

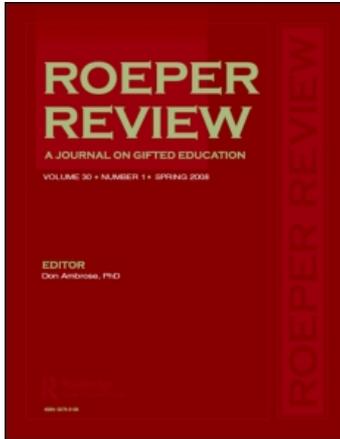
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## Roeper Review

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792156624>

## Spiritual sensitivity in gifted children

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Online publication date: 20 January 2010

To cite this Article Lovecky, Deirdre V.(1998) 'Spiritual sensitivity in gifted children', Roeper Review, 20: 3, 178 — 183

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/02783199809553887

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783199809553887>

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strength and courage, new situations of which they'll have no forewarning?

I think we can. But not by conveying only knowledge, not by challenging only the intellect, not even the multifaceted intelligence, not by teaching only the tried and tested methods of the past, nor by the acquisition of a series of skills or techniques that very soon become obsolete and unusable.

Emotional maturity is an essential condition for the development of every individual; and therefore, the sooner we achieve the sensitive balance between the components of the young child's self, the better we can prevent difficulties in his development. This will also contribute to a stronger and more stable personality structure in the adult, who can communicate well with others and achieve the maximum from his capabilities and strengths. I feel that the concept

of emotional maturity is an entire complex subject of the utmost importance.

Emotional maturity develops throughout one's life; however, it is very important that parents and teachers be aware that the emotional sphere must be nurtured in one's intelligence, and intelligence in one's emotions, from an early age. This is what we refer to as the literacy of the comprehensive personality.

The seed that we plant in early childhood will bear fruit not only during one's active life but throughout one's various ages. Its climax will occur during old age, when each of our selves will act on basic and stable ground in the shrinking and withering world which surrounds the elderly person. Attention paid to emotional maturity in early childhood is, therefore, a long term investment in man's existence.

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## Spiritual Sensitivity in Gifted Children\*

*Deirdre V. Lovecky*

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*Starting from an early age, some gifted children show evidence of spiritual sensitivity. These children understand the universality of spiritual concepts such as forgiveness of others, develop spiritual self-awareness through asking questions and finding spiritual problems to solve, develop a systematic philosophy of life and death, or are seekers of the transcendent in the universe, other people and themselves. Spiritual sensitivity encompasses those children who develop knowledge of spiritual concepts and examine belief systems in advance of age peers, those who act from a desire to relieve the suffering of others and those who show evidence of transcendent or mystical experiences. This article explores the concept of spiritual sensitivity, examines the role of asynchrony in the development of spiritual concerns, and offers examples of how gifted children experience these concerns in their everyday lives.*

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Ruby Bridges, at age six, was one of the children chosen to integrate the New Orleans Public Schools in the early 1960's. At age 10, she observed that she knew she had to be the one to do it, to walk through the mobs of screaming, spitting white people; she was God's Ruby. She survived the ordeal emotionally intact because of her strong religious faith. As she walked through the mobs, she prayed for those

people. Afterwards, as people wrote her letters, she came to see that she was walking for many (Coles, 1986).

Tom, at age 10, was baptized into the Baptist Church. He felt drawn to the power of the spiritual especially as exemplified by the minister to whom he felt a deep personal connection. Yet, at age 11, Tom's faith underwent a profound change. He attributed this to his experience in looking at the Milky Way through a telescope, and first seeing the moons of Jupiter. He reported remembering that he felt life at that moment exceeded his expectations in an absolute and wonderful way, and left him stunned. He opened his heart to the universe that night with a feeling of awe and thanksgiving that has never really left him, even at the most painful and disappointing moments of his later life. This was a truly transcendent moment and from that day on, he became a seeker of the transcendent in himself and others.

