



# G UNDERSTANDING OUR GIFTED®

Dedicated to helping gifted children reach their full potential

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## Gaining Intimacy as a Talented Adolescent: A Primer for Parents

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*"The desire for intimacy is on the increase in American society, but our capacity to fill those desires is declining. Some research has demonstrated that divorce and loneliness are intergenerationally transmitted, meaning that the deficiencies in intimacy we experience today might be perpetuated through our children in the future."* (Perlman and Fehr, 1987, p. 20)

### Developmental Priorities

Adolescence is about separation and intimacy—conflictual experiences and feelings. The struggles to break free of the family, establish oneself as an adult, and embark on a productive career all have the quest for intimacy as a common denominator. Too often we mistake an adolescent's early pursuit of sexual closeness for the gaining of mature intimacy. That can be a grave error. Even teenagers who marry early seldom achieve a sense of closeness and intimacy until later in their twenties; most become disillusioned since no relationship achieves the intensity and intimacy they expected as adolescents. (Continued on page 7)

### FOCUS ON:

#### ADOLESCENTS

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## Profiles of Creative Adolescents

Jane Piirto, Ph.D.

### Female Visual Artist

CATHY, a quiet 15-year-old, has a glance that shunts away when you look at her directly. She is tall and slim and dresses like any other 15-year-old in the summer—in t-shirts and shorts. She is studying printmaking at a special Governor's Summer Institute for the visual and performing arts, creativity, and writing. Cathy has come on a full scholarship provided by an anonymous donor from her home city, a major urban area. Her letter of reference from her art teacher said that Cathy has already won several art awards and is among the most talented students this teacher has seen.

Her mother didn't finish college and works as a server. Cathy doesn't know or care where her father is. Her father, a Vietnam veteran, abused her mother, her, and her three older siblings to the point that her mother gathered the children one night and fled. A religious fanatic and substance-abuser, he would not allow the children to participate in any extracurricular activities at school, "but he couldn't do anything about my art, because art is done in school, and I would always (Continued on page 10)

go to the art room on my extra periods." After they left, he cruised the neighborhood in a vehicle with guns in it, and banged on their door late at night.

She continues, "When he would be yelling and hitting, I would just go into my room and throw myself on the bed and pray to God for awhile, and God would fill me with a good feeling, and I would do art." She regrets that her older brother had to leave all his art work behind when they fled that Christmas night, "so he can never get it back." Cathy was younger, and hadn't done that much that she wanted to save. "I have all my work at my aunt's, where we're living now, and I take it out and look at it when I'm alone." She derives great pleasure from her art.

She knew early on that she had talent; she was the girl other children asked to draw horses and pictures of pretty people. For the final show, she displays a series of patterned prints, impeccably done. Her summer teacher says they're of the highest quality, "almost as if she were a senior in college majoring in art." A local collector approaches her to buy one, and she reluctantly sells the smallest.

Her other pleasures include walking in the woods with her two best friends, and talking about the meaning of life, "getting deep, you know?" She says they talk for hours, sitting on a rock in a stream in a park. Her future plans include going to college in art, if they can afford it. Her greatest fear, though, is that she will turn out to be an abusive person like her father, "because it runs in families." She has already seen signs of aggressiveness and violence in two of her older siblings.

Though shy, Cathy has found herself a few special friends among the other girls in the dorm. Her gentle nature and her skittish good looks attract boys to her during the Institute. After our interview, she does not talk to me

again, though I see her looking at me. Sometimes she smiles.

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## FEMALE CREATIVE WRITER/MUSICIAN

**D**uring a Christmas party when TIFFANY was two, she climbed up on the piano bench of a family friend's baby grand and began picking out the tune of "Silent Night." The party stopped in awe of what she was doing. The family friend told her mother that if Tiffany took piano lessons, the baby grand would be hers on her sixteenth birthday. Tiffany, now 15, has one more year to go. She's been taking lessons for 13 years.

But she's not at this summer institute for the music component; she's here in creative writing, for she also writes poetry and stories and essays. She's a cheerleader, in the band, a class officer, gets all A's, and her family is the most prominent in her home town. Her mother works full time in real estate. Tiffany dresses in preppy style. Among the sounds that lull her to sleep is the sound of their swimming pool motor.

This summer she's been to two other institutes, one in video and one in feminism. During this institute's final production, a performance for parents, she reads a nonfiction essay on women's rights. After this institute, she's going on a church retreat to the Adirondacks. She's recently "accepted Christ." Before she went to a meeting of her Episcopal youth group, she thought that religion was a "bunch of baloney." While there, however, she experienced "sweet certainty that Jesus was there."

