

Chapter 11

Clinical Practice with Gifted Families

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We have gained profound respect for the 5000 families served by the Gifted Development Center over the last 28 years. These unsung heroes have an uphill battle convincing educators that their children have legitimate needs. They often face a wall of resistance, if not outright hostility. Would those who claim, “All our children are gifted” be as likely to say, “All our children are retarded”? While gifted children have parents and some teachers who advocate for them, their parents may have no advocates at all. Parents of the gifted need as much support as their children. As the primary influence in their children’s lives, they should be perceived as partners in the emotional and academic development of their children. Parents have fought for provisions for the gifted and are invaluable allies in keeping special programs alive. They need practitioners who care not only about their offspring, but also about them. Everyone who serves gifted children needs to become an advocate for the parents of these children.

Although empirical research on the issues of gifted families is sparse (Moon, 2003), there is ample clinical research on the types of support needed by families of the gifted. Parents often seek psychological services to (a) confirm their child’s giftedness, (b) guide them in parenting, (c) determine an educational path, (d) help them advocate more effectively, (e) locate available resources, (f) deal with family dynamics, (g) provide home stimulation, and (h) obtain guidance with specific issues, such as underachievement (see Chapter 8), finding friends (see Chapter 3), twice exceptionality (see Chapter 7), and, occasionally, undeveloped potential in the parents.

“Is My Child Gifted?”

This is the first question parents ask—the initiation of the journey. It is important for professionals to know how early giftedness can be recognized, the accuracy of parental observations, the characteristics that signify advanced development, the stability of these developmental differences over time, the optimal time frame for assessment, and the intricacies of interpreting test results for the gifted. Misinformation and myths about gifted development abound, influencing clinical practice. Too often, parents’ perceptions of their children are devalued. To work effectively with gifted families requires mental health workers to be well informed and to take parents seriously.

For as many as 87%, the journey begins well before school age (Gogel, McCumsey, & Hewett, 1985; Kaufmann & Sexton, 1983). Some observe developmental differences in infants 6 months old or even younger. Louis and Lewis (1992) discovered that some parents make judgments about their children’s abilities in the first 48 hours of life. Of the 1039 U.S. parents in the Gogel, McCumsey, and Hewett (1985) study, 7% responded that their children’s alertness and responsiveness in the first 6 months of life led them to suspect that their children were gifted. Another 15% saw signs of giftedness in their children between 6 and 12 months of age. Forty-five percent recognized their child’s gifts before the age of 2. Nearly two decades later, in Kuwait, Alomar (2003) reported similar observations. Some parents became aware that their infants—between 3 and 12 months of age—were developing at a greater than average rate.

The pervasive myth, “All parents think their child is gifted,” may lead one to be skeptical of these parental observations. However, there is substantial evidence that parents are proficient at recognizing early signs of giftedness (see Robinson, 1993). One example is the Fullerton Longitudinal Study of the development of gifted and non-gifted children from infancy to age 8 (Gottfried, Gottfried, Bathurst, & Guerin, 1994):

These findings support the notion that parents recognize their child’s potential prior to the time that educators test for giftedness... (p. 29)

Parents...are accurate in their ratings of their children’s functioning and...perceptive of their children’s developmental position as early as infancy. This is supported by...the correspondence of their ratings with the objective developmental test data... (p. 83)

Differences in level of intellectual performance between the gifted and nongifted children emerged on the psychometric testing at 1.5 years and maintained continuity thereafter. However, the earliest difference was found on receptive language skills at age 1 year. (pp. 84–85)

What are the Signs of Giftedness?

Among the earliest signs of giftedness are a preference for novelty (Fisher, 1990), high newborn cry count (Robinson, 1993), alertness (M. Rogers, 1986), awareness and intensity (Maxwell, 1985), and faster progression from reflexive to intentional behavior (Berche Cruz, 1987). Parents notice that their child is talking earlier than other children of the same age and making connections that seem very advanced. A child’s remarkable memory and rapid learning rate are also observable in early

childhood (Louis & Lewis, 1992; Parkinson, 1990; Tannenbaum, 1992). Other indicators include less need for sleep in infancy (Gaunt, 1989); high activity level; smiling or recognizing caretakers early; marked need for attention and stimulation; intense reactions to noise, pain, or frustration; fascination with books, and asking many questions (Silverman, 1997).

When parents have access to developmental norms for average children, they quickly become aware that their child is progressing through the developmental milestones at a much swifter rate. These guidelines tend to focus on verbal abilities, so that an early talker is much more likely to be recognized as gifted than an early builder.

During the early years (perhaps throughout childhood), parents tend to do best at identifying precocious children in domains in which there are distinctive milestones and normative expectations, as there are for the emergence of language and reading. Parents are, for example, quite good at identifying toddlers with broad vocabularies and complex sentence structure and better at identifying preschoolers who reason well mathematically and read early than those who exhibit precocious spatial reasoning and memory, areas in which adults typically do not possess such informal timetables. (Robinson, 1993, p. 510)

Children with advanced visual-spatial abilities may not be perceived as gifted by their parents or teachers unless they also demonstrate verbal precocity. When children develop speech later than their siblings, parents often worry that the children are developmentally delayed, even if they display extraordinary facility with puzzles, construction toys, creating things from odds and ends, disassembling items, and spatial memory. Some of these children have auditory issues (Silverman, 1989), and those who are also asocial may have Asperger's syndrome (Lovecky, 2004), but many are simply developing their right hemisphere before their left hemisphere (Silverman, 2002).

Parental recognition has been found to be a key ingredient in identification of, and differentiation for, gifted children in school settings (Dickinson, 1970). Recognition is enhanced when parents are exposed to a list of the typical traits of giftedness (Munger, 1990; Silverman, Chitwood, & Waters, 1986), such as the following:

Characteristics of Giftedness

Compared to other children your child's age, how many of these descriptors fit your child?

- Reasons well (good thinker)
- Learns rapidly
- Has extensive vocabulary
- Has an excellent memory
- Has a long attention span (if interested)
- Sensitive (feelings hurt easily)
- Shows compassion
- Perfectionistic
- Intense
- Morally sensitive
- Has strong curiosity
- Perseverant in areas of interest
- Has high degree of energy
- Prefers older companions or adults

- Has a wide range of interests
- Has a great sense of humor
- Early or avid reader (if too young to read, loves being read to)
- Concerned with justice, fairness
- Judgment mature for age at times
- Is a keen observer
- Has a vivid imagination
- Is highly creative
- Tends to question authority
- Has facility with numbers
- Good at jigsaw puzzles

The 25 traits above are from the *Characteristics of Giftedness Scale* (Silverman, 1993b), developed and studied over a period of 34 years (K. Rogers & Silverman, 1998; Silverman, 2003a). The descriptors were selected to meet the following criteria: (a) applicable to a wide age range, (b) generalizable to children of varied socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, (c) gender fair, (d) easily observed in the home environment, (e) brief and clearly worded for ease of interpretation by parents, and (f) supported by research. The Characteristics of Giftedness Scale is a 4-point Likert scale, with room for anecdotal descriptions of each characteristic. Delisle (1992) has found that accuracy of parent checklists improves dramatically when parents are asked to provide anecdotal data about each characteristic endorsed. For many years, the scale was administered in a phone interview, and now it is sent to parents electronically. There is also a teacher version. In a study of 1000 children whose parents indicated that their children exhibited three-fourths of the characteristics, 84% of the children tested above 120 IQ (Silverman, 1998). Another 11% demonstrated superior abilities in some areas, but had weaknesses that depressed their IQ scores below 120. Exceptionally gifted children (above 160 IQ) demonstrated 80 to 90% of the characteristics (K. Rogers & Silverman, 1998).