There have been few studies of the spiritual concerns of children. There has been even less written about the spirituality of gifted children, and what is available is anecdotal. Nevertheless, this anecdotal evidence is rich and compelling. Those gifted children who report on spiritual concerns (and many do not) show complex responses. How these differ from those of more

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\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the National Association for Gifted Children forty-third annual convention, Indianapolis, IN, Friday, November 1, 1996. In order to protect confidentiality, all names and identifying details have been changed for all examples used in this article. In some cases, children described are composites of several children; in other cases, parents have given permission for the description of their child.

*Manuscript submitted January, 1997.  
Revision accepted September, 1997.*

average children can only be inferred from comparisons to the few studies of children's spirituality. Unfortunately, research in the fields of moral and spiritual development makes no distinction among intellectual levels of subjects. Thus, what is reported with the assumption of being average children's responses may, in fact, not be. The use of anecdotal data from gifted children at least gives the basis for understanding how this particular population understands spiritual issues and may be the starting point for further research about differences.

Spiritual sensitivity is the term used to define the spiritual concerns of gifted children. It has both cognitive and emotional aspects. In gifted children, spiritual sensitivity encompasses precocious questioning, unusual types of questions asked at an early age, and reported experiences of transcendent moments. It also encompasses areas of faith and compassion. Spiritual sensitivity does not necessarily mean that the child or family belong to a religion or even believe in a Supreme Being. The seeking of the transcendent may be an experience of connection to something larger than oneself, to nature, the universe, or as an inner experience of wonder and awe.

In the literature, Hollingworth (1942) undertook the most extensive study of exceptionally gifted children's moral and spiritual development. Child A, between the ages of six and eight (Mental Age 12-15; IQ 191) was very religious. Yet, by age nine (MA 18), he no longer devoted himself to religious pursuits. Child E, at age eight, was confirmed in the Episcopal Church. He had decided to become a minister before age five, and was ready for ordination as a deacon by age 16, but had to wait until age 21 to do so. He also made original contributions to historical, philosophical and religious literature starting at age 10 when he made an original discovery in connection to the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Old Testament).

Gross (1993) described the exceptional truthfulness and honesty of some of the exceptionally gifted children in her study. In fact, they had difficulty on the lie scale of several personality tests because they really never did behaviors most other people tend to take for granted.

Roeper (1995) reported the responses of several three-year-old children to hearing about the death of Robert Kennedy. One child had his mother write a letter to the Kennedy children empathizing with them and recalling the death of his own father. Another child played dead and discussed the concept of what death was with her mother.

Matthews (1980, 1994), described spiritual questions and concerns of several gifted children. He recalled an incident from his own childhood in which he puzzled over the beginning of the world. At about age six he posed the question: "Supposing that God created the world at some particular time, how is it that the world looks as if it had been going on forever?" (1994, p. 13). When his mother could not help him answer the question, he developed an analogy that satisfied him. He decided that the creation of the world was like looking at a completed circle. If one saw the circle being drawn, one knew the beginning, but the completed circle gave no clue as to its beginning; the end connected up with the beginning in a perfect way. It is little wonder that Matthews grew up to become a philosopher!

Another child, Michael (Matthews, personal communication, January 3, 1996) became a mathematician, was a Rhodes Scholar and has made contributions to the discovery of infinite minimal surfaces. At age seven, Michael was part of a discussion about whether the universe is infinite or not. He thought that the universe could not be infinite or there would be no place in it for God. He also felt more immediately that if the

universe were infinite there would be no sense of anything being any particular place, that is, there are no locations within infinity and so no place for anything to be (Matthews, 1980).

The literature describes unusual, mystical experiences of some gifted children. Hollingworth (1942) mentioned child H who wrote a poem, at age 10, called, "The Gospel of Intolerance," which later won a prize in a poetry contest. This poem was written without much fore-thought and was experienced as emerging full-blown from a source outside herself. This same unconscious process was described by Feldman (1986) for two of the children in his study, Randy and Adam. Three separate episodes of unusual flow of mystical ideas were attributed to Randy. For example, at age seven he announced: "Truth is the word of being. People who are questioned by the being word must be answered..." (p. 193). Adam was described as having experiences in which he remembered details from other lives, pre-natal and neonatal experiences and some psychic manifestations of spirits.

