

# SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GIFTED STUDENTS

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Do gifted students have unique social and emotional needs? Are gifted students more vulnerable to social and emotional difficulties than average-ability students? Common perceptions of the gifted include that they are more likely to suffer from emotional problems and more likely to have difficulties in social relationships (Bain, Choate, & Bliss, 2006), but what does the research say? Some researchers argue gifted individuals do have unique characteristics that render them particularly vulnerable to an array of social and emotional problems, such that gifted individuals experience the same developmental milestones and tasks as average-ability individuals (e.g., identity development, career decision-making, and friendship formation), but “the characteristics associated with giftedness . . . may make the subjective experience of meeting normal challenges qualitatively different from others’ experience and also sometimes hinder task accomplishment” (Peterson, 2009, p. 281). Further, some developmental tasks (e.g., development of abstract thought) are accelerated for gifted individuals compared with average-ability individuals (Moon, 2009). Others argue that gifted students are no more likely to be vulnerable to, or experience, social and emotional difficulties than students of average ability levels (Bain & Bell, 2004; Nail & Evans, 1997; Shechtman & Silektor, 2012). The purpose of this chapter is to explore findings from existing research regarding the social and emotional development of gifted children and adolescents, as well as the circumstances in which social and emotional development may be compromised.

## IMPORTANCE OF THE TOPIC

Most models of talent development (e.g., mega-model of talent development; Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011) support the idea that high ability is not enough to ensure success or eminence in adulthood and include social and emotional needs and characteristics as important factors in transforming childhood potential and ability into success or eminence in adulthood (Olszewski-Kubilius, Subotnik, & Worrell, 2015). Social and emotional development occurs over a lifetime (Cross, 2009) and “we simply must take into account the psychological, social, and emotional needs of gifted individuals to encourage and support talent development . . . the academic needs of gifted individuals *cannot* be met without simultaneously addressing their psychosocial needs” (Rinn, 2012, p. 207).

## HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

Since the time of the ancient Greeks, the general belief was that highly intelligent individuals were doomed to lives of social isolation, emotional instability, and psychopathology (Simonton, 2009). Terman (1925) was the first to challenge that notion with his longitudinal study of 1,528 children with IQs above 140. Terman and his colleagues found that gifted children were average in many respects, including social adjustment and emotional stability. However, critics of Terman’s work point out that the gifted children in the study were all intellectually

gifted and identified as so by their teachers, and there was very little ethnic or economic diversity in his sample. The generally positive adjustment found among these gifted children may not have been found among similarly able children who were not selected for the study (Gross, 2004; Vialle, 1994). Regardless, Terman's work was influential and changed the way we view highly intelligent individuals.

Hollingworth (1926, 1942) also made significant contributions to our understanding of the social and emotional development of gifted individuals. Hollingworth examined the peer relationships of children at differing ranges of intellectual giftedness. She conducted her research in public school classrooms and discovered differences in the cognitive and affective development of moderately (IQ of 125–155) and highly (IQ above 160) gifted children. Moderately gifted children were found to be socially well-adjusted and self-confident, but the highly gifted children struggled with social isolation because of difficulties finding intellectual peers (Hollingworth, 1926). Yet, when these highly gifted children were permitted to work and play with their intellectual peers, regardless of chronological age, their social isolation largely disappeared (Gross, 2004).

Contemporary approaches to studying the social and emotional needs of gifted children and adolescents are varied. Giftedness may still be equated with anything from socially awkward behavior to “madness” in popular culture (Simonton, 2009), but current research on the social and emotional characteristics of gifted individuals is largely positive. Most research focuses on factors that might place gifted students uniquely at risk for social and emotional difficulties (Neihart, Pfeiffer, & Cross, 2015), which can affect academic and intellectual development. Many of these factors have to do with the mismatch between gifted students and their typical peer and school environments, which is discussed in the following sections.

