

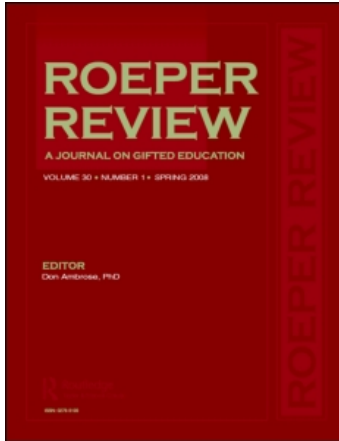
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“I can do it myself!” Reflections on early self-efficacy

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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

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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What does early self-efficacy say about the self and its part in such obvious assertiveness? Are we being given a window through which to view the selves in action of remarkable children and so gain valuable information about the self in each of us? There are several characteristics of giftedness that become clearer through the premise that gifted children may develop a sense of self earlier than other children, just as they often acquire earlier language or advanced reading skills. The often observed tendencies toward non-stop questioning, the urge to mastery and perfectionism, the demand for precision, their persistent goal-orientation, and the tendency to regard themselves as equals of adults make more sense as the behavior of a conscious self seeking to actualize. Deirdre Lovecky calls this *ent-
elechy*, “a particular type of motivation, need for self-determination, and an inner strength and vital force directing life and growth to become all one is capable of being” (Lovecky, 1990, p.79). Children with early self-efficacy act inner-directed with their own agendas. In the language of William James in his examination of the self, they are more “I” than “me.” (James, 1890). They are far more active agent than passive receptor.

The self is a concept long been out of fashion in an era that favors the objective over the subjective, but which, over the past three decades, has been under examination again, from a variety of separative and sometimes conflicting perspectives. (Brinthaupt & Lipka, 1992; Lee & Noam, 1983). There is little agreement as to what the self may be—construct or process or function—or whether it even exists beyond being a convenient handle on which to hang life narratives. This article draws upon the viewpoint of Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (Assagioli, 1965) and his associate Piero Ferrucci (Ferrucci, 1982) which insists that the self does indeed exist and is a demonstrable experiential phenomenon, a “point of pure self-awareness” (Assagioli, 1965, page 18). Further, it agrees with Augusto Blasi, of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, who cogently argues that self cannot be just a construction or just a process but must also be an active evaluator, a necessary subjective judge of the truth of what is perceived, conceived, even received affectively:

The implication of this view of human cognition, particularly concerning the role that the individual self plays in it, can be elaborated by looking at the meaning of asking

questions about an object and of answering them through judgments.

Asking a question about an object or about the world is different from adapting to the world, or even from behaviorally discriminating and anticipating events in the world.

(Blasi, in Lee & Noam, pp. 195-196)

This recognition of the active evaluative aspect of the self, fits well with observations that many gifted children are idiosyncratic learners, assert their own opinions, learn through immersion in their own interest areas, and are chary with respect for authority from a very early age. It is interesting that the evaluative function, stressed by Blasi, appears at the top of Bloom’s taxonomy as the culminating thinking skill. Gifted and highly gifted young children are active investigators who make up their own minds and know their own hearts. Further, if gifted children assume an evaluative attitude (much more than simple liking and disliking) early, are they displaying the self in action in ways that make its investigation more clinically viable? Are they providing, especially in the upper ranges of intellectual functioning, a window on the self?

Parenting Challenges

Parents of the highly and profoundly gifted are least likely to be able to disregard their young children’s advanced abilities. They quickly become aware of precocity and often are disconcerted by it, discovering early that stories of their children’s exploits are likely to be disbelieved by others, and they themselves labeled pushy, ego-invested, bad parents. Many don’t want to believe the evidence of their own eyes and hope the giftedness will go away. They just want their children to be happy and normal (Roedell, 1988).

