

Chapter 3

The Social World of Gifted Children and Youth

Nancy M. Robinson
University of Washington

Introduction

The young people about whom this book is written share mainly the fact that, in one or more cognitive/academic domains, their development is advanced. Aside from this characteristic, however, they are as diverse as any group one can find—diverse in ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and experiences, diverse in family composition and family dynamics, and diverse in aptitudes and creativity. They are just as diverse in motivation, energy, confidence, temperament, and social skills. Finally, they are diverse in the asynchronies they exhibit—some advanced in all cognitive domains (though seldom equally advanced in all) and others in only a few; some exhibiting maturity in social skills and emotional self-regulation at a level commensurate with their mental age and many somewhere between mental age (MA) and chronological age (CA) in this respect; some only age-appropriate in fine and/or gross motor skills; and so on. Complicate this with their degree of advancement or giftedness, gender-related issues, age-related issues, and educational experience as well as peer groups, and it is easy to see that any generalizations about social issues need to be tempered by significant caution!

The focus of this chapter is deliberately limited to the social world of gifted children, that is, their interpersonal relationships. Because other chapters deal with intrapersonal or emotional issues, with family issues, and with specific populations such as females/males, ethnic groups, underserved populations, and the highly gifted, these topics are touched on here only tangentially.

The Social Life of Gifted Children

Social Skills and Maturity of Gifted Students

Despite the diversity mentioned above, there is plentiful and consistent evidence that, *on average*, gifted students are more mature socially than their age peers in spheres such as friendship patterns, play interests, social knowledge and behavior, and personality. While this degree of maturity may not equal their maturity in intellectual domains, gifted children and youth exhibit personal maturity that contradicts the widespread belief that they are “only” gifted and otherwise just like other children their age. Furthermore, in critical areas such as self-concept, gifted children tend to compare favorably with peers (the major exception being adolescence, especially for girls). Reviews of the literature (e.g., Assouline & Colangelo, 2006; Janos & Robinson, 1985; Robinson & Noble, 1991) are consistent on this point: Group differences—when they exist (and they do not always exist)—usually favor the gifted.

Are Gifted Youngsters Inherently More Socially Vulnerable Than Others?

In short, the answer to this question is no. In fact, as a group, they are probably more robust than an unselected group of their agemates. But neither are they immune to the social-emotional issues and disorders that other people endure. According to a task force of the National Association for Gifted Children (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002) that recently examined research on a variety of topics related to the social-emotional development of gifted young people,

High ability students are typically at least as well adjusted as any other group of youngsters. Nevertheless, they face a number of situations that, while not unique to them, constitute sources of risk to their social and emotional development. (p. xiv)

Among these situations are:

- intellectual and often social advancement compared with age peers, so that their social environments are poorly calibrated to their interests, language, and personal maturity
- typically inappropriate school settings that fail to match the level and pace of their learning and understanding
- their own internal developmental unevenness (asynchronies)
- the tensions created by their creativity, energy, intensity, and high aspirations, often far greater than those expected at their age
- at the same time, their wish to be “like everyone else” and therefore the temptation to deny their abilities in the service of finding friends
- local and national milieus that are often anti-intellectual and unsupportive, sometimes frankly negative

All of these issues can be exacerbated, of course, when gifted students are “twice exceptional”—doubly different from the norm by virtue of having a disability, being a member of an ethnic or sexual minority group, or growing up in a dysfunctional family.

Social Needs Shared with Agemates

The basic social needs of gifted children are no different from those of other children: stability and security in a family and the ability to count on someone’s unwavering love

and support; a peer group and close friends with whom there are comfort, acceptance, and shared interests; an educational setting and trajectory that provide both a good match for their pace and level of learning and the sense of strength that comes from mastering the difficult; opportunities to develop their special talents and interests and to share these with peers who are similarly engaged and passionate; rules of daily living and independence calibrated to their competence; and warmly engaged parents and teachers whose expectations are appropriately high—high but not impossible (Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, & Whalen, 1993; Neihart et al., 2002).

Social Needs that Are Special (if Not Unique) to This Group

The major problem is, of course, that in an age-stratified society such as ours, gifted children and adolescents are almost always out of step with those groups they encounter in the natural course of events—mostly agemates in school, church, the playground, or the neighborhood. The younger the children are, the more circumscribed is their social radius and the less likely they are to encounter truly compatible friends; the older they are, the more paramount the social agenda becomes. Even within the family, gifted children are sometimes a poor fit if parents and siblings do not share their abilities, interests, and aspirations, and if parents are inexperienced in navigating the educational system.