When Should a Child Be Formally Identified as Gifted?

School wisdom and psychometric research differ on the answer to this question. In a study in Canada, only 50% of the preschool and kindergarten teachers surveyed believed that gifted children should be identified between the ages of 3 and 6 (Sankar-DeLeeuw, 2002). The purpose of testing advanced students in schools is for selection to programs. Where gifted programs exist, they may start at fourth grade and stop after sixth grade. It is common for school districts to test children on group IQ tests at the end of third or the beginning of fourth grade. Some school districts extend gifted programs to the primary grades or up through middle school. Coordinated kindergarten through 12th grade programs for advanced students are rare.

There are three major problems in waiting until around age 9 to test a gifted child. First, this is the age when girls go underground and are likely to hide what they know in order to fit in. Many girls say, "I don't know" to test questions they can readily answer because they do not want to be separated from their friends. They also become perfectionistic at this age and are unwilling to guess unless they are absolutely certain of the answer, which depresses IQ scores (Silverman, 1995). Second, at this age, exceptionally gifted children easily hit the ceiling on the IQ tests. Since

the content is of insufficient difficulty, the children may be considerably brighter than their test scores. Third, a critical period for the development of talent is lost. Giftedness is exceptionality; therefore, as with all forms of exceptionality, early intervention promotes optimal development (Bloom, 1985; Guralnick & Bennett, 1987). Because of the importance of early intervention, it would not be appropriate to wait until age 9 to identify a child with developmental delays. For the same reason, it is best to identify gifted children as early as possible.

Since parents are able to recognize their child's giftedness in early childhood, it is wise for them to obtain formal identification before the child enters school. This may sound bizarre to those who have bought the myths that early IQ scores are just the result of a stimulating home environment and that "by third grade, all kids catch up." It is true that intelligence tests measure a mixture of environmental exposure and innate intelligence. But which child has had the most environmental exposure: the 4-year-old or the 9-year-old? The effects of environment increase with age, not decrease. As for "catching up," the gifted mind has access to higher levels of abstraction, learns more information, retains it better, accesses it more efficiently, organizes it, and associates it with previous information more effectively. How, then, would it be possible for a child of average intelligence to "catch up" to a child of extremely high intelligence? It can only appear that way if the information being taught is at such a low level that children of vastly different abilities can perform at the same level.

A fundamental principle in developmental psychology is that "Development usually proceeds at the rate at which it started" (LeFrancois, 1981, p. 89). This principle has been found repeatedly to apply to the gifted: "The differences between gifted and nongifted children were significant at 1.5 years and every age thereafter" (Gottfried et al., 1994, p. 56). From her review of the research, Robinson (1993) wrote: "Advanced ability tends to maintain its rapid pace of development. This evidence substantiates the notion that early giftedness, or rapid development, also *predicts* the subsequent rate of development" (p. 511).

The optimal time to identify a gifted child is between the ages of 4 and 9. Children younger than 4 may lack the ability to attend and respond to the examiner. Four-year-old gifted children are intellectually more like 6-year-olds, and they usually respond to assessment like school-age children. Based on a half-century of research in testing, Elizabeth Hagen, coauthor of the *Cognitive Abilities Test* and the *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Revision IV*, confirmed that accurate information can be obtained with 4-year-olds.

I don't think four to six is too early to obtain a valid assessment. The correlations between scores obtained at ages four or five and later IQ scores are slightly lower than those obtained at age nine, but not that much lower. The only reservation I would have about testing at that age is being able to locate children who come from somewhat limited backgrounds. (quoted in Silverman, 1986, p. 170)

The Knowledgeable Examiner

It takes more courage than most people realize for a parent to initiate testing of a highly able child. "In truth, few parents think their children are gifted and want to label their children as gifted" (Feldhusen, 1998, p. 194). Afraid that they are overestimating their children's abilities and will be proven foolish, parents feel compelled to amass large amounts of evidence of precocity before they are willing to even begin

exploring the possibility of giftedness (Seeley, 1998). Once they decide to assess the child, locating an examiner with knowledge and experience in testing the gifted is not simple, but it is easier today with the advent of the Internet. Some websites offer lists of testers who have been recommended by parents and professionals:

- Hoagies Gifted Education Page www.hoagiesgifted.org
- Institute for Educational Advancement www.educationaladvancement.org

Another excellent resource is TAGFAM, Families of the Gifted and Talented [www.tagfam.org]. On TAGFAM, parents can ask other parents where they had their children tested and how satisfied they were. Local advocacy groups and state conferences for the gifted are also good places to get recommendations of experienced examiners (Gilman, 2003).

There is always a need for knowledgeable testers of the gifted. Within the school setting, assessment of advanced students is limited. Many school districts use teacher-administered group IQ tests for program selection. There is a shortage of school psychologists, and most of them work with learning-disabled students; they receive little or no training on testing gifted students. In those school districts that employ specialists to test advanced students, budgetary constraints limit the assessment to specific instruments. Determining if a child qualifies for gifted services is only a first step. School districts should welcome more in-depth evaluations by psychologists to assist parents and teachers in planning effectively for the child's affective and academic needs.

Ideally, a comprehensive evaluation provides an in-depth understanding of the child, including level of ability, cognitive and modality strengths and weaknesses, achievement as compared with ability, self-concept, preferred learning style and personality type, social and emotional development, and detection of possible learning disabilities. The examiner offers recommendations, resources, a plan for accommodating the child's needs at home and at school, and referrals to other diagnosticians, as needed. Regardless of the range in which the child scores, extensive assessment is invaluable for understanding how the child learns best and what modifications of the school and home environment will assist in optimal development. (See Chapter 9 for more on this topic.)

Preferably, the psychological examiner of the gifted should have (a) considerable experience in testing gifted children, (b) ability to gain rapport easily with gifted children of all ages, (c) skill in working with the typical personality traits of the gifted (e.g., introverted, perfectionistic, sensitive, highly active, etc.), (d) knowledge of extreme levels of giftedness, (e) understanding of how giftedness interacts with various exceptionalities, (f) knowledge of resources for gifted children and, in the case of twice exceptional clients, referrals for further diagnoses, and (g) willingness to test the full strength of the child's abilities.

