

What are the social-emotional needs of gifted children?

While it is true that gifted children have the same basic needs as other children, and progress through the same developmental stages as other children, (though often at a younger age), and can be confronted with same problems, (such as family poverty, substance abuse, or alcoholism) research indicates that there are needs and problems that appear more often among gifted children. (Webb & Kleine, 1993) In addition, there are three important factors that interact to influence a gifted child's well-being: type of giftedness, educational fit and personal characteristics. (Neihart 1999)

Are gifted children more, or less at-risk for psychological problems than their nongifted peers?

Research suggests that neither conclusion can be drawn for gifted children. A great deal of research has been conducted over the past fifty years on the impact of giftedness on psychological well-being. There is research to support two apparently conflicting views on the effects of giftedness. They are that: giftedness increases resiliency and that giftedness increases vulnerability in gifted children.

Intellectually or academically gifted children who are achieving, and participate in special educational program for gifted students are at least as well adjusted and are perhaps better adjusted than their nongifted peers. These children do not seem to be any more at-risk for social or emotional problems. It is clear from the research that giftedness does influence psychological outcomes for people, but whether those outcomes are positive or negative seems to depend on several factors that interact synergistically. These factors are the type and degree of giftedness, the educational fit or lack thereof, and one's personal characteristics. (Neihart 1999)

In a comprehensive review of the literature, Nancy Robinson and Kate Noble report: "Perusal of a large group of studies of preadolescent children revealed [that] ...as a group, gifted children were seen as more trustworthy, honest, socially competent, assured and comfortable with self, courteous, cooperative, stable, and humorous, while they were also seen as showing diminished tendencies to boast, to engage in delinquent activity, to aggress or withdraw, to be domineering, and so on." (N. Robinson & Noble, 1991, p. 62)

Problems Arise from One of Four Sources

- Asynchrony
- Difficulty Finding Peers
- Lack of Challenge
- Personal Characteristics

Types of Problems

Gifted children's needs arise due to the interaction with the environmental setting which includes family, school, and culture, and those that arise internally due to the personality of the gifted child.

The chart below highlights intellectual and personality attributes that characterize gifted children. These characteristics may be strengths, but potential problems also may be associated with them (Clark, 1992; Seago, 1974).

Characteristics Common to Gifted Children	
Strengths	Possible Problems
Acquires/retains information quickly	Impatient with others; dislikes basic routine.
Inquisitive; searches for significance.	Asks embarrassing questions; excessive in interests.

Intrinsic motivation	Strong-willed; resists direction
Enjoys problem-solving; able to conceptualize, abstract, synthesize.	Resists routine practice; questions teaching procedures.
Seeks cause-effect relations	Dislikes unclear/illogical areas (e.g., traditions or feelings)
Emphasizes truth, equity, and fair play.	Worries about humanitarian concerns
Seeks to organize things and people	Constructs complicated rules; often seen as bossy
Large facile vocabulary; advanced, broad information	May use words to manipulate; bored with school and age-peers
High expectations of self and others	Intolerant, perfectionistic; may become depressed.
Creative/inventive; likes new ways of doing things	May be seen as disruptive and out of step
Intense concentration; long attention span and persistence in areas of interest.	Neglects duties or people during periods of focus; resists interruption; stubbornness
Sensitivity, empathy; desire to be accepted by others	Sensitivity to criticism or peer rejection
High energy, alertness, eagerness.	Frustration with inactivity; may be seen as hyperactive.
Independent; prefers individualized work; reliant on self.	May reject parent or peer input; nonconformity
Diverse interests and abilities; versatility	May appear disorganized or scattered; frustrated over lack of time
Strong sense of humor	Peers may misunderstand humor; may become "class clown" for attention
Adapted from Clark (1992) and Seago (1974) by Webb.	

James Webb noted that while the characteristics shown in the chart above are seldom inherently problematic by themselves, a combination of the characteristics can result in the following behavior problems:

Uneven Development

(Asynchrony) Motor skills, especially fine-motor, often lag behind cognitive conceptual abilities, particularly in preschool gifted children (Webb & Kleine, 1993). These children may see in their "mind's eye" what they want to do, construct, or draw; however, motor skills do not allow them to achieve the goal. Intense frustration and emotional outbursts may result.

Peer Relations

As preschoolers and in primary grades, gifted children (particularly highly gifted) attempt to organize people and things. Their search for consistency emphasizes "rules," which they attempt to apply to others. They invent complex games and try to organize their playmates, often prompting resentment in their peers.

Excessive Self-Criticism

The ability to see possibilities and alternatives may imply that youngsters see idealistic images of what they might be, and simultaneously berate themselves because they see how they are falling short of an ideal (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989; Powell & Haden, 1984; Whitmore, 1980).

