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Misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis of gifted children

James T. Webb


Many gifted and talented children (and adults) are being mis-diagnosed by psychologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, and other health care professionals. The most common mis-diagnoses are: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder (OD), Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), and Mood Disorders such as Cyclothymic Disorder, Dysthymic Disorder, Depression, and Bi-Polar Disorder. These common mis-diagnoses stem from an ignorance among professionals about specific social and emotional characteristics of gifted children which are then mistakenly assumed by these professionals to be signs of pathology.

In some situations where gifted children have received a correct diagnosis, giftedness is still a factor that must be considered in treatment, and should really generate a dual diagnosis. For example, existential depression or learning disability, when present in gifted children or adults, requires a different approach because new dimensions are added by the giftedness component. Yet the giftedness component typically is overlooked due to the lack of training and understanding by health care professionals (Webb & Kleine, 1993).

Despite prevalent myths to the contrary, gifted children and adults are at particular psychological risk due to both internal characteristics and situational factors. These internal and situational factors can lead to interpersonal and psychological difficulties for gifted children, and subsequently to mis-diagnoses and inadequate treatment.

Internal Factors

First, let me mention the internal aspects (Webb, 1993). Historically, nearly all of the research on gifted individuals has focused on the intellectual aspects, particularly in an academic sense. Until recently, little attention has been given to personality factors which accompany high intellect and creativity. Even less attention has been given to the observation that these personality factors intensify and have greater life effects when intelligence level increases beyond IQ 130 (Silverman, 1993; Webb, 1993; Winner, 2000).

Perhaps the most universal, yet most often overlooked, characteristic of gifted children and adults is their intensity (Silverman, 1993; Webb, 1993). One mother described it succinctly when she said, “My child’s life motto is that anything worth doing is worth doing to excess.” Gifted children — and gifted adults— often are extremely intense, whether in their emotional response, intellectual pursuits, sibling rivalry, or power struggles with an authority figure. Impatience is also frequently present, both with oneself and with others. The intensity also often manifests itself in heightened motor activity and physical restlessness.

Along with intensity, one typically finds in gifted individuals an extreme sensitivity—to emotions, sounds, touch, taste, etc. These children may burst into tears while watching a sad event on the evening news, keenly hear fluorescent lights, react strongly to smells, insist on having the tags removed from their shirts, must touch everything, or are overly reactive to touch in a tactile-defensive manner.

The gifted individual’s drive to understand, to question, and to search for consistency is likewise inherent and intense, as is the ability to see possibilities and alternatives. All of these characteristics together result in an intense idealism and concern with social and moral issues, which can create anxiety, depression, and a sharp challenging of others who do not share their concerns.

Situational Factors

Situational factors are highly relevant to the problem of mis-diagnosis (Webb, 1993). Intensity, sensitivity, idealism, impatience, questioning the status quo—none of these alone necessarily constitutes a problem. In fact, we generally value these characteristics and behaviors—unless they happen to occur in a tightly structured classroom, or in a highly organized business setting, or if they happen to challenge some cherished tradition, and gifted children are the very ones who challenge traditions or the status quo.

There is a substantial amount of research to indicate that gifted children spend at least one-fourth to one-half of the regular classroom time waiting for others to catch up. Boredom is rampant because of the age tracking in our public schools. Peer
relations for gifted children are often difficult (Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan, 1982; Winner, 2000), all the more so because of the internal dyssynchrony (asynchronous development) shown by so many gifted children where their development is uneven across various academic, social, and developmental areas, and where their judgment often lags behind their intellect. Clearly, there are possible (or even likely) problems that are associated with the characteristic strengths of gifted children. Some of these typical strengths and related problems are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Possible Problems That May be Associated with Characteristic Strengths of Gifted Children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Possible Problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquires and retains information quickly.</td>
<td>Impatient with slowness of others; dislikes routine and drill; may resist mastering foundational skills; may make concepts unduly complex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquisitive attitude, intellectual curiosity; intrinsic motivation; searching for significance.</td>
<td>Asks embarrassing questions; strong-willed; resists direction; seems excessive in interests; expects same of others.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ability to conceptualize, abstract, synthesize; enjoys problem-solving and intellectual activity.</td>
<td>Rejects or omits details; resists practice or drill; questions teaching procedures.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Can see cause-effect relations.</td>
<td>Difficulty accepting the illogical – such as feelings, traditions, or matters to be taken on faith.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love of truth, equity, and fair play.</td>
<td>Difficulty in being practical; worry about humanitarian concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys organizing things and people into structure and order; seeks to systematize.</td>
<td>Constructs complicated rules or systems; may be seen as bossy, rude, or domineering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large vocabulary and facile verbal proficiency; broad information in advanced areas.</td>
<td>May use words to escape or avoid situations; becomes bored with school and age-peers; seen by others as a “know it all.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thinks critically; has high expectancies; is self-critical and evaluates others.</td>
<td>Critical or intolerant toward others; may become discouraged or depressed; perfectionistic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keen observer; willing to consider the unusual; open to new experiences.</td>
<td>Overly intense focus; occasional gullibility.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creative and inventive; likes new ways of doing things.</td>
<td>May disrupt plans or reject what is already known; seen by others as different and out of step.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intense concentration; long attention span in areas of interest; goal-directed behavior; persistence.</td>
<td>Resists interruption; neglects duties or people during period of focused interests; stubbornness.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity, empathy for others; desire to be accepted by others.</td>
<td>Sensitivity to criticism or peer rejection; expects others to have similar values; need for success and recognition; may feel different and alienated.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High energy, alertness, eagerness; periods of intense efforts.</td>
<td>Frustration with inactivity; eagerness may disrupt others’ schedules; needs continual stimulation; may be seen as hyperactive.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Strengths

- Independent; prefers individualized work; reliant on self.
- Diverse interests and abilities; versatility.
- Strong sense of humor.

Possible Problems

- May reject parent or peer input; non-conformity; may be unconventional.
- May appear scattered and disorganized; frustrations over lack of time; others may expect continual competence.
- Sees absurdities of situations; humor may not be understood by peers; may become “class clown” to gain attention.

Adapted from Clark (1992) and Seagoe (1974)

Lack of understanding by parents, educators, and health professionals, combined with the problem situations (e.g., lack of appropriately differentiated education) leads to interpersonal problems which are then mis-labeled, and thus prompt the mis-diagnoses. The most common mis-diagnoses are as follows.

Common Mis-Diagnoses

ADHD and Gifted. Many gifted children are being mis-diagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The gifted child’s characteristics of intensity, sensitivity, impatience, and high motor activity can easily be mistaken for ADHD. Some gifted children surely do suffer from ADHD, and thus have a dual diagnosis of gifted and ADHD; but in my opinion, most are not. Few health care professionals give sufficient attention to the words about ADHD in DSM-IV(1994) that say “…inconsistent with developmental level…. ” The gifted child’s developmental level is different (asynchronous) when compared to other children, and health care professionals need to ask whether the child’s inattentiveness or impulsivity behaviors occur only in some situations but not in others (e.g., at school but not at home; at church, but not at scouts, etc.). If the problem behaviors are situational only, the child is likely not suffering from ADHD.

To further complicate matters, my own clinical observation suggests that about three percent of highly gifted children suffer from a functional borderline hypoglycemic condition. Silverman (1993) has suggested that perhaps the same percentage also suffer from allergies of various kinds. Physical reactions in these conditions, when combined with the intensity and sensitivity, result in behaviors that can mimic ADHD. However, the ADHD-like symptoms in such cases will vary with the time of day, length of time since last meal, type of foods eaten, or exposure to other environmental agents.

Oppositional Defiant Disorder and Gifted. The intensity, sensitivity, and idealism of gifted children often lead others to view them as “strong-willed.” Power struggles with parents and teachers are common, particularly when these children receive criticism, as they often do, for some of the very characteristics that make them gifted (e.g., “Why are you so sensitive, always questioning me, trying to do things a different way,” etc.).

Bi-Polar and other Mood Disorders and Gifted. Recently, I encountered a parent whose highly gifted child had been diagnosed with Bi-Polar Disorder. This intense child, whose parents were going through a bitter divorce, did indeed show extreme mood swings, but, in my view, the diagnosis of Bi-Polar Disorder was off the mark. In adolescence, or sometimes earlier, gifted children often do go through periods of depression related to their disappointed idealism, and their feelings of aloneness and alienation culminate in an existential depression. However, it is not at all clear that this kind of depression warrants such a major diagnosis.

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder and Gifted. Even as preschoolers, gifted children love to organize people and things into complex frameworks, and get quite upset when others don’t follow their rules or don’t understand their schema. Many gifted first graders are seen as perfectionistic and “bossy” because they try to organize the other children, and sometimes even try to organize their family or the teacher. As they grow up, they continue to search intensely for the “rules of life” and for consistency. Their intellectualizing, sense of urgency, perfectionism, idealism, and intolerance for mistakes may be misunderstood to be signs of Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder or Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder. In some sense, however, giftedness is a dual diagnosis with Obsessive-Compulsive Personality Disorder since intellectualization may be assumed to underlie many of the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for this disorder.
Dual Diagnoses

Learning Disabilities and Giftedness. Giftedness is a coexisting factor, to be sure, in some diagnoses. One notable example is in diagnosis and treatment of learning disabilities. Few psychologists are aware that inter-subscale scatter on the Wechsler intelligence tests increases as a child’s overall IQ score exceeds 130. In children with a Full Scale IQ score of 140 or greater, it is not uncommon to find a difference of 20 or more points between Verbal IQ and Performance IQ (Silverman, 1993; Webb & Kleine, 1993; Winner, 2000). Most clinical psychologists are taught that such a discrepancy is serious cause for concern regarding possible serious brain dysfunction, including learning disabilities. For highly gifted children, such discrepancy is far less likely to be an indication of pathological brain dysfunction, though it certainly would suggest an unusual learning style and perhaps a relative learning disability.

Similarly, the difference between the highest and lowest scores on individual subscales within intelligence and achievement tests is often quite notable in gifted children. On the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children - III, it is not uncommon to find subscale differences greater than seven scale score points for gifted children, particularly those who are highly gifted. These score discrepancies are taken by most psychologists to indicate learning disabilities, and in a functional sense they do represent that. That is, the levels of ability do vary dramatically, though the range may be “only” from Very Superior to Average level of functioning. In this sense, gifted children may not “qualify” for a diagnosis of learning disability, and indeed some schools seem to have a policy of “only one label allowed per student,” and since this student is gifted, he/she can not also be considered learning disabled. However, it is important for psychologists to understand the concept of “asynchronous development” (Silverman, 1993), and to appreciate that most gifted children show such an appreciable, and often significant, scatter of abilities.

Poor handwriting is often used as one indicator of learning disabilities. However, many and perhaps most gifted children will show poor handwriting. Usually this simply represents that their thoughts go so much faster than their hands can move, and that they see little sense in making writing an art form when its primary purpose is to communicate (Webb & Kleine, 1993; Winner, 2000).

Psychologists must understand that, without intervention, self-esteem issues are almost a guarantee in gifted children with learning disabilities as well as those who simply have notable asynchronous development since they tend to evaluate themselves based more on what they cannot do rather than on what they are able to do. Sharing formal ability and achievement test results with gifted children about their particular abilities, combined with reassurance, can often help them develop a more appropriate sense of self-evaluation.

Sleep Disorders and Giftedness. Nightmare Disorder, Sleep Terror Disorder, and Sleepwalking Disorder appear to be more prevalent among gifted children, particularly boys. It is unclear whether this should be considered a mis-diagnosis or a dual diagnosis. Certainly, parents commonly report that their gifted children have dreams that are more vivid, intense, and more often in color, and that a substantial proportion of gifted boys are more prone to sleepwalking and bed wetting, apparently related to their dreams and to being more soundly (i.e., intensely) asleep. Such concordance would suggest that giftedness may need to be considered as a dual diagnosis in these cases, or at least a factor worthy of consideration since the child’s intellect and sense of understanding often can be used to help the child cope with nightmares.

A little known observation concerning sleep in gifted individuals is that about twenty percent of gifted children seem to need significantly less sleep than other children, while another twenty percent appear to need significantly more sleep than other children. Parents report that these sleep patterns show themselves very early in the child’s life, and long-term follow up suggests that the pattern continues into adulthood (Webb & Kleine, 1993; Winner, 2000). Some highly gifted adults appear to average comfortably as few as two or three hours sleep each night, and they have indicated to me that even in childhood they needed only four or five hours sleep.

Multiple Personality Disorders and Giftedness. Though there is little formal study of giftedness factors within MPD, there is anecdotal evidence that the two are related. The conclusion of professionals at the Menninger Foundation was that most MPD patients showed a history of childhood abuse, but also high intellectual abilities which allowed them to create and maintain their elaborate separate personalities (W. H. Smith personal communication, April 18, 1996).

