






What Educators Should Know about the Social/Emotional Development of Gifted Kids



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We don't know much
about the inner world of
gifted kids.
Who should we be
concerned about?




Gifted students
are socially and
emotionally complex,
highly idiosyncratic, and
uniquely at risk
for poor educational and
personal outcomes.




Gifted kids are among
the "**ALL CHILDREN**"
school counselors are to
address needs of.



Gifted students face
**universal developmental
tasks**, but their
experience of development
is qualitatively different
from the experience
of their less able age peers.



Gifted At Risk?

- For **poor educational outcomes**
 - For **despair**—IF the school context is hostile, uncomfortable, a poor fit
 - For **depression/suicide, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, bullying** and other harassment, **loneliness**, exclusion and self-consciousness associated with "being different," debilitating **perfectionism**
 - For **poor career outcomes**
 - For developmental "stuckness" (what are the "tasks"?)
 - For **enduring relationship concerns**
 - Informal survey: 1/3 of middle-school G/T kids had experienced **depression and suicidal ideation**.
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Needs, Concerns

(Who was studied when determining "needs"?)

- Incidence of **psychopathology** in gifted population—at least comparable to that in the general population
- Stressors not unique, but **intensity, sensitivity** may contribute to problematic responses to stressors (family transitions, death, loss, change, trauma)
- Personality factors
- Biochemical, neurological predispositions
- Teasing, bullying
- Isolation
- Perfectionism, anxiety
- Asynchronies
- **High achievement may mask great distress**
- May perceive counselors as "for other kids"

Heightened Sensitivity: Cognitive—not "Emotion"

Implications . . .

- for **Family Transitions**
- for **Developmental Transitions**
- for **School Transitions**
- for **Change, Loss—Negative Life Events**
- for **Sensory Stimuli**
- **Rapid information-processing**—therefore responding to many stimuli, feelings, thoughts (more areas of the brain are "firing" in brains of gifted persons)

Dabrowski: **Overexcitabilities**

(potential effect on relationships with teacher, peers, family)

- Psychomotor
- Intellectual
- Emotional
- Imaginational
- Sensual
- **Theory of "positive disintegration"**
(useful for helping gifted kids make sense of themselves, feel hope, find meaning in **extreme struggles**)

Characteristics: A matter of **degree**

- **Intensity**
- **Stress** (pressures from self, others)
- **Denied, Controlled Emotions**
- **Control of Environment**
- **Protection of Image**
- **"Fix-yourself" assumptions**
- **Can't ask for help/Always ask for help**
- **Androgyny**
- **Asynchronous development**

Peterson study: **Perfectionism** (8-10, 1-10 scale)

- 32% *highly* critical of others
- 51% *highly* self-critical
- 15% *very* hard to begin something
- 29% *very* hard on self when make mistakes
- 11% "**definitely**" don't "play" well in life
- 18% don't enjoy doing a task, project *at all*
- 32% feel *very* inferior to others, generally

Characteristics, Concerns

- Intense idealism, sense of justice/fairness
- Doubts about ability (*Dweck*)
(depending on the child's view of "intelligence")
- Stress-related disorders
(e.g., **depression, eating disorders, insomnia**)
- The importance of "being known"
- Inappropriate family responsibilities, roles because of exceptional ability
- Difficult explaining "**the steps**" of solving a problem
- Poor fit with "more and faster" academics

Concerns, Vulnerability

Anxiety (OCD, Aspergers, school phobia, perfectionism, social, tests, family safety, future, development, parent marriage)

Existential concerns (at a young age)

Little room to rebel?

Sense of "differentness," sense of inferiority

Interpersonal problems

(e.g., bullying, loneliness, perspective-taking, no "mind mates," bossiness, inability to connect intellectually)

Perfectionism

(re: risk-taking, doing>being, unreasonable standards, can't begin/end/enjoy, product>process, hung up on mistakes, focused on "right" way, self-critical, critical of others, need for control)



Counselors and teachers
need to enter their inner
world respectfully and
nonjudgmentally,
without assumptions based
on common stereotypes.