Perfectionism

The ability to see how one might ideally perform, combined with emotional intensity, leads many gifted children to unrealistically high expectations of themselves. In high ability children, perhaps 15-20% may be hindered significantly by perfectionism at some point in their academic careers, and even later in life.

Avoidance of Risk-Taking

In the same way the gifted youngsters see the possibilities, they also see potential problems in undertaking those activities. Avoidance of potential problems can mean avoidance of risk-taking, and may result in underachievement (Whitmore, 1980).

Multipotentiality

Gifted children often have several advanced capabilities and may be involved in diverse activities to an almost frantic degree. Though seldom a problem for the child, this may create problems for the family, as well as quandaries when decisions must be about career selection (Kerr, 1985; 1991).

Gifted Children with Disabilities

Physical disabilities can prompt social and emotional difficulties. Intellect may be high, but motor difficulties such as cerebral palsy may prevent expression of potential. Visual or hearing impairment or a learning disability may cause frustration. Gifted children with disabilities tend to evaluate themselves more on what they are unable to do than on their substantial abilities (Whitmore & Maker, 1985).

Problems from Outside Sources

Not all of the problems that gifted children encounter are due to their own personality characteristics or behaviors. They may also be confronted with lack of understanding for gifted children, and ambivalence or hostility from other people. (Webb & Kleine, 1993) Webb lists the following common problem patterns:

School Culture and Norms

Gifted children, by definition, are "unusual" when compared with same-age children--at least in cognitive abilities--and require different educational experiences (Kleine & Webb, 1992). Schools, however, generally group children by age. The child often has a dilemma--conform to the expectations for the average child or be seen as nonconformist.

Expectations by Others

Gifted children--particularly the more creative--do not conform. Nonconformists violate or challenge traditions, rituals, roles, or expectations. Such behaviors often prompt discomfort in others. The gifted child, sensitive to others' discomfort, may then try to hide abilities.

Peer Relations

Who is a peer for a gifted child? Gifted children need several peer groups because their interests are so varied. Their advanced levels of ability may steer them toward older children. They may choose peers by reading books (Halsted, 1994). Such children are often thought of as "loners." The conflict between fitting in and being an individual may be quite stressful.

Depression

Depression is usually being angry at oneself or at a situation over which one has little or no control. In some families, continual evaluation and criticism of performance--one's own and others--is a tradition. Any natural tendency to self-evaluate likely will be inflated. Depression and academic underachievement may be increased. Sometimes educational misplacement causes the gifted youngster to feel caught in a slow motion world. Depression may result because the child feels caught in an unchangeable situation.

Family Relations

Families particularly influence the development of social and emotional competence. When problems occur, it is not because parents consciously decide to create difficulties for gifted children. It is because parents lack information about gifted children, or lack support for appropriate parenting, or are attempting to cope with their own unresolved problems (which may stem from their experiences with being gifted).

Preventing Problems

James Webb suggested the following five approaches for preventing social and emotional problems:

Reach out to Parents

Parents are particularly important in preventing social or emotional problems. Teaching, no matter how excellent or supportive, can seldom counteract inappropriate parenting. Supportive family environments, on the other hand, can counteract unhappy school experiences. Parents need information if they are to nurture well and to be wise advocates for their children.

Focus on Parents of Young Children

Problems are best prevented by involving parents when children are young. Parents particularly must understand characteristics that may make gifted children seem different or difficult.

Educate and Involve Health-Care and Other Professionals

Concentrated efforts should be made to involve such professionals in state and local meetings and in continuing education programs concerning gifted children. Pediatricians, psychologists, and other caregivers such as day-care providers typically have received little training about gifted children, and therefore can provide little assistance to parents (Webb & Kleine, 1993).

Use Educational Flexibility

Gifted children require different and more flexible educational experiences. When the children come from multicultural or low-income families, educational flexibility and reaching out may be particularly necessary. Seven flexibly paced educational options, relatively easy to implement in most school settings (Cox, Daniel & Boston, 1985) are: early entrance; grade skipping; advanced level courses; compacted courses; continuous progress in the regular classroom; concurrent enrollment in advanced classes; and credit by examination. These options are based on competence and demonstrated ability, rather than on arbitrary age groupings.

Establish Parent Discussion Groups

Parents of gifted children typically have few opportunities to talk with other parents of gifted children. Discussion groups provide opportunities to "swap parenting recipes" and child-rearing experiences. Such experiences provide perspective as well as specific

information (Webb & DeVries, 1993).

Credits

ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education

<http://ericec.org/digests/e527.html> , Author: James T. Webb, 1994

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