

Helping ALL Gifted Kids Deal with the Asset-Burden Paradox of High Ability

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Child/Teen Anxieties at Developmental Junctures

- Control! Change! (and therefore loss! grief!)
- Uncertainty! No "map"!
- Unknown Territory (and little tolerance for ambiguity?)
- Perfectionism (being used to being able to control)
- Sexuality (troubling thoughts, past embarrassments, androgyny, no sense of commonality with others, no chance to articulate the concerns?)
- Peer Relationships (new demands, concerns, peers > adults, unfamiliar territory)
- Future-Fear (afraid of asking "dumb" questions about college; relocation; perfectionism re: direction, major, roommate, college, marriage; leaving childhood behind; others' expectations; managing the complexities of adulthood)
- Fear (for Parents, Parents' Marriage, Family Safety)
- Internalization of Parents' "Concern" Messages

Gifted and Traumatized

As a workshop participant

beautiful, poised, insightful, mature, articulate, high achiever, leader

As a research subject (age 14/15 to 29)

- > multiple traumas
- > dangerous eating disorder
- > institutions which disappointed
- > educators with poor boundaries
- > needy counselors
- > vulnerability: "teach her a lesson"

A qualitative, longitudinal, phenomenological study:

What was her experience of development like?

Pertinent Areas not Addressed much or at all in Gifted Education

Divorce Sexual Abuse Physical Abuse Eating Disorder
Depression Suicidal Ideation Drug Use H.S. Dropout
College Dropout Public Humiliation Abusive Relationship Ostracism

Giftedness as Asset, Protective	Giftedness as Burden, Vulnerability
Age 2 - 11	Age 2 - 11 (boldface: not necessarily related to giftedness)
Idealized by dad (foreign-born)—future promise	
Good relationships with teachers	Mother uncomfortable re: giftedness
Identified for gifted program early	Told: responsible for mother's miscarriage
Good relationship with G/T teacher	Existential angst, age 6-7
Positive teacher/peer messages re: talent	Discord at home → need for control
Serious about religious learnings	Family scapegoat → isolation at home
Develops self-protection strategies	
Age 12 - 13	Age 12 - 13
Positive teacher/peer messages re: talent	Mother's message re: "handling disappointment"
Reads self-help, philosophy books	Gets less concern than less able sibling
	Adults hostile to her "knowing so much"
	Adult-like, becomes parent confidante
	Power: keeps parents together, blamed later

Giftedness as Asset, Protective	Giftedness as Burden, Vulnerability
Age 14 - 15	Age 14 - 15
Learns to find support outside of family	Extreme activities for parental approval
Self-aware; demands counseling	Focus on physical, other perfection
Recognizes stress; quits cheerleading	Strong presence in family
Student council president	Adults: "deserves (negative) what she gets"
Aware: religion-behavior disconnect	"Divorce was your fault."
Driven, effective action, self-advocacy	Intense emotional pain; anxiety, withdrawal, suicidal ideation
Able to describe feelings in writing	Beauty/talent: concerns not taken seriously; vulnerable to abuse
	Unable to relax, enjoy activities
Age 16-17 (research established)	School vindictive: leader/superstar "betrayal"
Hired as cheerleader director; affirmed	Extreme school shift: high control → little control
Demands counseling	Feels loss of control re: promising future
Reads psychology textbooks on her own	Brother gets counseling: she does not
Discovers concept of positive disintegration	Intellect discounted: "beautiful"

Giftedness as Asset, Protective	Giftedness as Burden, Vulnerability
Age 18 - 21	Age 18 - 21
Accepted into college without a diploma	Difficulty finding female friends with similar interests
Age 22 - 23	Age 22 - 23
Insights about father; applies skills with him	Others perceive her as insightful and helpful and burden her with their issues.
Leader/Advocate for campus rape victim	(Leader/Advocate for campus rape victim)
Age 24 - 25	Age 24 - 25
Insights about mother	Energy, intellect raised expectation re: heavy workload (first college position)
Does "homework," wins grievance	Eager to excel, control destiny
Age 26 - 28	Age 26 - 28
Comes to grips with unintended career path	Intense investment; emotionally drained by students' needs
Insights re: childhood via own parenting	School personnel: "too successful"