Gifted and highly gifted children are active learners with an inner agenda (Roeper, 1991). They learn remarkably quickly, but may be difficult to teach or control. Their behaviors produce unique challenges to parents and teachers. There are no guidelines for parenting these children. Knowing how to deal with a two-year-old who knows the alphabet and can put together a puzzle of the United States right side up or face down is outside the expertise of advice columns. Hearing a toddler’s voice from a car seat say, “Mommy, that sign says *exit*,” can be unsettling. Keeping track of a three-year-old who has figured out how all the household locks

work and finds the outside world utterly enticing can be a mother’s nightmare. Discovering a four-year-old walking the bar of his swing set is an experience that is hard to deal with. Is this child a rash risk-taker or an incipient Olympic gymnast? How are parents to react when a five-year old molds plasticine Ming lions with each curl of the mane exquisitely detailed but her arms are shaking and tears are streaming down her face? The parents we work with report that it is difficult to dissuade a gifted child who is determined to learn or accomplish something. Again and again, it is clear that it is the children who drive themselves and pressure their parents, and not the other way around.

The intense drive toward mastery can override even biological needs (Roeper, 1991). Many parents of highly gifted children report reduced hours of sleep and refusal to nap as early as two or three years of age, or even earlier. It is as if there is too much to see and do and learn to bother with sleep (Tolan, 1994). One four-year-old told his mother that he hated to sleep because it was a waste of his time. Other similar anecdotes are: “Jane would rather read than eat; Justin gets so wound up in his projects that sometimes I just bring finger food to the site of his latest experiment to ease my conscience; I came down to the living room at 2:00 A.M. and discovered my two-year-old watching late night TV.”

Parents of highly gifted children remember noticing signs of intense awareness almost from birth (Rogers, 1986). Babies are seen to be extremely alert, with a penetrating gaze. They smile early and show early recognition of caregivers. The probing, active self of such children appears to relate early to a recognized other and presses to refine its interactive tools. They sit, walk and develop large vocabularies at an early age. Many parents report that they never talked baby talk with their children and were surprised how early it was possible to have a real conversation with them. This is development with a difference.

Three Areas in Which Early Self-Efficacy Can Express

There are many possible areas in which early self-efficacy displays itself; in this article, which is intended to stir interest and further investigation, the examination is confined to three: intellectual, emotional, and volitional.

Intellectual Self-Efficacy

Children who have a remarkable memory, grasp concepts quickly, learn rapidly and are excellent problem solvers—who function at a high level of intellectual ability—may see themselves as equal to adults. This may be because their remarkable memories and reasoning abilities allow them to detect flaws and inconsistencies in adult behavior. They definitely do not stand in intellectual awe of adults or authority figures. Sometimes it seems unfair to them that adults wield power because they believe that thinking ability should count as much as age. The three-year-old who asked to borrow the car so he could pick up his grandfather and take him to the park evidently felt as able as any adult to do this. He knew he was very capable. He already knew the names of World War II airplanes and kept track of time in six cities of the world, two of his current passions. He knew all about the solar system and about black holes. He was as capable in his mind as any adult and more so than many he knew.

Many experts in the field of gifted education have noted that gifted children do not automatically afford respect to adults they encounter (Meckstroth, 1991; Sebring, 1983). They are likely to correct mistakes they notice and assert their opinions. Larry, at five years old, noticed that the helmets on the Spanish conquistadors portrayed in a mural in a state capital were historically incorrect. He would not let this rest. Through his persistence, a museum curator finally corroborated that he was right. Brent, an extraordinarily gifted child, would routinely say, when errors in his early pronunciation were brought to his attention, “But I say it this way.”

Modeling adult behavior is regarded as a major way that very young children learn skills and acquire social behavior. Gifted children are highly observant and able to model adult behavior quite well, but they do it selectively. There is a self-assertiveness in their modification, as if mere copying were too passive. They are dependent on parents for love and support, but not for direction as to what to do. In fact, the continual cry of young, able children is, “I can do it myself!” They assert their independence by doing things their own way and love to add their own creative touch to the parental model. If allowed to follow their own agenda, they can amaze—the more able, the more amazing they can be. Early self-efficacy makes them excellent directors of their

own learning, but they may have difficulty adopting the passive role of following others’ directions.