The examiner also needs to be skillful in interpreting test results for the gifted. A boilerplate description of relative strengths and relative weaknesses in relation to the norms for average students is insufficient. Are there major discrepancies between the child's strengths and weaknesses? If so, would the derivation of a General Ability Index (GAI) on the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC) provide a better estimate of the child's abilities (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004)? Are there patterns of strengths in the test results (e.g., high visual-spatial perception combined with advanced math comprehension indicates talent in mathematics)? Are there patterns

of weaknesses (e.g., low scores in Comprehension, Digit Span, and Spelling may signify a Central Auditory Processing Disorder)? Did the child answer more items than the minimum necessary to obtain the highest subtest score (i.e., 19 on Wechsler scales)? If so, how many additional raw points did the child earn (e.g., 19 + 4)? Is a second test with a higher ceiling needed? If siblings attained much higher scores, is the current assessment an underestimate? Was the child comfortable with the examiner? If not, perhaps the child should be tested again in a year with another tester who might be able to establish better rapport.

Practitioners who wish to develop expertise in assessing the gifted may consider doing internships with seasoned examiners. The gifted have complex profiles and deserve intensive study to develop proficiency in interpreting their scores.

“Now What Do I Do?”

When parents discover that their children are gifted, they may be delighted with the news—at first. Then they become anxious about how to meet the special needs of the child, both at home and at school. Some parents feel inadequate and overwhelmed by the information. Typical reactions include, “Am I smart enough to guide my child?” “How will my family and friends react to this?” “Will I be able to find the right educational program?” and, “Do I have enough time and money to properly stimulate my child?” The varied and changing needs of a gifted child can push a family’s financial resources to the limits (Alomar, 2003).

It is important to assure parents that their children were not randomly distributed. There is “evidence for a very strong genetic influence on intelligence” (Bouchard & Lykken, 1999, p. 92). Thus, parents and children are usually close in ability, and, despite their fears, parents do have the inner resources to raise their gifted child. Relatives generally have high abilities as well, which may make the child’s abilities more difficult to recognize (Munger, 1990). And relatives and friends all have their own opinions on how to raise a gifted child. Parents may be bombarded with well-meaning but misguided advice. “Skipping grades will make him a social outcast.” “If you put her in a school for the gifted, she will not be able to relate to people in the *real* world.” “I was in regular classes in the public school, and I turned out just fine.” All of these messages can create anxiety in the parents. They need to be able to rely on an informed health care professional, who is knowledgeable about research and resources, and has had experience with gifted children and their families.

Raising a gifted child can be a roller coaster ride of extreme highs and distressing lows. The child’s high levels of energy, inquisitiveness, less need for sleep, and tremendous need for stimulation can easily exhaust the energy of even the best of parents. One parent commented, “When other babies were getting 12 hours of sleep, I was lucky if he slept 6 hours. I figured he was smarter than other children his age because he had been awake twice as long” (Silverman & Kearney, 1989, p. 52).

The emotional intensity that often accompanies giftedness can make the child difficult to manage. Gifted children are asynchronous (Morelock, 1992; Silverman, 1993c); they can be both adultlike and childlike, almost simultaneously. The same child who can communicate his love of dolphins by reciting the Latin names of virtually every species can be found moments later arguing over toys. Adolescent-type conflicts often appear on the scene during the elementary school years. This can lead

to a great deal of parental insecurity. It is useful to create forums where parents of the gifted can come together to share common issues, under the guidance of a skilled facilitator. Betty Meckstroth (1991) created the prototype of the parent forum models currently available.

For most American families, there is no village available in which to cooperatively raise a gifted youngster. But parents are forming their own “villages” on the Internet—listserves where they can connect with other parents facing similar dilemmas. In this context, parents often become coaches for each other. However, in the end, parents must learn to trust their own judgment about their child’s needs. They have spent 24 hours a day with this young person since birth and they have more information about their child than any neighbor, relative, Internet parent, educator, or expert. All advice needs to be filtered through their knowledge and experience with their child.

It is ironic that parents of the gifted are often accused of “pushing” their children when most are hanging on for dear life (Golon, 2006)! Parent advocacy is actually essential for the emotional and academic development of highly able children. One of the services a mental health provider can offer to parents is advice on how to advocate effectively. Parents may need guidance in establishing a collaborative relationship with the child’s teacher. The mother who is concerned with creating opportunities for all gifted children will be more successful than one who is concerned only with her own child. Volunteering in the classroom gains the trust of the teacher. Parents can offer to be resources on student projects, supervise students on the computer, share special areas of interest, or mentor other gifted children (Lucas, 1995). Teachers appreciate a parent asking, “How can I help?” Parents show respect for a teacher’s time when they set up appointments. Providing two highlighted sheets of recommendations is also more respectful than expecting a teacher to read a wheelbarrow full of documentation. Most important of all, parents need to remember to express appreciation for a teacher’s efforts.

Sometimes parent–teacher collaborations fail. In the event of clashes between the perceptions of teachers and parents, the practitioner can act as a mediator. A classroom observation or participation in a staffing can make a world of difference. Parent education is still another needed service. Parents want help in understanding what is normal for this population, what the research says, as well as various strategies and resources.

Educational Alternatives

Selecting a School

Finding the right school for a gifted child can be an overwhelming task. The simplest solution is the neighborhood school with its advantages of geography, neighborhood friends, and the fact that it is *free*. There are many excellent public schools throughout the country with innovative programs, individualized curricula, exciting teachers who understand the needs of gifted children, and supportive principals who are willing to consider “out-of-the-box” alternatives. Therefore, the neighborhood school should be the first place parents consider in their search. Unfortunately, some schools are not responsive to the needs of gifted children, particularly highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted children (Kearney, 1993).

In guiding parents through the slippery waters of the school selection process, it helps to investigate with them all the local options available. Does the district have open enrollment? Are certain public schools more welcoming and accommodating to the gifted than others? (As the principal sets the tone of the school, this situation is likely to change whenever there is a new administrator.) Are there self-contained classes for the gifted or pull-out programs available within the district? Are there magnet, charter, or independent schools in the area that specialize in serving gifted students? How amenable is the child's school to substituting faster-paced distance learning courses, such as the Education Program for Gifted Youth (EPGY), for the regular coursework? Can a child be partially homeschooled? How early can a student enroll in an Advanced Placement class? Is there an International Baccalaureate program?