## RELEVANT THEORY AND PRINCIPLES

In examining the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals, the notion of *asynchronous development* is

helpful for explaining the differences between rates of intellectual, social, emotional, and physical development. Asynchronous development has come to mean being out-of-sync within oneself, or having uneven rates of development. A gifted individual's intellectual development occurs much more quickly than his or her social, emotional, and physical development, which are typically in line with chronological-age peers (although social, emotional, and physical development could be advanced or delayed, depending on the individual). The notion of asynchronous development was included in the definition of giftedness provided by the Columbus Group:

Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (Moreland, 1992, “Defining Giftedness From Within,” para. 2)

Typical social and emotional development depends somewhat on a child's ability to relate to and connect with other individuals. Gifted children, though, because of their asynchronous development, may have difficulty relating to chronological-age peers in a school environment. It may be difficult for gifted children to develop friendships with their classmates because they may not share similar interests. This difficulty in connecting with other individuals during childhood can have lasting social and emotional complications. Further, the greater the level of cognitive ability,

the more out-of-sync the child feels internally, in social relationships, and in relation to the school curriculum. Age is not an appropriate ruler for a gifted child's social or academic needs; degree of asynchrony must also be taken into account. (Silverman, 1997, p. 40)

## RESEARCH REVIEW

A number of topics related to the social and emotional development of gifted children and adolescents have emerged as some of the most crucial for positive adjustment and the facilitation of talent development (Neihart et al., 2015; Subotnik et al., 2011). Research on these topics will be explored in the following sections.

### Social Development and Interpersonal Relationships

Research findings regarding the social development of gifted children is largely inconsistent. In some research, gifted children have been found to be more at risk for problems related to social development and social skills than average-ability children (Freeman, 2006; Silverman, 1993). Because of their advanced cognitive skills, gifted adolescents may have different approaches to forming and maintaining close friendships. Kwan (1992) believed that the differences in aptitudes between gifted and average-ability students may present barriers for the development of positive peer relations. For example, in a study of 1,465 gifted adolescents, 14 to 18 years old, more than half reported they do not feel as if they can be themselves at school (Cross, Coleman, & Stewart, 1993), and, in other studies, many admit to feeling different from peers (Coleman & Cross, 1988; Manor-Bullock, Look, & Dixon, 1995; Tomchin, 1996). Swiatek (2001) pointed out that many gifted adolescents see their advanced capabilities as a source of potential difficulties in social relationships. Other studies have confirmed that the gifted tend to view their high aptitude as a social hindrance (Brown & Steinberg, 1990; Coleman & Sanders, 1993; Manaster, Chan, Watt, & Wiehe, 1994). Other research, though, has found no differences in social development between gifted and average-ability children (Gallucci, Middleton, & Kline, 1999; López & Sotillo, 2009), or even fewer social problems among gifted children than among average ability children (Richards, Encel, & Shute, 2003). A number of factors have been found to influence the social development of gifted individuals, including one's family environment and access to like-minded peers.

**Family environment.** Families are very influential in the intellectual and social and emotional development of gifted children (Jolly & Matthews, 2012), and have been described as “the most critical component in the translation of talent, ability and promise into achievement for gifted individuals” (Olszewski, Kulieke, & Buescher, 1987, p. 6). Most research examining parenting behavior and gifted children indicates gifted children tend to have positive relationships with their parents and that their parents tend to set limits, have reasonable expectations, and are warm and responsive (i.e., authoritative in nature; Cornell & Grossberg, 1987; Dwairy, 2004; Rudasill, Adelson, Callahan, Houlihan, & Keizer, 2013). Family environments that are affectionate, supportive, and respectful likely impact the development of interpersonal skills and peer relationships among gifted individuals (Olszewski-Kubilius, Lee, & Thomson, 2014), as well as psychological adjustment (Dunn, Putallaz, Sheppard, & Lindstrom, 1987; see also Chapter 30, this handbook).

**Access to like-minded peers.** Although findings related to acceleration/ability grouping and social experiences are mixed (Vogl & Preckel, 2014), most research indicates acceleration and ability grouping foster positive social outcomes for gifted individuals. Gifted children and adolescents often gain access to like-minded peers through advanced course enrollment (e.g., acceleration, advanced placement, international baccalaureate), thus fostering their intellectual and social and emotional development (Foust, Hertberg-Davis, & Callahan, 2009; Frank et al., 2008; Hertberg-Davis & Callahan, 2008; Park, Caine, & Wimmer, 2014). For example, Lee, Olszewski-Kubilius, and Thomson (2012) found students who were grade accelerated reported more interpersonal competence than those who were not grade accelerated. Cross and Swiatek (2009) found gifted adolescents attending a boarding school for the gifted reported high levels of social acceptance and psychosocial adjustment over a two year period of time. Adolescents taking advanced coursework have been found to have larger networks of friends and more engaged friends than equally able adolescents who were not enrolled in advanced coursework (Barber & Wasson, 2015).