The school setting is in many ways the most acute problem, since we compel children to attend school 180 days a year, 6 hours or so a day. If the setting is a poor match, the consequences can be nearly unbearable. Children who are otherwise kind, good-hearted, and patient can grow irritable, impatient, negativistic, even arrogant under such circumstances, and alienate potential friends as well as adults who might otherwise pave the way for them. Conversely, gifted youngsters may adopt the goal of “being like everyone else” and purposefully squelch their own curiosity, aspirations, and abilities. The brighter the child is, the more acute the mismatch and its ensuing consequences.

Developmental asynchrony from domain to domain can produce special challenges to social options. By definition, the development of “average” youngsters has a relatively narrow range, exhibiting neither aspects that are exceptionally high (that would qualify as “gifts”) nor exceptionally low (that would qualify as “disabilities”). The typical range of a gifted student’s development, however, includes some areas that are more-or-less age-appropriate, some exceptionally high, and still others in-between, with none below average unless a disability exists. While, as mentioned, gifted students tend to be more socially and emotionally mature than others of their chronological age (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Robinson & Noble, 1991), emotional regulation, social skills, size and physical maturity, as well as fine and gross motor skills, are seldom the equal of their mental age. These asynchronies place realistic limits on academic solutions that might otherwise be appropriate, such as radical acceleration in grade placement, and on the age-restricted clubs and other groups in which gifted children might seek friends. Although too much is often made of milestone issues such as the age of attaining driving privileges or being invited to the prom, these, too, are not irrelevant.

Interestingly, beginning in infancy (e.g., stranger anxiety) and early childhood (e.g., encounters with death), the advanced cognitive abilities of gifted children cause them to experience fears and concerns like those of older children (Klene, 1988), awareness of world issues such as famines and conflicts (Clark & Hankins, 1985), at

least according to parental report (von Károlyi, 2006), and even concepts like infinity (“What’s holding up the universe?”). For the same reason, gifted youngsters are also likely to be more sensitive to issues of social comparison, such as class status and competition, before these concepts mean much to others. Because they do not have the emotional calluses that develop with the experience of living through such episodes, they are vulnerable to worries of which their agemates remain blissfully unaware.

Social Issues that Are More Common in Gifted Students

For the reasons outlined above, a few social issues appear with some regularity among the gifted population. These are, by and large, natural outcomes of the advancement of these youngsters compared with their age peers and school environments. Several of these issues will be dealt with in detail in other chapters, so coverage will be a bit uneven in this chapter, but the following list may give the reader a feel for the kinds of things to expect, primarily when there is a mismatch with peers and school.

- Difficulties meeting compatible peers and aspirations for greater intimacy, loyalty, and stability in their close friendships (Gross, 2001), with consequent loneliness even if casual observers believe this student to be reasonably popular and accepted. This disconnect with peers cannot be stressed too greatly. Gifted children are not just looking for pals who “talk their language” and understand their jokes, but buddies who share their notion of what close friendship entails: sharing feelings, worries, and secrets as well as triumphs; standing up for one another; and staying close friends over time.
- The brighter the children, the more likely are they to report that they seek older friends, have fewer friends than they wish, and see that “being smart” makes it harder to make new friends (Janos, Marwood, & Robinson, 1985). Children who see themselves as “different” are also more likely to report that they have few friends (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985), even when the difference they identify is what most people would consider positive (e.g., “bigger,” “draw better,” “better at games”).
- Withdrawal from an unsatisfying social scene, giving the impression of being unapproachable, “stuck-up.”
- Difficulties reconciling achievement/affiliation conflicts that result from membership in conflicting subcultures, an especially acute problem for gifted students who aspire to high academic achievement in school but who come from social or ethnic backgrounds that devalue such aspirations and commitment (Neihart, 2006).
- Suboptimal ways of dealing with school boredom, including daydreaming; impatience and irritability with fellow students who move so slowly or fail to understand the “obvious”; rebellion against homework; “meltdowns” (among the younger students). Sometimes, conversely, gifted students conclude that, because they understand concepts such as multiplication or spelling rules, they needn’t practice them and therefore fail to master these to the degree needed to use them efficiently, leading to even more negativity.
- Depression and hopelessness about the future, endless years of the “same old thing” seeming to loom ahead.

Because these issues are not inherent in gifted children but arise from the disconnect between the level and pace of their development, and the environments in which they live, the solution is obvious: Correct the mismatch. To the extent that special school programs are provided to meet the needs of gifted students, and/or they are given opportunities to move into school and social situations with older students, these problems are likely to be minimized or prevented altogether. Of course, no “solution” is without its drawbacks and side effects, but educational approaches that simultaneously provide appropriate challenge and access to compatible peers are effective not just academically, but socially as well (Kulik, 2004; Rinn, 2006; Shaunessy, Suldo, Hardesty, & Shaffer, 2006; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991).