Repercussions of the Abuse

- **Feelings** of powerlessness, shame, sadness, embarrassment, rage (later: humiliation, grief)
- **Sense of urgency:** “move ahead”
- **Frantic need to maintain control** of unsettling, disorienting emotions
- **Extreme responses** to events and contexts
- **Loss of objectivity** and escalation of tension
- **Developmental** task-accomplishment

Giftedness as Asset, Protective	Giftedness as Burden, Vulnerability
Age 29 - 30	Age 29 - 30
Recognizes need for cutoff (parents, context)	Intense, over-eager regarding teaching abroad
Conscious choices: contexts, relationships	<i>Perceived by self and others as a problem-solver, depleting energy and delaying reflection about the need to set appropriate personal and professional boundaries</i>
Consciously “lets go of” impulse to rescue	
Self-diagnosis: PTSD (control, urgency)	
Applies cognitive strengths: self-monitoring	

The “Worst”: Not Sexual Abuse

- **Assumptions** by others
- **Minimizations**
- **Denials**
- **Misrepresentations** by important adults
- **School experiences** (impact on peer relations and trust in institutions)
- **Perceived abandonment** by mother
- **Being pathologized** by helping professionals
- **Defense mechanisms** didn't elicit others' concern (e.g., intense investment in activities)

Symptoms of PTSD

- Intense, confusing emotions
- Hypervigilance
- Need for control
- Sensitivity to others' responses
- Eating disorder

Repercussions of the Abuse

- **Feelings** of powerlessness, shame, sadness, embarrassment, rage (later: humiliation, grief)
- **Sense of urgency:** “want to move ahead”
- **Frantic need to maintain control** of unsettling, disorienting emotions
- **Extreme responses** to events and contexts
- **Loss of objectivity** and escalation of tension

Propelled . . . (assets)

- **Intensities** propelled her to “be done with” internal upheaval, learn about pertinent phenomena, make sense of experiences and people, invest in career opportunities, to prepare for and be immersed in parenting.
- **Questioned** “what was real, unreal”
- She recognized when she “misread” situations
- **Worked hard** to face her fears
- **Recognized epiphanies** (helped to “frame”)
- **Self-therapy** (re: positive disintegration)

Counseling: Mostly Positive Experiences

- **High school:** a counselor broke confidentiality, contributed to ostracism, shame ("Everyone knew.")
- A psychologist thought she needed to understand that "others were smart, too, in college." Another pathologized her.
- **Several moves,** several counselors (traditional and alternative)—extended work
 - to understand professional context
 - to sort out relationships with parents
 - to continue healing
 - a support group of like-minded women
 - university colleagues who could validate her strengths.

"I recognize that I have always dealt exceptionally well with failures, my own and others, and disappointments. This is one of my highest functioning qualities—the ability to move forward in clarity or stay behind as long as I need to unravel complex situations."

Resilience

- Ability to get the **attention of others**
- **Proactive** in problem-solving
- **Fighting against being** "responsible for family dysfunction"
- Positive **attention from father early** in life
- **Self-understanding,** high self-efficacy
- **Desire to be different** from parents
- **Crucial environmental supports**

G/T teacher, male teacher, **counselors,** student-govt. advisor, rebellious long-term **boyfriend,** female **profs,** university advisors, **husband,** work contexts, validation "from the outside"

- **Intelligence**

Healing

- **MySpace**— used it to let classmates know about her life, her children; reconnect; heal relationships; connect to adolescence
- **At 28:** "This move—the first time in my adult life without a sense of urgency."
- **Husband:** "In the process, I've felt a great deal of empathy for what my mother missed in a partner."
- **Mother:** "a careful connection"

Summarizing . . . Positives

- Emotional and intellectual **sensitivities, intensities**—helped her survive? Added a negative layer?
- Intense and **proactive investment** in forging a new life
- **Wisdom and instincts** related to help-seeking and action
- Intelligence salient as factor in **sense-making,** survival, **use of available resources**

Summarizing . . . Vulnerability

- **Others assumed** she was "fine," had advantages, needed to be taught hard lessons, did not need help.
- **Mothers' passivity** regarding protection: lack of knowing how to deal with a bright, intense, conflicted, verbal child?
- **Characteristics of giftedness**—intensified her most painful and unsettling emotional experiences?