At age five, Pearce's (1985) son delivered a long discourse on the relationship of God and man using complex theological terms and an organized coherent pattern of analysis. Afterwards he left for school, and when he returned hours later, had no recollection of the discourse which had so staggered his philosopher father.

These mystical experiences are somewhat akin to the selection process for spiritual leaders in some religions. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism, the Dalai Lama is found as a very young child. This child, known for unusual spiritual awareness, is able to select from among many choices the items belonging to the Lama he will replace. The present Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, was about four years old at the time of his discovery. The movie, "Little Buddha" (Thomas & Bertolucci, 1994) gave a poignant account of this selection process for several young children.

How mystical experiences occur, and what they represent in terms of developmental cognitive functioning is unknown. Such experiences have been recorded throughout history, often in the context of religious ecstasy, and are by no means limited to young gifted children.

### Theories of Spiritual Development

The sparseness of literature on spiritual development may be due, in part, to difficulties of definition. For one thing, the same examples of what exemplify the highest stages of moral development are also used to define the highest stages of spiritual development. Discussions of spirituality also may range in focus from discussions about religion to discussions about self-actualization.

Spirituality is not the same as religion, though both share common aspects such as growth towards a transcendent center. Growth in spirituality also encompasses ideals common to many of the major world's religions such as the Buddhist idea of loving-kindness and the universal goals of compassion and forgiveness. The few theories that describe spiritual development independent of a specific religious tradition do not show the dichotomy of reason and compassion that is so pervasive in the moral development literature. Indeed, theories of spiritual development are more integrative of both aspects. Nevertheless, most theories begin in late adolescence because they require a differentiated and autonomous self that can reason abstractly. Children, who are still in the process of forming selves and learning to reason abstractly, are not seen as capable of spiritual development. This is not to say that these authors see children as unspiritual, just that they are not

viewed as capable of achieving the self-transformation upon which spiritual development, in its highest stages, depends. The spiritual concerns of children are thus, irrelevant; however, to understand what spiritual sensitivity in childhood entails, it is necessary to study how children are spiritually aware. Exploring the stages through which children develop as well as studying anecdotal evidence from exceptional children provide two different kinds of evidence.

Fowler (1981) is a stage theorist who described eight stages of faith (spiritual) development starting with infancy and ending with a universal faith much like Kohlberg's (1984) final stages, and Dabrowski's (Piechowski, 1979) highest levels. Fowler (1981) included children because, to him, spiritual development is a life-long process. In Fowler's schema, the infant stage is a pre-stage in which children first begin to learn about faith by developing basic faith in people. As children grow in ability to form relationships, to develop empathy and reciprocity, they grow in spirituality.

Ages two to seven are the *Intuitive-Projective stage*. Young children explore the use of language, fantasy and imagination. Not yet able to completely separate reality from fantasy, their thought processes are more intuitive, holistic, and mood-based. Self-development continues with beginning awareness of individual feelings and experiences, but similarity to others is emphasized. Children are egocentric and unable to assume another's perspective.

Ages seven to twelve are the *Mythical-Literal stage*. Older children develop individual life stories to organize experience. They explore the difference between real and unreal, self and other. Thought is more linear and logical; children are more able to separate fantasy from reality. They are more able to consider another's point of view, and base more decisions on attaining reciprocal fairness and justice.

The *Synthetic-Conventional stage* occurs from ages 12 and 21. Young people develop a personal ideology grounded in rules, outside authorities, and beliefs. Ideology is rational and coherent because young people are more self-aware and able to reason logically. They start to develop independent identities but are still subject to the pressures of peers' judgments about values (Fowler, 1981).

In the literature there are also some examples of non-stage theorists who explore children's spiritual development from a more holistic point of view. Taylor (1989) interviewed 17 children from ages 4 through 12 and placed them into six categories of spirituality. The sensitivity of the children to spiritual concerns was evident with concerns about death particularly striking. More than concerns about issues though, the vignettes recorded by Taylor show spirituality to be a process in which depth of understanding might change over the course of several moments. Since Taylor (1989) also included drawings, it was possible to assess high intellectual potential in some of these children.