Relational Problems and Giftedness. As one mother told me, “Having a gifted child in the family did not change our family’s lifestyle; it simply destroyed it!” These children can be both exhilarating and exhausting. But because parents often lack information about characteristics of gifted children, the relationship between parent and child can suffer. The child’s behaviors
are seen as mischievous, impertinent, weird, or strong-willed, and the child often is criticized or punished for behaviors that really represent curiosity, intensity, sensitivity, or the lag of judgment behind intellect. Thus, intense power struggles, arguments, temper tantrums, sibling rivalry, withdrawal, underachievement, and open flaunting of family and societal traditions may occur within the family.

"Impaired communication" and "inadequate discipline" are specifically listed in the DSM-IV (1994) as areas of concern to be considered in a diagnosis of Parent-Child Relational Problems, and a diagnosis of Sibling Relational Problem is associated with significant impairment of functioning within the family or in one or more siblings. Not surprisingly, these are frequent concerns for parents of gifted children due to the intensity, impatience, asynchronous development, and lag of judgment behind intellect of gifted children.

Health care professionals could benefit from increased knowledge concerning the effects of a gifted child's behaviors within a family, and thus often avoid mistaken notions about the causes of the problems. The characteristics inherent within gifted children have implications for diagnosis and treatment which could include therapy for the whole family, not in the sense of “treatment,” but to develop coping mechanisms for dealing with the intensity, sensitivity, and the situations which otherwise may cause them problems later (Jacobsen, 1999).

Conclusion

Many of our brightest and most creative minds are not only going unrecognized, but they also are often given diagnoses that indicate pathology. For decades, psychologists and other health care professionals have given great emphasis to the functioning of persons in the lower range of the intellectual spectrum. It is time that we trained health care professionals to give similar attention to our most gifted, talented, and creative children and adults. At the very least, it is imperative that these professionals gain sufficient understanding so that they no longer conclude that certain inherent characteristics of giftedness represent pathology.

References


Existential depression is a depression that arises when an individual confronts certain basic issues of existence. Yalom (1980) describes four such issues (or “ultimate concerns”)—death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Death is an inevitable occurrence. Freedom, in an existential sense, refers to the absence of external structure. That is, humans do not enter a world which is inherently structured. We must give the world a structure which we ourselves create. Isolation recognizes that no matter how close we become to another person, a gap always remains, and we are nonetheless alone. Meaninglessness stems from the first three. If we must die, if we construct our own world, and if each of us is ultimately alone, then what meaning does life have?

Why should such existential concerns occur disproportionately among gifted persons? Partially, it is because substantial thought and reflection must occur to even consider such notions, rather than simply focusing on superficial day-to-day aspects of life. Other more specific characteristics of gifted children are important predisposers as well.

Because gifted children are able to consider the possibilities of how things might be, they tend to be idealists. However, they are simultaneously able to see that the world is falling short of how it might be. Because they are intense, gifted children feel keenly the disappointment and frustration which occurs when ideals are not reached. Similarly, these youngsters quickly spot the inconsistencies, arbitrariness and absurdities in society and in the behaviors of those around them. Traditions are questioned or challenged. For example, why do we put such tight sex-role or age-role restrictions on people? Why do people engage in hypocritical behaviors in which they say one thing and then do another? Why do people say things they really do not mean at all? Why are so many people so unthinking and uncaring in their dealings with others? How much difference in the world can one person’s life make?

When gifted children try to share these concerns with others, they are usually met with reactions ranging from puzzlement to hostility. They discover that others, particularly of their age, clearly do not share these concerns, but instead are focused on more concrete issues and on fitting in with others’ expectations. Often by even first grade, these youngsters, particularly the more highly gifted ones, feel isolated from their peers and perhaps from their families as they find that others are not prepared to discuss such weighty concerns.

When their intensity is combined with multi-potentiality, these youngsters become particularly frustrated with the existential limitations of space and time. There simply aren’t enough hours in the day to develop all of the talents that many of these children have. Making choices among the possibilities is indeed arbitrary; there is no “ultimately right” choice. Even choosing a vocation can be difficult if one is trying to make a career decision between essentially equal passion, talents and potential in violin, neurology, theoretical mathematics and international relations.

The reaction of gifted youngsters (again with intensity) to these frustrations is often one of anger. But they quickly discover that their anger is futile, for it is really directed at “fate” or at other matters which they are not able to control. Anger that is powerless evolves quickly into depression.

In such depression, gifted children typically try to find some sense of meaning, some anchor point which they can grasp to pull themselves out of the mire of “unfairness.” Often, though, the more they try to pull themselves out, the more they become acutely aware that their life is finite and brief, that they are alone and are only one very small organism in a quite large world, and that there is a frightening freedom regarding how one chooses to live one’s life. It is at this point that they question life’s meaning and ask, “Is this all there is to life? Is there not ultimate meaning? Does life only have meaning if I give it meaning? I
am a small, insignificant organism who is alone in an absurd, arbitrary and capricious world where my life can have little impact, and then I die. Is this all there is?”

Such concerns are not too surprising in thoughtful adults who are going through mid-life crises. However, it is a matter of great concern when these existential questions are foremost in the mind of a twelve or fifteen year old. Such existential depressions deserve careful attention, since they can be precursors to suicide.

How can we help our bright youngsters cope with these questions? We cannot do much about the finiteness of our existence. However, we can help youngsters learn to feel that they are understood and not so alone and that there are ways to manage their freedom and their sense of isolation.

The isolation is helped to a degree by simply communicating to the youngster that someone else understands the issues that he/she is grappling with. Even though your experience is not exactly the same as mine, I feel far less alone if I know that you have had experiences that are reasonably similar. This is why relationships are so extremely important in the long-term adjustment of gifted children (Webb, Meckstroth and Tolan, 1982).

A particular way of breaking through the sense of isolation is through touch. In the same way that infants need to be held and touched, so do persons who are experiencing existential aloneness. Touch seems to be a fundamental and instinctual aspect of existence, as evidenced by mother-infant bonding or “failure to thrive” syndrome. Often, I have “prescribed” daily hugs for a youngster suffering existential depression and have advised parents of reluctant teenagers to say, “I know that you may not want a hug, but I need a hug.” A hug, a touch on the arm, playful jostling, or even a “high five” can be very important to such a youngster, because it establishes at least some physical connection.

The issues and choices involved in managing one’s freedom are more intellectual, as opposed to the reassuring aspects of touch as a sensory solution to an emotional crisis. Gifted children who feel overwhelmed by the myriad choices of an unstructured world can find a great deal of comfort in studying and exploring alternate ways in which other people have structured their lives. Through reading about people who have chosen specific paths to greatness and fulfillment, these youngsters can begin to use bibliotherapy as a method of understanding that choices are merely forks in the road of life, each of which can lead them to their own sense of fulfillment and accomplishment (Halsted, 1994). We all need to build our own personal philosophy of beliefs and values which will form meaningful frameworks for our lives.

It is such existential issues that lead many of our gifted individuals to bury themselves so intensively in “causes” (whether these causes are academics, political or social causes, or cults). Unfortunately, these existential issues can also prompt periods of depression, often mixed with desperate, thrashing attempts to “belong.” Helping these individuals to recognize the basic existential issues may help, but only if done in a kind and accepting way. In addition, these youngsters will need to understand that existential issues are not ones that can be dealt with only once, but rather ones that will need frequent revisiting and reconsideration.

In essence, then, we can help many persons with existential depressions if we can get them to realize that they are not so alone and if we can encourage them to adopt the message of hope written by the African-American poet, Langston Hughes:

*Hold fast to dreams,*  
*For if dreams die,*  
*Life is a broken-winged bird*  
*That cannot fly.*

*Hold fast to dreams.*  
*For if dreams go,*  
*Life is a barren field*  
*Covered with snow.*

Langston Hughes
References
Overexcitability and the gifted
Sharon Lind
From The SENG Newsletter. 2001, 1(1) 3-6.

A small amount of definitive research and a great deal of naturalistic observation have led to the belief that intensity, sensitivity and overexcitability are primary characteristics of the highly gifted. These observations are supported by parents and teachers who notice distinct behavioral and constitutional differences between highly gifted children and their peers. The work of Kazimierz Dabrowski, (1902-1980), provides an excellent framework with which to understand these characteristics. Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, developed the Theory of Positive Disintegration as a response to the prevalent psychological theories of his time. He believed that conflict and inner suffering were necessary for advanced development- for movement towards a hierarchy of values based on altruism- for movement from “what is” to “what ought to be.” Dabrowski also observed that not all people move towards an advanced level of development but that innate ability/intelligence combined with overexcitability (OE) were predictive of potential for higher-level development. It is important to emphasize that not all gifted or highly gifted individuals have overexcitabilities. However we do find more people with OEs in the gifted population than in the average population.

OVEREXCITABILITIES

Overexcitabilities are inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. Found to a greater degree in creative and gifted individuals, overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity, and represent a real difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience. Dabrowski identified five areas of intensity-Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional. A person may possess one or more of these. “One who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner” (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7). Experiencing the world in this unique way carries with it great joys and sometimes great frustrations. The joys and positives of being overexcitable need to be celebrated. Any frustrations or negatives can be positively dealt with and used to help facilitate the child’s growth. The five OEs are described below. Each description is followed by several examples of strategies, which represent a fraction of the possible solutions to issues that may cause concern for overexcitable individuals or those who work and live with them. These should serve as a springboard for brainstorming additional strategies or interventions that will help improve the lives of overexcitable people.

PSYCHOMOTOR OVEREXCITABILITY
Psychomotor OE is a heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system. This Psychomotor intensity includes a “capacity for being active and energetic” (Piechowski, 1991, p. 287), love of movement for its own sake, surplus of energy demonstrated by rapid speech, zealous enthusiasm, intense physical activity, and a need for action (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). When feeling emotionally tense, individuals strong in Psychomotor OE may talk compulsively, act impulsively, misbehave and act out, display nervous habits, show intense drive (tending towards “workaholism”), compulsively organize, or become quite competitive. They derive great joy from their boundless physical and verbal enthusiasm and activity, but others may find them overwhelming. At home and at school, these children seem never to be still. They may talk constantly. Adults and peers want to tell them to sit down and be quiet! The Psychomotor OE child has the potential of being misdiagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

PSYCHOMOTOR STRATEGIES
• Allow time for physical or verbal activity, before, during, and after normal daily and school activities-these individuals love to “do” and need to “do.” Build activity and movement into their lives.
• Be sure the physical or verbal activities are acceptable and not distracting to those around them. This may take some work, but it can be a fun project and beneficial to all.
• Provide time for spontaneity and open-ended, freewheeling activities. These tend to favor the needs of a person high in Psychomotor OE.

SENSUAL OVEREXCITABILITY
Sensual OE is expressed as a heightened experience of sensual pleasure or displeasure emanating from sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Those with Sensual OE have a far more expansive experience from their sensual input than the average person. They have an increased and early appreciation of aesthetic
pleasures such as music, language, and art, and derive endless delight from tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and sights. But because of this increased sensitivity, they may also feel over stimulated or uncomfortable with sensory input. When emotionally tense, some individuals high in Sensual OE may overeat, go on buying sprees, or seek the physical sensation of being the center of attraction (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Others may withdraw from stimulation. Sensually overexcitable children may find clothing tags, classroom noise, or smells from the cafeteria so distracting that schoolwork becomes secondary. These children may also become so absorbed in their love of a particular piece of art or music that the outside world ceases to exist.

SENSUAL Strategies

- Whenever possible, create an environment which limits offensive stimuli and provides comfort.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for being in the limelight by giving unexpected attention, or facilitating creative and dramatic productions that have an audience. These individuals literally feel the recognition that comes from being in the limelight.
- Provide time to dwell in the delight of the sensual and to create a soothing environment.

INTELLECTUAL OVEREXCITABILITY

Intellectual OE is demonstrated by a marked need to seek understanding and truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze and synthesize (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Those high in Intellectual OE have incredibly active minds. They are intensely curious, often avid readers, and usually keen observers. They are able to concentrate, engage in prolonged intellectual effort, and are tenacious in problem solving when they choose. Other characteristics may include relishing elaborate planning and having remarkably detailed visual recall. People with Intellectual OE frequently love theory, thinking about thinking, and moral thinking. This focus on moral thinking often translates into strong concerns about moral and ethical issues—fairness on the playground, lack of respect for children, or being concerned about “adult” issues such as the homeless, AIDS, or war. Intellectually overexcitable people are also quite independent of thought and sometimes appear critical of and impatient with others who cannot sustain their intellectual pace. Or they may become so excited about an idea that they interrupt at inappropriate times.