Change/Loss/Sadness: Self-reflection (by age 16, which ones?)

- | | |
|--|--|
| ■ Death of someone close? | ■ Loss of innocence? |
| ■ Death of a pet? | ■ Loss of childhood? |
| ■ Moving away from friends? | ■ Loss of the past? |
| ■ Having friends move away? | ■ Loss of feeling secure? |
| ■ Losing trust in someone? | ■ Loss of position in family? |
| ■ Losing trust in something? | ■ Loss of image, reputation? |
| ■ A serious illness? | ■ Loss of safety (e.g., cyberbullying) |
| ■ A serious accident? | ■ Loss of a relied-upon strength? |
| ■ A change in family or life that made it different from before? | ■ Loss of a sibling relationship? |
| ■ The loss of a special friendship? | ■ Estrangement from parent? |
| ■ Being disappointed in someone? | ■ Loss of a romantic relationship? |
| | ■ Feelings? How long? |

What Kinds of Losses?

- How might these be **experienced uniquely** by gifted kids?
- What **“extra”** kinds might be experienced only by gifted kids?
- Change (Change → Loss → Grief)
(All change requires adjustments.)
We can frame situations and responses as LOSS—to help kids make sense of feelings.

Negative Life Events (N = 91)

as reported by parents in a longitudinal study

- (94) Death in immediate or extended family
- (77) Serious illness in immediate or extended family
- (15) New or chronic illness: self
- (13) Change in family constellation
- (10) Injury and/or surgery
- (10) Death of a friend (adult or age peer)*
- (6) Car accident (driver, passenger)
- (6) Moving to school for gifted students (grades 2-5)
- (4) Incarceration of parent (3) or well-liked teacher (1)*
- (3) Family relocation (remained in city and in study)
- (3) Mental-illness diagnosis: self
- (2) Family financial reversal
- (2) Substance-abuse treatment: driving under the influence*
- (1) Severe personality conflict with teacher*
- (1) Sexual abuse: self as victim*

* not on checklist: added

Death Loss

- “I experienced death in my immediate family for the first time in middle school—three funerals within a month. Life was not as carefree as it used to be.”
- “Brought about questions about life in general.”
- **It’s not pathology to grieve.**

Serious Health Issues

- [back disease, which marked the end of gymnastics]
“Gymnastics had always been a huge part of my life, and now it was gone.”
- [asthma diagnosis]
“Changed my self-image, caused physical pain and mental stress.”

Perceptions: Social Deficit

- “too serious”
- “too caring”
- “getting worked up over minor things”
- “blowing things out of proportion”
- “letting emotions boil inside”
- “being too trusting.”
- “not outgoing”
- “not open”
- “shy”
- “feeling insignificant”
- “self-conscious”
- “feeling inadequate”
- “dorkiness”
- “social awkwardness”

Loneliness

- “All grades, except senior year, **trying to gain acceptance** from people my age. Many bouts of severe depression. *In the end, I had to stop caring to keep from crying.*”
- “shuffling between friends, **trying to find where I belong**”
- “being anti-social due to **lack of knowledge in such areas.**”
- “Middle school, just a terrible time—**lonely, awkward, irritating**—made me both shy and paranoid.”

Responding to Major Family Loss

- Protect parent from “toxicity”
- Take care of the parent
(by not expressing grief, crying, talking about it)
- Children—can’t stay in grief long at a time
- Maybe can’t talk for a long time at one time, but need to talk (so be ready)
- Yes, even young children grieve.
- Asynchronous development

Many GT-related Kinds . . .

- **Multipotentiality and choice dilemmas**
- **Peer relationships:** friendships lost if pursue dreams
- **Smart Girls:** the thorns of being “different”
- **Developmental transitions:** loss of childhood; loss of “special” status; losses related to the “dream of school”; puberty; to middle school; leaving home)
- **Losses for high achievers:** fun, time, play, friends, experiences, rebellion, differentiation
- **Losses for underachievers:** maybe loss of approval of significant adults; college choice; loss of some friends; loss of parent pride
- **Loss of identity:** no longer with just one teacher
- **Parentified kids:** “bottom line” in family? Loss of childhood?

