



**An Interview with Sal Mendaglio:  
About Meeting the Emotional Needs of Gifted Children and Adolescents**

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*SENG's Editor in Chief, Dr. Michael Shaughnessy, interviews Sal Mendaglio. Sal Mendaglio, PhD, is an associate professor in the Division of Teacher Preparation, Graduate Division of Educational Research and Research Associate, Centre for Gifted Education, University of Calgary. He is the current Chair of the Counselling and Guidance Division, National Association for Gifted Children. Sal's interest in perfectionism is part of his interest in clarifying what the field of gifted education identifies as the social and emotional issues of gifted individuals. He also has a keen interest in Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration.*

**Question by M.S.: Sal, first of all, could you tell us a bit about yourself and your education?**

**Answer by S.M.:** Well, I was born in Capistrano—not the one where the swallows go back to, but the one in Calabria, Italy. My family moved to Montreal when I was quite young. I am the eldest son in a family consisting originally of seven children (most Italians know what that means), four girls and three boys. Of course, Montreal is known for its French language and culture, and, for a while, I was trilingual in Italian, English, and French. In those early years in Canada, I had experiences that I think are common to many immigrant children. I sum these up as living in two conflicting cultures, one at home and one in the outside world. I learned from experience that, among other things, young people run into extra challenges when they are different from the norm. Those early years were very difficult. Later, after surviving them, I began to value those early experiences. I believe that they enhanced my empathic ability. More than that, I think that my experience as an immigrant contributed to the different perspective I have on life. I noticed over time that I seem to think differently from others on many things. This is also evident to me in my approach to psychology and giftedness.

I received all my education in Canada. I received a Bachelor's degree, major in psychology, at St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, and Nova Scotia. After my BA, I taught elementary and junior high school for three years in

Montreal. During that time, I earned a BEd degree from University de Montreal. My teaching experience sparked my interest in counselling. I left teaching and went to McGill University where I received a Master's in counselling, and from there I went directly into a PhD in the counselling psychology program at the University of Toronto. My 1976 job hunting for academic positions led me to the University of Calgary, where I have been ever since. After 20 years or so of contributing to the preparation of psychologists, I transferred to the preparation of teachers, the area that I have taught in since 1998.

**Question: How did you first get involved in counselling gifted kids?**

**Answer:** My involvement with counselling gifted individuals began rather serendipitously. In 1977, I was teaching a practicum course in our counselling program. This involved supervising student counsellors' practice in community settings. To enhance my work with my graduate students, I decided that I needed to maintain my counselling skills. This led to establishing a very small independent practice as a psychologist. At that time, there were no psychological services for gifted children and their families. In fact, gifted education programs in public schools were in their infancy. My involvement with gifted children began when I was approached by an educator who said that no one was working in the area of counselling gifted students and suggested that I consider working with that population. I had no

academic background in the area, but I felt confident about my counselling skills, so I decided to give it a chance. When I received my first referral, being a good professional and needing to be a model for my graduate students, I, of course, went to the literature. I can still recall my amazement during my first interview with a gifted child of about seven or eight years old: I looked at my watch and was stunned that I had an adult-like conversation with him for forty-five minutes. As I think back, I remember that I was looking for clients that could challenge me so that I could evolve as a practitioner. Gifted children and adolescents experiencing difficulties were challenging indeed! Unlike other young people, they challenged me, not simply accepting my interpretations and suggestions because of my being a psychologist—they wanted me to explain my rationale to them. I was used to having adults do that, but not children. As I began to work with parents of gifted children, the challenges I experienced with children paled when I worked with their parents. It was then that I realized that I had found the population that would keep me sharp.

During my first 15 years or so of counselling practice, I worked with young people who had a variant of exceptional needs, ranging from ADHD, LD, ODD, to selective mutism. Since that time, my counselling has focused exclusively on gifted individuals. I have had the privilege of counselling gifted individuals ranging from preschoolers to senior citizens. A chance encounter with an educator of gifted students and the demands of my initial teaching duties led to discovering my area of passion.

**Question: I once read a piece of yours entitled "It's All About Emotions." Would please discuss that idea?**

**Answer:** My proclamation had its origins many years ago, the product of reflection on my counselling experiences. It struck me that, regardless of the reasons clients gave for seeking counselling, there was an underlying theme: people seek counselling when they can no longer cope with intense negative emotions. This seemed to be the case whether it was a parent's needing help with her underachieving child, a couple's seeking marital counselling, or an individual's looking

for help with an existential crisis. They all had one thing in common—they could no longer handle their negative emotions. This did not apply only to clients but to everyday life. Intense negative emotions are associated with a wide range of difficulties that we experience. Over time, it became clear to me that coming to terms with negative emotions was key to success in life.

This was not rocket science since counselling and psychotherapy has long acknowledged the importance of emotions. The difference was that I began to really know this. In counselling sessions, I have the experience of saying something to a client and the response is, "Yeah, yeah, I already know that!" As an example, when I say to parents something like, "Consistency is important to effective parenting," the "yeah, yeah" response often follows. My view is that they do not know the importance of consistency. "Knowing" in the sense that I am using it serves to permanently change you. That's how I came to know the role of emotions. With this knowledge, my behavior did change. I was no longer satisfied with helping people cope with their emotions. Coping became synonymous with a form of denial or distraction. Coping strategies, no matter how effective, seemed to provide only temporary relief from persistent negative emotions. My approach moved from coping strategies to helping clients know the full impact of their emotions and the need to get to the root cause, so as to come to terms with the emotion eliciting situations.