Many parents are fiercely committed to the egalitarian values of a public education. Too often, though, their local school focuses exclusively on minimal standards, increasing test scores, and bringing up the bottom, to the detriment of gifted children's development. An alternative is to enroll the child in a special school designed for the gifted. There is now a National Consortium of Schools for the Gifted, which includes 86 private, charter, magnet (K-8), and public schools in the United States specifically for gifted students (www.gifteddevelopment.com/PDF_files/natlconsrt.pdf). In contemplating a special school, parents are often concerned that removing children from the neighborhood school will result in elitism, isolation, inability to get along with the mainstream, or rejection of democratic values. Some parents fear that placement in a selective school will develop only their children's intellectual abilities, at the expense of their social, emotional, artistic, or athletic lives. "Clearly, the social concerns have come from adults unfamiliar with gifted schools" (Gilman, 2006, p. 1). We have found that these apprehensions are usually unwarranted and disappear once families visit a school, witness the daily happenings, and consult with other parents who have chosen this path. The advantages of a special school are (a) development of friendships with true peers, (b) teachers who are specially trained and experienced in working with the gifted, (c) faster paced instruction, and (d) opportunities to develop specific interests. Some practitioners accompany parents to different schools and assist them in evaluating the school. Guidelines for selecting a school for the gifted are also available (Gilman, 2006; Silverman & Leviton, 1991).

A comprehensive evaluation provides a basis for matching an individual student to the school environment. Each school is different, as is each student, and the strengths of the student should be matched with the strengths of the school. Just as a continuum of services exists of increasing amounts of support for the developmentally delayed, depending on the degree of severity, the higher the child's IQ is, the greater the need for special provisions (Silverman, 1993c). Children who score in the high average range on individual tests of intelligence (115–119 IQ) will probably be successful in the neighborhood school. Children who score in the superior range (120–129 IQ) are good candidates for differentiation, enrichment, some gifted programs, and college preparatory schools. Many who score in this range on a group test, or on the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Revision 5, actually would test in the gifted range on other instruments. Thus, retesting or other evidence of high ability should be considered. Moderately gifted children, those who score two standard deviations above the mean (130–144 IQ), usually need programs or schools designed specifically for the gifted in order to progress at their own rate and achieve

optimal social relations with true peers. Highly gifted children, those who score three standard deviations above the mean (145–159 IQ), are usually best served in full-day congregated programs, special schools for the gifted, or at least partial homeschooling. Children in the exceptionally (160–174 IQ) or profoundly gifted range (175+) require such provisions to an even greater degree.

Additional considerations in selecting a school include the preferred learning style and unique profile of the student, as well as the needs of the family, including the financial limitations, distance to the school under consideration, ease of transportation, and so on (Silverman & Leviton, 1991). Families should visit as many potential programs and schools as possible before making a decision. Parents should inquire about acceleration options, special training of the staff in gifted education, the staff's and administration's experience with gifted students, and observe the atmosphere of the school as well as the attitude of attending students. When the parents have narrowed the choice to two or three schools, the child should visit these schools for a day or so and parents should be afforded an opportunity to talk with other parents whose children are enrolled. A skilled practitioner can help the family weigh the positives and negatives of each school, giving primary weight to the overall impression of the child following a full-day visit. When care is taken in the selection process, and everyone—including the child—has the opportunity to be heard, a good choice is usually the outcome.

To Accelerate or Not to Accelerate ...

No educational strategy for highly able students has been as closely scrutinized as the acceleration of students and none has as large a body of empirical evidence to support its success (Gross & van Vliet, 2005). Yet, there are many educators who strongly oppose any, or all, forms of acceleration. Mental health professionals are also likely to harbor the misperception that acceleration causes social adjustment difficulties. Research has continually demonstrated that gifted students receiving various acceleration options are as well adjusted as their nonaccelerated peers (Caplan, Henderson, Henderson, & Fleming, 2002; Gagne & Gagnier, 2004; Plucker & Taylor, 1998; K. Rogers, 1992; Sayler & Brookshire, 1993). Although belief in the harmful effects of acceleration is deeply entrenched, there have been no studies that show that gifted children have better social adjustment when they are kept with their age peers. A recent review concluded, "We can lay firmly to rest the myth that acceleration is inherently dangerous for gifted students" (Robinson, 2004, p. 64). A bonus for parents and schools is that acceleration is *free*.

A Nation Deceived (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004), a report funded by the John Templeton Foundation, has had a powerful impact on dispelling the pervasive myths about acceleration. It is available for free at <http://nationdeceived.org>.

Students who are moved ahead tend to be more ambitious, and they earn graduate degrees at higher rates than other students. Interviewed years later, an overwhelming majority of accelerated students say that acceleration was an excellent experience for them.

Accelerated students feel academically challenged and socially accepted, and they do not fall prey to the boredom that plagues many highly capable students who are forced to follow the curriculum for their age-peers. (Colangelo et al., 2004, p. 53)

Most people who are antiacceleration say that they know someone who had terrible social experiences because he or she skipped a grade. This always raises two questions: How do they know that the person would have been well adjusted if kept with age peers? And, did anyone *ask* this person if he or she wanted to be advanced? It has been common practice to place children in grades and groups without ever consulting them. Julian Stanley (1981), one of the first in current times to systematically accelerate students, found that youth who want to be accelerated have no difficulty with social adjustment. The critical factor in predicting the success of grade advancement is the student's desire to be accelerated. The bottom line is, "Ask the child."

Feldhusen, Proctor, and Black (2002) provide excellent criteria to determine if acceleration will be effective, including: (a) a comprehensive psychological evaluation of intelligence, academic mastery, and social and emotional adjustment, (b) an IQ of at least 125, (c) academically, the child demonstrates skill levels above the mean of the grade desired, (d) the child is free of any serious adjustment problems, (e) the receiving teachers have positive attitudes and willingness to help the child adjust to the new situation, (f) efforts are made to accelerate at natural transition points, and (g) grade advancement is done on a trial basis of approximately 6 weeks. *The Iowa Acceleration Scale* (Assouline, Colangelo, Lupkowski-Shoplik, Lipscomb, & Forstadt, 2003) is a valuable tool to assist families, educators, and counselors in making successful decisions regarding acceleration.

Advanced students often need a variety of accelerative options available to them throughout their school years in order to perform optimally: (a) early entrance into kindergarten, (b) grade skipping, (c) content acceleration in one or two subject areas while remaining with age peers, (d) continuous progress classes in which students can complete 3 years of curriculum in 2 years, (e) compacting coursework so that it can be covered in less time, (f) testing out of courses or partial course requirements, (g) substituting fast-paced distance learning courses for the regular coursework, (h) taking advanced courses for credit in summers or after school, (i) early admission to advanced placement courses, (j) dual enrollment in high school and college, (k) early graduation and early enrollment in college, and (l) for extremely gifted children, radical acceleration (more than 2 years). Highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted children may need several types of advancement throughout their educational career.