Not Exempt from More Universal Kinds

- **Family distress:** parents distracted, nonnurturing, preoccupied with self, unavailable
- **Suicidal ideation in a peer:** end of innocence
- **Deployment of parent**
- **Rape**
- **Trauma related to relocation, destruction, disruption**
- **Home invasion**
- **Sexual aggressivity (re: compliant, nice kids)**
- **Bullying**
- **Romantic break-up**
- **School violence (re: sense of safety)**
- **Terrorism/Fearful Threats/Shootings (in the news)**
- **Not making a team; rejection by friends**
- **Struggling with higher math**

“Absence”

- **Not socially/emotionally equipped** to handle what cognitive is wrestling with (e.g., events)
- **Anxieties:** precocious existential concerns
- **Loneliness:** no intellectual peers
- **Attention from school counselors**
- **What they NEED** from peer relationships
- **“Absent” parents** (work, divorce, depression . . .)

Negative Feedback

What is the loss?

- **If they hear only criticism**, and we never point out small, positive things about them, they miss important, crucial feedback, potentially affecting their sense of self.
- **What they think of themselves**—is negative.
- **How can we affirm their strengths**, their desirable qualities—including non-performance-related strengths?
- **They need to hear about their “true qualities.”**
- **They need “true compliments.”**

Counseling re: Loss

- **Differential counseling**
(helping them make sense of giftedness, behavior, feelings)
- **Information about giftedness, sexuality.** (to help **cognitive control**).
- **Giftedness as a risk factor**
- **Small-groups homogeneous re: age and ability** focused on social/emotional
- **Counselor biases re: high achievers, underachievers**
- **If in awe of intellectual nimbleness**—not able to “counsel” them
- **GT kids may not be able to lean** on anyone, be open, express
- **Adult vocabulary, but approach must match emotional-developmental stage**
- **Their humanness**—scared, struggling, doubting
- **Recognize parental anxieties:** Take burden off parents’ shoulders
- **Help parents model making mistakes, being sad, playing**
- **Being in the moment** (not preoccupied with the future)
- **Posture: achievement isn’t everything**
- **Paying attention to developmental level, asynchronous development**
(cognitive vis á vis social/emotional)

Disenfranchised Grief:

Loss Unrecognized

- Death of a negligent, abusive parent (*lost opportunities* for a decent relationship; lost childhood; loss of opportunity to get to know the father as an adult; lost opportunity to confront, be angry AT the parent)
- Mom's *miscarriage*
- *Blending families*—"not how it used to be"; "displaced" in the family hierarchy, family constellation; *loss of "place"*
- *Sibling to college*; exchange student
- *Parent distracted* by own social needs
- *School disappointing*; teacher biases
- Not being able to connect, as anticipated, with a therapist
- *Image* ("cracked")
- *Self-disenfranchisement* if feeling guilty re: sadness
- *Sense of self* (more able kids at a *summer program* for gifted kids)

Counselor Talk

- "Makes sense" (feelings, distress)
- Strengths-focus
- No "cheerleading"
- Resilience information
- Real talk
- Validation, reflection of feelings
- Listening—100% present
- Self-disclosure—No!

"Processing"—Anything!

Ask Kids These Kinds of Questions

- "What was it like today to talk about this complicated topic?"
- "How did that feel when she said that to him?"
- "What were you feeling when he was talking about that?"
- "How did it feel to give her that compliment?"
- "How did it feel to get that compliment?"
- "Today some impressive things happened in your group. How did you accomplish that?"
- "What did you gain from this discussion?"
- "What might you remember from this discussion later?"
- "How did you feel during the competition?"

Nonmainstream gifted students may not reach their potential because teachers and counselors are not aware that **differences in cultural values** may preclude "**demonstrated gifted behaviors,**" and some cultures may actually not encourage those behaviors.

Dominant-Culture Teachers as Gatekeepers: Preferences (Qualitative data—themes)

- Individual, competitive, conspicuous achievement
- Organization, precision
- Production (of a familiar variety)
- Strong work ethic (of a familiar variety)
- Eagerness to learn, high motivation (of a familiar variety)

Individual, Competitive, Conspicuous Achievement (Dominant-culture Teachers)

What does it look like?