## Self-Concept

Self-concept can be defined as “our attitudes, feelings, and knowledge about our abilities, skills, appearance, and social acceptability” (Byrne, 1984, p. 429). Numerous studies have examined the perceived link between a positive self-concept and level of an individual’s social and emotional development and academic achievement (e.g., Dai, 2001; Dai, Rinn, & Tan, 2013; Rinn, McQueen, Clark, & Rumsey, 2008). Academic self-concept, in particular, is related to numerous achievement-related variables, including academic achievement (Huang, 2011), career intentions and aspirations (Rinn, 2007), and motivation (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010). Van Boxtel and Mönks (1992) asserted that a positive self-concept is essential to the realization of potential and superior achievement.

As individuals mature, self-concept becomes increasingly multifaceted (Marsh, 1993). The result is the cultivation of a number of self-concept domains, including general, social, emotional, physical, and academic (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). Social self-concept pertains to how individuals view themselves in terms of social interactions. Physical self-concept concerns how individuals view their appearance and physical ability. Emotional self-concept relates to the processing of particular emotional states. Academic self-concept is associated with how individuals view their academic ability, particularly in the areas of math and verbal ability.

With regard to the various facets of self-concept, researchers have consistently observed that the academic self-concepts of gifted individuals are higher than those of their average-ability peers (Colangelo, Kelly, & Schrepfer, 1987; Hoge & Renzulli, 1993; Kelly & Colangelo, 1984; Litster & Roberts, 2011; Marsh, Chessor, Craven, & Roche, 1995; Rinn, 2007). Further, Hoge and Renzulli (1993) and Litster and Roberts (2011), in their respective meta-analyses, found higher global self-concept scores among gifted students than nongifted students. Hoge and Renzulli (1993) found little difference between the physical self-concepts of the gifted and nongifted students, but Litster and Roberts (2011) found gifted students scored significantly lower than nongifted students on measures of appearance and athletic self-concepts. Some researchers have reported significant

differences between the social self-concepts of gifted students when compared with their average-ability peers; namely, that gifted adolescents’ social self-concepts were significantly lower than average-ability adolescents’ social self-concepts (e.g., Lea-Wood & Clunies-Ross, 1995; Ross & Parker, 1980). One study observed this difference in social self-concept only in highly gifted individuals whose IQ scores were at least two standard deviations above the mean (Norman, Ramsay, Martray, & Roberts, 1999).

## Motivation

*Motivation* is a construct that encompasses many of the traits that researchers in the field of gifted education believe are crucial for the development of talent (Renzulli, 1978; Rinn, 2012; Subotnik et al., 2011). Defining motivation is complicated, though, as evidenced by the numerous theories and perspectives of motivation that exist (e.g., attribution theory, Weiner, 1986; expectancy x value theory, Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975; Wigfield & Eccles, 2002; self-determination theory, Deci & Ryan, 2002). Recent research on *mindset* is intertwined with the motivation research on gifted students, although not much research has been directly conducted on this topic (Dweck, 2006).

Most in the field of gifted education would argue that the distinction between intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation is important (Rinn, 2012). Intrinsic motivation is internal and involves a drive to do something for its own sake (i.e., because the activity itself is rewarding), as compared with extrinsic motivation, which involves doing something to obtain something else (e.g., good grades, prestige; Woolfolk, 2009). Gifted individuals typically score higher on the intrinsic type of motivation than the extrinsic type (Clinkenbeard, 2012). For example, Olszewski-Kubilius, Kulieke, and Krasney (1988) reviewed a number of studies that showed gifted students score higher on measures of intrinsic motivation. Gottfried and Gottfried (1996) and Csikszentmihalyi, Rathunde, and Whalen (1993) found that gifted students scored higher on measures of intrinsic motivation than average-ability students. Some research, though, suggests gifted individuals can be intrinsically and extrinsically motivated by the same activity (Feldhusen, Dai, & Clinkenbeard, 2000).