Sweet and Fahs (1930) studied spiritual development of eight-year-old children in a Sunday School class at the Union Theological Center. Over the course of a year, the children grew in appreciation of their own strengths and weaknesses, in tolerance of others' weaknesses and in conceptualizations of what pathways they needed to follow to be their better selves. In a discussion about whether or not there is a God, initiated by the children, they felt able to explore various ideas, including that each person must work out what God is like and that no one knows for sure. Contrast the concerns expressed by these children (Sweet & Fahs, 1930) with the expectations of the Mythical-Literal stage postulated by Fowler (1981). For one thing, they seem more able to tolerate differences and to

understand others' perspectives than expected. Also, they are much more self-aware.

Coles (1990) explored a number of issues with children pertaining to religion, God and spirituality. He showed quite clearly that young children think about spiritual issues. One nine-year-old girl, for example, told Coles: "I don't want to waste my time here on this earth... I'm so happy I've been given this time here! Think of all the people the Lord hasn't sent here!" (p. 135).

Other children expressed their experiences of wonder and transcendence to Coles (1990). For example, two children from agnostic homes, ages 11 and 12, expressed a sense of unity with the cosmos. One boy reported looking at Van Gogh's painting, "Wheat Fields and Cypress Trees." Later, while listening to the wind in the trees, he had a transcendent experience as he imagined what Van Gogh must have felt. The boy stated he didn't know if there was a God, there was no real evidence that God existed, but when he listened to the wind in the trees he felt he was part of a whole.

Coles saw these young children and adolescents as pilgrims on life journeys, starting spiritual wondering at early ages and growing in richness of experience over time. Young children were by no means seen as spiritually inferior or less developed than older ones. Like Matthews' (1994) exploration of moral development, Coles (1990) appears to view spirituality as a process in which different paradigms develop over time dependent on what came before, but not supplanting that first formulation.

### The Problem of Asynchrony

Giftedness can be defined as "asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity" (The Columbus Group, 1991). Asynchrony is the discrepancy among rates of cognitive, emotional and physical development. Gifted children show greater asynchrony among areas of development than do average children (Silverman, 1995). There may also be within-area discrepancies with some aspects of development more advanced, and others less so. Thus, a child may know what is the right thing to do, but still be unable to act upon that knowledge.

Since spiritual sensitivity has both intellectual and emotional components, asynchrony may occur as gifted children attempt to grapple with spiritual issues. For example, young gifted children may ask content-related questions without recognizing the potential emotional impact. For example, the four-year-old child may be able to ask complex questions about the finality and universality of death, and then have difficulty coping with the fact now recognized that parents and self will also die.

It can also be difficult for children who ask questions that adults are not ready or unwilling to discuss. Thus, young children in some traditional religions may be discouraged from asking questions, or there may be no provision for those whose mental age, and consequent questions, are the same as older seekers. Melody, for example, at age six, started to question hell and damnation. Her pastor was unable to deal with these questions; it was only her mother who offered the necessary emotional climate for Melody to feel that she and her questions were both welcome and accepted.

Gifted children may need emotional reassurance when examining beliefs. Despite very high level questions, they may not be questioning matters of faith or religion. Instead, they

## Understanding Universality of Spiritual Concepts

may be trying to make sense of their feelings about an issue. For example, Madeline, age six, while riding in the car asked her mother if God would be angry at her if she did DNA cloning when she grew up. Madeline was aware of what cloning involved, was interested in genetics and science but wanted reassurance that she was not asking to do a job that she saw as belonging to God, that of creating things. What she required was that her mother discern the most salient aspect of the question for her – what makes God angry, and what might happen if God became angry at her.

Some gifted children also become confused because they accept the tenets of their religion but ask questions that challenge issues of faith. Constantine, age 12, for example, struggled with trying to decide how the world could have been created in seven days given the vast amount of knowledge he already knew about astrophysics and evolution. Though his religion did not adhere to a strict Biblical interpretation, Constantine seemed to focus on the truth or lack of it in the Biblical passages he read. He was confused by his need to have explanations fit his childhood beliefs while also fitting in new knowledge. Thus, despite exceptional reasoning skills (with an IQ in the 170+ range), he was still more age level in his acceptance of assumptions about outside authority. This asynchrony caused him much stress.