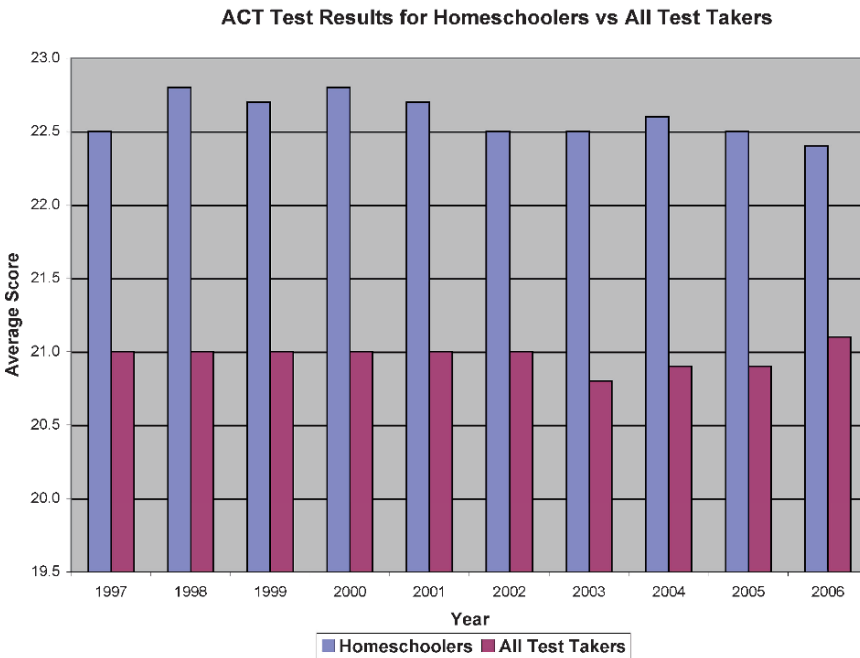
Acceleration is simply matching the curriculum to the learning rate and level of mastery of the student. In one-room schoolhouses, this was accepted practice. The opportunity for continuous progress is an essential response to the accelerated development of gifted students. It allows every child the opportunity to learn at his or her own rate with no glass ceiling.

Homeschooling

Once dominated by families who chose homeschooling for religious purposes, the number of homeschooling families today is swelling with those who have chosen this form of education solely for academic reasons. Homeschooling should be seriously considered for the gifted child requiring acceleration, individualization, or other accommodations that may not be available in the community. "Instead of regimented, standardized provisions delivered within a detailed set of rules and regulations, learning could be much more diverse, open and flexibly tailored to a child's requirement and responsive to his or her individual development" (Belfield, 2004, p. 18).

With the prevalence of the Internet, options abound for homeschooled gifted students, including online classes and virtual field trips to museums of other countries. There are classes that “meet” online on a regular basis to offer students peer feedback and camaraderie. While each state has its own set of rules and regulations surrounding homeschooled students, there is now a wealth of resources and support for families choosing this alternative. Some avenues to consider include correspondence courses through accredited institutions and universities, as well as public school or state programs that provide curriculum and computers. In Iowa, public support is provided on a regular basis to homeschoolers through Home School Assistance Programs.

There is growing evidence that homeschooling is effective, particularly for gifted children. In one study, 16,000 home educated children in grades K–12 performed at the 79th percentile on standardized achievement tests for reading and at the 73rd percentile for language and mathematics (Klicka, 2000). “Nearly 80% of home schooled children achieve individual scores above the national average” (Klicka, p. 1). Homeschooled students appear to be better prepared than their traditionally schooled counterparts to enter and succeed in college. Research from both the College Board (SAT) and the American College Testing Program (ACT) “indicate that homeschoolers are exceeding the national average test scores on both the SAT and ACT college entrance exams” (National Center for Home Education, 2000, p. 1). “The College Board, which administers the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), also notes the above-average performance of homeschoolers” (Home School Legal Defense Association, 2003, p. 1). For the years 1998 through 2003, homeschooled students consistently outscored nonhomeschooled peers in both college board examinations. Below is the comparison of ACT scores for homeschooled students versus all test takers for the years 1997 through 2006:



With permission from: <http://homeschooling.gomilpitas.com/olderkids/CollegeTests.htm>

Ivy League colleges have begun to seek homeschooled students (Klicka, 2000, p. 2). A report from Stanford University suggests that these students have greater “intellectual vitality” than their competitors. “Homeschooled students may have a potential advantage over others in this [intellectual vitality], since they have consciously chosen and pursued an independent course of study” (Foster, 2000, p. 1). Practitioners can assist parents in finding homeschool support groups in their area and resources for homeschoolers.

Knowledge of Resources

Supportive professionals working with gifted families need to become acquainted with the resources in their local community, their state, and available on the Internet for advanced students. Are there any enrichment programs for the gifted within driving distance? Do the local colleges and universities offer talent searches, summer courses, afterschool or weekend programs, mentoring, auditing, free Internet courses, early entrance, scholarships, or any other services for gifted students? Can juniors or seniors simultaneously enroll in high school and college and receive credit toward both high school and college degrees?

To build a practice with the gifted, it is helpful when clinicians perceive themselves as advocates and become active in local, state, regional, and national advocacy groups, such as the National Association for Gifted Children. This increases their knowledge of resources, workshops, and conferences—information they can pass on to families; it also establishes parents’ confidence in them. It is extremely valuable for practitioners to be aware of the journals in the field, magazines and newsletters for parents, books written specifically for parents, and major websites (see Appendix).

Parents may need assistance in finding distance learning resources (see Golon, 2004) and homeschooling support groups. A list of free online courses can be found on www.hoagiesgifted.org. These include advanced placement courses, foreign languages, mathematics, physics, history, and so on.

It is estimated that 10 to 15% of school children suffer from learning disabilities (Springer & Deutsch, 1998) and a similar percentage has been found among the gifted (K. Rogers & Silverman, 1998). Therefore, it is important for service providers to be aware of the possibility of dual exceptionality, the signs, referral sources, and resources. The most common issues that have surfaced among our clients at the Gifted Development Center are (a) sensory processing disorder (SPD), (b) attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD), (c) central auditory processing disorder (CAPD), (d) visual processing deficits, (e) dyslexia, (f) spatial deficits, and (g) Asperger’s syndrome (AS) (Silverman, 2003b). It helps to develop a network of specialists who regularly see gifted clients. Ideally, clinicians who specialize in giftedness can coordinate information from these various referral sources, so that the interaction of giftedness with other syndromes can be taken into account. (For example, the AD/HD specialist may not realize that a gifted child with AD/HD is able to concentrate for long periods of time when the work is sufficiently challenging, but unable to concentrate if the work is below his or her level of mastery.)