The Contribution to Social Issues of Personal Variables that May Differ in Gifted Students

Aside from the cognitive issues like the fears and concerns described above, which are simply a part of being intellectually gifted, there may be inherent personal variables that impinge on the social experience of gifted children. We regard the evidence for these differences as more tenuous, and their generality among gifted children questionable, but present them here for consideration:

- **Introversion.** A number of authors (e.g., Silverman, 1993) suggest that gifted individuals are more introverted, on average, than nongifted peers, with the result that they may be more independent of and less needy in social relationships than others. Extensive research with the Myers-Briggs inventory (Mills & Parker, 1998; Sak, 2004) confirms this observation. While introverts do not tend to win popularity contests, they may be more comfortable pursuing solitary pursuits (compatible with high achievement) and able to maintain a more even keel than those tossed about by the vicissitudes of turbulent social agendas.
- **Sensitivity (sometimes phrased as overexcitability).** This notion derives from the theories of the Polish psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964), whose most prominent contemporary interpreter is Michael Piechowski (e.g., 1997, 1999). According to Dabrowski’s theory, development of gifted individuals consists of a series of stages, each of which is terminated by a process of disintegration and succeeded by more mature adaptation and deepening self-knowledge. The “psychic excitabilities” accompanying development can be seen in psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional domains and inevitably impinge on the relationships individuals have with others. Physical tensions and restlessness may interfere with calm interactions. Moreover, gifted children may be more sensitive to minor slights from others and instances in which they pick up on aspects of unfairness, either in their immediate experience or events in the society or the world at large. Their subsequent crusades for “justice” may not endear them to those they consider the perpetrators.
- **Perfectionism** (see Chapter 17, this volume). Perfectionism is an exceptionally controversial topic in the field. In part, this stems from differing definitions of the concept, representing for some authors simply high aspirations, interest in doing one’s best whenever possible, and commitment to success but comfort with lower standards when appropriate, while others view perfectionism as an inherently neurotic trait, a “compulsive and unrelenting strain toward impossible

goals" (Schuler, 2002, p. 73). Still others view perfectionism as segmented into various components, some of which are more destructive than others. Hewitt and Flett (1991), for example, see the high standards we set for ourselves and for others as sometimes positive and certainly less neurotically debilitating than the feeling that one must live up to the expectations of others. (Insisting on high standards for one's family and friends may, on the other hand, have its downside in those relationships but is not necessarily debilitating.)

Indeed, gifted children who go on to develop their talents do set high goals for themselves, in the context of families who expect them to do their best (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993) without which they would not endure the hours and hours of practice (Ericsson, Nandagopal, & Roring, 2005) and single-minded commitment needed for success. In the context of a social setting in which their peers have neither the aspirations nor the commitment they do, however, they may be regarded with some derision and criticism. Despite the obvious positive outcomes of successful talent development (Czikszentmihalyi et al., 1993; Subotnik & Jarvin, 2005; von Rossum & Gagné, 2006), the aspiring student may be isolated from classmates both by being actively excluded from friendships and because of time commitments that interfere with ordinary contacts. The situation is, of course, somewhat different for students whose activities are team related (e.g., tennis or math competitions or participation in an orchestra) versus those that are more solitary (e.g., piano or long-distance running).

- Extreme giftedness. As Hollingworth (1942) noted as a major finding of her study of children with IQs above 180,

... there is a certain ... range of intelligence which is most favorable to the development of successful and well-rounded personality in the world as it now exists. This limited range appears to be somewhere between 125 and 155 IQ. Children and adolescents in this area are enough more intelligent than the average to win the confidence of large numbers of their fellows, which brings about leadership, and to manage their own lives with superior efficiency. ... But those of 170 IQ and beyond are too intelligent to be understood by the general run of persons with whom they make contact. They are too infrequent to find many congenial companions. They have to contend with loneliness and with personal isolation from their contemporaries throughout the period of immaturity. (pp. 264–265)

Contemporary research (Gross, 1993, 2004; Janos, Marwood, & Robinson, 1985) bears out this astute observation by Hollingworth. Indeed, the child who is so astonishingly variant from expected norms is very difficult to nurture appropriately. Asynchronies in development are even more marked with these children than with those more moderately gifted, so that even when they are placed in school with mental peers, perhaps nearly twice their age, they remain visibly and painfully different. Of a group of children with IQs above 160, Gross (1993) reported that 80% experienced intense social isolation in regular classrooms and carefully monitored their own behavior to conform to the norms of the social group.

There are, of course, very few of these children and many practitioners will not encounter even one in a lifetime of practice. But they do exist and both they and their parents deserve thoughtful support and respect, understanding of the complexity of their situation, and inventive solutions to their needs, if they are going to develop in a healthy way and make anything like the unique contributions of which they are capable.