Many gifted young adolescents feel ready to make spiritual choices that are more usually made by older people. For example, they may recognize authority as internal rather than externally given, or systemize values into a coherent thesis for living at an age when most peers still accept outside authority and do not question values. Thus, Tom, the boy mentioned at the start of this article, recognized the need for questioning the tenets and values of his religion. By early adolescence, he started to recognize the necessity of finding his own answers.

### The Formation of Spiritual Paradigms

Because most theories of spiritual development view children's spirituality as different from adults', there is need of a theory that encompasses children's experience. Such a theory would involve spiritual sensitivity, that is, knowledge and reasoning, as well as, compassion and generosity of spirit. It would also encompass the experiences of those drawn to the transcendent. While many children may, in fact, follow the developmental path postulated by Fowler (1981), the experiences of the exceptions also have much to teach us about spiritual sensitivity.

Matthews (1994) described five dimensions across which moral development might take place: development of paradigms, use of defining characteristics, range of cases applicable, adjudication of conflicting moral claims, and use of moral imagination. This theory placed the moral development of children in context since the way children thought about moral issues was not necessarily less developed than that of adults, but lacked complexity and life experience. Children developed paradigms for terms of moral assessment, like just and unjust, that continued into adulthood. As the person grew in life experience, new paradigms arose to add complexity and diversity to moral responses, but the initial paradigms were not replaced (Matthews, 1994).

Children may also develop spiritual paradigms that give shape and meaning to their experience. These paradigms might have several dimensions: understanding the universality of spiritual concepts, development of spiritual self-awareness, development of a systematic philosophy of life and death, and seeking the transcendent.

As children grow in spiritual sensitivity, they refine their initial understanding of spiritual concepts such as the meaning of compassion or forgiveness of enemies. They do not replace earlier paradigms, but add more complex or additional models as these were defined by experience. Thus, a universal spiritual concept is kindness to others. A first paradigm of this might be sharing even when one doesn't want to. Later on, kindness might mean generosity and compassion. A third view is caring about those one doesn't like. A fourth step might be understanding the concept of taking on the suffering of others. An example of caring about those one doesn't like occurred with Anne, age nine.

Anne was in the fourth grade. Jimmy, the class problem, was in trouble almost every day. Jimmy was so bad the day before Valentine's Day that Ms. Ray forbade his participation in the next day's party. Further, Ms. Ray told the class not to give Jimmy any valentines. Everyone except Anne followed this directive. Anne, though she couldn't stand Jimmy, bought him the biggest valentine she could find, and left it on his desk. It was the only one he got. Anne did not open her cards or participate in the party. She sat with Jimmy until the class left. When she and Ms. Ray were alone, Anne took her valentines and dropped them in the trash in front of Ms. Ray. The teacher and Anne stared at each other, then without saying a word, Anne left (Lovecky, 1992).

Natalie Babbitt, the children's author, described an incident that occurred when she was seven or eight years old. Natalie took to heart the preaching that she was supposed to love her neighbor but felt she could not do so after a neighbor child purposely killed a cat with the garage door. Eventually, she decided she was just going to have to go to hell when she died because she just couldn't love this neighbor (Babbitt, 1996). Natalie's desire to do right thing in loving her neighbor suggests she understood the concept and its universal application to those we don't like.

### Development of Spiritual Self-awareness

Many gifted children appear to explore spiritual concepts and to develop awareness of their role in the universe. They do this by asking questions and finding creative spiritual problems to solve. These paradigms may involve theories about the origin and destiny of the universe, the place of God in the universe, the nature of God and God's relationship to humans, and questions about good and evil.

Questions and formulations about the origins of the universe, of the nature of God and of their relationship to God seem to hold a special place in the larger questioning about philosophical matters. For example, Matthews (1994), when posing his childhood question about the origin of the world, was formulating a hypothesis about origins and destinies and his place in these. Ian, at age seven, focused on the concept that the oldest stars in the universe were dated as older than the formation of the universe and how that might have happened. Ian decided that this meant there was a proto-universe first and that the Big Bang happened on top of that. In fact, he traced the proto-universe back to primordial nuclei. When asked what happened before that, Ian was quiet for a long while, then hypothesized that he thought there was a Force that started everything off. Ian loved to mix fanciful explanations into his

hypotheses, so he also speculated what would happen if Godzilla, the nuclear-radiation eating monster from the movies, his favorite character, was there at the Big Bang.