INTELLECTUAL Strategies

- Show how to find the answers to questions. This respects and encourages a person’s passion to analyze, synthesize, and seek understanding.
- Provide or suggest ways for those interested in moral and ethical issues to act upon their concerns—such as collecting blankets for the homeless or writing to soldiers in Kosovo. This enables them to feel that they can help, even in a small way, to solve community or worldwide problems.
- If individuals seem critical or too outspoken to others, help them to see how their intent may be perceived as cruel or disrespectful. For example saying “that is a stupid idea” may not be well received, even if the idea is truly stupid.

IMAGINATIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY

Imaginational OE reflects a heightened play of the imagination with rich association of images and impressions, frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Often children high in Imaginational OE mix truth with fiction, or create their own private worlds with imaginary companions and dramatizations to escape boredom. They find it difficult to stay tuned into a classroom where creativity and imagination are secondary to learning rigid academic curriculum. They may write stories or draw instead of doing seatwork or participating in class discussions, or they may have difficulty completing tasks when some incredible idea sends them off on an imaginative tangent.

IMAGINATIONAL Strategies

- Imaginational people may confuse reality and fiction because their memories and new ideas become blended in their mind. Help individuals to differentiate between their imagination and the real world by having them place a stop sign in their mental videotape, or write down or draw the factual account before they embellish it.
- Help people use their imagination to function in the real world and promote learning and productivity. For example, instead of the conventional school organized notebook, have children create their own organizational system.
EMOTIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY

Emotional OE is often the first to be noticed by parents. It is reflected in heightened, intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others’ feelings, and strong affective expression (Piechowski, 1991). Other manifestations include physical responses like stomachaches and blushing or concern with death and depression (Piechowski, 1979). Emotionally overexcitable people have a remarkable capacity for deep relationships; they show strong emotional attachments to people, places, and things (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). They have compassion, empathy, and sensitivity in relationships. Those with strong Emotional OE are acutely aware of their own feelings, of how they are growing and changing, and often carry on inner dialogs and practice self-judgment (Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Children high in Emotional OE, are often accused of “overreacting.” Their compassion and concern for others, their focus on relationships, and the intensity of their feelings may interfere with everyday tasks like homework or doing the dishes.

EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES

- Accept all feelings, regardless of intensity. For people who are not highly emotional, this seems particularly odd. They feel that those high in Emotional OE are just being melodramatic. But if we accept their emotional intensity and help them work through any problems that might result, we will facilitate healthy growth.
- Teach individuals to anticipate physical and emotional responses and prepare for them. Emotionally intense people often don’t know when they are becoming so overwrought that they may lose control or may have physical responses to their emotions. Help them to identify the physical warning signs of their emotional stress such as headache, sweaty palms, and stomachache. By knowing the warning signs and acting on them early, individuals will be better able to cope with emotional situations and not lose control.

GENERAL STRATEGIES

It is often quite difficult and demanding to work and live with overexcitable individuals. Those who are not so, find the behaviors unexplainable, frequently incomprehensible, and often bizarre. Overexcitable people living with other overexcitable people often have more compassion and understanding for each other, but may feel conflicts when their OEs are not to the same degree. Finding strategies for helping children and adults deal with and take advantage of these innate and enduring characteristics may seem difficult. However, resources may be gathered from varied places: Literature regarding counseling, learning styles, special education, and classroom management; parenting books; even popular business texts. Perhaps the best place to begin is with the following general strategies, applicable regardless of which OEs are present.

DISCUSS THE CONCEPT OF OVEREXCITABILITY

Share the descriptions of OEs with the family, class, or counseling group. Ask individuals if they see themselves with some of the characteristics. Point out that this article and many others like it indicates that being overexcitable is OK and it is understood and accepted.

FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES

Jointly discuss the positives of each overexcitability when you first introduce the concept, and continue to point out these merits. Benefits include being energetic, enthusiastic, sensual, aesthetic, curious, loyal, tenacious, moral, metacognitive, integrative, creative, metaphorical, dramatic, poetic, compassionate, empathetic, and self-aware.

CHERISH AND CELEBRATE DIVERSITY

One outcome of the pursuit of educational and societal equity has been a diminishing of the celebration of diversity and individual differences. Highly gifted individuals, because of their uniqueness, can fall prey to the public and personal belief that they are not OK. It is vital when discussing OEs that individuals realize that overexcitability is just one more description of who they are, as is being tall, or Asian, or left-handed. Since OEs are inborn traits, they cannot be unlearned! It is therefore exceedingly important that we accept our overexcitable selves, children, and friends. This acceptance provides validation and helps to free people from feelings of “weirdness” and isolation.

Another way to show acceptance is to provide opportunities for people to pursue their passions. This shows respect for their abilities and intensities and allows time for them to “wallow” in what they love, to be validated for who they are. Removing passions as consequences for inappropriate behavior has a negative effect by giving the message that your passions, the essence of who you are, are not valuable or worthy of respect.
USE AND TEACH CLEAR VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS
All people deserve respect and need to be listened to and responded to with grace. Overexcitable people need this understanding and patience to a greater degree because they are experiencing the world with greater intensity and need to be able to share their intensity and feelings of differentness to thrive. It is vital to learn good communication skills and to teach them to children. Good communication skills are useful on multiple levels, from improving the chances of getting what you want, to nurturing and facilitating growth in others. Regardless of one's motivation for learning these skills, the outcomes will include less stress, greater self-acceptance, greater understanding from and about others, and less daily friction at home, school, work, or in the grocery store.

When learning communication skills be sure to include both verbal-listening, responding, questioning, telephoning, problem solving (Faber and Mazlish, 1980), and nonverbal-rhythm and use of time, interpersonal distance and touch, gestures and postures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and style of dress (Nowicki, 1992). Verbal and nonverbal strategies improve interpersonal communication and provide the skills individuals need to fit in when they wish to, to change the system if necessary, and to treat others with caring and respect.

TEACH STRESS MANAGEMENT FROM TODDLERHOOD ON
Everyone deals with stress on a daily basis. But overexcitable individuals have increased stress reactions because of their increased reception of and reaction to external input. There are many programs and books about stress reduction. The key components are to (1) learn to identify your stress symptoms: headache, backache, pencil tapping, pacing, etc. (2) develop strategies for coping with stress: talk about your feelings, do relaxation exercises, change your diet, exercise, meditate, ask for help, develop organizational and time management skills and (3) develop strategies to prevent stress: make time for fun; develop a cadre of people to help, advise, humor you; practice tolerance of your own and others’ imperfections.

CREATE A COMFORTING ENVIRONMENT WHENEVER POSSIBLE
Intense people need to know how to make their environment more comfortable in order to create places for retreat or safety. For example: find places to work or think which are not distracting, work in a quiet or calm environment, listen to music, look at a lovely picture, carry a comforting item, move while working, or wear clothing which does not scratch or cling. Learning to finesse one’s environment to meet one’s needs takes experimentation and cooperation from others, but the outcome will be a greater sense of well being and improved productivity.

HELP TO RAISE AWARENESS OF ONE'S BEHAVIORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON OTHERS
Paradoxically, overexcitable people are often insensitive and unaware of how their behaviors affect others. They may assume that everyone will just understand why they interrupt to share an important idea, or tune out when creating a short story in their head during dinner. It is vital to teach children and adults to be responsible for their behaviors, to become more aware of how their behaviors affect others, and to understand that their needs are not more important than those of others. The key is to realize that you can show children and adults how they are perceived, you can teach them strategies to fit in, but they must choose to change.

REMEMBER THE JOY
Often when overexcitability is discussed examples and concerns are mostly negative. Remember that being overexcitable also brings with it great joy, astonishment, beauty, compassion, and creativity. Perhaps the most important thing is to acknowledge and relish the uniqueness of an overexcitable child or adult.

References
As a licensed clinical psychologist specializing in giftedness, I read my colleague Jim Webb’s paper with much interest. I, too, am concerned about the too frequent mis-diagnosis and over-diagnosis of gifted and talented youth.

In addition to the clinical syndromes outlined by Dr. Webb, Asperger’s Disorder is another that is becoming commonly mis-diagnosed in gifted youth. Although there can be similarities between a gifted child and a child with Asperger’s Disorder, there are very clear differences. Thorough evaluation is necessary to distinguish gifted children’s sometimes unusual and sometimes unique social interactions from Asperger’s Disorder. In the same way, thorough evaluation is also necessary to distinguish Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) from behavioral problems and inattention that result from other causes such as anxiety, traumatic experiences (e.g., abuse), inappropriate curriculum, or even poor parenting.

A “qualitative impairment” in social interaction is one of the two main characteristics of Asperger’s Disorder. Although the DSM-IV gives fairly explicit criteria for this type of social impairment, which does sometimes appear in gifted kids, the highly gifted child’s atypical social interactions or unusual modes of commenting and joking may often be misinterpreted as being characteristics of Asperger’s Disorder. However, a closer look at the criteria shows differences between Asperger’s Disorder and behaviors associated with gifted children. For example, a lack of social or emotional reciprocity is characteristic of Asperger’s Disorder while gifted children most often show a tremendous concern for others. They may not always know how to express it appropriately, but the concern is there.

The second major DSM-IV diagnostic component of Asperger’s Disorder includes restricted interests characterized by an “encompassing preoccupation with one or more...interest(s) that is abnormal either in intensity or focus.” Professionals knowledgeable about Asperger’s Disorder describe an intense fascination with a special interest that can come and go, but which will dominate the child’s free time and conversation. Children with Asperger’s Disorder may also show an uneven profile of abilities with remarkable long-term memory, exceptional concentration when engaged in their special interest, and an original method of problem solving. In contrast, they may also show motor clumsiness, and a lack of motivation and attention for activities that would engage age-peers. Social withdrawal, teasing by peers, and difficulties relating to others in an age-appropriate manner are other markers for Asperger’s Disorder.

All of the above characteristics are also commonly seen in gifted children and can easily be mistaken as Asperger’s Disorder by someone not familiar with the asynchronous development and special needs of gifted youth. The unusual behaviors of many gifted children do strike many who are not familiar with gifted characteristics as a “qualitative impairment” in social interactions. Although the gifted child’s interactions may technically show a “qualitative impairment,” it is certainly of a different nature and likely has different causes (e.g., thoughts or worries by a gifted child about interacting).

Someone knowledgeable about giftedness could see these differences more readily than those who are not familiar. What I frequently see in practice is that when gifted youth are given the opportunity to interact with true “intellectual peers” in a particular area, their interactions are not only unimpaired, but also are often typical. In a child with Asperger’s Disorder, one is not likely to see reciprocal interaction or discussion about a topic even if both children have an interest in the same topic. This is in marked contrast to gifted youngsters who will engage in extremely intense and also reciprocal conversations if both of them share the interest in, say, Pokemon or Harry Potter.

Differential diagnosing is an essential part of our work as health professionals, and it is easy to see how mis-diagnoses can be made. If professionals are unaware how characteristics of gifted children may appear similar to clinical syndromes, differentiation of diagnosis and treatment cannot occur, and many gifted children will continue to be mis-labeled and wrongly stigmatized. As a result, proper intervention cannot be implemented. For example, instruction for a bright but inattentive and disinterested student who is not being challenged in the classroom is very different from treatment or classroom approaches needed for an inattentive child with ADHD. Likewise, children with Asperger’s Disorder often require much more intensive treatment and different classroom management, while a gifted child may benefit from interventions as simple as the opportunity to interact with appropriate peers.

I encourage your organization to help educate health professionals about the characteristics and social/emotional needs of gifted youth.

Sincerely,
Edward R. Amend, Psy.D.
Competing with myths about the social and emotional development of gifted students

Tracy L. Cross


As a person who has dedicated himself to the study of the psychological and experiential lives of gifted students, I have encountered widely held myths and associated practices that have negative effects on the social and emotional development of gifted students. These myths are common among parents, teachers, administrators, and gifted students. As a wise person (Lao Tsu) once said, “Nothing is more difficult than competing with a myth.” Doing so, however, can create tremendous opportunities for people. Recall that it was not that long ago that myth prevented women from competing in long distance foot races. The following list includes some of the most common and insidious examples of myths pertaining to the social development of gifted students. I hope that by discussing these examples, gifted students will be better served and barriers to their well-beings will be broken.

