CHAPTER 13

Career Counseling for the Gifted

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Career development for the gifted is a lifelong process, beginning with the values, attitudes, and training provided in the home in early childhood and continuing throughout adulthood. Career guidance is needed early in the lives of the gifted, to help them recognize their capabilities and clarify their interests, and to expose them to the range of possibilities that await them. However, the broad spectrum of career opportunities available to these children tends to increase the complexity of decision making (Milne, 1979) and many actually delay career selection.

Since the gifted are often multitalented, they have potential for success in many fields, and aptitude becomes an insufficient criterion for selecting a career. Financial security and career stability, two determining factors for their parents and grandparents, play less significant roles today in young people's career choices (Yankelovich, 1972). Questions gifted students raise are: What career would be most interesting for me to pursue? Which field would offer the most opportunity for me to develop my potential? Where do I sense the greatest need? In what area can I be of most service? These are value-laden questions, all of which can be explored in a carefully designed career development program.

An effective career counseling program provides an opportunity for students to explore their own aspirations, experiences, and interests. It exposes students to various fields, to successful adults who have made a variety of career choices, and to real-life experiences in the work world. Biographical research is included as a way of helping gifted students to identify with those who have made great contributions in spite of obstacles. An effective program enhances the aspirations of those who have not had much encouragement and deals with such questions as how to manage a career and a family. It also involves itself with others in the young people's lives who influence their career choices.
PARENT EDUCATION

Career planning is actually a family affair. Perhaps the best way of helping young gifted students in selecting careers is to educate their parents. Parents play a critical role in shaping their children’s aspirations. They are their children’s first role models, and their encouragement and discouragement have lasting effects. In some families, it is expected that the child will follow in a parent’s footsteps, with all other career options foreclosed. This has been the tradition in most parts of the world for centuries, and it is still quite common in certain geographical regions and among some social classes and ethnic groups.

Career counseling for the gifted ideally begins with parent education or at least includes it as a component. Early exposure and expert instruction provided by the family often help to shape children’s future career paths. Recent research by Bloom (1982, 1985) reveals that individuals who have achieved worldwide acclaim in their fields before the age of 35 were groomed for their success while still in preschool. Concert pianists, for example, came from musically oriented families in which all members were expected to play musical instruments and were given instruction early in life. Bloom and Sosnian (1981) found the home to be far more important than the school in developing the talents of their subjects. In fact, in many cases, school was found to be counterproductive to talent development. While this research has important implications for child-rearing practices for the gifted, there is another viewpoint to be considered.

There are two currents flowing through modern society regarding parenting practices. One position holds that parents are their children’s best teachers and that the most impressionable years of the child’s life should not be wasted. Infant education is therefore recommended, even education in the womb. The other position advocates allowing children to have full, rich childhoods without pressuring them to learn too much too soon. Some writers warn that the “hurried child” is a candidate for all kinds of stress-related symptoms, from school failure to suicide (Elkind, 1981). Parents of the gifted have a particularly difficult time getting through these disparate views. They recognize their children’s abilities early in life (Silverman, Chitwood, & Waters, 1986) but do not know whether to teach reading to their toddlers or to hide all the books and slow the children down.

An important fact to remember in this regard is that there is a difference between designing children’s futures and enabling them, with parental support, to design their own futures. Parents sometimes need guidance in making this distinction, so that they do not become overbearing. Schools can actually play an important role in helping parents learn the art of responsive parenting. A curriculum designed to enhance the parents’ role in career guidance might include the following topics:

“Creator parents” versus responsive parenting (Silverman, 1986a)
Exposure to cultural events
Family activities designed to develop interests
Critical periods in the development of special talents
How to find expert instruction
How many lessons? How much free time?
Exposing children to various types of role models
Introducing children to biographies
Holding high expectations for daughters, as well as sons
Purchasing toys, games, and books that are not sex defined
Recognizing and nurturing mathematics talent at home
Avoiding overprotectiveness, especially with daughters
Appreciating specialists and generalists
Helping children set high aspirations
“Late blooming”: Delayed career selection
Reversing career decisions: Preparing children for multiple careers

The importance of avoiding sex-role stereotyping in the home cannot be overemphasized. Gifted and creative children tend to be more androgynous, exhibiting some characteristics and interests that may not seem typical for their sex (Dellas, 1969; Wolleat, 1979). Boys, for example, may display a level of sensitivity usually thought of as feminine, while girls may show levels of independence and aggressiveness associated with masculinity. Creative males tend to have unconventional career aspirations (Torrance, 1980), and gifted females who have high career aspirations are also thought of as “unconventional.” Traditional feminine stereotypes are limiting to achievement in women (Kerr, 1985; Silverman, 1986b), and these attitudes are well ingrained by the time the child reaches school age (Fox & Tobin, 1978).