Enduring Myths Constitute Barriers

Except for the writings of Galton (1869), Lewis Terman was the first—and certainly the most ambitious—investigator to turn attention to the development of gifted individuals. Starting in the 1920s, he identified a group of about 1500 children, almost all in California schools, who scored high on the original, 1916 version of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Terman, 1925). These individuals were followed throughout their lifetimes, and research continues on their offspring. Terman was motivated in this undertaking by his conviction that the myths then in vogue—myths such as “early ripe, early rot” and stereotypes of gifted children as weak and awkward—were untrue. He was right, of course, but surprisingly, the myths persist. Here are some:

- “Gifted children are nerds, bookish, socially ill-at-ease, sickly, and clumsy.” Even for the exceedingly bright children like those studied by Hollingworth and Gross (whom most people do not encounter but only read about), this stereotype is grossly untrue. In the public mind, there is considerable confusion between giftedness and the characteristics of Asperger disorder (Klin, Volkman, & Sparrow, 2000), among whom of course there are some gifted children but also many nongifted, the average IQ of groups so identified being about 100 (Klin et al., 2000). Terman’s own work and the research of many other investigators have demonstrated the fundamental error of this stereotype—it simply does not fit the majority of gifted children and youth.
- “If you’re so gifted, why can’t you tie your shoes?” The expectation that children who are intellectually gifted will be equally advanced in all domains is also inaccurate, as we have already discussed.
- “You can be anything you want to be.” Gifted youth may be advanced in a number of domains (i.e., showing “multipotentiality”), even if not equally so, so that deciding on college majors and careers can be wrenching and even paralyzing. Even among those showing multipotentiality, however, very few in fact show “equipotentiality”—equal potential across domains. Achter, Lubinski, and Benbow (1996), who gave a battery of rigorous adult-level tests to gifted adolescents, found a very small percentage with flat profiles, even using a very generous definition of what constituted a flat profile. Given the usual measures standardized for their age groups, many gifted children do “hit the ceiling” on most if not all of them. It is only when such ceiling effects are removed by above-level measures that true differentiation of talents can be seen. Even though gifted children may have a number of choices, they will profit from appropriate assessment of their talents and guidance in choosing courses of study and ultimate careers.
- “Math nerds are the worst.” Contrary to expectation, Dauber and Benbow (1990), following a group of students identified by high SAT scores during early adolescence, found that those with high math scores reported themselves to be more successful in their social relationships than those with high verbal scores. The authors concluded that one can easily hide one’s math talents, but that every time high-verbal individuals open their mouths, they inadvertently reveal their “gifts” and suffer the consequences.
- “Skipping a grade ruins you for life.” Acceleration in school can take many forms, most of which have been examined carefully (Colangelo, Assouline,

& Gross, 2004). The academic benefits of such options are clear and unmistakable (Rogers, 2004), but many practitioners retain fears about the harmful effects of accelerative options that permit youngsters access to classes for older students (Jackson, Famiglietti, & Robinson, 1981; Southern, Jones, & Fiscus, 1989; Vialle, Ashton, Carlon, & Rankin, 2001).

Indeed, the social benefits are, surprisingly, less clear than we might expect, but study after study finds an absence of harmful effects on social adjustment (Cornell, Callahan, Bassin, & Ramsay, 1991; Robinson, 2004) for groups of students who are accelerated. Most investigators have restricted their research to the effects of acceleration on academic self-concept measures, (e.g., "I'm good at most school subjects,") even though a wide array of measures of personal and social adjustment could potentially have addressed more differentiated questions.

- "Selective schools shatter your self-concept." A 26-country study (Marsh & Hau, 2003) using a few questions tapping academic self-concept, found consistently lower scores for gifted children in academically rigorous and/or accelerated situations than gifted children in regular classrooms (but not lower than those of nongifted students). The meaning of this finding is, however, far from clear (Dai, 2004; Plucker et al., 2004). Do gifted children grasp earlier than others the unwritten modesty code? Do they discover, on entering the more accelerated class, that they are no longer the single star who effortlessly gets every answer right? Do the findings reflect a more accurate sense of what expertise actually requires, once the student is appropriately challenged? Said one, "Now I know that I won't always be the smartest person, but I do know what I can do, and I do know I can do something when I put my mind to it" (Noble, Arndt, Nicholson, Sletten, & Zamora, 1999, p. 80). In contrast, people who are not skilled at something tend to overestimate their own skill levels and to underestimate those of others (Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, & Kruger, 2003). Is being the big fish in a little pond (Marsh, 1987) the road to confidence and success, or is being a medium-size fish in a bigger pond more likely to lead to a feeling of belonging and an invitation to investment in learning? As Gross (1998) expressed it, "The modest academic self-esteem ... reflects an acceptance of how far they still have to go if they are to become all they can be" (p. 23).