Myth 1. Gifted students should be with students their own age. The worry expressed here is that something inappropriate or untoward will occur if different age groups spend time together. Parents, teachers, and administrators worry that groups of multi-age children will struggle with exploitation, intimidation, inappropriate modeling, and sexuality. This prevailing myth undergirds some advocates’ preferences for educational models that emphasize enrichment rather than acceleration. The logic is as follows: “We should keep the students together even if they have already mastered the material.” Some believers of this myth will claim that research supports this point, but in fact they are mistaken. Writers have published this sentiment, but research does not support this idea. In fact, in my research with Larry Coleman, it is clear that gifted students need opportunities to be together with their intellectual peers, no matter what their age differences (Coleman & Cross, 2001). While there are plenty of appropriate reasons to provide enriching educational experiences, these decisions should not be made out of fear, worry or myth; they should be based on the needs of the students.

Myth 2. Gifted students are better off if they spend their entire school day amidst same-age, heterogeneous classmates. The claim is that if we allow gifted students to be clustered together through one of any means available, they will be unable to get along with others later in life, and this experience will cause emotional distress. Middle school principals and some middle school teachers regularly expressed these feelings. This concern includes the belief on the parts of the adults that gifted students, to be happy, must become socially astute. Becoming socially astute requires that gifted students spend as much time as possible in heterogeneous classroom environments. Once again, the claimed research that supports this myth is virtually nonexistent. Imagine all the opportunities students have to interact with other people. Church, sports, dubs, meals, camps, are just a few examples. Sacrificing learning and creating frustration based on this myth is unethical, in my opinion. This problem increases as the students develop and their knowledge base increases within a specific discipline.

Myth 3. Being perfectly well rounded should be the primary goal for gifted student development. Please note the carefully chosen phrase, “perfectly well rounded,” as opposed to “somewhat well-rounded.” Many parents, teachers, and administrators believe that it is their role to ensure that gifted students are perfectly well-rounded. To that end, they will encourage, prod, goad, push, threaten, and yell at gifted students to get them to spend less time engaged in their passion areas, so they can engage in something the adult wishes them to do. A very common example is that of an introverted gifted student who has great facility with computers. Adults will drag the child away from her passion to get her to participate in something she may loathe. While adults in each of these roles should be concerned with the well-being of gifted students, requiring them to engage in activities for which the gifted student has no interest (e.g., going outside and playing, or spending time with other children you do not choose to play with during the school day) as a means to make them happy later in life is misguided. Much of the research on successful gifted adults has revealed that they spent considerable amounts of time, often alone, in their passion areas as children. A more reasonable approach is to encourage and nurture other interests in the child rather than sending them the message that they are unacceptable as they are. For example, sending gifted children to a residential summer program can do wonders to broaden interests within a community where they feel emotionally safe and accepted for who they are.

Myth 4. Being gifted is something with which you are just born. A corollary to this is that things come easily when you are gifted or being gifted means never having to study or to try hard in school. This naive notion of giftedness, while intuitively proper, can be debilitating to gifted students’ development. Many teachers, parents, administrators, and gifted students hold this belief. It is not informed, however, by research on talent development and development in general. Moving from an entity notion of giftedness to an incremental notion, wherein talent is developed with hard work and some failure, is a much healthier and more nurturing experience of being a gifted student (Dweck, 1986). This change in understanding of giftedness is of particular importance before age 10 or so. That is because a school’s curriculum tends to get more focused as it moves toward middle
school. Many gifted students experience this change as personal failure, causing self-doubt and distress, because they have internalized intellectual struggle as failure. To change this belief merely requires teaching gifted students about the two definitions, exposing them to models who failed in the process of great accomplishment (e.g., Thomas Edison) and having them go through processes that include struggle as part of growth.

Myth 5. Virtually everybody in the field of gifted education is an expert on the social and emotional development of gifted students. An extension of this is that every adult (parent, teacher, school administrator) is an expert on the social and emotional development of gifted students. The field of gifted studies is quite small, often yielding professionals in the field who are called on to be experts in numerous areas. This regularly plays out with a high percentage claiming expertise and being called on to provide wisdom on this topic. Another reason for this situation is the fact that we were all students once ourselves and that, supposedly, makes us familiar with gifted students’ lives. This is similar to my having played football as a youngster and now claiming expertise equivalent to that of Peyton Manning. Many factors combine to create situations where competing advice—sometimes by people who mean well, but do not know the research on the social and emotional development of gifted students—is given. As the field of gifted studies grows and matures, I think that children would be better served by having the expertise of those who specialize, rather than relying on a model that requires its experts to know a little about everything associated with the field.

Myth 6. Adults (parents, teachers, and administrators) know what gifted students experience. This plays out on issues such as being around bullies and drugs, sexuality, and social pressures. In addition to the usual generational differences, in many ways, contemporary experiences are different from the experiences of previous generations. For example, many gifted students go to school fearful of schools as unsafe environments. Gifted students of today are often surrounded by guns, and when not, still perceive that they are. In short, the vague red menace of previous generations has been replaced by generalized anxiety and fear; fear that the media has exacerbated and kept alive in ways that are inescapable by today’s youth. The hubris of adults to believe that they know what gifted students experience on a daily basis is mind-boggling. Consider these two facts: the suicide rate of adolescents rose more than 240% between 1955 and 1990, and suicide is the second leading cause of death of this age group (Holinger, Offer, Barter & Bell, 1994). Is it possible that our children live in a somewhat different context than adults did at the same age? If parents can observe classrooms more often, talk with their gifted children, asking for descriptions of their experiences, then a much richer understanding is possible.

Myth 7. Being too smart in school is a problem, especially for girls. This myth has many facets to it. It represents adults’ worries about their own feelings of acceptance; concerns about fears associated with standing out; the typical antiintellectual culture of schools; the reflection of society’s under evaluation of high levels of achievement; and the often mentioned, intuitively based association of high levels of intellectual ability with low levels of morality. The obvious consequence of this myth is the nurturing of incredibly high percentages of our students who underachieve in school. A large proportion of American students with gifts and talents have developed social coping strategies that use up time, energy, limit their opportunities, cause bad decisions to be made, retard their learning, and threaten their lives. These behaviors and beliefs about self make perfect sense when one perceives the mixed messages about being gifted in their school’s social milieu. We must provide support for these children as they navigate the anti-intellectual contexts in which they spend much of their time.

Myth 8. All kids are gifted, and no kids are gifted. This myth is most often expressed by administrators and occasionally by teachers. The reasons for these two beliefs are predictable given the developmental differences that manifest across the grade levels. For example, while in the elementary grades, which are thought to have a more amorphous curriculum than the later grades, teachers typically perceive manifestations of potential for extraordinary work as indicators of giftedness. As the child moves toward high school where the curriculum tends to be quite focused, with distinct disciplines being taught by teachers passionate about the subject areas they teach (we hope), giftedness is often determined as meaningful only as a manifestation of success within the specific courses. Middle school represents some of both of these operative definitions of giftedness. Another important aspect to this belief is the primary motivator that led teachers and administrators to pursue their profession. For example, when you ask elementary teacher candidates what they want to do most, they will tell you that they want to teach young children. Secondary teachers tend to say that they want to teach math, English, and so forth. Middle school teachers often hold very strong views about the specific age group of students they have chosen to work with. These teachers and administrators often describe the primary school-based needs of middle school students in terms of social needs and their need to learn in a protective environment that emphasizes the students’ developmental frailties. A rigorous educational curriculum is seldom the highest priority.

Another undercurrent to these positions is that being gifted is tied to the assumption that gifted children are better than other students. This is a very unfortunate connection, because it encourages adults to hold the position that all kids are gifted or no kids are gifted. James Gallagher, a wise man in the field of gifted education, once said “When someone claims that all kids are
gifted, merely ask them 'In what?'” Being gifted eventually has to be in something. While all kids are great, terrific, valuable, and depending on your beliefs perhaps even a gift from God, they are not all gifted in the way the term is used in the field. Giftedness is not an anointment of value. A person who shows extraordinary ability for high levels of performance when young and, if provided appropriate opportunities, demonstrates a development of talent that exceeds normal levels of performance, is gifted.

I hope that providing a list of some of the pervasive and insidious myths that affect the lives of gifted students will inspire us to take action on behalf of the students. If we challenge these myths with examples of good research, provide appropriate counseling and create learning environments where students with gifts and talents can thrive, then many of these myths can be eliminated. Let us work to help all students have an appropriate education, including gifted students.

References

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Driving home from last week’s Hollingworth Conference on the Highly Gifted, I heard a radio interview with Thomas Moore, author of Care of the Soul. He spoke of the loss of empathy in our lives. His words echoed those spoken only hours earlier by Dr. Thom Buescher, an expert on gifted adolescents. We were discussing the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. I mentioned that I was about to write an article about gifted kids at risk. “What factors do you think were involved in this horrible incident?” I asked.

“The lack of intimacy and rejection,” he replied.

Now, I sit here surrounded by newspaper and magazine clippings all offering opinions about the “whys” of Littleton and other locations where bright kids have murdered or committed suicide. Suggestions on how to avoid similar incidents: gun control, metal detectors, peer mediation, conflict resolution, changing media messages, controlling video games and access to the Internet, parent involvement, religion, and more counselors in our schools... they are all here. Yet no one discusses an important component in understanding what is happening to some bright kids – their being “gifted” and at risk for emotional difficulties.

E-mails and discussions with colleagues around the country confirm what Thomas Moore and Thom Buescher so eloquently stated. Loss of empathy, lack of intimacy, and rejection are daily experiences for some gifted children and adolescents. As “Geek Profiling” sweeps the country, we must speak out to dispel the myths that surround what it means to be “gifted and talented.” We must make a concerted effort to educate our society so that awareness, acceptance, and action will result. It is time to ask others listen to us. It is time to say clearly: bright kids are not better, yet they are different; and because they are, they face different issues.

Consider these two prevailing and paradoxical myths about gifted children and adolescents.

Myth 1: They do not have problems; somehow they can handle difficulties on their own.
Myth 2: Some of their characteristics are perceived as pathological.

To dispel such misconceptions, we must better understand the gifted: their intellectual and personality characteristics, the manifestations of high ability, and the specific problems and issues they face.

Silverman (1993) presents lists of the interrelated intellectual and personality characteristics of giftedness that may be found across all talent domains:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Intellectual Characteristics</th>
<th>Personality Characteristics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exceptional reasoning ability</td>
<td>Insightfulness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual curiosity</td>
<td>Need to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rapid learning rate</td>
<td>Need for mental stimulation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facility with abstraction</td>
<td>Perfectionism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complex thought processes</td>
<td>Need for precision/logic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivid imagination</td>
<td>Excellent sense of humor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early moral concern</td>
<td>Sensitivity/empathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion for learning</td>
<td>Intensity</td>
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Giftedness impacts a child’s psychological growth and well-being through the relationship among these characteristics, the type of giftedness manifested, the degree of giftedness (above average to profound), and how well the needs of the child are being met. A child or adolescent may demonstrate general high ability or it may be in a certain domain such as mathematics, verbal, spatial, interpersonal, music, or kinesthetic. In addition to these characteristics and areas of high abilities, it is important to know what attitudes, values, personality temperament, and life experiences a gifted student brings to school. The culture and values of the school and community will also impact whether a gifted child or adolescent feels invited to participate as a positive contributing member.

Research consistently shows that many gifted children and adolescents have the capacity for intensified thinking and feeling, as well as vivid imaginations. Whether they are gifted athletes, artists, musicians, intellectuals, or are highly creative, they may have higher levels of emotional development due to greater awareness and intensity of feeling. “Being different” in ability and
personality characteristics may lead to higher expectations, jealousy, and resentment by adults and peers. Specific problems that may result can be external or internal:

- Difficulty with social relationships
- Refusal to do routine, repetitive assignments
- Inappropriate criticism of others
- Lack of awareness of impact on others
- Lack of sufficient challenge in schoolwork
- Depression (often manifested in boredom)
- High levels of anxiety
- Difficulty accepting criticism
- Hiding talents to fit with peers
- Nonconformity and resistance to authority
- Excessive competitiveness
- Isolation from peers
- Low frustration tolerance
- Poor study habits
- Difficulty in selecting among a diversity of interests (Silverman, 1987)

For some gifted adolescents, acceptance by their peer group is the major source of stress in their lives. Repeatedly they hear the message “It’s okay to be smart, but it’s better if you are something else we can accept as well.”

So what happens when a gifted adolescent is “just smart” and is trying to survive in a perceived anti-intellectual environment? Options may include: conformity (working hard to be “average” or “normal”), withdrawal (isolation or alienation), depression (blaming themselves), aggressiveness (blaming others), or continued nonconformity. Higham and Buescher (1987, p. 29) call this the “cultivated weirdness act” whereby a gifted adolescent makes individual statements which say, “Okay, I’m different — just let me show you HOW DIFFERENT I can be.”