Some excellent resources on dual diagnoses are the *2e Newsletter*; *Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome and Other Learning Deficits* (Lovecky, 2004); *Uniquely Gifted: Identifying and Meeting the Needs of the Twice-Exceptional Student*

(Kay, 2000); *Crossover Children: A Sourcebook for Helping Children Who Are Gifted and Learning Disabled* (Bireley, 1995); and *To Be Gifted & Learning Disabled: From Identification to Practical Intervention Strategies* (Baum, Owen, & Dixon, 1991). More information on twice exceptional learners can be found in Chapter 7.

Family Dynamics

What is it like to live with intense, sensitive, perfectionistic children? And what if the parents also fit this description? One would hardly expect to find calm, peaceful households in these cases. Add to these personality factors the findings that half of these children are “highly energetic,” a third of them need very little sleep, and most are argumentative. Welcome to living opera! (Silverman & Kearney, 1989, p. 52)

The prior sections address parental guidance, counseling, advocacy, and consultation. Clinicians who specialize in the development of gifted children emphasize the role of assessment in guiding interventions. “They are focused on prevention of social/ emotional problems through timely, early intervention” (Moon, 2003, p. 388). Dealing with the complex dynamics in gifted families requires a different set of skills, a therapeutic orientation, as well as an understanding of how giftedness affects individuals and interactions in families.

Albert (1978) has found that eminent adults often come from a family “that is anything but harmonious—one which has built into its relationships, its organization of roles, and its levels of communication a good deal of tension if not disturbances at times, what I term a ‘wobble’” (Albert, 1978, p. 203). The therapist working with such a family needs to have an appreciation for idiosyncrasy—the “wobble” of the gifted family, see beneath the surface, and not try to mold the family into more traditional patterns.

Characteristics of Gifted Families

The characteristics of giftedness in childhood do not disappear when one becomes an adult. Only memory has a short shelf life. Parents of highly able children are usually gifted ex-children (Tolan, 1994). Genetic studies suggest that “intelligence...is one of the most heritable dimensions of behavior” (Plomin, 1999, p. 29); therefore, if one child is gifted, it is likely that the entire family is gifted. From this perspective, there are no “potentially” gifted children, even as there are no potentially retarded children.

Families of the gifted have been studied from a different vantage point: to discover how family life creates giftedness or eminence (e.g., Albert, 1980; Bloom 1985; Goertzel, Goertzel, Goertzel & Hansen, 2004) and to see how one child being labeled gifted affects siblings (e.g., Colangelo & Brower, 1987; Cornell, 1984). (See also Chapter 4.) These questions are from the fields of psychology and education, which have been somewhat skeptical of genetics. The concept that a gifted child is imbedded within a gifted family is probably more palatable to medically trained psychiatrists and clinical social workers, since medicine places a strong premium on heredity.

When a parent brings a child for testing, it often opens the door to self-discovery, sometimes leading the parent to seek assessment for him- or herself. Even without

formal testing, parents may begin to recognize their own abilities when they read a list of the characteristics of giftedness. But owning one's gifts is another matter. Giftedness is so wed to recognized achievement in adults that most parents, regardless of what they have achieved, have an immediate disconnect from the notion that they might be gifted. This is particularly true of mothers, who often avow, "She gets it from her father!" If mothers are their daughters' first role models, and mothers cannot be gifted, how can their daughters believe in their own giftedness?

Many of the issues in gifted families are related to unrecognized giftedness and the characteristics of the gifted throughout the life cycle. The feeling of being an outsider in any social sphere, a feeling that began in childhood, colors the parent's attitudes and concerns for the child. It is this lack of belonging that may drive a gifted adult to seek therapy and that gets triggered when there is family conflict. If the conflict is intense, it may bring the threat of loss of the only community to which the parent has ever belonged.

Increased sensitivity is common throughout the family system. Intensity is another family trait (Meckstroth, 1989). Any perceived slight can quickly escalate into a major drama. Luckily, intense blow-ups often blow over quickly. In working with the incendiary quality of the gifted family, two other characteristics of giftedness can mitigate the potential damage to family relations. Highly intelligent people are capable of understanding the point of view of others. And, as the first counselor/psychologist of the gifted, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1940), often pointed out, humor is their "saving sense" (p. 274). If they can see the humor in the situation, or can get to the point where they are capable of laughing at themselves, they can get beyond their feelings of woundedness.

The argumentativeness of gifted families can be off-putting for those who do not understand it. Nearly all gifted individuals argue: some argue out loud and some argue with others in their minds—too polite to voice what they are thinking. Argument is a way of knowing and a form of mental exercise engaged in by inquisitive minds. In some gifted families, mental sparring is the basic form of communication. Leta Hollingworth understood this trait well. As part of her "emotional education," she designed a program to train highly gifted children in the fine art of argumentation, including "argument with oneself," "argument with others in private, involving etiquette and the art of polite disagreement," and "argument in public" (Hollingworth, 1939, p. 585). If parents were raised in authoritarian families where they were punished if they were disobedient, they may perceive their children's argumentativeness as oppositional defiance.

There is very likely to be heightened perfectionism in a gifted family. This is one of the most frequently misunderstood qualities of the gifted. Clinicians often assume that perfectionism needs to be cured, since it appears to be a factor in several conditions, such as stress-related ailments, anxiety, depression, anorexia, bulimia, workaholicism, sexual compulsions and dysfunctions, chemical abuse, Type A coronary-prone behavior, migraines, excessive cosmetic surgeries, suicide, psychosomatic disorders, and obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). However, in the gifted, perfectionism may have an entirely different significance (Silverman, 1999).

Perfectionism is an energy that can be used either positively or negatively. It can cause paralysis and underachievement, if the person feels incapable of meeting standards set by the self or by others. It also can be the passion that leads to extraordinary

creative achievement—an ecstatic struggle to move beyond the previous limits of one's capabilities and a component of the drive for self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). In a study of 400 gifted sixth graders, Parker (1997) found perfectionism to be correlated with conscientiousness rather than neurosis; he argued for appreciation of a healthy form of perfectionism. Therapists need to be able to distinguish between unreachable, punitive self-standards and a level of excellence within the grasp of gifted clients.

In gifted mothers, perfectionism may blend with their desire for beauty and order. Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1939) wrote that she had never met a gifted person who did not have a love of beauty. The desire to create beauty can express itself in gardening; flower arranging; taste in clothing; the care with which one decorates one's home; delight in music, art, and sunsets; orderliness; and appreciation of the elegance of mathematics. Gifted individuals with limited funds may become depressed having to live in inelegant surroundings. Family conflicts erupt when perfectionistic mothers with a strong aesthetic sense strive to maintain too high a level of order in their homes. For example, one mother insisted that her teenage son hang all of his clothes in the same direction in his closet. It is essential for the counselor to honor the gifted mother's need for beauty and, at the same, assist her in picking her battles.