The essential issue is, of course, the social comparison group. When students enter a class or school better matched to the level and pace of their learning, or when they graduate to a higher group in ballet, skiing, or soccer, their perspective changes—often without their realizing it. Their companions are perhaps older, more skilled, harder working than those they are used to, and their feelings may—especially at first—be ambivalent. (How many readers remember such disconcerting feelings their first week of college?) Adults can be most helpful by reminding students, in preparation for and again after the change, of this shift in the comparison group, acknowledging that it is hard to give up their former status even though the new opportunity has much to offer. They can also encourage what Marsh, Kong, and Hau (2000) have referred to as the "reflected glory effect," consciousness of having been admitted, because of their abilities and skills, to a more selective class/school, with its enhanced opportunities for learning.

Furthermore, as noted, investigators have failed by and large to look at more subtle indicators of adjustment than academic self-concept. Those who have

done so have tended to find trivial effects on personality and adjustment measures (e.g., Kulik, 2004; Robinson & Janos, 1986) when the comparison groups were equally bright, and much more positive reports from students who have experienced the acceleration (e.g., Janos et al., 1988; Noble et al., 1999; Noble & Drummond, 1992; Noble & Smyth, 1995). A typical quote: “[I could] be friends without feeling I had to *be* my friends” (Noble et al., 1999, p. 79).

- Social relationships within the family: “It’s a burden to have a gifted sibling.” For some time, it was assumed that having a gifted sibling, especially if one was not equally gifted, produced negative effects on self-esteem, achievement, and general well-being. A number of studies seemed to confirm this assumption, all of these based on interviews with siblings and other family members that encouraged the expression of negative feelings. A more objective appraisal of the situation was provided by Chamrad, Robinson, Treder, and Janos (1995), who did not ask the loaded question, but instead administered a battery of questionnaires about sibling characteristics and relationships, as well as behavioral issues, to a large number of mothers and to pairs of siblings, both ages 6 to 12. Initially, the classification of “gifted” was by placement in a special program; this approach yielded not a single significant difference among pairs in which there were 0, 1, or 2 “gifted” members (fewer than expected by chance). Next, we designated “giftedness” by the child’s status above or below the median of mothers’ appraisals of ability. With this change, a modest number of effects emerged, all indicating positive effects of having a gifted sibling! We believe that the previous studies had exploited the fact that sibling relationships are seldom perfect, finding the scapegoat in giftedness.
- Relationships with parents: “It’s more work to have a gifted child.” There is evidence that gifted children’s parents spend more time with them in activities that are a good cognitive match, such as reading, playing, and going to interesting places (Karnes, Shwedel, & Steinberg, 1984; Thomas, 1984). Child-centered parents can raise gifted children even in poverty (Robinson, Lanzi, Weinberg, Ramey, & Ramey, 2002). Until their child is able to establish satisfying peer friendships, many parents are called on to play the “best friend” role. The situation is sometimes complicated by home schooling, which is on the rise for gifted children.

The Stigma of Being Gifted in an Anti-Intellectual Society

Being labeled as “gifted” in a society that does not value the life of the mind can be as much of a stigma as any other characteristic that sets a person apart from others. Coleman and Cross (2000) describe a stigma-of-giftedness paradigm (Coleman, 1985) as influencing social relationships. Gifted students, like others, want “normal” social interactions and see the label as influencing others to treat them differently. As a result, they manage information about themselves (e.g., information about good grades or awards) to hide their accomplishments (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993), though some do this more than others (Coleman & Cross, 1988).

Unlike some other stigmatizing features such as race, giftedness can, of course, be hidden, though this is more difficult for some than others. As noted, Dauber and Benbow (1990) found that students who were highly able in math were more successful in their social relationships than those who were highly able verbally, presumably because the latter students found it harder to hide their abilities.

From a surprisingly early age, many—but apparently not all—gifted children sense their difference from others. The differences are almost invariably felt, whether admitted or not, by older students (Rimm, 2002). In a study by Janos, Fung, and Robinson (1985), even at age 6 to 10, more than a third of 271 gifted children said they felt “different” from others. Even when this difference was phrased in a positive way, such as being better at games or sports, these children described more negative views of themselves and their social relationships than those who did not report such feelings. Coleman and Cross (1988) indicated that even if children don’t feel themselves to be different, they assume that others look on them in that way and modify their behavior accordingly.

Rimm (2002), surveying the literature on peer pressures and social acceptance of gifted students, found that “...they are generally well liked and sometimes are even more popular than their peers, although, by age 13, that popularity advantage disappears” (p. 13). Rimm points to a study by Schroeder-Davis (1999) in which, responding to a newspaper columnist’s question asking whether they would rather be best looking, most athletic, or smartest in their class, over 3500 secondary students actually favored being “most intelligent” (54%), followed by “most athletic” (37%) and “best looking” (only 9%). Even so, their essays revealed considerable sensitivity to experiencing the anti-intellectual stigma of high ability, and almost none suggested that high ability conferred social benefits.