The intellectual abilities of gifted children often produce an urge to argue and debate. Leta Hollingworth was well aware of this contentiousness on the part of the extraordinarily gifted children whom she taught. She arranged for instruction in the art of debate, so that both skill and appropriate arenas for the use of the skill could be developed (Hollingworth, 1939). These “Walking Arguments” appear to have a need to hone their skills of analysis through intellectual sparring, the way an athlete polishes physical talents through competitive practice. Parents aware of this need can realize that arguments are not directed personally against them, but will also need to set boundaries as to how and when to debate.

Emotional Self-Efficacy

Many gifted and highly gifted young children develop self-efficacy in the area of emotional understanding. They are able to empathize with others’ feelings and to detect moods and emotional subtleties at a very early age. Many are delighted to discover that they can not only read others’ emotions but they can also affect how others feel. Smiles, humor, a pat on the cheek, bringing a drawing or a cookie as a gift can make a sad Mommy or Daddy feel better. These gifted children can reduce tensions with a funny saying or a silly voice. They can parent their parents and make them as well as others happy. This may feel very empowering especially when they perceive themselves as equal to adults, and it seems as if intimacy has been created among peers. If there is any immaturity or despondency, or inclination to narcissism on the part of parents or other adults, this role reversal and assumption of responsibility for adults’ welfare can lead to serious emotional problems.

This subject has been eloquently discussed in great detail by Alice Miller (1981) in *The Drama of the Gifted Child*. Miller looked at this situation from the view point of children emotionally abused by parents who used them for the parents’ ends, but children who show this kind of empathy and emotional nurturance risk becoming used by their parents simply because they are so good at nurturance. Parents need to be very alert to the child who puts parental interests ahead of her own interests. They need to reassure such a child that

Daddy and Mommy are strong and able to take care of themselves.

If gifted children are more inner-directed, with an earlier sense of self, the observed phenomenon of their discounting praise becomes more understandable, as does the disinclination of some gifted children to perform. If they are the evaluators, strongly aiming toward excellence, then praise, applause, and reward can feel patronizing. At the least, there can be mixed feelings. Compliments are nice and not-nice at the same time, part of the reaction against being controlled externally. The self wants to be seen and valued for itself in genuine ways.

Children with early self-efficacy in empathy and emotional discernment have been reported to share naturally without being taught. As they grow older, they often become peacemakers, able to mediate between friends, finding common ground between quarreling factions. However, the casual violence of the world appalls them. They may shun Saturday morning cartoons because a mouse slamming a cat against an electric fence or a roadrunner attacking a coyote with an anvil does not seem funny to them. One of the most difficult tasks for parents of these children is to explain why adults allow so much violence in the world. The feeling of being able to make a difference in some way is important to gifted children. Participating in social action can partly relieve their anguish because of the suffering of the world. Being a part of a solution can alleviate a sense of helplessness that is otherwise very alien to these able children.

Strong Will and Early Self-Efficacy

A subset of gifted and highly gifted children have highly developed will. Recognized in infancy, these children will not be deflected from the sharp, shiny scissors by a parental ploy of substituting a red rattle. They want what they want and they maintain goal constancy until they get it. If frustrated, they share their outrage protractedly. As they grow older, they often persist at a task until they have mastered it, doggedly determined to the point of collapse. One four-year-old girl spent all day learning to tie her shoelaces. At the day’s end, she was exhausted but her shoes were tied. She then insisted on wearing her shoes to bed. Sam, who was starting to eat solid food, kept knocking the spoon out of his mother’s hand. When, in exasperation, she handed him the spoon, he

could actually hold it and feed himself. He angrily resisted being spoon-fed by anyone but himself. Two-year-old Georgia, who firmly demanded her own way, to the consternation of her parents, was told by her mother, "Look, I'm the mom and you're the kid." "No, retorted Georgia. "I'm the mom and you're the kid." Even though this was a ridiculous statement, she held to this stance. Accepting subordination was appalling to her. Yet, when not in direct confrontation with her parents, she was sunny and affectionate, cuddly and confiding.