The complexity of gifted minds is mirrored in the complexity of their emotions. Highly intelligent people see so many variables in a situation, so many connections between seemingly unrelated events, and so many potential outcomes that they may not be able to sort through all of the information to find an appropriate path. Decision-making is simpler when one has less information. While there has been much psychological investigation of the pitfalls of black/white thinking, little has been written about the dilemma of living with an infinite number of shades of gray. If the individual is petrified of making a mistake and believes that all but one of those shades of gray will be a dreadful error, life becomes a perilous walk on a tightrope with no safety net below. And if members of a family share this trait, decision-making is highly charged. The therapist must provide the safety net, while attempting to unknit the multitudinous variables, so that family members can safely navigate life.

The heart of therapeutic work with gifted families comes from their insatiable need for meaning. The clinician often asks, "What does this mean to you?" Gifted individuals are willing to cope with loneliness, being the perpetual outsider, and even lack of joy, if they can find meaning in their experience.

Two other characteristics of the gifted family are their lack of conventionality and their cohesiveness. Both of these topics are covered thoroughly in Chapter 4. Some therapists mistake the closeness of many gifted families for enmeshment. This is especially true for the exceptionally gifted, who may have no one outside their family with whom they can relate. Kearney (1992) writes:

Giftedness is a family affair. ... Discrepancies in an individual child's development affect siblings, parents, and extended family members as well as the child, and educational options have repercussions that can reverberate throughout the family system and across generations. (p. 9)

If these children are placed in heterogeneous, rigidly age-graded classrooms in school with no opportunity to associate with gifted peers for academic and social activities, it may appear to their teachers that they do not "socialize well" with other children. In addition, if they complicate the play to the point where other children literally cannot play with them, they will not be surrounded by playmates at recess. But within the family,

they may spend hours and hours with gifted siblings of varying ages participating in imaginative, extremely complex play. During the 19th century, this would not have been unusual, since children spent much less time in school and much more time at home. Twentieth century society, however, features a much different pattern of expectations for family life. Thus, such closeness and creativity among gifted siblings sometimes is perceived negatively by schools and mental health professionals... (pp. 9–10)

Sibling Relations

As described above, siblings in gifted families often spend more time together than siblings in average families. In homeschooling families, there may be no break from sibling interaction. Given the intensity of these families, sparks are bound to fly. On rare occasions, we have come across a child who did not fight with his or her siblings. The parents of one 4-year-old boy said that “he has never hit, kicked, or pushed a sibling... extremely loving (e.g., he sings, ‘I’m so glad when Daddy comes home’ every day to me.) He daily praises my wife and I for taking care of his baby brother” (Silverman, 1993a, pp. 62–63). We have also come across eldest children who have never forgiven the second child for being born. But beneath the deafening level of squabbling of most gifted siblings lies a lifelong bond. They may say horrible things to each other; however, if someone outside the family were to verbally or physically attack one of them, the siblings would unite to protect their own.

Birth order plays an important role in children’s development, and the distinctions may be even sharper in gifted families. It is often the firstborn who is identified by the school and placed in gifted programs (Cornell, 1984). The list of characteristics of high-achieving children matches closely the list of characteristics of firstborns. Firstborn children have the greatest need for achievement, the need to please teachers and parents, and are more perfectionistic than their younger siblings (Leman, 1984).

Second-born children, in the attempt to individuate, will often do the exact opposite of the firstborn. If the first one is studious, the second child may lose homework and focus on sports. The school niche is filled. If the firstborn is lonely, the second child will be everybody’s buddy. If the older sibling is musical, the younger child might be a visual artist.

Like educators, parents are more aware of the giftedness in a high-achieving child than in one who is not achievement motivated. They are much more likely to bring their first child in for assessment. At the Gifted Development Center, only an offer of a substantial discount for second children lured parents to bring in their happy-go-lucky, “nongifted” second children for assessment. We found numerous second children who were “average” on the outside and gifted on the inside. Over 60% of 148 sets of siblings scored within 10 points of each other (Silverman, 1988).

Cornell (1984) reported that parents of second children who were recognized as gifted found them to be better adjusted than those second-born children who were not identified. The tension and disharmony created when the firstborn is the family’s only identified gifted child can be avoided. Our experience at the Gifted Development Center has shown that the so-called “nongifted” child often demonstrates extremely high reasoning ability on IQ tests, which may be combined with hidden learning disabilities. One of the signs that siblings are well matched intellectually is that they can play highly complex games together. The differences that make them seem miles apart in ability at school often disappear at home.

There are also families with an extremely advanced firstborn who consumes most of the family's energy. Some of these high-maintenance children are musical prodigies or involved in competitions for national championships or they attend college at a very young age (with a parent chaperone). In these families, second-born children live in the shadow of the accomplishments of the firstborn. The family may choose to move in order to support the unusual abilities of the firstborn, and the plans and social life of the second child are disrupted. In families of prodigies, it is difficult to distribute financial, emotional, and time resources so that all children feel equally important.

When parents learn that their easygoing second-born children are gifted, we often see marked changes in their attitudes toward these children. As the younger siblings receive more special attention for their abilities, family harmony increases. Their new self-perceptions have an ameliorative effect on family dynamics. However, in those families in which the children remain highly competitive or are verbally or physically abusive to each other, family therapy is strongly recommended.

Family Therapy

When a gifted family is experiencing stress, family therapy is often the solution. Family therapists are trained to see the family as a unit and to deal with interactions among family members, rather than trying to fix the member who is labeled "the problem." They can facilitate greater understanding through role-play, modeling how to listen, creative problem solving, and moving toward mutual goals. Skilled family therapists strengthen cohesiveness by drawing out the love and deep connection in families that may be temporarily buried in conflict.

Knowing how to listen is a fundamental therapeutic skill. Piechowski (2006) writes:

In order to understand emotional life, two kinds of knowledge and skill are absolutely necessary: the ability to listen, and the knowledge of human development. Anyone who teaches the basic skills of counseling or conflict resolution starts by training people to listen with attention to what others say and to understand what they mean. Listening attentively—without prejudice and without preconceived notions—requires putting on strong brakes so that one stops oneself from interpreting and thinking of what to say. Listening requires taking in how the other person sees his or her situation and how he or she feels about it. ... We have to listen, carefully and attentively, to hear *the intended message*—the feeling behind the words, the yet-unarticulated level of experience, not-yet-capable of being consciously grasped and expressed. To listen like this...we have to give the other person our full attention. (p. 7)

This intense level of listening is ameliorative. Gifted individuals have a deep yearning to be seen and heard, to be understood. Part of the therapist's role is to teach family members how to really listen to each other, to give each other undivided attention. As this is not always possible, parents can learn to say to their children, "I can't really listen to you right now because I'm in the middle of [cooking dinner, writing a paper, thinking about my work, etc.], but I promise I will sit down with you [at 7:00 PM or right after we do the dishes, etc.] and give you my undivided attention."