This problem may be felt more acutely by girls than boys (see Chapter 14, this volume). Beginning in early childhood, the social agenda is more important to girls than to boys (Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974), and it gains special significance and power for gifted adolescent girls (Kerr, 1985, 1997; Reis, 2002; Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman, 2000). In fact, gifted boys may be more popular than nongifted girls or boys, with gifted girls tending to be the least popular (Luftig & Nichols, 1990). In line with this finding, Janos, Sanfilippo, and Robinson (1986) found that, among the minority of very young early entrants to college who were underachievers (college GPA below 3.0), the boys’ achievement appeared to reflect the issues of disorganization and family conflict found in other groups of underachievers, while the girls appeared to be favoring an attractive social agenda over an academic agenda, with temporary damage to the latter. Indeed, by the time the article was published, the girls’ GPAs no longer qualified by the < 3.0 criterion, while the same was not true for the boys. Apparently the girls had learned ways to cope with more than one agenda simultaneously.

Again, the problem lies not within the students who are gifted but in the setting in which they are growing up. Particularly rampant in American life is a spirit of anti-intellectualism (Colangelo, 2002; Hofstadter, 1962), a denigration of the “elite” status of the bright and high-performing (except in sports). Fairness is seen to require equal education (not “appropriate” education) for all, regardless of individual differences (Benbow & Stanley, 1996). Coupled with the demands of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 (PL 107-110), which accords struggling students priority in school, little wonder that gifted students feel recognition of their accomplishments to be stigmatizing.

The Expanding Social World of the Child, Adolescent, and College Student

Social issues change in nature and intensity as children grow up, as do potential interventions.

Early Childhood

As gifted children begin to emerge from the family into preschool, play groups, and even visits to the homes of family friends, they are often puzzled by the fact that

their playmates do not enjoy the same complex games, read books, or play board games with complex rules as they do. Gifted preschoolers are more advanced in language and in the use of metacognitive strategies than are nongifted children (Kanevsky, 1992; Moss, 1992). They also show more cooperative play patterns (Barnett & Fiscella, 1985; Lupkowski, 1989) and on average are advanced in what they know about social relationships, even though this knowledge does not always translate into more mature behavior (Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980).

Even at this age, many activities are organized by age (the “threes” in the day-care center hardly ever play with the “fours,” even though no more than a few days may separate the oldest “three” from the youngest “four”). The asynchronies of early childhood compound the situation—issues such as toilet training, naps, and skills with crayons, scissors, and tricycles—and require some flexibility in standard expectations if the child is to join an older group for even part of the day. Smaller preschools sometimes do provide cross-age grouping, and some, such as Montessori programs, encourage children to go at their own pace. In informal groups at neighborhood playgrounds and at family gatherings, often gifted children happily do seek out older children. At this age, parents are well advised either to seek a flexible environment such as a mixed-age preschool, or to seek a variety of settings for their children – for example, a gymnastics or dance class with age-mates and a story time at the library for somewhat older children.

Early Elementary School

While kindergartens are generally relatively nonacademic, and therefore not necessarily a negative (though not necessarily an especially positive) experience for bright children, the primary grades can be deadly for a child who enters first grade already reading competently and comfortable with the number system. For bright children with competent motor skills who have already mastered the symbol systems of reading and math at a level advanced for their age, early entrance to kindergarten or first grade, or skipping first or second grade, should be a definite consideration, the research findings being on the whole quite positive and this step one that can be taken quite smoothly because it occurs from the beginning (Colangelo, Assouline, & Lupkowski-Shoplik, 2004). In addition, the three primary grades can be telescoped into two by skipping first or second grade.

Still, it is a decision to be made cautiously, taking into account the personal maturity of the child and remembering that a year at ages 5 to 6 is a larger proportion of a child’s life than a year will be later on. Fallout, when it occurs, hardly ever results from academic problems; almost always—when they occur—the issues are social. A recent study by Gagné and Gagnier (2004), for example, suggests that boys who enter school early may be a little more vulnerable than girls. Beware, though, of the extensive literature that shows that *unselected* younger children are, in the early grades, not as mature or successful as their older classmates! Such research is irrelevant.

Elementary Years

Teasing, even overt bullying about being “smart” or getting good grades can begin as early as kindergarten for gifted children, with a peak in sixth grade. About a quarter of gifted children admit to at least one instance of acting as a bully themselves,

however (Peterson & Ray, 2006). A few gifted children (11%) in the Peterson and Ray study admitted to being bothered “a lot” by such events. Classmates’ teasing them for being smart is experienced as hurtful and confusing (Ford, 1989) even when it may be meant in a kindly way. As we have mentioned, the sense of difference from others plays a major role in peer relations of gifted preadolescents, even when the differences perceived are in a positive direction and are not particularly intellectual (Janos, Fung, & Robinson, 1985). Many gifted students at this age begin to hide their talents, to do their best “to be like everybody else.”