How to Help Gifted Kids Become Anxious, Unbalanced

- Focusing only on **achievement**, performance (Parents: "How did you DO on the test?")
- Creating dependence, **overfunctioning**
- Insisting on "**perfection**" (in an already hard-wired child)
- Demeaning the concept of "**play**"
- **Overstructuring** their time
- Sending mixed, **paradoxical parenting messages**
- Forgetting their **age** (teachers, parents, coaches)
- Assuming that all "undesirable behaviors" are due to **giftedness**
- Talking about **products** more than **process**



Letting Them be Children

- Recognizing **asynchronous development**
- Recognizing the potential distress of **asynchrony**
- **Not being judgmental and critical** regarding what they're "not mature" about
- **Encouraging play**
- **Encouraging noncompetitive activities**
- Offering support re: **strengths**
- Offering statements without "an edge"
- Being someone different from adults preoccupied with their **performance or nonperformance**
- Paying attention to them **in the PRESENT**



Primary Grades: Concerns

- **Transition to School**: if highly verbal; if individual focus at home; if mostly adult conversation; if eager expectation
- **Developmental transitions** (for child and parent)
- **Entering School**—parental-control issues; less individualized attention; child-as-extension-of-parent issues; perfectionism; parents' "Am I doing enough"; parental → child anxieties
- **Small-motor skills** vs. rapid information-processing
- What feels **in control** and **out of control**?
- The need for **credible feedback** about **strengths** (non-academic), not "cheerleading"
- **Disparity in backgrounds**, enrichment, experiences



Middle Elementary: Possible Areas of Emphasis related to **Career Development**

- Early interest, concerns, anxieties about careers—respond!
- **Early/premature foreclosure**—avoid! No need to decide **NOW**.
- **Multipotentiality** (loss/grief issues?)
- **Fit**: Interests, Values, Skills/Talents, Personality (re: career)
- Note: The potential for strong interests developing into a career
- Arranging for kids to **SEE a career** (in action) (one-day shadowing of engineers, neon artist, lawyer, judge, business owner)
- Exposure to new areas during college, jobs, internships
- Eventual need to select a major in college (but not NOW)
- Perfectionistic "paralysis" re: perfect major, college, location.
- Considering **teaching as a career** for gifted individuals with appropriate strengths
- **Underachievement as related to career development** (they may be thinking more creatively than their peers or parents are)



Middle Elementary: Child and Parent Development

- **Parental memories of own experiences** (social/emotional/family)
- Overscheduling at home?
- Little **support for school** at home?
- Non-academic activities? Small-group discussion?
- Underachievement may become established? Why?
- **Differences from year to year** re: test scores
- Sensitivity to teacher-student mismatch re: **teaching/learning styles**

Upper Elementary, Early Middle School

- Age 9-12—less parental control; peer-group influences; catastrophic visions; mirror images; tendency to "keep 'em busy," fears regarding "doing enough?"
- Puberty—parents taking it personally, insecurely; being "needy," reliving own adolescence; creating what is most feared?
- When achievement "really matters"—no other topic of conversation; "doing" valued more than "being"
- Child's concerns about sexual orientation? Abandonment fears? Would disappoint invested adults?
- Thinking about sexuality in general

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) (prepare them for college social scene?)
- **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 students experience increasingly higher stress as they move through the school years.

Stress Levels: Elementary Middle School High School

1 xxxxxxxxxxxx	1	1 xx
2 xxxxxxxxxxxx	2 xxxx	2 xxx
3 xxxxxxxxxxxx	3 xxx	3 x
4 xxx	4 xxxxxxxx	4 xx
5 xxxx	5 xxxxxxxxxx	5 xxxx
6 xx	6 xxxxxx	6 xxxxxxxxxx
7 x	7 xxxxxx	7 xxxxxxxxxx
8 x	8 xxxxxxxx	8 xxxxxxxxxxxxxx
	9 xxx	9 xxxxxxxx
	10 xx	10 xxxxx

An Identification Issue: Life Events Study

In those identified (N = 70):

24 discrepancies (> 20 percentile points) of achievement-subtest scores over time—common in language and social studies, but also in science, math, and reading.

(Important information for those who use ONE year's test scores for screening for gifted programs)

What about the gifted who aren't identified?

"What Should Teachers Understand About Kids Like You?"

Stress
Sensitivity (hidden, silent)
 Not necessarily more mature
Difficulty with criticism
 Not caring about school as much as they think
Being different
 No life outside of school
Isolation, hostility, ridicule
 Over-involvement
Family stress—"school may be a safe haven"
Resentful Teachers
Perfectionism
 "Trying too hard"
Apathy—"hard to overcome"
 Don't want to be singled out
Need gentle feedback
Need for varied teaching styles
 Need for optimism in teachers
Need to connect to community
 Need for creative output
Need for unconditional acceptance—more than just their achievement matters

Kids Who Don't Fit Common Stereotypes

whose lives are extremely chaotic,
 who are disadvantaged,
 who lack support and positive role models,
 who wrestle with fears and doubt,
 who are finding their own way,
 whose high ability may never have been acknowledged or nurtured,
 who may or may not respect their parents (but recognize that "family is all they've got").