Children need their parents to support, guide, and nurture their talents, but they do not want to become carbon copies of their parents. They need the emotional freedom to determine their own life paths. Gifted children, in particular, are at risk for becoming what their parents want them to be, at the expense of their own needs and desires (Miller, 1981). Through parent education, educators can help release both parents and children from taking too much responsibility for one another’s happiness. When young people feel in the driver’s seat of their own future, instead of passengers in their parents’ plans, then career education with the students can begin.
TIMING OF CAREER DECISIONS

Early Decision Makers

Timing of career decisions tends to be either earlier or later for the gifted than for their agemates (Milne, 1979). Because of their developmental advancement, gifted children begin to be concerned about vocational choice much earlier than their peers. A child who is mentally 3 years ahead of the norm for his or her age may begin setting career goals in elementary school. Willings (1986) indicates that most gifted students are thinking seriously about career choices by the age of 9 and that they find conventional career search programs designed for high school students to be "boring and trivial" (p. 95).

Some gifted children become thoroughly engrossed in their interests early in life and commit themselves to careers in those areas before they have had an opportunity to explore other options. The 6-year-old "expert" on constellations announces for all time that she is going to become an astronaut. No amount of coaxing apparently can make her change her mind. When her interest in the stars wanes, she attaches to her chemistry set and is staunchly determined to pursue chemistry for the rest of her life. These young specialists may feel a sense of security in mapping out their life goals at an early age. Sometimes these goals change as their interests change, and sometimes they remain steadfast into maturity.

Children whose parents have defined their career goals for them, and children who early in life determine their paths, seem to foreclose many options. Teachers often try in vain to broaden their aspirations. Sometimes, however, children have a better perspective on their futures than either their teachers or counselors. Willings (1986) provides the example of a 14-year-old gifted girl who wanted to be a racing driver and fashion model, despite the ridicule of her classmates. Her counselor told her she was immature, and her mother told her she'd outgrow these desires. By the age of 26, she was working as a fashion model during the week and on a racing team on weekends. Some children develop a career at a very young age simply to avoid dealing with the overwhelming multitude of career options available to them. Having too many choices can be threatening.

Late Decision Makers

Although some children decide their future careers before they enter school, many gifted youth complete high school without knowing what they will be when they grow up. Most gifted students are multitalented and suffer "an embarrassment of riches" (Gowan, 1980, p. 67), making the problem of selection a very difficult one. The anxiety created by too many options more readily reaches the attention of counselors than does the problem of early foreclose on those options. The early bloomer may even be held up as the ideal, so that students who cannot decide what they want to do with their lives feel ashamed by comparison.

Coping with multiple talents and interests is a serious problem for many gifted students (Ford & Ellis, 1979). They are generalists rather than specialists; they find all aspects of life fascinating, and they don't want to miss any of it. They need assurance that their abundance of interests is an asset rather than a liability, and reassurance that their lack of early achievement does not mark them as washouts for life.

Betsy is an example of a generalist (Silverman, 1982). As a high school senior, she had boundless enthusiasm for everything and an endless supply of energy. Her interests included psychology, creative writing, language, physics, chemistry, jewelry making, fencing, bicycling, nature, science fiction, and "people." The lead cross-country runner in her senior class, she also topped the class in college aptitude tests and the advanced placement English examination. She had a strong desire to be of service to humanity, and she wanted to master 12 languages before she turned 40.

Vocational preference tests are of little value to students like Betsy, since they cannot help them discover what they are unable to do (Hoyt, 1978). In addition, they provide only limited insight into the exact content of different fields (Anastasi, 1982). How does Betsy begin to make a career choice? Students like her experience vocational selection as an existential dilemma. They are as concerned about the road not taken as they are with finding the "right" path (Herr & Watanabe, 1979; Sanborn, 1979). Choosing to be a linguist means giving up a career as a physicist.

Giving up dreams is not easy for any child, but most children learn quite early that they must temper their dreams with the reality of their limitations. Not so for the gifted. They learn early in life that they can direct their abilities successfully in most pursuits. Any door to their future is closed only by choice, and what if they make the wrong choice? How does Betsy know she will be happy with her decision? What will her life be like if she makes another choice? Is it better to become really good in one area or to know about a lot of areas? And if she tries to hang onto all her interests, won't she become a dilettante, master of none?
Career counseling for the gifted needs to be sensitive to their multiple interests, the existential dilemmas they face in making choices, their fear of making an error, their fear of being less than their ideal or not living up to their potential, the depth of their sadness over the road not taken, and their fear that if they try to nurture all of their potentials, they will end up second-rate at everything.