Other gifted children have different ideas about the origin and nature of God. These appear to be part of a process of exploration so that what a child hypothesizes at any one point in time may not be the same as what is expressed at a different point. Thus, one cannot state that gifted children, in general, believe any one concept. What is similar is the search for understanding and the creation of paradigms to explore ideas about spiritual questions. For example, Martha, age four, asked her mother what there was when there was nothing. At age six, Peter proclaimed his atheism, citing scientific explanations for the origin of the universe. At age twelve, he was less sure about how he felt about God, and has said he sometimes thinks there might be one. At age fifteen, Paul, who never really paid much attention to religion before, became very fervent and converted to Catholicism.

### Developing a Systematic Philosophy of Life and Death

From about age 12 on, children start to develop coherent systems of thought about spiritual matters according to Fowler (1981). They start to evaluate the world, their values and beliefs, and their place in society. Hollingworth (1942) described much earlier awareness in her exceptionally gifted children. In fact, for some, a systematic philosophy of the meaning of life and death was needed from age six or seven, or whenever the child reached a mental age of about 12.

Some of the earliest questions about life and death occur in pre-school years as children start to understand first the fact, and second, the finality of death. For the gifted, these questions may start earlier than for average children. Questions may require more in-depth answers and have further reaching emotional consequences. Morelock (1992) described such an incident with one girl, Jennie, age four. This little girl, who was exceptionally gifted, questioned the nature of God. She asked if God really loves everyone, then what happens to bad people? They should go to heaven too, if God really loves everyone. She went on to ask about the finality of death, how God could let people die and about the possibilities of children dying. It was difficult for her mother to reassure her because Jennie's knowledge outstripped her ability to deal with it. She could find an answer for every reassurance, and she underwent significant emotional turmoil regarding her knowledge. Her anxiety decreased only when she was emotionally ready to accept the finality of death and able to recognize that it did not occur for most people in early childhood.

Other gifted children use metaphors to help deal with their discomfort. One boy, Martin, age three, was very angry at God for letting his grandmother die. He had many questions about what happens after death and eventually decided that death was a transformation to an angel as a caterpillar transforms into a butterfly. This he found very comforting.

Developing a systematic philosophy of life may also involve making choices about what one will do. Some gifted children question society's values and from this formulate their own responses. Madeline, at age six, decided to boycott all Miramax films because she didn't approve of the negative values in some of them. She felt she couldn't just go to the good films and ignore the rest but had to make a broader decision that reflected her values.

Some gifted children feel very much in harmony with the universe. They experience a sense of transcendence with the infinite, whatever they define that to be. Ian, at age six, for example, felt holes in the fabric of the universe with the extinction of every species and with the felling of the rain forest. He felt part of himself had died too.

Some gifted children feel a more personal relationship with God, take religion seriously and try to live up to the tenets of their faiths. At age seven, Isaac took the tenets of his Orthodox Jewish religion seriously and faithfully practiced them far in advance of the expectations for his age. His spirituality was obvious to his classmates and teachers. There was something special about him, and all who came close to him felt it immediately.

Many spiritual traditions have stories about young people who are unusually spiritual, able to comprehend at an early age the enlightenment and compassion that marks the highest of spiritual development. Traditionally, the story of the boy, Jesus, in the Temple, at age 12 is such. Young people of unusual spiritual sensitivity have also been recorded in the Menuhin family (Rolfe, 1978). Hollingworth's (1942) report of Child E's unusual spiritual awareness even in pre-school years gives a good picture of such a child. A modern day example is Crissy, age five. She has always shown unusual spiritual sensitivity and awareness of others. Her mother reported that when only a few months old, she was calling out "Halleluia" and "God is good" at appropriate times in church. Just before her fifth birthday, when visiting relatives she had not met before, Crissy felt a strong need to pray for her seven-week-old cousin. After three days of prayer, it was discovered that the child had a birth defect. Crissy informed everyone that it would be healed if they prayed, and she continued to do so. By the time they left for home, two weeks later, the baby had healed. Crissy sees herself as a gift from God. Her stated goal in life is to be a doctor for Jesus.