For some gifted adolescents, seeking special environments, positive or negative, where they can be accepted and excel helps them to deal with the lack of empathy, loss of intimacy and rejection. This may intensify their own lack of tolerance for others, and they may choose overt anti-social and/or suicidal behaviors. Add to that easy access to guns, an everyday stream of acceptable violent messages in the media and video games, inappropriate educational opportunities, lack of parental awareness or supervision, role conflicts, community apathy or stagnation, and possible mental illness, and should we be surprised that horrible, tragic incidents occur?

Repeatedly, we see factors for children and adolescents who are at risk for emotional difficulties stated in the press. Dirkes (1983) provided symptoms of undesirable levels of anxiety in gifted children, including:

- decreased performance
- expressed desire to be like teen-agers
- reluctance to work in a team
- expressions of low self-concept
- excessive sadness or rebellion
- reluctance to make choices or suggestions
- extremes of activity or inactivity
- a change in noise or quietude
- repetition of rules and directions to make sure that they can be followed
- avoidance of new ventures unless certain of the outcome
- other marked changes in personality

In addition, we find other danger signals for gifted children and adolescents that indicate they may be seriously depressed or suicidal

- self-imposed isolation from family
- self-imposed perfection as the ultimate standard, to the point that the only tasks enjoyed are the ones completed perfectly
- deep concern with personal powerlessness
- narcissism — total preoccupation with self and with fantasy
- unusual fascination with violence
- eating disorders
- chemical abuse
- rigidly compulsive behaviors (Schmitz & Galbraith, 1985)
I worry that educators, parents, and counselors may not be able to detect the stress burdening gifted children and adolescents. Some gifted children and adolescents cover up their symptoms of sadness and depression in order to fit in. Still others fear admitting to distress, because they may be perceived as less than perfect and not in control of their lives. I hear too many straight A gifted students, who are a “pleasure to have in class,” speak of their anguish because of peer and adult rejection. The intensity of their pain and anger is hard to imagine.

What actions can we, the lawmakers, parents, educators, and counselors, take to help gifted kids at risk?

- **Become more aware of the characteristics, needs and issues of gifted children.** They need help in “being different.” The lack of empathy and rejection by others, including adults and peers, is commonplace for many of these children. According to Thom Buescher, “Lack of empathy and intimacy lead to poor coping skills, and those provide the momentum for intolerance... the precursor to violent acts.” Too many gifted children and adolescents suffer in silence, or seek negative ways to express their frustration and anger. Teasing and humiliation must be stopped. Empathy and intimacy are needed so that emotional sensitivity doesn’t become emotional disturbance.

- **All of us must advocate for appropriate services to address the lack of challenge and the issues so many gifted children and adolescents face.** Programming and services need to be implemented for specific extraordinary talents. In New York State, gifted children are the only special needs students who do not warrant appropriate educational services! The laws need to be changed-now.

- **Parents, develop an awareness of your gifted child’s characteristics.** Let them know that they are more than their achievement or academic ability. If you sense sadness, rejection, or anger, speak with your child. Find a counselor who has training and experience in working with gifted children and adolescents to help you.

- **Educators, reexamine your own attitudes and beliefs about gifted children and adolescents, especially those who are highly creative and may be comfortable in their nonconformity.** Resist the urge to “Geek Profile.” The messages I have read in the past two weeks from bright kids harassed because they look or think differently are frightening. Offer all staff members training on how to differentiate instruction for gifted students, including acceleration, enrichment, special programs, mentorships, as well as how to meet their social and emotional needs. All school personnel need to understand the differentiating characteristics of gifted individuals, related needs, and possible concomitant problems. Teachers need to open the lines of communication, and LISTEN, really listen to what bright kids are saying — about themselves, their values, their interests.

- **Counselors, get training on the intellectual, social, and emotional issues of gifted children and adolescents.** Become aware of how schools can be the most restrictive and stressful places for bright kids. Help gifted students develop appreciation for the similarities and differences between themselves and others, teach social skills if necessary, and show how to solve problems in creative and positive ways. Every school district should have at least one counselor who specializes in or has specific training about gifted students.

What happened in Littleton, Colorado is horrific. It is not known if mental illness was a factor in the lives of the adolescent boys who created such carnage. We do know, however, that they were bright young men who perceived rejection from the culture within their school, and chose violence as a coping strategy.

As parents, educators, and counselors we can foster intimacy, empathy, and acceptance for gifted children and adolescents. The choices are now ours to make.

Who is listening? Who will act?

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

Sally M. Reis
From The SENG Newsletter. 2002 2(3) 1-5.

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, 1983; 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 than 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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SUMMARY
Gifted adults (people with a very high intelligence; 2% of the population) sometimes are not able to function adequately at work. Their high intelligence can cause them to dysfunction when adapting to the work situation, sometimes leading to absenteeism and disability. Hardly any scientific research on this topic has been performed.

This article describes some characteristics of gifted people. The problems at work are explained using examples from the work floor. Based on certain characteristics and signals, occupational health physicians and insurance doctors are able to recognize giftedness and to bring the subject out into the open. The solution can lie in a change in the job requirements or working conditions; medical or psychotherapeutic treatment is then rendered unnecessary.

When their motivation is restored, people with very high intelligence are capable of high-quality work and of solving complex problems. Thus, a gifted employee who is not functioning as required becomes a valued worker providing a unique contribution at work.

INTRODUCTION
It is increasingly being realized that gifted individuals have the capacity to help solve complex problems. Many are functioning at a high level. But just like a number of gifted schoolchildren, some gifted employees do not function adequately and are unhappy as a result. Some become ill and even permanently occupationally disabled. What are the characteristics of the problems of the gifted at work. And what can occupational health physicians and insurance doctors do with this information?

To illustrate our point, we present two case studies.

CASE STUDY 1
Alice Wismeijer is a 38-year-old woman. She works as a researcher for a government service and has gained many qualifications through self-study in the evenings. She functions well in her work. However, a colleague has been bullying her for years. She tries to ignore this and hardly ever reports sick for work. One day, it all becomes too much for her. The occupational health physician diagnoses a burn-out. She becomes long-term sick. She goes in search of therapy, in the course of which much suffering during her youth is revealed. After a year, an occupational disability examination assesses that she is able to do work of a simple nature for 20 hours a week. Alice has the impression that she is very intelligent and knows that she will not be able to perform simple work for a lengthy period of time. However, she does not dare to voice her belief about this. During the surgery hours of the occupational health physician she bursts into terrible bouts of crying and the occupational health physician doesn’t know how to help her. The reintegra-
tion process fails.

CASE STUDY 2
Joost Bakker is a 42-year-old automation expert. He suffers from neck problems, as a result of which he regularly stays off work. The occupational health physician has a lengthy interview with him. Joost is rather anxious and very preoccupied with his health. Additionally, he appears to be quite lonely, has little contact with his colleagues. He functions adequately, his manager is happy with him. The occupational health physician suggests that Joost be examined by a psychologist specialized in work-related problems at the working conditions service. After completing a detailed anamnesis, the psychologist performs a number of tests. The results show that Joost scores very high in analytical thinking, amongst other areas. Joost tells the psychologist that he had been tested at high school but that his parents had refused to tell him the results of the tests. The tests and interview do not reveal any severe problems. The psychologist advises Joost to request information from Mensa*, a worldwide association for very intelligent people. He overcomes his initial resistance to the idea and follows the advice. Based on the results of the tests he had already undergone, he is accepted as a member. He acknowledges a lot of what is contained in the documentation that he receives. Within the association, he establishes several valuable contacts. A year later, the occupational health physician observes that Joost appears to be relaxed. He still suffers from neck problems, but he hardly ever reports sick. He has started studying again and is happy with the advice the psychologist gave him.
A generally accepted definition of “gifted” does not exist. According to the definition used by Mensa, this means having an IQ that lies in the uppermost 2%, scored on an approved IQ test. Depending on the kind of test, this is an IQ ranging between 140 and 150.

There are many kinds of intelligences. Gardner distinguishes eight: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily, naturalistic, emotional and intrapersonal. The two last-named intelligences are sometimes referred to by others as emotional intelligence. The most attention in the literature and in tests is paid to the first three mentioned intelligences.

The usual intelligence tests do not seem to predict work performance very accurately. How effectively someone will be able to solve problems in the real world is determined not only by intelligence, but also by the knowledge and skills that that individual has acquired. The environment (parents, school, etc) also plays a role in an individual’s development.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFTED

Although of course all gifted individuals are unique, they do share certain characteristics. Some of these are present naturally, others have come into existence gradually through interaction with the environment. Cause and effect can therefore not always be distinguished from each other.

**Speed of thinking.** Gifted individuals think more quickly than others. They make many mental switches, associate rapidly and give the impression that they jump from one subject to the next.

**High sensitivity.** A higher development potential often is accompanied by high sensitivity. This high sensitivity manifests itself in different areas: psychomotoric, sensorial, intellectual, imaginative, emotional, and can resemble ADHD.

Over-stimulation of the senses manifests itself auditivevly (machines, radios, smacking lips), visually (light sources) or sense of touch (certain fabrics, labels in clothing, or touching). Currently, there is a high level of interest being shown in high sensitivity in general.

**Introversion.** The internal world of the gifted is particularly well-developed. They are quickly and easily hurt, which is why they tend to keep people at a distance. Some avoid parties and suchlike since the topics of conversation do not interest them. This can resemble autism. Introversion can also arise through having the feeling of being rejected. People with high IQs would seem to have difficulty meeting like-minded people, which can quickly lead them to become isolated.

**Perfectionism.** Perfectionism is often accompanied by having too high expectations of others, but also with shame, guilt feelings and feelings of inferiority through not being able to meet their own high expectations. This leads to tension and occasionally ‘paralysis’.

**Learning style.** The learning style of the gifted is often exploratory. They have an extreme dislike of learning lists, they find it uninteresting and become bored. Of- ten, they do not understand the teacher’s questions or the questions in the text books, because they are looking for things that aren’t there. This leads to frustration. Some gifted adults lack basic knowledge but have a lot of knowledge in areas that they are interested in. They often fail to develop learning strategies because they never learn from their failures.

**Fear of failure and under-performing.** If their intelligence is not stimulated, children often develop bad working habits. They sometimes think that they are stupid, become afraid of failure and start under-performing. Their motivation to learn decreases. This can result later in frustrations and disappointments in their career.

**Emotional development.** Many gifted individuals feel emotions strongly. But because cognitive thinking dominates and provides safety, emotional development remains relatively underdeveloped. They have difficulty in linking feelings and reason. This can be reinforced when an individual has felt lonely from a young age. For example, when the environment does not acknowledge or recognize the child as being gifted. Fortunately, the emotional development of many gifted individuals has progressed well.

**Creativity.** The thought processes of the gifted differ from those of average intelligence; they are more global in nature and with a strong capacity for imagination. Average intelligent people can often not follow their train of thought. They can identify patterns quickly, so that they can, for example, predict trends successfully. They can often draw conclusions intuitively. This creativity is often frustrated by the regular education system.

**Independence.** The forming of judgments and opinions often takes place autonomously. They are non-conformist and therefore display what teachers easily label as ‘inappropriate behavior’. This independence accompanies the creativity mentioned above. They often have an aversion to non-democratic authority.

Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted

www.sengifted.org
THE GIFTED AND PROBLEMS AT WORK

Little research has been done concerning how being gifted manifests itself in the arena of work and how the gifted individual experiences this. One of the authors (FC) worked for a lengthy period as P&O advisor in an environment where many gifted employees worked. He discovered a surprising parallel between the gifted and artists. Both often find it difficult to develop their own talents unless certain strange conditions are met. Inspiration and motivation would appear to be more significant factors than knowledge and ability.15

In addition, we have collected career histories of Mensa members, amongst others, and from our own practice. Based on all this, we present in table 1 a number of characteristic statements, from the perspective of both the employee and the environment. If three or more of these characteristics are present, the possibility should be considered that being gifted is a reason for an employee experiencing adaptation problems at work.

The differences between the left- and right-hand columns highlight the adaptation and communication problems. Gifted individuals who dysfunction are often not aware of their own intelligence, which results in them interpreting the lack of knowledge of others as unwillingness. They become irritated and often start going too fast. Additionally, there is a tendency to focus on the content, rather than on issues such as enthusiasm and motivation. On the other hand, they try sometimes to adapt too much, which can result in a general dissatisfaction, and the job profiling is not clear enough to allow them to take on suitable tasks.

Advisory functions, creative professions and specialist functions in, for example, the legal, medical, technological, educational science, PR or journalism sectors are often well-suited, just as setting up an own business. The manager or supervisor should focus on goals and results rather than the method to be followed (the so-called compass approach). Given this approach, the gifted individual can provide a unique contribution to, for example, strategy, problem-solving, trend watching and product development.