## Perfectionism

Hollender (1965, 1978), citing English and English (1958), was among the first to describe perfectionism as “the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation” (p. 94). Individuals with perfectionism have been described as “setting unrealistically high standards, rigidly adhering to them, and defining their self-worth in terms of their achieving these standards” (Shafran & Mansell, 2001, p. 880). Perfectionism is typically deemed unhealthy, or “neurotic,” which Hamacheck (1978) differentiates from healthy, or “normal,” perfectionism. Although healthy perfectionists can derive pleasure from their accomplishments, unhealthy perfectionists are “unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things good enough to warrant that feeling” (Hamacheck, p. 27).

Another way to view perfectionism is Hewitt and Flett’s (1991) distinction between self-oriented and socially prescribed perfectionism. *Self-oriented perfectionism* is an internally motivated belief that perfection is important. *Socially prescribed perfectionism* is an externally motivated belief that perfection is important to others, leading individuals to believe that others expect them to be perfect and that others will be highly critical if they are not perfect. Socially prescribed perfectionism is viewed as the more maladaptive variety (Hewitt & Flett, 1991, 2007). Most research on gifted individuals measures what researchers have termed the unhealthy or maladaptive aspects of perfectionism (Parker & Adkins, 1995).

Researchers examining perfectionism among gifted individuals are largely seeking to answer the question of whether gifted individuals are more of perfectionists than are average-ability individuals (see Chapter 42, this handbook). It is important to note that several studies have found that gifted children are no more likely to be perfectionists than are their average-ability peers (LoCicero & Ashby, 2000; Parker, 2000; Parker & Mills, 1996). However, it is generally thought that many gifted children are academic perfectionists and place high personal standards on themselves, particularly in the classroom (Basirion, Majid, & Jelas, 2014; Dixon,

Lapsley, & Hanchon, 2004; Kornblum & Ainley, 2005; Neumeister, 2007; Parker & Adkins, 1995; Wang, Fu, & Rice, 2012), and some (Portešová & Urbánek, 2013) even suggest rates of perfectionism among gifted students are increasing.

## PRACTICE AND POLICY ISSUES

There are numerous ways to nurture the social and emotional development of gifted individuals. Parents, teachers, psychologists, and counselors can have a dramatic impact on the adjustment and well-being of gifted students by way of the following practices.

### Parenting

In addition to serving as advocates for gifted children (Duquette, Orders, Fullarton, & Robertson-Grewal, 2011) and twice-exceptional children (Besnoy et al., 2015; Neumeister, Yssel, & Burney, 2013), parents can engage in a variety of behaviors that support the social and emotional needs of their children. In a systematic review of the literature on parenting gifted children, Jolly and Matthews (2012) summarized effective parenting behavior:

Effective parents of all ages encourage their children to ask questions and use their imaginations through play; they react to their child in a developmentally appropriate manner, and they allow their young high-ability children to make decisions commensurate with their age. At younger ages, in their capacity as their child’s first teacher, these parents gauge their child’s ability level and motivation and are highly engaged with their children in family activities. These parents report engaging their children in intellectual activities more often than parents of average-ability children do, and they also report supporting independence, encouraging the development of a sense of responsibility, and providing unconditional love and support for their child. (pp. 272–273)

## Instructional Strategies

Specific activities, curricula, or programs that provide gifted and talented students with opportunities to develop a greater sense of self-awareness and self-acceptance are likely to facilitate positive social and emotional growth. Formal social and emotional curricula have been found to positively impact gifted students, teaching students how to respond to stress, improve social skills, and facilitate social coping strategies (Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, McCormick, & Rogers, 2012; Fonseca, 2015; Peterson & Lorimer, 2011). A number of social and emotional curriculum models have been found to be effective for use with gifted students: bibliotherapy (Hébert, 1991, 1997), videotherapy (Hébert & Neumeister, 2001), using guest speakers (Peterson, 2003), and regular small group discussions (Peterson, Betts, & Bradley, 2009; Peterson & Lorimer, 2011).

## Counseling

Counseling can be helpful in addressing the social and emotional issues that might arise from the effects of an understimulating classroom environment and/or personal issues that gifted individuals might face (e.g., perfectionism; Colangelo & Wood, 2015). Counseling held in the school environment can be helpful in assisting with academic issues, but also with issues related to underachievement, difficulties with peers, and/or transitions into a new environment (Wood, 2010). School counseling can also be helpful for issues with career decision making (Chen & Wong, 2013). Individual counseling outside of the school environment, as well as support groups, group therapy, and family therapy, can assist gifted individuals with psychological issues (e.g., depression, anxiety), as well as social and emotional issues.