Parents are responsible for parenting and meeting the challenges of early self-efficacy coupled with strong will. If, in a situation such as this, they seek psychotherapeutic help, a child like Georgia may be diagnosed as having Oppositional Defiant Disorder, whose definition specifically includes the terms, "negativistic and defiant behaviors," "arguing with adults," "unwillingness to compromise," and "resistance to directions" in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition*.

(1994, p. 91) Strongly inner-directed, goal-oriented children fit many of these descriptors. Yet, if their behavior is analyzed, it can often be seen that they are not automatically oppositional. A more common situation is that they are in the process of striving toward a goal and have been interrupted, an understandable frustration. The aspects of Oppositional Defiant Disorder that refer to "hostility...deliberately doing things that will annoy other people...being spiteful or vindictive" do not apply.

Such strong goal-orientation can be the source of frustration and temper tantrums when the mind envisions more than a small body can execute, and it can wreak havoc with parental schedules; but it is not a disorder. A sympathetic understanding of how difficult it is for such children to feel forced against their will may find better ways to induce cooperation.

Although a strong-willed child may rage and flail in the midst of a temper tantrum and may reactively shout defiance in a bout of angry frustration, when the temper has cooled, such a child is usually capable of talking over the situation reasonably. Children with early self-efficacy in the area of will do not want to hurt others; they simply seek freedom from coercion. They have a strong sense of their own integrity and need patient, understanding help to find creative solutions that preserve that sense of integrity.

Courage is another issue for these children. They want to be brave. They are likely, like Dale, to force themselves to go down into the dark basement because, "I had to do it. It scared me." They will champion the cause of a younger child who is being bullied and force themselves to stand up even to much older children. They have a strong sense of justice, which includes justice for others at a very early age. They want to be strong and invincible and heroic and protective.

Gifted children with strong wills often display self-efficacy in mastering difficult tasks that are beyond age expectations. They can learn to cook, handle adult tools, sell door to door, oversee the family's recycling system, and, of course, program the VCR. One determined seven-year-old, who was also a lover of everything mechanical, operated a lawn-mowing business, mowing his own and neighbors' lawns. He even designed his own business card. Strong-willed children can't wait to grow up. Giving them as much responsibility as they can handle, which may be beyond the limits usually set by parents, helps them to feel respected by others and to gain the self-respect they crave. Including them in a family council is an excellent way to harness that drive and energy and enable them to own their part of the solutions reached (Silverman, 1997).

Strong-willed children display leadership qualities that are hard to teach. They are courageous, responsible, plan well, will champion weaker or younger children, have drive and determination, and will persevere where others crumble. The youngest years with them are the hardest. As they grow older, temper tantrums diminish as they develop the self-mastery that is so important to them.

Implications

However they assert their ability, young gifted and highly gifted children outpicture the self as an aware and active agent, ready to take on the world. They strain the limits of developmental theories which underemphasize or skirt the centrality of the aware, proactive, evaluative self.

Augusto Blasi, while recognizing the considerable merits of the cognitive developmental, Piagetian-based approaches to the understanding of personality, points to these very weakness-

es. He states that a major deficit is the "inability to account for the centrality of the self and of consciousness (Blasi, 1983, p. 189). He further states:

Consciousness of self in action, which is the fundamental constitutive of the self, is therefore at the origin of cognitive activity. Here is one of the major themes of the present [Blasi's] approach: cognition is about objects, but objects are not objects unless the conscious subject plays a fundamental role in the cognitive process. (p.196)

Observation of something as subjective as the self in action is a difficult feat. It may be that the striking behavior of some young gifted children can provide at least a partial window for such observation. An examination of characteristics of gifted children finds them rich in inner-directed, value-laden aspects. Here is a selection from Barbara Clark's listing of such characteristics, taken from both the cognitive and affective domains (Clark, 1992):