Family therapists can also demonstrate how members can interact respectfully with each other in family discussions. Family meetings can be held in the therapist's office and then, when therapy is no longer needed, continued on a regular basis as a method of preventing issues from escalating out of control. These meetings provide an opportunity

for gifted children to have direct experience in democratic decision-making. Parents are no longer the arbitrators and enforcers. When issues arise, they are dealt with in the context of the family meeting. Grievances are aired and the entire family works together to achieve solutions that respect everyone's needs. Gifted children learn conflict resolution techniques and practice effective communication skills on a routine basis.

Family meetings can also be a vehicle for building self-esteem and family solidarity. Everyone is treated like an equal and works together to resolve issues equitably. A time for compliments should be included as well as a time for complaints. When a child is praised, the praise should be specific, rather than general. Another way to build self-esteem in the family is to forbid put-downs of oneself or of others. This house rule can diminish to a large extent the sarcasm that typifies the communication patterns of many gifted children.

Boundary setting is another arena where family therapy can be helpful. Gifted children tend to be extremely strong willed. Often, they are able to outargue their parents or simply refuse to cooperate and there is nothing the parents can do to make them change their minds. They can wear down the resistance of any parent. In the battle of wills, everybody loses.

In family therapy, the warriors can relax, listen to each other, try to take each other's point of view, and brainstorm solutions that will make everyone happy. Parents learn that "Do it because I said so" does not work. Reasoning does. Talking to a gifted child the way they would talk to a dear friend is more likely to gain cooperation. Asking works; telling does not. Gifted children think "Respect your elders" is ageism. They believe everyone deserves respect.

Gifted children are quick to complain, "That's not fair!" In family therapy, they can learn that "fair" does not mean, "I get whatever I want whenever I want it." Fair is a reciprocal concept. "Is it fair to your brother?" "Is it fair to me?" "Should I have to pick up everyone's clothes when I didn't throw them on the floor?" Responsibilities are shared and chores get accomplished because it is in everyone's best interest that the garbage be taken out, the dishes washed, the house kept clean—at least the main parts that are shared by the family. Gifted children learn to really think about fairness in a different light. And the therapist can help parents learn to be consistent and fair.

A family therapist can help the family divide attention and resources equitably. Parents can learn to spend time alone with each child every night or every week, doing something that child wants to do. They can support different interests in their children in order to reduce competition. An effective therapist recognizes each person's strengths, the strengths of the family, and the underlying bond that will keep this family together throughout the life span. The most important element in family cohesiveness is respect. A high school student wrote, "Above all, I respect the way my parents have raised me because they have always respected me" (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p. 53). Respect lasts a lifetime.

Home Stimulation

As children's first teachers, parents of gifted children should be encouraged to provide nurturing, enriched homes that quench the craving for knowledge most gifted children possess. Reading to a child is the best means of teaching a child to read.

Frequent trips to the library and witnessing other family members read enforce that reading is a family value. Everyday math such as cooking together, counting, building, and learning to skip count provide an excellent foundation for mathematics. Even the most introductory knowledge of maps on a local, state, national, or global level will help children understand the foundations for geography, a subject many gifted children enjoy. Trips to local art and history museums foster an appreciation for those subjects and offer gifted children opportunities to explore new interests and passions. Stimulation provided in the home is as varied as children are and should have no limitations, particularly none from outside influences that fear such enrichment may harm the child.

Gifted families are generally responsive rather than controlling. We have encountered very few parents who tried to create a gifted child. These families tend to be child-centered (Bloom, 1985; VanTassel-Baska, 1989). Perhaps the most striking impression is the high degree of parental involvement with their children (Gogel et al., 1985; Silverman & Kearney, 1989). When parents of gifted children are asked to describe their interests, the first response of many mothers is "my children."

Gogel et al. (1985) asked over 1000 families to list the most successful ways they work with their gifted children at home. Reading together was the number one response. Consistent encouragement came in second. Also listed were frequent conversations; participation in community activities; field trips to museums; vacations; discussions; listening; asking and answering questions. VanTassel-Baska (1989) found that in culturally diverse families, emotional support from extended family members, such as grandparents, was critical in the development of giftedness. (See Chapter 15 for more information about cultural diversity.) A great many parents simply share their own interests with their children and these become the most meaningful experiences of childhood. Stimulating home environments are filled with warmth and affection, respect, honesty, support for children's interests, opportunities to develop independence and understanding of their emotional needs. (See Chapter 4 for more information about talent development in families.)

Conclusion

Mental health professionals need to be aware of the characteristics of giftedness in order to recognize what is typical and atypical for this population, rather than comparing gifted individuals with the general population. Society recognizes retardation is an organizing principle—a unique trajectory of development with atypical characteristics. Few expect developmentally delayed individuals to behave like everyone else. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) provides ample demonstration of this. The criteria for many of the psychiatric diagnoses have the exclusionary clause, "If Mental Retardation...is present, the...difficulties are in excess of those usually associated with these problems" (American Psychiatric Association, 1994, p. 58). Certain behaviors that would appear abnormal in an average person are part of the syndrome of retardation; therefore, they are attributed to retardation rather than to other categories. The diagnostic emphasis is on comparing the developmentally disabled with their own group rather than with societal norms.

This same principle needs to be applied to the gifted population. Traits that may be viewed as dysfunctional—intensity, sensitivity, perfectionism—need to be seen as typical manifestations of this population. The gifted are injured immeasurably when their strengths are seen as deficits. In the same vein, gifted families may be misread as enmeshed or dysfunctional, when they are often doing their best to meet the needs of exceptional children without sufficient societal support. They need practitioners who understand their challenges.

Luckily, the mental health professions attract highly intelligent people. Those with higher ability are often called to take responsibility for others. It is a natural role as the gifted are usually empathic, conscientious, good problem solvers, and desire to be of service. However, there are pitfalls in being the responsible one. Highly responsible people may have difficulty saying “no” to all the demands made of them. They are easily overcommitted and overextended because they see the need and think they are the only ones who can fill it. They may know little about what they need to take care of themselves. People who give a great deal to others are not usually aware that they need a great deal of support from others as well. Even if they are, they are often reluctant to ask for help. It is important for gifted practitioners to put on their own oxygen masks before helping others.

The conspicuous absence of training in psychology and related fields on issues related to giftedness has provided the gifted practitioner with no compass for self-awareness or for assisting gifted clients. Learning about one’s own giftedness can be healing, not only for oneself but also for those one is called to serve. This volume is a first step in the journey to discover one’s own gifts.

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Resources

Websites

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Hoagies Gifted Education Page www.hoagiesgifted.org
Institute for Educational Advancement www.educationaladvancement.org
National Association for Gifted Children www.nagc.org
TAGFAM, Families of the Gifted and Talented www.tagfam.org
Supporting Emotional needs of the Gifted (SENG) www.sengifted.org
Twice-Exceptional Newsletter www.2enewsletter.com