What is missing in the research on counseling the gifted is information related to best practices. Pfeiffer (2013) suggested evidence-based counseling of the gifted constitutes “the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of the gifted student’s unique characteristics, culture and preferences” (p. 170). Unfortunately, most training programs that prepare counselors and psychologists do not address the specific nature of gifted and talented individuals

(Pfeiffer & Burko, 2015), leaving counselors or therapists to engage in professional development on their own time.

## Diversity and Multicultural Issues

Exceptionally gifted children and twice-exceptional children are especially at risk for social and emotional difficulties related to asynchronous development (Silverman, 2002).

**Exceptionally and profoundly gifted.** Hollingworth (1926) was among the first to suggest that exceptionally and profoundly gifted individuals may experience social difficulties. The “degree of social difficulties may increase in proportion to level of giftedness. Not only is a profoundly gifted child likely to have no intellectual or interest peers at school or in the community, but also schools may not be receptive or accommodating to highly able children” (Peterson, 2009, p. 280). Exceptionally and profoundly gifted children, like other children, may prefer to work and play alone, either because of a lack of intellectual peers in their environment or because of a personal preference.

Current research on highly gifted individuals suggests they may not experience social difficulties as once believed. Although some research has shown that highly gifted students feel less socially adept than their average-ability peers (Dauber & Benbow, 1990), other research has shown that highly gifted students have fewer social and emotional difficulties than mildly or moderately gifted students (Garland & Zigler, 1999; Guldmond, Bosker, Kuyper, & van der Werf, 2007).

**Twice exceptional.** Social and emotional difficulties are prevalent in the twice-exceptional population (gifted students who also have another exceptionality, such as a learning disability; Assouline, Nicpon, & Whiteman, 2010). Like other gifted children, they are more cognitively advanced than their same age peers, but, unlike other gifted children, they may be less advanced than their same age peers in realm of social and emotional development. Dual asynchronous development in opposite directions can lead to a number of issues with social and emotional development (Moon, Zentall, Grskovic, Hall, & Stormont, 2001).

Twice-exceptional individuals are “often caught between two worlds” (King, 2005, p. 17), as they usually have the intrinsic motivation of typical gifted students, but they also struggle with academic failure, similar to a child with a learning disability (see Chapter 35, this handbook). As such, twice exceptional individuals have been found to have lower self-concepts than individuals identified solely as gifted or as having a learning disability (Barber & Mueller, 2011). Twice-exceptional individuals may also struggle with social development and may be at even greater risk for social difficulties than their peers who are gifted and their peers with learning disabilities (Moon & Dillon, 1995; Vespi & Yewchuk, 1992).

### FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS AND DIRECTIONS

After examining the research on the social and emotional needs of gifted individuals, a number of research questions remain unanswered:

- How do the attitudes, values, and expectations of parents translate into supportive behaviors in the home, which in turn can facilitate the social and emotional development of gifted young people (Jolly & Matthews, 2012)?
- “How might existing psychological constructs such as stereotype threat, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, attributions, mind-sets, achievement-goal orientation, and academic self-concept and related theoretical models be useful in providing explanations for failure of talented students to engage in talent development activities?” (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 38)
- “What additional social and psychological supports are most critical for students who have had little opportunity to develop or demonstrate interests and abilities?” (Subotnik et al., 2011, p. 38)

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Similar to the conclusions drawn by Neihart et al. (2015), research reviewed in this chapter shows that serious social and emotional issues appear no more or less often among gifted individuals than among

their average-ability peers (perhaps with some exceptions for highly creative writers and artists; Simonton, 2009). Social and emotional difficulties that might arise seem most often to be due to a mismatch between a gifted individual and his or her environment. Many of these social and emotional difficulties can be alleviated with the prevention of difficulties through the provision of appropriate educational placements and acceptance of the inherent asynchronous development of gifted children. Research has shown that parents, teachers, psychologists, and counselors can impact the well-being of gifted students by way of advocacy, strategic instructional design, and counseling.

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