<table>
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<th>Table 1</th>
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<td>Characteristic statements made by gifted employees and people in their working environment concerning adaptation problems</td>
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<tr>
<td>What the working environment notices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Many conflicts with management and authorities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Cannot listen to what others say</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Difficult to place motives. What's behind it all?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Bad timekeeping, for example in meetings</td>
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<tr>
<td>5 Strongly fluctuating performance, without any clear cause</td>
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<tr>
<td>6 Not clear where the employee's optimal work position is; concerns him/herself with all kinds of things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Lack of perseverance and discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Is difficult to approach, not social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Makes all kinds of demands concerning work environment factors</td>
</tr>
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Recognizing one’s own giftedness often is an important step toward improving one’s functioning. Based on his experiences with coaching and career counseling, one of the authors (FC) distinguishes here five, often unconscious, strategies, see table 2. Upon being published, this list provoked twenty responses from individuals belonging to the target group, all stating that they recognized much of what was in the list.

Development often takes place from one strategy to the other. Occasionally, in different environments, different strategies are applied alongside each other.

Currently, several psychologists, coaches and career counselors have specialized in gifted adults. They are able to point out specific characteristics and indicate points of application for developments. And they will be less inclined to make an incorrect pathological judgment. Furthermore, they understand that, despite the fact that the gifted are able to think well and very quickly, this does not apply to the control over their own development or their own career.

Psychologist Hans de Vries gives some practical tips in his book with regard to coming into better contact with everyday life and thereby with society. One such tip is ‘Don’t do it’ as the theme for avoiding becoming involved too quickly and with too many things. Corten emphasizes the importance of self-management with regard to one’s career: the gifted show, by nature, a tendency to reason rationally based on what they are able to do, what needs to be done, and which specific circumstances this demands. And, subsequently, to be surprised or disappointed when they discover that this does not automatically lead to them connecting well with their work environment. Contact with their own feelings, with that which they really want and whereby they become motivated, appears often to be a better basis for contact with colleagues and profiling in the work environment than real qualities.

What can occupational health physicians and insurance doctors do with this knowledge? If they recognize or suspect the patterns described in a client, they can first of all discuss this with their client. Preferably with some measure of discretion, considering the fact that being gifted does not always provoke positive associations in the Netherlands. Sometimes the client will know already what he or she needs to do, in which case some light supervision will be adequate.

If necessary, they can request a psychological test (with special attention for the intelligence aspect) or specifically refer the client to a care provider with experience in this area. As so often is the case, intervention at an early stage can prevent much suffering, and much can be achieved with relatively simple resources. Particularly if

<table>
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<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Place of giftedness in life and career</th>
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<tr>
<td>Inconspicuous</td>
<td>Keeps a low profile, which results in personal development being restricted. Often not aware of high intelligence; considers him/herself rather stupid. Functions in simple jobs. Upon becoming aware of their giftedness, can develop to one of the other types.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accepted</td>
<td>Has established a connection with other people at his/her own level at an early stage, which acts as a stimulus. Has not had any major adaptation problems and has gone through a normal personal development. Works, for example, in a gifted environment (Whiz kids? Specialized researcher?), as advisor with a unique task within a unique company, or starts up a business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Has discovered through experience that you can’t achieve anything with intelligence alone. Has actively raised his/her social skills to a high level. Is therefore able to solve many adaptation problems. Often functions well in jobs that are intrinsically multidisciplinary in character.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontational</td>
<td>Has a checkered career history. From conflict to conflict and occasionally even from dismissal to dismissal. Tries to survive by placing the emphasis on the quality of the work. Can progress to ‘Social’ or may find him/herself in ‘Isolation’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Operates almost exclusively in a state of isolation. Runs the risk of losing contact with society.</td>
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the employee learns to develop and profile him/herself more according to motivation and interests, many problems can be resolved. The result for employer and society can be highly valued and motivated employees.
Finally

The most important sources for this article, apart from the literature mentioned, have been experiences with clients. Experiences and insights gained within Mensa Nederland and, of course, our own life experiences. We hope that researchers are interested in following up this line of research. This in order to make more optimal use of the talents of the gifted. The insights gained, however, will also benefit others: methods for, for example, self-study, that work well for the gifted have proven to be just as enriching and fascinating for others.

We would be very interested in hearing your reactions to this subject based on your own professional experience.

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Translation (from dutch)

Kumar Jamdagni
Language Matters, Zwolle, The Netherlands
Asynchronous development and sensory integration intervention in the gifted and talented population

Anne Cronin
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Parents of children who develop differently are under different pressures and have many difficult decisions to make. As the Internet makes information so accessible, families often find themselves in information overload when looking for resources for their child. Popular books like, The Out-of-Sync Child (Kranowitz, 1998) have informed families about sensory integration difficulties that might have never been referred to an occupational therapist. Families of children who are both highly gifted, and have some other exceptionality are increasingly looking toward sensory integration as a resource for their children. The special education literature abounds with documentation of the social and emotional consequences of having exceptional abilities and learning disabilities, when one or both of the conditions is unrecognized, can be pervasive and quite debilitating (Baum et al., 1991; Durden & Tangherlini, 1993).

These emotional and social consequences lead parents to search for new and different strategies to support their children. Many parents have asked me for additional information and resources discussing the use of sensory integration strategies, like those described by Kranowitz (1998), for gifted and twice exceptional children. There is no research or even case report information specifically addressing sensory integration and giftedness. For that reason this paper will provide and overview of sensory integration and current relevant literature, and discuss this in the context of existing literature about the characteristics of gifted children.

Sensory Integration is a theory of brain-behavior relationships originally proposed by A. Jean Ayres in the 1970’s (Bundy, Lane, and Murray, 2002). It has been an exciting idea and has led to much research and speculation in the past thirty years. Information and research about Sensory Integration Theory falls into three general categories:

- Normal development and aspects of sensory integration in the typically developing child
- Sensory integrative dysfunction
- Sensory Integration interventions

In normal development, Sensory Integration theory explains why individuals behave in particular ways. Learning is believed to be “dependent on the ability to take in and process sensation from movement and environment and use it to plan and organize behavior” (Bundy, Lane, and Murray, 2002, p. 5). Because sensory integration cannot be directly observed, the theory has been dependent on research in neurobiology. Explanations of the neural basis for SI have changed dramatically from Ayres’ original speculations with increases in understanding of the nervous system. Ayres originally de-emphasized the role of cognition in development, hoping to tap underlying, subconscious neurobiological mechanisms. Current research demonstrates that the nervous system is more complex, and less of a hierarchy than once believed. This means that although there are subconscious neurobiological mechanisms, they cannot be isolated from thought and intention. I emphasize this point here, because parents seeking sensory integrative support for their gifted child should be sure that their therapist uses this more modern model. In my experience, gifted children do best when cognitively engaged.

The following diagram is adapted from (Bundy, Lane, and Murray, 2002, p. 7) to present an overview of Sensory Integration theory in the context of development.
In this conception, sensory integration, in typical development, supports the development of posture and fine discrimination of environmental demands based on sensory cues. Normally it also is reflected in an “inner drive” toward exploration, engagement, participation and confidence in interactions with both the human and non-human world.

Sensory Integration Dysfunction, then, is when a decreased ability to process sensation results in difficulty participating in daily functional contexts and interferes with learning and behavior. The research suggests that there are two general types of sensory integrative dysfunctions, dyspraxia and poor modulation. Dyspraxia relates to deficits in the behavioral expressions side of the diagram above. Children who are dyspraxic are often described as clumsy, and may have difficulties with handwriting. These are children who join teams and may “clown” rather than build skills, because the clowning draws attention from their deficits. The literature describes many of these problems common to populations of children with learning disabilities and attention deficits. Gifted children with these additional exceptionalities should, in theory, respond in a manner consistent with other children treated for dyspraxia. The research on the impact of sensory integration interventions for dyspraxia is mixed, but generally positive. I have attached some current research citations to this paper for further exploration.

Poor modulation, called Sensory Modulation Disorders, has been an area of great interest in recent years. Ayres first described the idea of “tactile defensiveness.” Ayres observed that some children responded to ordinary touch as though it were painful or distressing. These children tended to have many functional limitations. They could be very picky about their food, their clothing, and their daily routines. Children with tactile defensiveness sometimes had delays in handwriting and other fine motor skills. These same children disliked settings where they might be touched unexpectedly, like the playground or on the school bus. Ayres description of this pattern was so appealing, and so intuitively explained patterns of behaviors, that it has been adopted by diverse disciplines like psychology, nursing, and education.

Ayres proposed that tactile defensiveness occurs because the nervous system does not make sense of, or adequately discriminate tactile information so that the individual can respond to touch in a sub-conscious way. Additionally, it has been observed that other sensory systems can have similar disorders in modulation. Therefore, the category of tactile defensiveness was expanded to be a category of sensory modulation problems. This type of SI problem I most commonly hear about from parents of highly gifted children. Sensory Modulation Disorders have been very hard to measure empirically. For more than 20 years diagnoses were made on the basis of observation and history alone. More recently a series of tools, the Sensory Profiles (Dunn, 1994; Dunn and Brown, 1997; and Dunn and Westman, 1997) have been promising. This tool is a sensory history questionnaire that has some normative comparison data and has been statistically analyzed to determine patterns in sensory responses. This instrument has been very useful in identifying persons whose sensory responses were far outside the “norm” and in identifying recognizable patterns in the results. Whether a statistical significance in sensory processing is a “disorder” continues to be a personal judgment.

Now here is where I’m moving away from SI into the literature of giftedness. Be aware that most occupational therapists providing sensory integration do not have any training in the special developmental and behavior issues of gifted children. Dabrowski (1964) described patterns of overexcitabilities consisting of inborn, heightened abilities to receive and respond to stimuli. His theory related to creativity and the creative process, and has been widely applied to the gifted population. Overexcitabilities are expressed in heightened sensitivity, awareness, and intensity. Mendaglio (1995) and Lind (2000) offer similar views. These authors do not describe these overexcitabilities as “disorders,” rather as characteristic features of the exceptionally creative.

Dabrowski goes on to state that “Each form of overexcitability points to a higher than average sensitivity of its receptors. As a result a person endowed with different forms of overexcitability reacts with surprise, puzzlement to many things, he collides with things, persons, and events which in turn brings him astonishment and disquietude” (1964 p.7). Is Dabrowski describing something that Sensory Integration trained therapists would label a “sensory modulation disorder”? The two look the same to me as a clinician.

So, do highly gifted children with clearly identified “overexcitabilities” need occupational therapy? This is where it all gets muddled. The first question for parents to ask is “Do your child’s reactions to sensory experiences limit his or her ability to do things that are meaningful and important to the child or to your family?” If you answer is no then I would suggest you look at some sensory integration materials and perhaps the “Alert Program” (Therapy Works, 2000) as a tool to help your child recognize and learn to manage their own excitabilities. Although they may not be experiencing difficulties now, having a language to discuss what they are feeling and being aware that not all people experience things in the same way, are important tools in helping the child cope when new challenges emerge. I do not think that you must have an occupational therapist involved at this level, although an assessment and the development of a “sensory diet” may streamline the self-education process.
For those of you who did feel that your child does have activity limitations secondary to their sensory sensitivity, I have provided some more detailed information. All of the published research on the efficacy of Sensory Integration has been conducted on children with identified delays. Highly gifted children with identified difficulties in some area are considered twice exceptional (or as having dual exceptionalities). In most cases, the twice exceptional label is given when the child’s intelligence scores are in the gifted range, but some other score, like reading, language, or attention, fall below a normative range. I think that the outcome studies can be considered without reserve for this group of children. Most Sensory Integration research has focused on observable motor behaviors and studies have consistently shown the gains are few and unpredictable, similar in general to similar focused 1-to-1 perceptual-motor training programs (Wilson, et al. 1992, 1994; Bundy Lane and Murray, 2002). In response to these findings, researchers have expressed concerns about the appropriateness of the outcome measures used (Polatajko et al., 1992; Cohn and Cermak, 1998). Cohn (2001a, 2001b) and Cohn, Miller and Tickle-Degnan (2000) have done some innovative studies to address the need for different outcome measures. This research identifies parent expectations from therapy and positive outcomes perceived by parents whose children received sensory integrative therapy. Interesting to our discussion, one of the major benefits reported by parents was a language to describe sensory sensitivities, and strategies to address and avoid sensory “meltdowns.”

