Roep Review

Public details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t792156624

“I can do it myself!” Reflections on early self-efficacy
Elizabeth Maxwell *
* Associate Director of the Gifted Development Center, Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, Denver, Colorado

Online publication date: 20 January 2010

To cite this Article Maxwell, Elizabeth(1998) “I can do it myself!” Reflections on early self-efficacy’, Roeper Review, 20: 3, 183 — 187

To link to this Article DOI: 10.1080/02783199809553888
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02783199809553888

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
could not. This answer, which an adult would likely not have given, satisfied both children.

Many gifted children act more like average children. They ask occasional questions but do not show the pressing need to delve into spiritual issues. They show less spiritual sensitivity, and tend to resolve spiritual concerns through more conventional means such as organized religion, or asking questions that have specific answers. They do not try to resolve spiritual issues until they are at the age when others also are resolving questions, doubts, contradictions and inconsistencies. They may follow closely the developmental pathway delineated by Fowler (1981). Some may remain more conventional all their lives; others may find spiritual awareness at a later age.

The gifted children described in this article seem more to follow Plato’s (1956) credo: “Life without enquiry is not worth living” (p. 443). This examination of life can start very early. These gifted children are seekers who need special support from the adults around them as they continue to evolve new aspects of self. Acceptance of their seeking, deepening of relationships, and help in expressing their concerns with spiritual issues like compassion, the problem of good and evil and the question of mortality all are important in developing their identity as spiritual selves.

REFERENCES


Columbus Group. (1991, July). Unpublished transcript of the meeting of the Columbus Group, Columbus, OH.


“Reflections on Early Self-Efficacy”

Elizabeth Maxwell

Young gifted and highly gifted children are active agents in their own learning processes. They exert pressure upon parents and other adults in their environment to a sometimes amazing extent. Their exploits and capabilities make sense as activities of a self that is aware early and actively evaluative, seeking its own actualization. Three areas of expression of this sense of self as capable agent are depicted: the intellectual, the emotional and the volitional. Parenting issues with regard to early self-efficacy are explored. The point is made that early self-efficacy provides a fertile field for investigation of aspects of the self.

Elizabeth Maxwell is Associate Director of the Gifted Development Center, a service of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development, Denver, Colorado. She is also Associate Editor of Advanced Development Journal.


We expect children to work at organizing and gaining increasing mastery of the world into which they are born. We know that, barring tragic circumstance, they will acquire mobility, language, a remarkable array of skills and concepts, and their own expressive personality in the process of this developmental imperative. We know that this will happen at different rates for different children and that a wide range of individual differences is possible. But sometimes phenomena emerge within these larger growth patterns that are striking and evocative. They cause us to ponder and reflect. An accumulation of parental reports of very young children’s remarkable exploits is such a phenomenon. It is the basis for the reflections of this article.

At the Gifted Development Center in Denver, there is opportunity to collect test scores and background information across a wide gamut of intellectual giftedness. Children tested achieve scores that range from average to more than six standard deviations above mid-Bell Curve. On file are at least 265 children of 160 or above IQ score and over 50 who score at 180 or above. Anecdotal information has been collected for these children, as it has for all clients of the Center. Parents have shared remarkable vignettes of early ability. They depict an early childhood with a difference.

One major difference is a strong push toward early self-efficacy, with the most outstanding examples lying in the upper IQ ranges. It is difficult not to notice the assertive drive of gifted and highly gifted young children to master their environment as quickly and as thoroughly as possible, far beyond the age expectations of developmental timetables. They appear to be self-directed, their sense of self awareness arriving early and thrust in the face of parents and the environment in general. Their ways of behaving differently are worth pondering.
What does early self-efficacy say about the self and its part in such obvious assertiveness? Are we being given a window through which to view the selves in action of remarkable children and so gain valuable information about the self in each of us? There are several characteristics of giftedness that become clearer through the premise that gifted children may develop a sense of self earlier than other children, just as they often acquire earlier language or advanced reading skills. The often observed tendencies toward non-stop questioning, the urge to mastery and perfectionism, the demand for precision, their persistent goal-orientedness, and the tendency to regard themselves as equals of adults make more sense as the behavior of a conscious self seeking to actualize. Deirdre Lovecky calls this entelechy, “a particular type of motivation, need for self-determination, and an inner strength and vital force directing life and growth to become all one is capable of being” (Lovecky, 1990, p.79). Children with early self-efficacy act inner-directed with their own agendas. In the language of William James in his examination of the self, they are more “I” than “me.” (James, 1890). They are far more active agent than passive receptor. The self is a concept long been out of fashion in an era that favors the individual viewpoint of Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli (Assagioli, 1965) and his associate Piero Ferrucci (Ferrucci, 1982) which insists that the self does indeed exist and is a demonstrable experiential phenomenon, a “point of pure self-awareness” (Assagioli, 1965, page 18). Further, it agrees with Augusto Blasi, of the University of Massachusetts at Boston, who cogently argues that self cannot be just a construction or just a process but must also be an active evaluator, a necessary subjective judge of the truth of what is perceived, conceived, even received affectively:

The implication of this view of human cognition, particularly concerning the role that the individual self plays in it, can be elaborated by looking at the meaning of asking questions about an object and of answering them through judgments. Asking a question about an object or about the world is different from adapting to the world, or even from behaviorally discriminating and anticipating events in the world. (Blasi, in Lee & Noam, pp. 195-196)

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

Parenting Challenges

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

Gifted and highly gifted children are active learners with an inner agenda (Roepen, 1991). They learn remarkably quickly, but may be difficult to teach or control. Their behaviors produce unique challenges to parents and teachers. There are no guidelines for parenting these children. Knowing how to deal with a two-year-old who knows the alphabet and can put together a puzzle of the United States right side up or face down is outside the expertise of advice columns. Hearing a toddler’s voice from a car seat say, “Mommy, that sign says exit,” can be unsettling. Keeping track of a three-year-old who has figured out how all the household locks work and finds the outside world utterly enticing can be a mother’s nightmare. Discovering a four-year-old walking the bar of his swing set is an experience that is hard to deal with. Is this child a rash risk-taker or an incipient Olympic gymnast? How are parents to react when a five-year-old old molds plasticine lions with each curl of the mane exquisitely detailed but her arms are shaking and tears are streaming down her face? The parents we work with report that it is difficult to dissuade a gifted child who is determined to learn or accomplish something. Again and again, it is clear that it is the children who drive themselves and pressure their parents, and not the other way around.

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

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

Three Areas in Which Early Self-Efficacy Can Express

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

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

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

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

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

Emotional Self-Efficacy

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

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

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

Children with early self-efficacy in empathy and emotional discernment have been reported to share naturally without being taught. As they grow older, they often become peacemakers, able to mediate between friends, finding common ground between quarreling factions. However, the casual violence of the world appalls them. The feeling of being able to make a difference in some way is important to gifted children. Participating in social action can partly relieve their anguish because of the suffering of the world. Being a part of a solution can alleviate a sense of helplessness that is otherwise very alien to these able children.

Strong Will and Early Self-Efficacy

A subset of gifted and highly gifted children have highly developed will. Recognized in infancy, these children will not be deflected from the sharp, shiny scissors by a parental ploy of substituting a red rattle. They want what they want and they maintain goal constancy until they get it. If frustrated, they share their outrage protractedly. As they grow older, they often persist at a task until they have mastered it, doggedly determined to the point of collapse. One four-year-old girl spent all day learning to tie her shoelaces. At the day’s end, she was exhausted but her shoes were tied. She then insisted on wearing her shoes to bed. Sam, who was starting to eat solid food, kept knocking the spoon out of his mother’s hand. When, in exasperation, she handed him the spoon, he...
Courage is another issue for these children. They want to be brave. They are likely, like Dale, to force themselves to go down into the dark basement because, “I had to do it. It scared me.” They will champion the cause of a younger child who is being bullied and force themselves to stand up even to much older children. They have a strong sense of justice, which includes justice for others at a very early age. They want to be strong and invincible and heroic and protective.

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

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

Implications

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

Augusto Blasi, while recognizing the considerable merits of the cognitive developmental, Piagetian-based approaches to the understanding of personality, points to these very weakness-
Few themes that emerge from the stories of gifted children are more compelling than the striking demonstration, over and over, of early self-efficacy. It seems plausible that early self-efficacy is the visible evidence of early self-awareness and high intelligence in synergistic combination. High intellectual functioning, intense focus, and probing curiosity, early acquisition of language, and rapid learning ability shape a young life differently. Children who are passionate in their pursuit of knowledge, who question conventions others take for granted, who care deeply about people and ideas, and who strongly resist injustice are children who may feel a stronger urge to reshape their environment than to accommodate to it. A robust sense of self as an active, capable, perceptive, valuable player in the field is a resource to be valued. Children who display early self-efficacy appear to operate from this orientation. They offer the opportunity to advance our understanding of many aspects of that mysterious and very central entity: the self. They are hopefully our leaders of tomorrow, but also our teachers of today.

REFERENCES

Ferrucci, P. (1982). What we may be. Los Angeles: Tarcher
Hollingsworth, L. S. (1939). What we know about the early selection and training of leaders. Teachers College Record, 40, 575-592.

Preserving the True Self of the Gifted Child

Maureen Neihart

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

Maureen Neihart is a psychologist at the Northwest Counseling Center, Billings, Montana, a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of the Roeper Review, and Guest Editor of the special issue on the Psychological Well Being of the Gifted Child.

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

(Jamison, 1995, p. 26)