- Unusual curiosity and variety of interests
- Advanced comprehension
- Early ability to use and form conceptual frameworks
- Heightened capacity for seeing unusual and diverse relationships and overall gestalts.
- Ability to generate original ideas and solutions
- An evaluative approach toward self and others
- Persistent, goal-directed behavior.
- Intensity
- Earlier development of an inner locus of control and satisfaction
- Advanced levels of moral judgment
- Sensitivity to inconsistency between ideals and behavior
- Strongly motivated by self-actualization needs

These describe active, outreaching, evaluative, self-directed behavior, the interaction between a highly conscious self and heightened intelligence. Here is what Blasi has to say:

The reciprocal influence of self and cognition, and the dialectical nature of the whole process, should be emphasized: on the one side, the dynamics of the cognitive activity presses on the self a more differentiated consciousness and a more differentiated self; on the other, the kind of self that asks the cognitive question determines the kind of cognitive answer. (Blasi, 1983, p.197)

Few themes that emerge from the stories of gifted children are more compelling than the striking demonstration, over and over, of early self-efficacy. It seems plausible that early self-efficacy is the visible evidence of early self-awareness and high intelligence in synergistic combination. High intellectual functioning, intense focus, probing curiosity, early acquisition of language, and rapid learning ability shape a young life differently. Children who are passionate in their pursuit of knowledge, who question conventions others take for granted, who care deeply about people and ideas, and who strongly resent injustice are children who may feel a stronger urge to reshape their environment than to accommodate to it. A robust sense of self as an active, capable, perceptive, valuable player in the field is a resource to be valued. Children

who display early self-efficacy appear to operate from this orientation. They offer the opportunity to advance our understanding of many aspects of that mysterious and very central entity: the self. They are hopefully our leaders of tomorrow, but also our teachers of today.

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Preserving the True Self of the Gifted Child

Maureen Neihart

Fundamental principles of self psychology are described to explain how the self begins and develops over the life span. The influences that contribute to the creation of false and true selves in gifted children are discussed and strategies for promoting the true self of gifted children are presented.

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It is only now, in looking back — after deflating experiences later in life when I was told either to lower my sights or to rein in my enthusiasms — that I fully appreciate the seriousness with which my ideas were taken by my parents and their friends; and it is only now that I really begin to understand how desperately important it was to both my intellectual and emotional life to have had my thoughts and enthusiasms given not only respect but active encouragement. An ardent temperament makes one very vulnerable to dreamkillers, and I was more lucky than I knew in having been brought up around enthusiasts, and lovers of enthusiasts.

(Jamison, 1995, p. 26)

There is no one definition of the self. However, there is some agreement that it comprises the very core of the personality. It includes identity, self-esteem, and what one brings to the world. Winnicott said, "For me the self, which is not the ego, is the person who is me, who is only me, who has a totality based on the operation of the maturational process. At the same time the self has parts, and in fact is constituted of these parts" (1989, p. 271)

Self psychology is the study of the self and its development. It is a field pioneered by Heinz Kohut (1971, 1977) and comprises several guiding principles. One principle is that the essential processes of self development include the phenomena of differentiation, self-efficacy, authenticity and self-esteem. Two other principles that Kohut proposed are that the enduring goal of development is preservation of the integrated self and that this integration, or cohesion, is the center of personality. A fourth principle delineates the determinants of health and psychopathology. Kohut argued that health is the result of frequent experiences with empathy and responsiveness from caregivers and is demonstrated in feelings of mastery and self-efficacy. Kohut further argued that psychopathology arises when the individual repeatedly experiences lack of empathy and responsiveness from caregivers. In other words, the most important factor in determining the development of a healthy self is the response of others to the individual. When an individual repeatedly experiences lack of positive response, the process of integration is impaired and the result is often frag-

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