**Different Paths for Gifted Adults**

Not all gifted individuals decide what to do with their lives in high school and college. Some do not find their calling until midlife. Very often gifted adults move from job to job within a profession or have several careers in their lives. Voltaire's (1759/1956) apt observation that anything is better than boredom is a creed for the gifted. In order for them to be happy with their work, they must be constantly learning. When they have learned all that they can in a position, it is time to move on to new challenges. This may take them to higher echelons of management within a business; more demanding research projects in science; new schools of thought in mathematics, music, and art; or perhaps to totally new careers. If high school students and their parents are informed of the possibility of late blooming and helped to understand that career decisions are not irreversible, some of the struggle around career choices can be lessened.

A former dentist, who sued the decision he had made in junior high school to study dentistry as a career, remarked, "What gives a 14-year-old the right to decide what a 40-year-old should do with the rest of his life?" In many cases, when we press adolescents to make decisions about their careers, we are recreating this dilemma. The mobility of our society may be making obsolete the ideal of a single career throughout life. Gifted students should be prepared to deal with the probability that they will make at least one major career change in their lives. Adults frequently return to school to pursue training in another field. An elementary teacher may become a college professor; a microbiologist may become a psychologist; a chemical engineer may leave that field to become a philosopher. Students can be introduced to individuals in the community who have successfully maintained multiple careers. There are several ways in which adults maintain interests in more than one field. It is possible to have concurrent careers, as did the Russian composer, Borodin, who was also an internationally renowned chemist in his lifetime. One's career is not necessarily one's livelihood. Most musicians find that they cannot make a living with their music, and so gain skills in other fields. Music, however, remains as their major love and life's work, while their other work supplies the money for them to survive. They sometimes refer to their money-making career as their "day job" and their musical profession as their "night job." Many gifted adults put a great deal of time and energy into avocations—major interests from which they do not attempt to derive their livelihood. These can include coin collecting, playing classical guitar, painting watercolors, writing science fiction stories, and so forth.

The counselor can help students determine which of their interests would be most likely to supply them with an acceptable income, and which they might decide to pursue as avocations. When gifted students are having difficulty determining which path they wish to follow, it is wise to allow them extra time to make their career choices and to give them a broad enough educational base so that they can later move in several different directions.

**CAREER GUIDANCE**

Through a well-planned career counseling program, Betsy and others like her can be assisted with their dilemmas in many ways. Helpful approaches include:

- Preparing them for many options
- Exploring with them careers in which they would have the opportunity to synthesize interests in many fields
- Allowing them to delay decision making until college
- Giving them real-life experiences in some of their avenues of interest through internships, mentorships, work-study, or community service
- Discussing the possibility of serial or concurrent careers
- Helping them determine which of their interests they could maintain as avocations
- Suggesting the possibility of creating new careers
- Exploring life themes as a basis for career choice

The counselor's responsibility to generalists is to guide them in planning as rich a program as possible, one that will prepare them to enter any of several careers. It is particularly important for girls to be advised to take advanced mathematics and science courses, so that they do not close those doors prematurely. It helps girls to know that there is a correlation between level of income and number of mathematics courses taken. In high school (9th through 12th grade), a good college preparatory program should include at least 4 years of English, 4 years of mathematics, 4 years of science, 3 years of a foreign language, and 3 years of social science. These are basic minimum requirements for gifted students. If it is appropriately planned, an accelerated program can be useful, with the student beginning algebra in seventh
to teachers, counselors, and administrators. Several excellent models exist for such programs (see Feldhusen & Koloff, 1979; Hoyt & Hebel, 1976; Willings, 1986).

SPECIAL NEEDS OF GIFTED GIRLS

In addition to the existential dilemmas faced by all gifted students, gifted girls must deal with a unique set of challenges. They must overcome societal programming to the effect that the career world and femininity are somehow antithetical (Horner, 1972). They need to determine how they can juggle both a family and a career and, indeed, whether they wish to do so. They need encouragement to explore career possibilities that traditionally have been for males only. They also need assistance in risk taking and in overcoming counterproductive beliefs about their own abilities.

The gifted girl may be unaware of her potential. Many girls hide their talents so that they will fit in better with their peers, so their special abilities will not be discovered (Silverman, 1966). In some cases, special talents are overlooked in girls because they are not expected to be there. Fox and Tobin (1978) and Bloom (1982) have hypothesized that girls who are gifted in mathematics receive less attention and nurturing of these abilities from their families than do boys with the same talents.

