



## Social and emotional issues faced by gifted girls in elementary and secondary school

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Research with talented girls and women has revealed a number of personality factors, personal priorities, and social emotional issues that have consistently emerged as contributing reasons that many either cannot or do not realize their potential. Not all gifted females experience the same issues, but trends have been found in research about talented women that identify a combination of the following contributing reasons: dilemmas about abilities and talents, personal decisions about family, ambivalence of parents and teachers toward developing high levels of potential, and decisions about duty and caring (putting the needs of others first) as opposed to nurturing personal, religious, and social issues.

The personal and social emotional issues occur across women's lifespans. Some affect the youngest girls and some are only apparent to women who have become involved in serious relationships in their college or graduate school years, or had children later in their lives. Older gifted women resolve many personal issues relating to ability and social issues experienced by younger gifted girls. It is also important to understand that some of these dilemmas cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of everyone involved. Rather, some dilemmas shift or are resolved due to changes in a woman's life, such as the maturation of her children, the dissolution of a relationship, the reemergence of other relationships, or a change in environments at work or home. Therefore, it is difficult, if not impossible, when discussing social and emotional issues, to discuss gifted girls without discussing gifted women, because many young gifted girls believe that they can "do it all" or "have it all," while many older gifted females have learned that they cannot. These gifted girls were extremely bright in school, but as they got older, ambivalence about their future caused their hopes and career dreams to waver. Preventing this, and learning more about why hopes fade, is the reason that much of the research about gifted girls and women continues.

Some research has suggested that belief in ability and self-confidence of talented females is undermined or diminished during childhood or adolescence. In a recent qualitative study of five talented adolescents, not one participant attributed her success in school to extraordinary ability (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994). Other recent research has indicated that despite a degree of "feminine modesty," some gifted students acknowledged their abilities despite admitting to having fears about the future (Reis, Hébert, Diaz, Maxfield, & Ratley, 1995). What factors help some smart young girls become self-fulfilled, talented adults who can achieve at high levels and enjoy personal happiness? Studies of gifted women provide essential information about experiences of smart girls during childhood and adolescence. Some of these experiences cause confusion about future career and personal goals. The following review of research focuses on the social and emotional issues faced by gifted females, and includes issues related to external barriers and internal barriers experienced by gifted and talented girls and women.

### **External Barriers**

The importance of environmental variables on the development of gifted and talented females cannot be overstated. Almost from birth, females find themselves in a world of limiting stereotypes and barriers to achievement. Research has identified external barriers that seem to negatively influence the development of talents and gifts in some gifted girls and women. These barriers include the role of parents, school, and the environment in general, as well as the need to develop a set of philosophical beliefs that is essential to the development of creative and academic potential. In a society in which the majority of our leaders, politicians, artists, musicians, and inventors are male, a young female may not develop a philosophical belief about her own creative potential. A brief discussion of some external barriers follows.

### **Parental Influences on Talented Females**

Recent research has established the importance of parents' attitudes and beliefs about the academic self-perceptions and achievement of their children (Hess, Holloway, Dickson, & Price, 1984; McGillicuddy-De Lisi, 1985; Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982; Stevenson & Newman, 1986). In some studies, parents' beliefs about children's abilities had an even greater effect on children's self-perceptions than previous performance (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982). Phillips (1987) confirmed this finding in her study of high ability students, and a recent study of parental influence on math self-concept with gifted female adolescents as subjects found consistently significant correlations between parent expectations and student math self-concept (Dickens, 1990). Reis found that memories of negative parental comments haunt gifted and talented women decades after they left home (Reis, 1995; 1998). This research provides compelling evidence of the difficulty of addressing this problem. Parental opinions matter greatly to young girls, and the messages sent by subtle and not-so-subtle verbal and nonverbal interactions may encourage or discourage girls for life.



### **Issues Relating to Teachers**

Kramer (1985) found that teachers were usually able to identify gifted boys, but were often surprised to learn that a girl was considered smart. The gifted girls in her study were very successful at hiding their intelligence and in silencing their voices. In another analysis of research about adult perceptions of girls' intelligence, Myra and David Sadker (1994) stated that "study after study has shown that adults, both teachers and parents, underestimate the intelligence of girls" (p. 95). Kissane (1986) found that teachers are less accurate in nominating girls who are likely to do well on the quantitative subtest of the SAT than they were in naming boys who were likely to achieve a high score. Research also indicates that teachers like smart girls less than other students. Similar findings emerged in a study by Cooley, Chauvin, and Karnes (1984). Both male and female teachers regarded smart boys as more competent than gifted girls in critical and logical thinking skills and in creative problem-solving abilities, while they thought smart girls were more competent in creative writing. Male teachers viewed female students in a more traditional manner than did female teachers, perceiving bright girls to be more emotional, more high strung, more gullible, less imaginative, less curious, less inventive, less individualistic, and less impulsive than males.