My view that emotions are paramount to our development was further reinforced when I began to appreciate the complexity of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration. Emotions are critical in Dabrowski's theory. Emotions, especially negative emotions, are the forces of development—negative emotions *drive* personality development. In the theory of positive disintegration, personality—equated with becoming truly human—is an achievement, not a given. Personality is created by positive disintegrating, which begins by the disintegrating power of emotions, such as anxiety, dissatisfaction with self, and inner conflict between the way the world ought to be and the way it is. Development rests with the transformative power of intense negative emotions.

**Question: How do we help them cope with these feelings and emotions?**

**Answer:** An important first step—a pre-requisite actually—is creating an atmosphere that encourages gifted children and adolescents to express their emotions. Ideally, this begins early in a gifted person's life. Young children, in general, begin by spontaneously expressing what they feel. In a real sense, with very young children, we see and hear what they feel—there is no inhibition of emotion expression. In time, they learn the rules of emotion expression that are reflective of cultural norms. These norms are typically transmitted by parents through their daily interactions with children. Essentially, we learn whether and how we should express our emotions from the responses we receive from parents when we express emotions. Parents' responses, though, affect only the *expression* of emotions not the *experience* of them. For example, the young boy who is told that big boys don't cry, still experiences sadness, though he learns to inhibit the expression of his sadness.

Ultimately, the atmosphere that I am talking about relates to the quality of relationship we have with gifted youth. Expressing one's emotions to another is a risk-taking affair. In some instances, I think that the risk is of bungee-cord-jumping proportions. Emotions are at the very core of us, young or old, and, to express them we need to trust other persons—that they will not ridicule us or judge us.

In my model of counselling gifted individuals, including gifted youth, helping gifted persons with their emotions means helping them express them in a trusting atmosphere. There are some assumptions underlying my assertion. The most important is the: we cannot “fix” emotions. We cannot use logic to help gifted youth cope with their emotions. A logic/problem solving is useful in dealing with problematic situations, but that is different from dealing with the emotions the situations elicit. Emotions must be dealt with first. Parents and teachers need to respond in a sympathetic/empathetic way. But, they should avoid scripted or counselling type responses that will likely be seen as superficial or gimmicky by gifted youth. There are some obvious types of responses to avoid: Why are you so upset about *that*? It's

not that important; have you tried this other way of handling the situation? The first type is evaluative, and the second one is aimed at problem solving. Neither response is appropriate, because they tend to stifle emotion expression. Appropriate responses are those that are aimed at encouraging expression of emotion, which is what we need when we are emotional.

**Question: What are some of the prevalent emotions that gifted kids have to deal with?**

**Answer:** What I have found is that gifted children have the same emotions as all children. The difference lies in the intensity and source of emotions. I have concluded, with others in our field, that gifted children tend to experience and express greater intensity of emotions. Because I espouse a cognitive view of emotions, I think that superior cognitive ability is largely responsible for the intensity of emotion experience. They do, in fact, feel more because they see—perceive—more. And so they differ from other children in terms of depth and strength of emotions.

A more significant difference between gifted and nongifted that I have noticed is the source or cause of emotion. For example, take the case of school related anxiety. Gifted and non gifted children may experience test anxiety, for example, but there are sources of anxiety that are unique to gifted students. One of these has been investigated by Larry Coleman and Tracy Cross—the stigmatization effect of giftedness. Larry and Tracy's research supports the idea that gifted students believe that others perceive them as different. and this has a negative effect—a source of anxiety in my view—on gifted students.

Another emotion that emerges in gifted students is the frustration they feel when they are in regular classrooms, or what we now call “inclusive” classrooms, and they are expected to learn at the same rate as other students. And, so, it is not the emotions—in my examples, anxiety and frustration—that are unique. It is their source: giftedness. I elaborate on this in a chapter, “Anxiety in Gifted Students,” that I contributed to Jerrell Casady's book, *Anxiety in School*, which has been recently published.

**Question: When do we establish that kids may need professional counselling?**

**Answer:** This is where “It’s all about emotions” also applies. I have noticed that, regardless of the type of problem that motivates people to seek my professional counselling, there is one thing they have in common: they tend to be overwhelmed by negative emotions. Parents seek me out when they have reached the point when they can no longer tolerate the frustration, disappointment, and/or worry about their gifted children’s attitudes and behaviors, often related to academic underachievement. Adults who are gifted have sought me out because they can no longer cope with the intense negative emotions associated with their marriages or existential angst. I, along with other psychologists, tend to be seen as the last resort.

Another point on this question. People tend to seek counselling to help them deal with their gifted children, after they “have tried everything”. My advice is that parents should seek help after their first unsuccessful intervention in trying to deal with negative social/emotional changes in the child, “attitude” problems, or academic underachievement. It should not come as a surprise to hear me say that the earlier the intervention, the better. In my profession, that is considered a truism. People need to understand that seeking counselling may involve only one or two consultations. Counselling should not be equated exclusively with psychoanalysis that has been the focus of comedians such as Woody Allen, with his quirky Manhattan humour. Much of what I do in counselling parents of gifted children, for example, is to educate parents about giftedness. When dealing with young gifted children, three or four sessions may be all that is needed to resolve or prevent problems. I can say with authority that it is a rather different story when dealing with, for example, a fifteen-year-old gifted adolescent with a history of problems often manifested in academic underachievement.

**Question: Sal, I believe firmly that a simple interview like this does not always do justice to the topic. Could you suggest a book or books that you believe would help parents and teachers understand the social and emotional needs of gifted children?**

**Answer:** I think that Jim Webb’s co-authored book, *Guiding the Gifted Child* is a good resource. Jim’s book is aimed at both parents and teachers. It has stood the test of time. Another one is Judy Galbraith’s *Gifted Kids’ Survival Guide*. Susan Daniels and Michael Piechowski have edited a new book for parents and teachers based on Dabrowski’s theory. Silvia Rimm, best known for her practical books on academic underachievement has also written dealing with parenting.