Even without dual exceptionalities, children can have participation limitations that are very distressing and limiting. Typically, in these children, the scores on all testing are so high that they do not qualify for either a label or services, but there are wide discrepancies in their scores. For example, verbal and analytic scores can be in the profoundly gifted range, while motor skills and attention may be in the low normal range. The outcome studies for Sensory Integration interventions are not strong, even with the “usual” populations, and so may be even less applicable to our gifted kids. For parents with kids of this type, I would advise learning more about sensory integration and the Alert Program (Therapy Works, 2000). I have been very successful in supporting kids with a sensory diet and with a framework like the Alert Program to educate them on the basics of self-regulation. In both Dabrowski’s theory and in Sensory Integration, the unusual sensory reactions are seen as an integral part of the individual to be accommodated and to be worked with. In fact, many of the strategies offered by Lind (2000) for dealing with “over-excitabilities” are similar to sensory integration strategies.

Attached as an appendix are a brief description of a sensory diet and a non-standardized sensory history. In summation, I believe that sensory integration strategies can be highly useful in aiding families in understanding and accommodating their highly sensitive children. I am hesitant to label this condition a disorder, and do not see intervention changing the condition, as much as educating everyone on strategies to manage and regulate the sensitivities. I do think that seeking out an occupational therapist with experience in sensory integration can be very helpful, but be aware that you, as parents, will need to educate her or him or the unique aspects of the gifted child. Be sure and ask questions, and encourage therapists to consider and explore research documenting the outcomes of therapy with the gifted population.

References


**Sensory History Interview**

When possible interview both the child and a parent. You may change the phrasing and offer examples to clarify items. Record any discussion under “remarks.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Touch</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Always or a lot</th>
<th>Remarks</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Do you like messy art projects, like finger paints or clay?</td>
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<td>2. Do you avoid getting your hands “messy”?</td>
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<td>3. When you were little did it bother you to have someone wash your face?</td>
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<td>4. Do you feel like you need to wash your hands often?</td>
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<td>5. Does it bother you to have someone else wash or comb your hair?</td>
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<td>6. Do baths bother you?</td>
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<td>7. Do some clothes bother you because of the way they feel?</td>
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<td>8. Do the tags in clothes bother you?</td>
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<td>9. Do you mind wearing insect repellent or sunscreen?</td>
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<td>10. Do you prefer long sleeve clothing even when it’s warm?</td>
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<td>11. Does it bother you when people touch you, even if it is a friendly pat or hug?</td>
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<td>12. Does going to the dentist bother you?</td>
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<td>13. Does it bother you to go barefoot outside?</td>
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<td>14. After someone touches you, do you feel like touching or rubbing that spot?</td>
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<td>15. Are there foods you avoid because of the way they feel in your mouth?</td>
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<td><strong>Movement</strong></td>
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<td>16. Do you like carnival rides that lift you off the ground?</td>
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<td>17. Do you like playing on a trampoline?</td>
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<td>18. Do you get scared in high places?</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Do you avoid games that include climbing and jumping?</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Do you like moving fast, like you do on a skateboard or skating?</td>
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<td>21.</td>
<td>Do you like rides or swings that spin you?</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>Do you have trouble sitting still?</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Do you get carsick easily?</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>Do you like riding on busses?</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>When you are playing, do you fall more than your friends?</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>Do you like to practice new things privately?</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>At school do you often lean or lay on your desk?</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>Do you get tired more easily than other kids?</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>When you were little did you walk on your toes a lot?</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>After spinning or jumping, do you find it hard to settle down?</td>
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<td>29.</td>
<td>Are you too distracted to work if there is a lot a noise around?</td>
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<td>30.</td>
<td>Do you think you startle or get more upset at loud noises more than other people?</td>
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<td>31.</td>
<td>Do you get confused or distracted in noisy places like the mall or the school cafeteria?</td>
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<td>32.</td>
<td>Do you enjoy music while you work?</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>Does making little noises, like tapping a pencil help you to focus?</td>
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<td>34.</td>
<td>Do you often get accused of not paying attention?</td>
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<td>35.</td>
<td>Does bright sunlight hurt you eyes?</td>
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<td>36.</td>
<td>Do your eyes seem to get tired or water easily?</td>
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<td>37.</td>
<td>Do you prefer dimly lit rooms?</td>
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<td>38.</td>
<td>Do you put puzzles together easily?</td>
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<td>39.</td>
<td>Do you like toys like lava lights to look at?</td>
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<td>40.</td>
<td>Do you get lost easily?</td>
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<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Do you dislike drawing or writing?</td>
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<td>42.</td>
<td>Is your writing very large compared to your friends'?</td>
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</table>
Sensory Diet

A sensory diet is a family-centered approach of providing sensory integrative therapy to meet the needs of a specific child and family. Sensory diets are not food diets, although food may be used in them. Sensory diets are activities that we use to help us feel calm, alert, and in an “optimal” state of arousal.

Sensory diets are planned, scheduled activities imbedded throughout the day to help these individuals achieve or maintain an optimal arousal level. A sensory diet should include the input and support of parents, teachers, and any other involved adult.

Developing a Sensory Diet

A sensory diet requires the family to document the daily routine for 4-6 days, with notations for particular problem times. It also requires the occupational therapist to observe the child in natural settings, including home, school, and daycare. In some cases, these observations may be supplemented by videotapes of the child.

Typically, with a pre-school child you would work within the regular activity routine to assure a sensory activity at least every half-hour. If the regular activity has a sensory basis an additional activity need not be included. With older children you schedule the activities based on need and on logical breaks in their day. Many older children can learn to manage their own sensory diet.

Considerations in Planning a Sensory Diet

An occupational therapist should work with you to tailor the sensory diet to your child’s needs. A sensory diet should include alerting activities, organizing activities, and calming activities based on the performance of the child. This includes interventions for specific problem areas, using “calming activities” during stress periods and “alerting” activities during slow periods.

Guidelines:
1. Routines are important so start simple and work up. An example might be after breakfast, after lunch, after school, before bedtime, or every 2 hours.
2. Use an activity that the child has an interest in, this will stop an opening confrontation.
3. When the transition is made between activities and during an activity. Try counting to 5 before making a transition.
4. Watch for signs of child starting to relax by facial expressions, these mean the child is involved in an activity that is working at that time. Crying, whimpering, and laughing can mean it is time to cool off or calm down.
5. Change the routine occasionally for variety. This will help to keep the sensory diet interesting. This also helps with the ability of change in their environment
6. Talk with your occupational therapist regularly to make sure the diet that you are using is age appropriate and is still fitting your child’s sensory needs.

Sensory Activities

Sensory diet activities are usually quite simple. The following lists offer a few examples of activities that may be done at home....

Games (alerting activities)
- Obstacle Courses including dragging/sliding things
- Silly Walks (e.g., crab walk)
- Red Light/Green Light
- Running Races
- Tug-of-war
- “Stop Dancing” where you freeze and hold you body posture at breaks in the music
Swinging/Bouncing (alerting activities)
- Inside swings
- Trampoline
- Hanging or pull-up-bar
- Outside swings/hammocks
- Exercise ball
- Jump Rope
- Stilts/Roller Skates

Exercises (organizing activities)
- Climbing
- Tumbling/Head Stands
- Wheelbarrow/Camel Play: Have the child carry loads on the back like a camel.
- Pushing a loaded box/wagon/cart.
- Running/jogging/biking/Stair Climbing
- Horsie and Leapfrog: These are great contact sports. Leapfrog is where one person jumps over the other. Next the other person does the same.
- Roughhousing: This can be a good all over sensory experience especially if you push, pull, tug, roll, and tumble. Make sure to use proper safety precautions.

Other Sensory Stimulation (organizing activities)
**If a child is sensitive to touch they should not be forced to do texture activities**
- Dumping and Pouring: Give the child a cup and bucket. Put blocks, dry beans, sand or water in the item. Then have the child dump the material back and forth from one to the other.
- Paper Ripping: Let the child have some type of paper material. Allow them to tear strips, squares, or circles from the paper.
- Music listening/dancing/singing
- Pushing and pulling activities: playing with a “stretch “ toy or stiff clay
- Finger painting with plain paint first then adding in; sand, cereal, rice, or other textures.
- Cooking Play: When you are cooking let the child play in the cookie dough, bread dough, etc.
- Dress-up: Collect a box of dress-up items for the child to use. Items can include hats, gloves or mittens, scarves of different materials, etc.

Calming Activities
- Cuddling with pillows in a “hideout”
- Making a “kid burrito” by rolling the child up tightly in a blanket, or a “kid sandwich” by (carefully) squishing the child between two gymnastic mats or sofa cushions.
- Deep pressure massages, back/neck rubs, cuddles or hugs
- “Heavy work,” such as moving furniture, carrying heavy bags, or lifting weights.
- Hideaway: Use towels, sheets, blankets, and other materials for placing over a table or two chairs put together to make a fort for the child to play in.
- Quiet music listening, books on tape
- Warm bath or shower
- Pushing on walls with, back, buttocks, hands, head, or shoulders.
- Sucking on something... it can be ice water from a squeeze bottle, a Popsicle, or anything else the child enjoys
Can you hear the flowers sing? Issues for gifted adults.

Deirdre V. Lovecky

Abstract

There has been comparatively little focus in the literature on the characteristics and social and emotional needs of gifted adults. Using observational data, the author attempts to delineate some of the positive and negative social effects of traits displayed by gifted adults. Five traits (divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy) seem to produce potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict. Unless gifted adults learn to value themselves and find support, identity conflicts and depression may result. Emphasis on self-growth through knowing and accepting self leads to the discovery of sources of personal power. Nurturing relationships through realistic expectations and learning to share oneself provides a supportive environment in which gifted adults can grow and flourish.

Although the personality traits and social and emotional needs of gifted children have been widely described (Erlich, 1982; Terman, 1925; Torrance, 1962; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), there has been comparatively little focus on gifted adults. Numerous longitudinal studies have indicated that the early advantage experienced by gifted children continues into adulthood and that gifted children become adults of superior vocational achievement, generally satisfied with themselves and their lives (Oden, 1968; Terman & Oden, 1947,1959). Nevertheless, by age 62, most gifted men have experienced the same dissatisfaction with family life as have most people (R.R. Sears, 1977). The gifted women reported to be happiest have been those with the best coping skills, which are dependent on early experience (P.S. Sears & Barbee, 1977). In fact, the effects of early experience, particularly in terms of early educational advantage, seem to be one of the most important contributory factors in later adult achievement (Bloom, 1964; Oden, 1968; Terman, 1925).

In studies of male scientists (Roe, 1952), creative artists and writers (Cattell, 1971), female mathematicians (Helson, 1971), and architects (MacKinnon, 1962), among others, the predominant characteristics found included impulsivity, curiosity, high need for independence, high energy level, introversion, intuitiveness, emotional sensitivity, and nonconformity.

For the most part, the literature on gifted adults does not address the social impact of the various traits described. Piechowski and Colangelo (1984) indicated that certain modes of mental functioning are not socially valued because their expression causes discomfort in others. These traits were termed overexcitabilities, that is, wider and more intense experiences in psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginative, and emotional areas. Gifted adults seem to be characterized by imaginative, intellectual, and emotional overexcitabilities.

In this article I attempt to delineate some of the social aspects (both positive and negative) of traits displayed by gifted adults. I selected gifted adults from among my colleagues, acquaintances, friends, and psychotherapy clients. Of the 15 gifted adults included, 6 were therapy clients. There were 8 women and 7 men ranging in age from 20 to 79. Of these, 6 were doctoral-level professionals, 4 were master’s-level professionals, and 3 were students. Fields of endeavor included the social sciences, education, medicine, the biological sciences, business and computers, art, literature, and history. Identification of giftedness was based on a variety of criteria, including identification of giftedness in childhood, memory of scores on achievement or IQ tests, SAT scores, current professional achievement, or attainment of national recognition for achievement.

Using anecdotal and observational material as a basis, I describe five traits that seem to be present in gifted adults and that seem to be central features of their giftedness. The goal is to generate a group of hypotheses about gifted adults and their interactions with others. Further explorations of these preliminary ideas, using more refined research methodology, will undoubtedly provide a more elaborate explanation of the impact of giftedness on the lives of those concerned.

Characteristics of Gifted Adults

There seem to be five traits that produce potential interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict: divergency, excitability, sensitivity, perceptivity, and entelechy. The first three traits have been derived from Torrance’s (1961, 1962, 1965) descriptions of creatively gifted children. The last two traits were developed from discussions with gifted adults. These traits seem to be an integral part of giftedness; however, the behavioral manifestations of these traits may vary depending on other physiological and personality factors, such as tolerance for ambiguity, degree of introversion or extroversion, and preference for particular types of sensory input. Gifted adults may exhibit several of the traits. The gifted adults who served as a basis for this article all exhibited at least three (divergency, excitability, and sensitivity).
Although the traits in themselves are neutral, their behavioral manifestations make them socially and emotionally significant. For example, the trait of sensitivity can be manifested as empathy, commitment, touchiness, intensity, or vulnerability. Thus, in any individual, the sum of the behavioral manifestations may be viewed as positive or negative.

