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# Myth 17: Gifted and Talented Individuals Do Not Have Unique Social and Emotional Needs

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## Roots of the Myth

It is understandable that school peers, significant adults, and the public in general may assume that gifted and talented individuals do not have unique social and emotional needs. When common, positive stereotypes prevail based on images of confident and motivated students, athletes, and musicians, giftedness might be perceived as being unrelated to social and emotional concerns. Educators and others may therefore not recognize or address social and emotional needs, assuming that gifted students deal easily with developmental challenges. Early scholarly work related to giftedness may also have contributed to the notion that high capability means solid mental and physical health and success and satisfaction in career and relationships. Research samples have often not been inclusive enough to reflect concerns of a broad range of high-potential students and may have perpetuated positive stereotypes.

In addition, deeply engrained societal attitudes as well as democratic and egalitarian political views may, for many citizens, preclude thinking that students with high-level abilities should be given special attention for social and emotional needs. Federal education mandates have also reflected little concern for the well-being of gifted and talented students. Even the field of gifted education may not have advocated as strongly as it could have for proactive approaches to promote healthy social and emotional development.

## Challenging the Myth

Collectively, research findings have not concluded that gifted individuals are more or less likely than others to have mental health concerns. In fact, studies have found an array of comparative strengths, vulnerabilities, and similarities. Anecdotal and empirical

literatures have suggested that “gifts” can be both positive and negative.

Clinical literature has suggested that characteristics associated with giftedness, such as sensitivity, intensity, and psychomotor, intellectual, sensual, emotional, and imaginal overexciteabilities, are not only risk factors but also potentially viewed inappropriately as pathology by helping professionals. In addition, gifted individuals may differ greatly from less able age peers and among themselves in the *degree* of characteristics associated with giftedness, making it difficult to anticipate social and emotional concerns. Giftedness may also co-occur with one or more learning disabilities, contributing to frustration, behavior problems, and general discomfort in the classroom.

Degree of social difficulties may increase in proportion to level of giftedness. Not only is a profoundly gifted child likely to have no intellectual or interest peers at school or in the community, but also schools may not be receptive or accommodating to highly able children. Even moderate giftedness may lead to a poor initial fit in school, with social and emotional discomfort increasing throughout the school years.

Gifted individuals may have unique concerns in other areas as well. Clinicians specializing in working with them have reported that client issues can include trauma, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, bullying, learning disability, underachievement, career-development impasse, and poor coping. In regard to guidance, gifted children need much earlier attention to career development than do other students. For high achievers, stress levels related to overinvolvement in activities and to their own and

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others' high expectations may match those related to unexpected, difficult life events. However, their sensitivities may indeed contribute to intense responses to negative life events and situations. In addition, perfectionism, extreme self-criticism, and disruptive, self-destructive, or delinquent behavior may affect school experiences and well-being. Gifted students may self-medicate distress with illegal substances and even drop out of school. Unfortunately, problematic behavior can preclude teacher referral for special programs or for appropriate challenge in academic coursework. Programs then cannot affirm and support gifts and talents, and troubled gifted students' contact with intellectual peers may be limited.

The myth may be driven by the reality that most of the above phenomena have received relatively little or no attention in literature related to giftedness. Other areas have also had little, if any, research attention in connection with giftedness: eating disorders, self-injury, substance abuse, sexual abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, parent-child conflict, difficult developmental transitions, and physical disability. With relatively little research attention to counseling issues, not much is known about how gifted individuals experience these phenomena and how counselors should differentiate their services for gifted youth across cultures and across socioeconomic levels. This limitation has implications for addressing concerns either through prevention (e.g., small-group and large-group work) or intervention.

Gifted individuals face the same developmental tasks as their less able age peers, related, for example, to identity and differentiation, career direction, peer relationships, autonomy, and confidence in competence. However, the characteristics associated with giftedness mentioned earlier may make the subjective *experience* of meeting normal challenges qualitatively different from others' experience and also sometimes hinder task accomplishment. Exploration of identity can be especially intense in persons with high ability, potentially contributing to protracted conflict with parents. In regard to identity, some gifted students, especially females, reject achievement in favor of peer acceptance. Some, because of ability and circumstances, have developmentally inappropriate family responsibilities. Parents and educators, both with high expectations, may be unaware that asynchronous development is not unusual in this population, with social and emotional development not as advanced as cognitive development. High moral development may mean struggling with social justice issues, sensitivity to peers, and

concern about world events and problems, without being equipped emotionally to handle these. In addition, gifted youth with extreme talent may not be socially and emotionally prepared to handle the power and attention that such levels of ability often generate. Influential in regard to emotional sensitivities and difficulties with developmental challenges is Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, which indicates that gifted individuals have potential to reach high levels of personality development through psychoemotional struggle.

## Implications of the Myth

Positive stereotyping of gifted and talented individuals has dangerous implications. With no purposeful attention to social and emotional development by significant adults, gifted students may not express their needs, believing them to be aberrant. In studies of gifted adolescent targets or perpetrators of bullying (Peterson & Ray, 2006) and gifted homosexual young adults (Peterson & Rischar, 2000), participants often had not asked for help even when in despair. In a study of profoundly gifted clients in therapy (Jackson & Peterson, 2003), some feared that mentioning their concerns would simply be "too much" for others. In addition, students may not show doubts and vulnerabilities to parents, coaches, and teachers who are invested in their performance and image, preferring to protect a positive image instead. Other obstacles to help-seeking are an ability to compensate for or disguise concerns and an assumption that they must solve their problems independently. With no prior curricular attention to developing skills related to articulating and making sense of social and emotional concerns, even the transition to college may be difficult for gifted students. They may be unprepared for challenges related to leaving home, loss of high school identity, social transitions, loss of a protective K-12 school structure, different academic expectations, and new autonomy.

The myth may contribute to the absence in counselor-preparation textbooks of complex information related to gifted students' social, emotional, and career development and the need for differential approaches. This lack suggests that school and other counselors may not respond to gifted students appropriately about social and emotional concerns and may have attitudes and biases that preclude effective work with this population. These professionals may not identify or support strengths unrelated to academic

or other performance, assets that may be crucial to well-being. They may not normalize troubling thoughts, feelings, and behaviors or may misdiagnose them. When they do not associate sensitivities and intensities with giftedness and do not respond supportively when, for instance, bullying or other harassment has occurred, school tragedies can result.

Neither high achievers nor gifted underachievers are exempt from troubling circumstances, of course. Yet adult assumptions may preclude support for troubled gifted youth when support is crucial. High achievers may need affirmation of their humanness and underachievers for their intellectual strengths and talents. Neither may feel understood or appreciated holistically. But both may be protective of the image they present socially. In addition, achievement may be central to achievers' identity, but identity development may be constrained by lack of differentiation from adults invested in them. Achievers may also foreclose prematurely on career direction, and they may refrain from taking appropriate risks. Underachievers may have the ability and courage to critically challenge common views and values but be unable to move ahead with various developmental tasks.

## Conclusion

Empirical and clinical literatures have challenged the myth that gifted students do not have unique social and emotional concerns. When the myth prevails, pertinent concerns are not recognized and addressed formally or informally, proactively or reactively. Educators, parents, coaches, and even counselors may miss indications of distress. Lack of opportunity for gifted students to discuss concerns related to social and emotional development potentially contributes to vulnerability.

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