Teachers have been found to believe and reinforce one of the most prevalent sex stereotypes—that males have more innate ability, while females must work harder. Fennema (1990), commenting on the role of teacher beliefs on mathematics performance, reported that, in a study she conducted with Peterson, Carpenter, and Lubinski, "teachers selected ability as the cause of their most capable males' success 58% of the time, and the cause of their best females' success only 33% of the time." They also concluded that even though teachers did not tend to engage in sex-role stereotyping in general, they did stereotype their best students in the area of mathematics, attributing characteristics such as volunteering answers, enjoyment of mathematics, and independence to males. Recent research has indicated that some teachers seem to expect less from females than they do from males, especially in regard to achievement in mathematics and science. Girls may internalize these lowered expectations very early in life.

### **Internal Barriers (Personality Factors, Personal Choices and Decisions)**

Research studies with talented females have revealed a number of personality factors, personal priorities, and decisions which have emerged as the reasons that many of them either can not or do not realize their potential in academic areas and their professions. The factors include: dilemmas about abilities and talents; personal choices about family; choices about duty and caring and nurturing the talents in oneself as opposed to putting the needs of others first; religious and social issues which consistently affect women across their lifespans; poor planning; hiding abilities and differences; perfectionism; attributing success to luck rather to ability; poor choice of partners; and confusing messages from home about politeness (Reis, 1998).

### **Loss of Belief in Abilities and Self-Confidence**

Previous research has found that some gifted girls lose, to varying degrees, their enthusiasm for learning and their courage to speak out and display their abilities. Some research and reviews of research (Arnold, 1995; Bell, 1989; Cramer, 1989; Hany, 1994; Kramer, 1991; Leroux, 1988; Perleth & Heller, 1994; Reis & Callahan, 1989; Subotnik, 1988) have indicated that some gifted females begin to lose self-confidence in elementary school and continue this loss through college and graduate school. These girls may grow to increasingly doubt their intellectual competence, perceive themselves as less capable than they actually are, and believe that boys can rely on innate ability while they must work harder to succeed. Some of this research also indicates that girls try to avoid competition in order to preserve relationships, even if that means that they don't take the opportunity to use their skills.

Kline and Short (1991) found, in a review of the literature, that the self-confidence and self-perceived abilities of gifted girls steadily decreased from elementary grades through high school. Buescher, Olszewski, and Higham (1987) found gifted boys and girls were more alike than peers not identified as gifted except in one critical area—the recognition and acceptance of their own level of ability. Interviews with middle school gifted females revealed that girls avoid displays of outstanding intellectual ability and search for ways to better conform to the norm of the peer group (Callahan, Cunningham, & Plucker, 1994).

### **Social Problems and Isolation**

Being identified as being bright or talented may create social problems for females (Bell, 1989; Buescher, Olszewski, & Higham, 1987; Eccles, Midgley, & Adler, 1984; Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988; Kramer, 1991; Reis, 1987, 1995; Reis, Callahan, & Goldsmith, 1996). Some research indicates that gifted girls believe it is a social disadvantage to be smart because of the negative reactions of peers. Fearing their peers' disapproval, bright young women may deliberately understate their abilities in order to avoid being seen as physically unattractive or lacking in social competence. In other words, they may "play dumb." Parents may also send negative messages about how girls should act, how polite they should be, how they should dress, and how often they should speak out and in what situations.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism can cause talented women to set unreasonable goals for themselves and strive to achieve at increasingly higher levels. It also can cause women to strive to achieve impossible goals and spend their lives trying to achieve perfection in work, home, body, children, wardrobe, and other areas. Hamachek (1978) viewed perfectionism as a manner of thinking about behavior and described two different types of perfectionism, normal and neurotic, forming a continuum of perfectionist behaviors. Normal perfectionists derive pleasure from the labors of effort and feel free to be less precise as the situation permits. Neurotic perfectionists are unable to feel satisfaction because they never seem to do things well enough. In a recent study on perfectionism in gifted adolescents in a middle school, Schuler (1997) found that perfectionism is a continuum with behaviors ranging from healthy/normal to unhealthy/dysfunctional. Order and organization, support systems, and personal effort were the factors that affected the healthy perfectionists who received encouragement to do their "personal best" academically, and were told that mistakes were acceptable parts of learning. On the other hand, concern over mistakes, perceived parental expectations, and perceived parental criticisms were the salient factors for the gifted unhealthy/dysfunctional female perfectionists. They possessed a fixation about making mistakes, resulting in a high state of anxiety. Their definitions of perfectionism focused on not making any errors. Unlike the healthy female perfectionists, the unhealthy females' earliest memories of being perfectionistic centered on making mistakes. These unhealthy female perfectionists were concerned about making errors both because of their own high standards and those of their parents, and they worked to please others—teachers, peers, or parents. Unlike the healthy female perfectionists, they viewed their parents' perfectionism negatively, and perceived parental expectations as demands to be perfect in everything they did.

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