- Academic achievement
- Hard-working, conscientious, productive, extra effort, "going beyond"
- Competitive
- "Perfection"—thorough, detailed, precise
- Highly organized
- "top," winning awards
- Domain-specific strengths

Knowledge, Learning (a Theme)

- Strong knowledge base
- Memory
- Higher-level thinking skills
- “Quickness”
- Eager learner
- Highly motivated, challenge-seeking
- Being interested (in the subject matter)

Major Themes in Teacher Language, Defending their Nominations

- Behavior
- Verbal ability, articulateness, assertiveness
- Family and socioeconomic status
- Work ethic
- Social skills

Nonmainstream Values

- Significant minority values sometimes do not fit well in the individualistic, competitive, conspicuous-achievement-oriented culture of mainstream schools.
- The dominant culture—white, middle-class, “mainstream,” historically Northern European—drives the culture—and IS a culture.
- Asked of dominant-culture interviewees: “What is strange about the dominant culture?”

Five Nonmainstream Communities: Extension of the Study

- Latinos
- Immigrant Asians
- African Americans
- American Indians
- Low-income Anglo Americans

Thematic analysis of language in response to “Who would you nominate as ‘gifted’?”

Latinos: Who is “gifted”? (Themes)

- Arts as expression, not “achievement”
- Humility, instead of self-promotion or assertiveness
- Community service, but not through organized activities
- Personal responsibility to help extended family

OTHER LATINO VALUES (Spindler & Spindler, 1990)

- Collaborative, not competitive, relationships
- Generous hospitality, without expectation of reciprocity
- High respect for parents, even after leaving home
- Informal networking for emotional, social support
- Reliance on personalized relationship with public service personnel
- Emphasis on women as mothers, males as economic support and disciplinarians
- Stoicism in the face of hardship
- Privacy and respectful distance from conspicuous consumption

Recent Immigrant Asians: Who is “gifted”? (Themes)

- Education (as related to adaptation)
- Adaptation
- Caring for Family
- Asceticism and Hard Work for the Future

African Americans:

Who is “gifted”? (Themes, in rank order)

- **Selfless contribution** to the neighborhood, including caretaking, nurturing of children “doing nice, thoughtful things,” being a concerned neighbor
- **Handiwork**—“making something out of nothing,” making something “a work of art”
- **Concern for family, emphasis on children**
- **Wisdom** (as contrasted with knowledge)
- **Ability to inspire** others to higher level
- **Being hard-working**, but not tied to material gain

American Indians:

Who is “gifted”? (No nominations)

- “We don’t believe in standing out.”
- **“You don’t put yourself above anyone.”**
- “Can blend the cultures, find satisfaction in both, without being assimilated”
- **“They’d have to speak the language.”**
- “It’s not ‘I did this.’”
- **Can separate the cultures when necessary, while practicing traditional religion**
- “taking an active role in monitoring the changes in the tribe so the culture is still intact for the next generation”

American Indian Culture Teachers

(no nominations, but discussed observations)

- “formulating answers before speaking”
- “creativity in art, stories, thinking”
- “having a unique approach to a problem”
- “excitement about their work”
- “asking for more answers than I know”
- “thinking of how it will affect family”
- “intense interest”
- “excited about their work”

Low-income Anglos:

Who is “gifted”?

- Helping others, listening, advising
- Child-rearing, teaching the young
- Manual dexterity, creativity, versatility
- Academic ability with practical application
- Overcoming adversity
- Non-bookish learning

Common Themes Among Nonmainstream Groups

- Concern for family, children
- Helping others, community, listening
- Respect for elderly, parents
- Stoicism in face of adversity
- Manual dexterity
- Non-bookish Learning
- Not “showing what you know”

What Can We Conclude?

In our complex, global society, it is increasingly important to value

- Networking
- Collaboration
- Nonjudgmental listening
- Humility
- Family loyalty and support
- The wisdom of age
- Expressive arts
- Respect for authority
- Automatic deference to teachers
- De-emphasis on the trappings of social status

These are several of the many deeply held values in minority groups in the United States which contrast some of the primary values of the dominant culture.

Implications for Educators

- Awareness-raising regarding culture value-orientations, continuum of acculturation
- Non-hierarchical view of value-orientations
- Valuing, affirming, **learning FROM**, not just “tolerating”
- A non-hierarchical view of “goodness” and “ability”: What does the culture take pride in? What is valuable? What is “good”? What is instilled in children?
- How can mainstream educators and counselors “connect” with nonmainstream children?