Counseling—preferably in groups, for children who are not seriously debilitated by such conditions—can help gifted children to normalize their feelings and to develop positive ways of coping. Books such as *Gifted Kids Speak Out* (Delisle, 1987) or *The Gifted Kids’ Survival Guide for Ages 10 and Under* (Galbraith, Espeland, & Mohar, 1998) are also excellent resources to help children develop insight and coping skills.

Middle-School Years

The issues that began earlier intensify in the early adolescent years—the strong wish to fit in, to belong to a group, and yet a growing sense of difference from same-age classmates (Assouline & Colangelo, 2006). Gifted students who are good at sports are liked better by their peers than those who are not, particularly gifted boys who are not good at sports. Self-concept tends to decline for gifted students more intensely than for others, and a middle-school curriculum that is not rigorous makes the situation even worse. Tedium significantly erodes optimism and coping skills (Hoekman, McCormick, & Barnett, 2005) that in turn relate to intrinsic motivation and commitment to schoolwork.

In a study (Colangelo & Assouline, 1995) of 563 gifted students, grades 3–11, although the overall picture was relatively positive, there was a perceptible decline in self-concept across grade levels. Scores overall were highest in domains of intellectual and school status, and lowest in interpersonal skills and self-satisfaction. A review of the several studies on self-concept of gifted children (Neihart, 1999) found few differences between gifted and nongifted students except that gifted students felt more positive about their academic abilities. (Recall that, at earlier ages, gifted students tended to feel more positive than other students, so no difference represents a shift.) Moreover, gifted students tend to feel that others view them negatively (Kerr, Colangelo, & Gaeth, 1988) and, in fact, this seems to be the case for those who do not know the students well (Monaster, Chan, Walt, & Wiehe, 1994). As with any other group who see themselves as victims, however, it is important to move on from that perception of being the victim, to adopting positive coping skills. (See last section of this chapter.)

Various curricula exist for teaching personal and social talent development (Moon & Ray, 2006), as well as secondary-level affective curriculum and instruction for gifted learners (VanTassel-Baska, 2006). Here again, group experience can shore up a student’s feeling of belonging, and devising coping strategies. For gifted teenagers, books such as *The Gifted Kids’ Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook* (Galbraith, Delisle, & Espeland, 1996) that address the issues directly, or various novels in which gifted teens are the major characters, can spark effective discussions.

Another approach that works well for gifted students is participation in team competitions, such as debate teams, math team competitions, chess clubs, and the like. When students participate in individual contests such as the National Spelling Bee, they may bring some reflected glory on their school but also risk the negative consequences of putting themselves forward as “the best.” Team competitions, on the other hand, can be just as demanding but clearly are identified with the school, encouraging classmates to root for the success of the team, just as they do for football or basketball teams.

The High School Years

Like other adolescents, gifted adolescents face complex and competing developmental tasks during this period of transition to young adulthood. Even though gifted adolescents may traverse these years with competent social skills, there are still built-in pressures to “fit in,” and to resist the largely anti-intellectual atmosphere of the high school. Fortunately, especially in the upper grades of high school, peers tend to become less critical of those who are different, exerting less incentive for gifted students—if they are still engaged—to “hide.”

Moreover, the options for finding and creating a better academic and personal match increase during the high school years. Even though the self-concepts of many gifted students, especially girls, are at a low ebb during the early high school years (Robinson & Noble, 1991), students can often move ahead to more advanced classes and in other ways find a community of like-minded peers (Csikszentmihalyi et al., 1993). Many students in the latter half of high school will be able to enroll in college courses simultaneously or instead of high school courses. As mobility increases through use of public transportation, or even driving a car, it is increasingly feasible for teens to find “homes” in clubs and specialized talent-development groups. It is encouraging to find so few gifted students dropping out of high school (Matthews, 2006), despite the persistence of myths to the contrary.

Even so, gifted adolescents do not all flourish. Piechowski (1989), for example, found that there were two distinct patterns of adaptation in a small group of adolescents. The healthier group was characterized by responsibility, hard work, and altruism, while others were characterized by sensitivity, intensity, and self-criticism.

The interventions suggested earlier, including counseling, particularly group counseling; reading books with gifted individuals as heroes; group participation in competitions; and pursuit of talent-development groups—are all equally valid during this period.