Who, of your students, comes to mind?

What About Non-stereotypical Gifted Kids?

- What about enrichment, remediation?
 - Must they affirm teachers through their work?
 - What about **developmental lag**?
 - What about life circumstances?
 - How can we affirm ability when it isn't being demonstrated ... or if kids aren't "likeable"?
 - How sensitive should programs be to troubled lives?
 - Must they "fit" a program (instead of vice versa)?
 - How can we *stand beside them* as they grow up?
 - One message? "You need to be **more selfish** re: school."
 - Do we believe in a person's ability to change?
- Can we predict the future, at only one stage?

Gifted students with learning and other disabilities
 may not be identified as gifted, may miss special services for both giftedness and disabilities, and may not be affirmed for their abilities.

Seeing them only as performers or non-performers...
 not believing that they could have problems,
 given their image,
 the stereotypes,
 the smiles,
 the apparent social ease

Gifted students want to be known as more than just performers or non-performers.
 They want to "be known"—a whole person.

Being "Known" and Appreciated as More than Just a Performer or Non-performer

- As a child, adolescent
- As a complex individual
- As more than "achiever," "underachiever"
- As more than "performer," "nonperformer"
- As a son, daughter, grandson/daughter
- As worth attention
- As being interesting and worthy of contact
- As having intelligence

All gifted students, even though they wear a façade of invulnerability, worry about the future, need support, want to be taken seriously, are sensitive to family tension, and may feel stressed, angry, guilty, socially inept, discouraged, and maybe even depressed . . .



. . . but they may lack **expressive language**, want to protect the image they have crafted (and may be imprisoned by), want to *protect* others, and don't want to disappoint.

They need opportunities to **learn** expressive language.
They need nonjudgmental listeners.
They need opportunities to normalize feelings.

Gifted students may not lean on others for help, including school counselors, even when it is desperately needed.


Gifted Kids and School Counselors

Perhaps because of "guilt over gifts," or because of the **perception** that school counselors are mostly focused on students who fit more stereotypical risk factors, or because they are **not aware of the scope of, or the roles involved in, school counseling**, gifted kids often do not seek out school counselors for help when in distress or even for career and college planning.



Educators,
including school counselors,
may have **attitudes**
about gifted students
that potentially
interfere
with the helping
relationship.


Self-reflection




Check our **biases** about gifted kids.
Check out **attitudes** about gifted kids.
Can we be **comfortable** with them?
Can we be **fully present**, without feeling
intimidated or insecure or less able—or
judgmental?
What are our **feelings about underachievers**?
What are our **feelings about high achievers**?
What are our **feelings about their parents**?
Can we avoid thinking in stereotypes?




Attitudes Interfering with the Relationship





- 
- ~ Needing to be "one up"
 - ~ Competing with them
 - ~ Envyng them
 - ~ Feeling inferior intellectually
 - ~ "Putting them in their place"
 - ~ Missing their complexity
 - ~ Not recognizing their vulnerability
 - ~ Not seeing them holistically
 - ~ Not seeing them developmentally
 - ~ Being **in awe** of them
(an effect on the relationship?)



Life happens.
Gifted kids are not exempt from
trauma;
family dissolution and
reconfiguration;
serious illness, accidents, injury;
parental unemployment;
frequent relocation;
other family distress.



Life events can have an
impact on a child's ability
to accomplish
development tasks at an
expected time.



Negative life events,
trauma, family distress
can be a factor in **high**
achievement—
and **underachievement**.

Developmental Challenges

- Competence
- Identity
- Direction
- Relationships
- Sexual Identity
- Male and Female (what is expected? What is acceptable in this context?)

Developmental challenges underlie much of **underachievement**.


Developmental "Stuckness"

- At what stage?
- With what developmental task?
- At what age?
- Help them to make sense of it.
- Talk about DEVELOPMENT!
- Counselors are developmental specialists.
- Underachievement might have a developmental function, may represent courage—or depression.

Whatever we do/don't do, including acceleration and differentiation, has implications for social and emotional well being.

How can educators, coaches, and directors (who are not counselors) help them?

By not being afraid of emotion, not being afraid of what we'll hear, not assuming responsibility for "fixing" them, being **interested** in their lives, without being voyeurs, staying **poised** and **nonjudgmental**, no matter what we hear, remembering they are human--confused, sad, struggling, anxious, doubting, etc., etc.



We are most helpful when we
can meet them **where they**

ARE,

not where we (or others)
think they **SHOULD** be.

That's when they can relax,
be themselves, **feel**, and feel
connected.