Tiffany spends her most pleasurable times with her boyfriend, the son of her family's old friends, whom she has known "since birth, but we just started going out last year." She also enjoys riding her horse. "But my little sister is riding him and taking care of him more, now, since I'm so busy with my other interests."

There is a rule in her school that freshmen cannot go to the prom. But Tiffany took it in stride—she designed and sewed prom gowns for three of her older friends. "They were nice. I looked in magazines and just designed them." She often does things like that, she says with an infectious giggle. "People call me a fluff chick, but I do a lot of thinking, too. I just like to do a lot of different things. And I do them pretty well."

When asked what she plans to do in the future, Tiffany says she'll go to college, of course. "But after college, I'll probably be the one in the station wagon with all the kids."

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## MALE VISUAL ARTIST

**W**herever Tommy, 17, goes, all eyes go with him—for he wears his reddish hair in a Mohawk that is five inches high. His fair bald scalp gleams, and his Mohawk is stuck out with the strongest mousse available. His art teacher at a technical school writes, "Tommy is the most talented student I have had in years." He is studying printmaking and is minoring in creative writing, even though he does not consider himself poetic. "The words just don't come. I'm always struggling with words. The feelings come. The pictures come. But not words or poems."

Tommy has been through many changes in his childhood: his parents have been divorced, he has moved at least six times, he has been sickly, and has had mono twice. He has "basically screwed up the school thing," and is entering his junior year a year late, because he had substance abuse problems a couple of years ago.

He was in gifted programs in junior high school and he has been keeping sketchbooks since he was eight. But he didn't like the structured way his high school art teacher taught so he flunked his first year of art in high school. (Continued on page 11)

His mother, a former high school English teacher, is very supportive of his art work and willingly buys him new supplies. He wants to study to be a commercial artist, "to support my fine art."

He's also involved in theatre through his brother because he likes the people. Tommy has sung in two rock bands. His type of music talks of "politics, the state of the world, personal changing, and changes in the world." He has a small business painting people's leather jackets, and works as a cook in a restaurant.

Tommy wears t-shirts from his favorite rock bands or with designs that he makes. His jeans have artfully placed frayed holes. He wears combat boots, leather jackets, chains, and has both ears pierced, which makes people "think I'm gay or something, and I just tell them I ran out of space on my left ear." He has a "weird feeling I'm always being watched," (he's probably right) and he calls himself overly imaginative.

He says about his look that, "If people actually knew me, they wouldn't have that much of a problem with me, how I look. My look gets people to notice me. If I look real open and approachable, I look interesting enough for people to come up to me and talk to me. It's one way of weeding out the ignorant."

Tommy's favorite animal is the bat. He hates the sunshine and calls himself nocturnal, staying up during the summer, breaking curfew until 7 a.m., and sleeping until 5 or 6 p.m. When he gets up he has a breakfast of lukewarm tea and an apple.

When he's nervous or upset or wants to think, Tommy sketches for a couple of hours, and gets calmed down. He attributes his creativity to the various events that have happened to him. "They have really forced me to look within myself for something that was there—the strength to get through—and I'm finding it." He has a wide circle of 20

close friends, and he likes to think a lot, reading about 6 books a month. Science fiction, psychology, and fantasy are his favorites. He wonders about the meaning of life, and loves to sit and think about life's meaning, though he doesn't call himself religious.

For the final art show, his prints show bold graphics of fantastical landscapes intertwined with macabre symbols. He sells one to a faculty member.

## MALE CREATIVE WRITER/MUSICIAN

**R**ANDY, 15, is a creative writer. He has been in gifted programs in all the schools he went to. His father is involved in biology, and his mother is in finance. His family is very supportive of his work, and gives him feedback—especially his mother, who discusses his poetry and stories with him. When he was in preschool, his mother read to him every day. In kindergarten, his teacher let him read stories to the rest of the children.

Reading has been his greatest source of pleasure throughout his life. When he is reading a good book, he may talk out loud to the characters, warning them of perils to come. His favorite books are science fiction and fantasy. Beautiful language gets his mind going. He admires Edgar Allen Poe, and often reads a poem and gets inspired. When he does his homework, which is often boring, he will "zip back and forth" between the books he is reading for pleasure and his homework.

When he is writing a story, he will go out to the woods and imagine that he is the character he is writing about. He cannot visualize—mentally photograph—"hardly at all," he says, though he doesn't feel that's a handicap to a writer. "I am a poet," he says. "I am the one who seeks the truth. I like to imagine that I have

some power in creating the truth." In writing, he often imitates forms in poetry. He doesn't like poetry that's "just there. I like to think when I read poetry."