The College Years

Much less is known about gifted students during the college years than grades K–12. We seem to assume that all we have to do is help students survive to college, where they will automatically find Nirvana. Indeed, some thrive in college and others create the environments they need (Hébert, 2006). And yet, colleges differ greatly in the opportunities they offer gifted students, and many offer few opportunities at all (Robinson, 1997; Yoo & Moon, 2006). Students who follow a standard curriculum or fail assertively to find appropriate settings to develop their interests and friendships, may be as unhappy as at any other time. Several longitudinal studies

following highly talented students through the college years (Arnold, 1995; Kerr, 1985; Subotnik & Steiner, 1994) have found a disappointing trajectory. Some of the risk factors include a habit of being at the top of the class with little effort, "culture shock" on encountering classmates of equal or higher accomplishment, coming from a family outside the educational mainstream without the tacit knowledge and skills needed to operate within the complex bureaucracy of higher education, as well as all the hazards other students may face, such as homesickness, depression, financial stresses, the anonymity of large classes, time management, selecting activities and classes judiciously among many tempting alternatives, and so on (Robinson, 1996, 1997; Yoo & Moon, 2006). It is essential to prepare during the high school years, before gifted students sink or swim in the new environment, and to be sure that supports are in place once they reach college to assist with the transition. Otherwise, "Nirvana" may turn out to be "never-never land," where promising children never grow up.

Positive Coping Skills

As we have seen, gifted children and youth face all the situations and dilemmas that other students do, intensified perhaps by their self-awareness and the fact that they often encounter these dilemmas at an earlier-than-average age, before their experience has produced the kinds of emotional "calluses" that enable them to put the issues into perspective. This section will, therefore, focus only on those coping skills that address what we have identified as the relatively unique issues for gifted individuals: (1) finding compatible friends in an incompatible environment and (2) resolving the incompatibility of finding acceptance in a social group and pursuing one's academic talents. (It should be pointed out that students whose talents lie in nonacademic fields often do find compatible peers within that talent area.)

Finding Friends: "That's where the money is!"

The famous remark credited to Willie Sutton when asked why he robbed banks is good advice for gifted youngsters in search of potential friends: Go where they are. Look in places you will find a variety of people whom you find compatible in terms of shared topics of interests and the depth and complexity of their understanding, whatever their ethnicity, age, gender, philosophy, or political views. In school, this certainly means looking for programs for bright students and more advanced classes, as well as multiage or other groups that are open and welcoming even if most of their members are older. Yet, gifted students who are given the opportunity to move into such settings are often reluctant to do so, fearing to lose the few friends they have made already—often at considerable personal cost. Adults sometimes need to insist that students give the new setting a good try, sharing with them their optimism that a person who has in the past made friends under trying circumstances can do so even more readily when the ground is more fertile.

Social Coping Skills

A group of young adolescents queried by Buescher (1989) about their preferred coping strategies yielded a variety of coping approaches, based on their personal experiences. While the specific ranking of the following strategies varied somewhat

from one age to another over the course of 4 years (ages 11 to 15), the list is informative. In order from least preferred to most preferred, they were:

1. Pretending to know less than you do.
2. Acting like a “brain” so friends leave you alone.
3. Change language and behavior to mask your true abilities.
4. Avoid programs designed for gifted students.
5. Engage in community activities where age is unimportant.
6. Develop talents outside of school.
7. Focus on achieving at school in nonacademic areas.
8. Seek adults to relate to.
9. Select programs and classes that are designed for gifted students.
10. Seek friends among other students who have exceptional abilities.
11. Become comfortable with your abilities and use them to help peers.

Of course, this list could be extended:

- Take an active problem-solving stance; if your life needs changing, change it. Advocate for yourself if you’d like a modified school option, an alternate assignment, a new friend, or whatever.
- Distinguish between having one or a few close friends and being “popular,” the former being much more satisfying than the latter.
- Broaden your horizons—think outside the box. Especially in cities, an extraordinary variety of clubs exists for people with all kinds of interests, and if there isn’t one you’d like, start one.
- Join in team competitions.
- Focus on developing one or two areas of special interest and/or talent—avoiding frenetic activity designed just to fill up time and to avoid the realization that your life is boring, boring, boring. The more you invest in a specialized area, the more pleasure you will have, and the more you will encounter others across the age span whose company you enjoy. Try on some career opportunities to see whether they appeal, and whether you feel comfortable with the people who are in those fields, be they young or older.
- Engage in community service projects or political campaigns. Making a contribution to the lives of others enriches you as well as those who can use your help.
- Keep a few projects going at home that you really want to do – alone.

Conclusion

As we have seen, professionals can make a serious error by assuming that poor social skills and social vulnerability are an *inherent* part of being gifted. They are not. [On the other hand, gifted students are not invulnerable, either (Pfeiffer, 2003).] The condition of being gifted does not constitute a liability—rather, in many ways, it is a social asset. The combination of cognitive competence and social maturity is a precious one.

The most important social issues arise when there is a mismatch with the academic and/or social setting in which the student is growing up. Often, there are more options than students or families are aware of. Your professional support can often help the students, and the adults responsible for them, to see matters in a more realistic light, to put things into proportion, and to make effective choices and transitions.

Gifted students have a great deal to offer the world—and you have special skills to help them along the way. Don't overlook the possibilities in this partnership!

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