Gifted girls often experience conflict around career planning. Most know that they will enter the workforce at some time in their lives, and they want to choose careers that are both rewarding to themselves and of service to others. Yet, they do not see how they can plan a career path and still raise a family. These two desires seem to be in conflict. In a career counseling program, gifted girls should be exposed to the research on different paths taken by gifted women. For example, Rodenstein and Glickauf-Hughes (1979) found that women who combined childrearing with careers derived a great deal of personal satisfaction from both.

Exposure to role models is essential (Fox, 1981). Gifted girls need role models of women who successfully combine marriage, raising children, and a career. They also need to meet women who have chosen to have marriage and a career but no children. And they need to meet successful, happy women who have made the decision not to marry or have children. Despite the double standard of the debonair bachelor and the unmarried spinster, the follow-up studies of Terman’s population (Sears & Barbee, 1977) indicated that gifted women who were single heads of households felt more fulfilled at midlife than gifted women who had become housewives at the
expense of their careers. If a girl's mother has been a full-time homemaker or held a low-paying clerical position while trying to raise her family, the girl may have little conception of what else might be possible for her. Models may be professional women who come to a career development class, to a career day on campus, or to a special course designed for gifted girls. Mentorships and internships can be arranged for girls to work directly with women in their fields of interest.

Although it is obvious to boys that they will work, it is less so for girls, so some of the focus in career planning for girls is basic education about women in the workforce. They need to know realistically that cost-of-living and divorce rates both make it necessary for most women to work while they raise their families (Verheyden-Hilliard, 1976). They also need to become aware of the differences in pay scales in different occupations. A few years ago, I asked a panel of gifted freshmen about their career choices. All 10 of the young women were preparing for some form of service occupation, while all 4 of the young men planned on executive positions. Thus, all the women were heading toward low-paying occupations, while the men were preparing for high-paying, high-status professions.

Since girls tend to be less aware than boys of the necessity of supporting themselves in adult life, career education may be even more necessary for them than for boys. Boys have more societal programming to prepare them to make career choices. They are expected to support a family; they often have parental pressures to make career choices at an early age; they have more opportunities in the society; and they have more role models. These factors make them more aware of the world of work and their place within it. Girls, on the other hand, may expect to be financially taken care of for the rest of their lives. They may have no guidance from home about career possibilities. They may feel that there is little opportunity for them in the society and may therefore lower their expectations. They also have fewer role models.

A key piece of information for the gifted girl is that financial independence is often vital for self-realization. As long as a young woman is counting on someone else to support her, she is limiting herself in many ways.

Expectations at home that are different for boys than for girls can also be limiting. An example of this occurred in a counseling group that included a brother and a sister. The boy was encouraged by his parents to do well in school and was supported in his desire to study mathematics at Yale University. His equally talented sister was told that if she did not lose 10 pounds, her parents would not pay for her education at a state college. She was fascinated by biochemistry, but they wanted her to learn a trade, such as accounting or optometry, so that she could earn a little extra money while she raised a family. She eventually won a fellowship to study biochemistry at one of the most prestigious graduate schools in the country. Even then, her parents did not approve of her career choice.

Although this story does not resolve as happily as one might hope, there is little doubt that the role of the counselor in advocating the wishes of the young woman is of great importance. For those interested in career counseling, many resources are available for use in assisting gifted girls in their planning process (see, for example, Addison, 1983; Callahan, 1979; Fleming & Hollinger, 1979; Fox, 1981; Kerr, 1985; Silverman, 1966b; Watley & Kaplan, 1971; Wolleat, 1979).

CONCLUSION

The question of combining family and career is not just an issue for gifted girls. With more women entering the workforce, with climbing divorce rates, and with men more often gaining partial or total custody of their children, males have a much greater responsibility for child care today than ever before. Career development programs must take this into account. Also, with changing values in society, many gifted young people are no longer willing to make their work the central focus of their lives (Miner, 1973). These changes mean that both sexes need to examine careers within the context of their life plans. What are their hopes, dreams, and aspirations? How will a specific career choice enhance the quality of their lives or the lives of others?

When viewed in this light, career development becomes a lifelong pursuit, with room for exploration of side roads throughout the journey. Decisions are affected by one's values and dreams, and opportunities are created, not just sought. Career counseling, then, becomes an integral part of the program for gifted students, having an important place throughout the grades and involving parent education as a part of the process.

REFERENCES