He also likes to think about the presence of a Supreme Being. Not that he's a believer, but since so many people do believe and get some comfort from it, he wonders whether there's anything to it, even though he can't see it logically.

He does not like to stand out by his appearance; that's what he notices first about people and he doesn't want people to do that to him. He dresses in t-shirts and jeans, and says, "I would hate to be defined by how I look. People will get past appearances quicker if there's nothing to look at." He has a small group of friends at school, and says "none of my friends would ever guess how I act when I read my books."

When he was in first and second grade, he used to get headaches because people were always asking him for help. "There was a huge barrage of my name being constantly thrown at me." People still ask him for help in their schoolwork, but he just gives it to them now and doesn't worry about it.

Randy is also a musician, and accompanies groups in school once in awhile. "I don't like to play for other people," he says. "I like to play for myself. My grandmother likes it when I play. She tries to possess it.

She thinks I'm playing for her. But I'm not. I don't like to give it away, and when I listen to music, I don't like to listen to instrumental music, I like to listen to music with words I can think about. When I play, I play things that are fast or complicated. Bach is the best."

Randy and another poet did a joint reading at the final performance of a poem with (Continued on page 12)

*At least one of their parents is supportive of their creativity.*

two voices. Then Randy played jazz piano while the other poet read a beat poem.

These four creatively gifted adolescents were part of a group of 50, from 30 cities in all geographic areas of Ohio.

The OverExcitability Questionnaire (Piechowski and Cunningham, 1985), was administered to 30 of the students aged 15 and above. Taped interviews were conducted with 20 of them. The OverExcitability Questionnaire, derived from Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration, measures the strength of five "overexcitabilities": emotional, intellectual, psychomotor, imaginative, and sensual. These, combined with a high IQ, may help to describe the various types of gifted individuals. The quotations in this article are from the interviews.

The group was also administered the *Myers Briggs Type Inventory* (MBTI) (Myers, 1980). The MBTI is based on Jung's theory of personality, and has been the most used in research on learning style and personality type. Ninety-five percent of the students, and all of the faculty, were iNtuitive (N)/Perceptive (P) types, with Extraversion and Introversion equally divided. More of the adolescents had preferences for Feeling (F) rather than Thinking (T). There were no obvious sex differences in the distribution of Feeling and Thinking types.

One can also notice from these profiles other traits that are perhaps common to creatively gifted adolescents.

- A significant number of them have undergone major changes in their young lives, including divorce, abuse (both physical and substance), frequent moving, illness. MacKinnon (1977) points out that something has happened in the childhood of the person who becomes a "creative." Guilford (1977) indicates that creative people have had some trauma in their childhoods. Perhaps creative expression and the need for it is an attempt to seek equilibrium, "normality," to make sense out of life (Piirto, in press).
- These creative adolescents have rich interior lives that often extend to strong fantasy and animism. Boys reported hearing their name called when no one is there, and imaginary playmates were common among girls.
- Their participation in the arts is more than perfunctory. They often started very early in their art.
- They are often good in more than one of the arts.
- They are direct in their speech, and are not afraid to challenge authority.
- At least one of their parents is supportive of their creativity.
- They think about spiritual matters.
- They may dress unconventionally or conventionally. They may have wide circles of friends, or a few special friends. They may or may not do well in school subjects.

From these brief profiles, it can be seen that Randy and Tiffany are the most "typical" gifted children, com-

ing from intact homes, having had a long and successful participation in gifted programs in their schools. Both are also talented musicians, recognized for their talent, but they chose to study creative writing. They are multi-talented.

Cathy and Tommy are not "typical" of intellectually gifted students. They are children of divorce, with various kinds of abuse in their lives. Both say they have strong visualization capabilities, and *feel that their involvement in their visual art has somehow rescued them*. In fact, the creative work having an aspect of "rescue" is also apparent in Randy's writing, and in Tiffany's essay on feminism. To none of these adolescents is their involvement in their creative pursuits merely "homework." They are already deeply committed. ■

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#### How To Nurture Creativity (Navarre, 1979)

- Provide a private place for creative work to be done.
- Provide materials (e.g. musical instruments, sketchbooks).
- Encourage and display children's creative work, but do not overly evaluate it.
- Do your own creative work, and let the children see you doing it.
- Value the creative work of others (e.g. attend museums, theatre, movies, talk about books).
- Do not emphasize sex-role stereotypes.
- Provide private lessons.
- Use hardships as opportunities to encourage children to express themselves through the arts.
- Emphasize that talent is only a small part of creative production and that discipline and practice are important.
- Allow children to be "odd"; do not emphasize socialization at the expense of creative expression.