### Conclusion

Some gifted children exhibit very early interest in spiritual matters. They take delight in pursuing spiritual questions, and in making observations about people and life. Their observations lead to developing models of thought and emotion that help define meaning. Children who are more reason focused may ask unusual questions, far in advance of age peers, and understand the universality of concepts at an advanced level. Children more focused on intuition and emotion may be unusually self-aware from an early age and seek that which is transcendent in self and others. These are all children with unusual spiritual sensitivity. For these gifted children, asynchronous development of emotional and cognitive areas may cause much stress. Not only the issues raised by the children, but also, the responses of adults who do not understand the source of their discomfort is problematic. These children require support from adults who can empathize with their feelings.

The support of other gifted children with whom they can discuss issues and feelings can be very helpful. For example, Mark, age four, asked if God who is omnipotent could destroy himself, and what would happen then to the world. His sister, Marissa, age six, responded that only the ancient gods in myths could destroy themselves; their God

could not. This answer, which an adult would likely not have given, satisfied both children.

Many gifted children act more like average children. They ask occasional questions but do not show the pressing need to delve into spiritual issues. They show less spiritual sensitivity, and tend to resolve spiritual concerns through more conventional means such as organized religion, or asking questions that have specific answers. They do not try to resolve spiritual issues until they are at the age when others also are resolving questions, doubts, contradictions and inconsistencies. They may follow closely the developmental pathway delineated by Fowler (1981). Some may remain more conventional all their lives; others may find spiritual awareness at a later age.

The gifted children described in this article seem more to follow Plato's (1956) credo: "Life without enquiry is not worth living" (p. 443). This examination of life can start very early. These gifted children are seekers who need special support from the adults around them as they continue to evolve new aspects of self. Acceptance of their seeking, deepening of relationships, and help in expressing their concerns with spiritual issues like compassion, the problem of good and evil and the question of mortality all are important in developing their identity as spiritual selves.

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## "I Can Do It Myself!" Reflections on Early Self-Efficacy

Elizabeth Maxwell

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*Young gifted and highly gifted children are active agents in their own learning processes. They exert pressure upon parents and other adults in their environment to a sometimes amazing extent. Their exploits and capabilities make sense seen as activities of a self that is aware early and actively evaluative, seeking its own actualization. Three areas of expression of this sense of self as capable agent are depicted: the intellectual, the emotional and the volitional. Parenting issues with regard to early self-efficacy are explored. The point is made that early self-efficacy provides a fertile field for investigation of aspects of the self.*

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We expect children to work at organizing and gaining increasing mastery of the world into which they are born. We know that, barring tragic circumstance, they will acquire mobility, language, a remarkable array of skills and concepts, and their own expressive personality in the process of this developmental imperative. We know that this will happen at different rates for different children and that a wide range of individual differences is possible. But sometimes phenomena emerge within these larger growth patterns that are striking and evocative. They cause us to ponder and reflect. An accumulation of parental reports of very young children's remarkable exploits is such a phenomenon. It is the basis for the reflections of this article.

At the Gifted Development Center in Denver, there is opportunity to collect test scores and background information across a wide gamut of intellectual giftedness. Children tested achieve scores

that range from average to more than six standard deviations above mid-Bell Curve. On file are at least 265 children of 160 or above IQ score and over 50 who score at 180 or above. Anecdotal information has been collected for these children, as it has for all clients of the Center. Parents have shared remarkable vignettes of early ability. They depict an early childhood with a difference.

One major difference is a strong push toward early self-efficacy, with the most outstanding examples lying in the upper IQ ranges. It is difficult not to notice the assertive drive of gifted and highly gifted young children to master their environment as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, far beyond the age expectations of developmental timetables. They appear to be self-directed, their sense of self awareness arriving early and thrust in the face of parents and the environment in general. Their ways of behaving differently are worth pondering.

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Manuscript submitted February, 1997.  
Revision accepted October, 1997.