Trait Descriptions

**Divergency.** A preference for unusual, original, and creative responses is characteristic of divergent thinkers. The positive side of the trait includes people who are often high achievers, innovative in a number of fields, task committed, self-starters, and highly independent. Many theoretical scientists, writers, artists, composers, and philosophers are divergent thinkers. Einstein, Freud, and the French impressionists are examples of gifted adults successful in using their divergent thinking ability.

Divergent thinking has positive social and emotional value. Gifted adults possessing this trait are able to find creative solutions to a wide variety of problems, including interpersonal problems, and are able to see several aspects of any situation. In an organization, they are often the “idea” people who bring challenge and enthusiasm to others. They find deep personal satisfaction in the development of new ideas. Divergent thinkers challenge stereotypes. Socially, they bring color to the lives of others, who may use their example to find the courage to break the bonds of conformity and decrease the effects of prejudice.

On the negative side, divergent thinkers encounter difficulty in situations in which group consensus is important. They are often dedicated to their own ideas and find it difficult to support ideas they find foolish. The usual rewards may not motivate divergent thinkers. In fact, they may ignore a reward system imposed by others to work on their own. In social situations, divergent thinkers may not fit in. Common social rules, such as not criticizing others publicly or not disagreeing with one perceived by the majority to be influential, may be disregarded. The dilemma of the divergent thinker is one of maintaining identity in the face of pressure to conform. A highly divergent thinker is often a minority of one. If no one else hears the flowers singing, the divergent thinker may experience alienation and eventually an existential depression.

**Excitability.** High energy level, emotional reactivity, and high nervous system arousal characterize the trait of excitability. Although excitability and hyperactivity may seem to be similar, they are fundamentally different in that gifted adults with the trait of excitability are able to focus their attention and concentration for long periods of time, to use their energy productively in a wide variety of interests, and to do many things well. These gifted adults enjoy the excitement of taking risks and meeting challenges. This risk taking is dissimilar to that found in mania or impulsivity in that the gifted adult (a) is aware of the consequences of the risk, (b) takes risks in the form of challenges rather than reckless activities, and (c) knows when to stop.

The high energy level of these gifted adults allows them to produce prodigiously in whatever most captures their interest. They often pave the way for others to follow with refinements of their innovative ideas. Many inventors and entrepreneurs have the trait of excitability. Thomas Edison and Leonardo da Vinci are examples of people who possessed this trait.

The trait of excitability has positive social and emotional value. Productivity and risk taking create new ideas and innovations. There is energy to spend on a variety of projects and personal concerns without the necessity of choosing whether to expend energy on work or self. Finally, these gifted adults know their feelings, act on the basis of these feelings, and are unafraid of the appropriate expression of feelings.

On the negative side, gifted adults with this trait may find it difficult to self-regulate. Boredom and the need for stimulation can produce a habit of constant activity. Some gifted adults may be unable to follow through on projects because they crave novelty. A cycle of high interest and activity for a new venture, followed by loss of interest when the novelty decreases and details must be addressed, can leave others feeling frustrated and angry. In addition, some gifted adults may feel little satisfaction with what has been achieved. Their dilemma is one of always doing but feeling little gratification because others often reap the rewards accruing from the long-term development of their initial ideas. A chronic depression that triggers more activity may be the result. These gifted adults may know that the flowers sing but may never have a chance to enjoy them.

**Sensitivity.** A depth of feeling that results in a sense of identification with others characterizes the trait of sensitivity. Gifted people form deep attachments and react to the feeling tone of situations; they think with their feelings. People who are highly sensitive make commitments to other people and to social causes. They can be enthusiastic and intensely single-minded about their dedication. Poets, Investigative reporters, Peace Corps workers, and political and religious leaders are often gifted in sensitivity. Examples of such people include St. Francis of Assisi, Elizabeth Blackwell, Emily Dickinson, Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and Virginia Woolf.
People gifted with the trait of sensitivity find positive social and emotional benefit in their deep concern for the needs and rights of others, their empathy for the feelings of others, and their desire to help even at significant cost to themselves. These gifted adults may be unusually aware of the feeling tone of situations and of the more sensual aspects of the environment, such as color and shading. They are often aware of their own shortcomings. Some gifted adults feel a sense of unity with the cosmos, an experience of a universal sharing of self. Adults gifted with sensitivity tend to be highly moral people concerned with giving and with doing what is right for others.

On the negative side, these gifted adults may not understand that others do not feel so deeply or intensely or that others may have different priorities. They may be very intolerant of the needs of others when they perceive those needs to be superficial.

Adults gifted in sensitivity may be so sensitive that others may hesitate to share problems with them. In fact, other people may believe that the gifted adult experiences their pain more intensely than they do, and they may feel robbed of their own feelings. These gifted adults must learn to guard their vulnerability while still remaining sensitive to others, to continue caring in the face of rejection, and to moderate emotional responsiveness so that they feel “with” rather than “for.” The risk is that they will become isolates who avoid relationships that could nurture them. They hear the flowers singing, feel a unity with the universe, and want everyone else to hear the song as well.

**Perceptivity.** An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to see quickly to the core of an issue are characteristic of the trait of perceptivity. These gifted adults are able to understand the meaning of personal symbols and to see beyond the superficiality of a situation to the person beneath. Skilled at understanding motivations, they may be able to help others to understand themselves. Adults gifted with perceptivity are those who can hear the flowers singing within others not yet aware of their own gifts. Their intuition and ability to understand several layers of feeling simultaneously help them to assess people and situations rapidly. In fact, they are often skilled at sensing the incongruency between exhibited social facades and real thoughts and feelings. Another aspect of perceptivity concerns the recognition of and need for truth. Social facades displayed by others may seem to this gifted adult to be a sort of lie. Adults gifted in this way detect and dislike falsehood and hypocrisy.

People who are gifted at “seeing” often seem to have a touch of magic about them. Religious and political leaders, philosophers, creative therapists, writers, and poets may be especially gifted with perceptivity. Jane Austen, Langston Hughes, Anne Hutchinson, William Shakespeare, and Henry David Thoreau are all examples.

Positive social and emotional correlates of the trait of perceptivity include the ability of these gifted adults to view their own behavior somewhat objectively, to assess their own as well as others’ motivations, and to base their responses on perceptions of underlying dynamics. They are aware not only of what their own needs are but also of the necessity of avoiding internal stress by learning to use their perceptions to know what they truly want. Often, they will decide to do what is best for themselves despite the disapproval of others.

On the negative side, this trait can present difficulties in interpersonal relationships because others, unaware of what the gifted adult sees so clearly, feel both vulnerable and threatened. For the gifted adult, seeing several layers of a person may be confusing. It may be difficult to pair the response obtained with what the situation seemed to indicate was required. The more discrepancy between the inner self and outer face, the more uncomfortable the gifted adult may feel.

The dilemma of this gifted adult is whether to hide the insights and respond superficially to the social facade or to use the gift and risk rejection. Either course may produce constraint and difficulty with spontaneity. Finding interpersonal support is a major priority for these gifted adults; the risk is fear of closeness and intimacy.

**Entelechy.** From the Greek word for having a goal, entelechy bespeaks a particular type of motivation, inner strength, and vital force directing life and growth to become all the self is capable of being. Adults gifted in entelechy are highly attractive to others who feel drawn to openness, warmth, and closeness. Being near someone with this trait gives others hope and motivation to achieve their own self-actualization. Teachers, therapists, physicians, and social reformers may be among those so gifted. Examples include Helen Keller, Carl Rogers, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

People gifted in entelechy bring deep feelings to a relationship. By spontaneously expressing feelings, they encourage others to do so as well. Their example of overcoming obstacles and their continuing support and interest encourage others to grow. They not only hear the flowers singing but invite others to hear them too.

People gifted in entelechy are capable of creating “golden moments” of friendship, those special times when two people are truly their best selves and able to share on a deep level (N. Jenckes, personal communication, December 26, 1984). Gifted adults may find sources of rare intimacy; however, they may also find an overwhelming number of people who want contact but have little
to offer in return. They may feel vulnerable to and intruded on by the demands of others who may feel cheated that the promise implied in the initial sharing cannot continue. The dilemma of these gifted adults is to find ways to nurture the self through others while avoiding the expenditure of vital personal resources on others’ needs. The risk is anxiety about requests from others and avoidance of closeness in interpersonal relationships.

Options For Self Growth
The five traits described may lead to crises; gifted adults continuously face choices that seem to lead either to denial of gifts or rejection by others. Unless they learn to value self and find support from others, these adults will experience identity crises whenever the conflict resurfaces. This process entraps creative energy, which is then lost to creative production. Gifted adults can learn to deal creatively with their conflicts. Although many use the resources of psychotherapy, one of the primary traits of adult giftedness is a need for independence. Thus, they may wish to find their own unique ways to nurture themselves and to develop supportive relationships. Some options to be considered might include the following.

Nurturing the Self.
Knowing and loving all aspects of oneself enables one to find and use sources of personal power.

**Knowing oneself.** Discovering personal symbols can help gifted people understand and value their insights and intuitions. Personal symbols can be explored in a variety of ways, including daydreaming, analysis of dreams, poetry writing, sketching, and the use of imagery and visualization techniques. Lazarus (1977) described visualization techniques and Moffat and Painter (1974) described the use of journal writing to define and maintain self in a sometimes hostile world.

**Accepting oneself.** Valuing their uniqueness is necessary for gifted adults in accepting themselves. Valuing and accepting negative traits can be a means of freeing energy to deal creatively with life. If the gifted adult is able to accept faults and vulnerabilities, then the positive sides of these traits can come to light. Energy will not be focused on feeling unhappy about self or on denying faults and failings. Most creativity develops from the energy found in discontent; using discomfort as a sign that creative energy is available allows for the taking charge of self rather than for feeling fated to misfortune.

**Finding sources of personal power.** Freeing self the constraints that inhibit use of creativity by listening to inner messages is one means of finding personal power. Learning to use loneliness rather than avoiding or fearing it can be an important means of increasing personal power (C.A. Martin, personal communication, June 12, 1984). Many gifted adults are lonely because of a lack of true peers. Feeling comfortable with oneself, having a wide variety of interests, knowing that there are some people who value at least parts of themselves, and viewing lonely times as a chance of further self-care and self-exploration are ways of growing in personal power.

Nurturing Interpersonal Relationships
Having realistic and sensitive expectations for oneself and others and being able to share oneself with others are vital to the development of supportive interpersonal relationships. Gifted adults often have high expectations for themselves and others. Sometimes they forget that other people are not gifted in the ways they are. In fact, gifted adults may need to develop an appreciation for the talents of others. Recognition of others’ talents can lead to warm friendships in which different talents can complement each other. The lives of Salieri and Mozart might have been completely different had each been able to value the other.

Understanding the effects of one’s giftedness on others entails a realization that the same behaviors may elicit different responses from different people and from the same people at different times. For example, emotional intensity can be energizing at one time but exhausting at another. Different limits may have to be negotiated with individuals (D.K. Baker, personal communication, December 22, 1984). Just as sensitive gifted adults may cause others to feel robbed of deep feelings, the anxiety expressed by others may cause the gifted person to feel robbed of the chance to make decisions about the relationship. Learning to set clear boundaries and to negotiate particular limits on giving, expenditure of time and energy, and individual needs for distance and expression of uniqueness can help gifted adults feel some sense of choice in a relationship.

Because of their inner depth and complexity, gifted adults may need to find a large number of friends, each of whom can meet some needs and reflect some aspects of self. Gifted adults sometimes expect to share everything with one person and over-look the special relationships that can develop around one interest or one facet of self.

Sharing one’s particular gifts with another can be a source of both self-sustenance and connectedness to others. Some gifts are easier to share with individual friends; others may require a larger audience. A special kind of sharing occurs in the writing of
poetry, as described by Harrower (1972). She discussed the need to communicate as an integral part of the experience of writing a poem. Writing poetry is a self-enhancing process that occurs by connecting the writer in some new way to other people, it is from this sort of sharing that emotional growth is fostered.

Gifted adults can use their special talents to help others find their own creativity and their own sources of inner power. Finding ways of sharing self can enhance both people in a relationship and bring depth to that relationship as it grows and changes over time.

**Conclusion**

Gifted adults, perhaps more than any other group, have the potential to achieve a high degree of self-actualization. Despite the problems that being gifted can bring, the positive social and emotional aspects of giftedness can more than compensate for the problems. To continue to hear the flowers singing and to turn visions and dreams to reality throughout an entire lifetime is a goal to be desired by every gifted adult.

**References**


