take time. The testing alone may take three or four hours, and probably the psychologist will divide that into two or three sessions to make sure the child is not fatigued, and also to have the opportunity to see the child on two separate occasions to look for any behavior changes. And the counselor will do a lot of listening and asking questions. This is good. You want thoughtful suggestions and advice based on a thorough assessment, not a casual or sloppy approach. Try to be patient, but ask the counselor questions as well as answer them.

When the assessment is finished, you should expect to have a meeting of at least an hour with the counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist to learn what the findings are and to plan what should happen next. If there is a significant diagnosis, ask how it was arrived at. Make sure, ahead of this appointment, that the professional was made aware of articles such as *Mis-Diagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children* (Webb, 2000) to try to minimize the likelihood that gifted behaviors are not mis-diagnosed. For example, some gifted children, if they are in an environment with few intellectual peers, are misdiagnosed as suffering Asperger's Disorder. Others, with their intense moods, may be misdiagnosed as Bi-Polar Disorder. Also, however, be alert to the possibility that gifted behaviors may mask real diagnoses. For example, more than one gifted child has been able to put on a happy face to conceal significant depression, and children suffering Asperger's Disorder are sometimes mistaken as "quirky gifted children."

If therapy is needed, insist that the counselor or therapist meet with the parents frequently, at least once for every three or four times the child is seen. For pre-adolescent youngsters, rarely is it appropriate for a therapist to counsel the child for several sessions without also consulting with the parents. You are a key part of the child's world, and need to know how to help the counseling process. The therapist likely will suggest specific behaviors for you to try at home or at school.

Medication for children—including gifted children—should be used only when really necessary. Try to insure that the medication is not being prescribed to treat characteristics of giftedness, such as the child's intensity, curiosity, divergent thinking, or boredom in an educationally inappropriate placement. All too many highly gifted children have been mis-diagnosed as ADHD

or as Oppositional Defiant Disorder and placed on medication, when what really was needed was more understanding, appropriate behavioral approaches, or an educational modification.

Finally, believe in yourself. You are the parent, and the one in charge of the family. Professionals are “hired help.” Seeking counseling or therapy is not easy, particularly when you have an exceptional child, but the benefits are worth it.

#### References

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