

Using Books to Meet the Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Students

By Judith Wynn Halsted

As readers of this newsletter are acutely aware, even gifted children whose intellectual needs are adequately met have other needs, as well. The very existence of SENG is a response to the recognition that our gifted children often face social and emotional challenges that differ from those of their classmates. They need to understand and learn to cope with their differences--and ideally, they will learn to thrive because of them.

In broad outline, as they grow, gifted children must

- recognize and accept that their level of intellectual or artistic ability is not shared by everyone--that they are, indeed, different;
- understand that they may need more time alone than other children do (and be supported by adults who understand this, too);
- learn to build relationships with other people, many of whom do not share their abilities and interests;
- learn how to use their abilities well, even when doing so sets them apart from many others; and
- learn to take responsibility for finding ways to satisfy their intellectual curiosity and to express their creativity.

In addition, depending on each child's nature and personality, he or she may need to address more specific issues, such as creativity, intensity, introversion, a high level of moral concerns, perfectionism, and sensitivity, among others. This is a tall order, and gifted children and adolescents need the support of adults--parents as well as teachers--who understand, accept, and are able to help them meet the social and emotional challenges they face simply because they are gifted.

Parents who need background information will find helpful resources online, in organizations like SENG, and in the many books published in the last several years related to various aspects of growing up gifted. When they have acquired an understanding of the issues and are ready to step in with a practical approach to helping their child, these parents can turn to books again--this time, to children's books.

When an adult and child both read a book in which the characters deal with some of the same issues the child is facing, they are preparing for a meaningful discussion that might not happen otherwise. After all, the characters in books are separate from the child--it is often easier for a child to talk about the problems of a fictional character than about her own problems. Reading and then discussing books with children is an easy, readily available, inexpensive, and very pleasant way of helping children think and talk about the situations they face--a non-threatening approach, because they are talking about someone else.

This kind of discussion may take place in a school setting, through a pull-out gifted program, or with a small group in a regular classroom. It requires three components: a teacher or librarian to make it happen, enough copies of a selected book for each child in the group, and time in the schedule for the group to meet--preferably with a modicum of privacy--for discussion. The program is similar to a Junior Great Books™ discussion group, but the books and the questions are chosen specifically for the gifted children who have been selected to join the group, with their social and emotional characteristics in mind.

Whether or not such a program is available at school, parents can offer a more personalized version of the same opportunity at home. Home schooling parents certainly can arrange to fit reading and discussing books into the curriculum. It is a natural way of communicating with children, especially for parents who love to read. And parents as well as teachers can organize boys' or girls' groups to talk about books.

The process involves

- selecting an appropriate book,
- reading the book and developing questions,
- introducing the book to the child, and after the child has read it,
- enjoying an open-ended discussion.

Selecting appropriate books. First, books chosen for discussion with gifted children should be well-written and intellectually challenging. The language should stretch their vocabulary and reflect the time or place in which the story is set, offering them a broader experience with language than they find in their daily lives. In some of their books, plots should be unresolved, causing readers to consider alternative possibilities and choices. Books for these readers should make good use of literary devices such as metaphor, flashbacks, and alternating narrators. Humor should be on a spontaneous, creative level.

In addition, books selected for discussion of social and emotional needs will have characters who are experiencing some of the same issues as the child who will read them: making friends, establishing an identity, feeling alone or different, standing up for a conviction, intensity, perfectionism, or other characteristics of gifted children and adults.

Of course, not everything a gifted child reads has to be this serious; escape reading is useful and valid when we recognize it for what it is and know when and why we are choosing it. But lightweight reading will not bear the weight of the kind of discussion we are proposing here.

Reading the book and developing questions. Questions may occur as you are reading the book; jot these down to consider later. If you can assume that the child has read and understood the book, you can skip over fact questions and focus on thought questions: What does the child *think* about the book? Not what happened, but why did it happen, why did a character react as he or she did, what would the child have done in the same situation? How did a character *feel* in a given instance? Does the child know others who have felt or done the same thing? What is the child's response to this?

Before you begin a conversation with your child, you may want to write your questions down. A list of five to ten questions will be a good start for a 20-minute discussion; you probably will not get to all of them, but you will feel more confident if you begin with more than you need.

Introduce the book to the child. Perhaps you and your child have selected the book together, or maybe you are working with a book your child introduced to you--in which case this step is not necessary. But if the book was your choice, you will want to explain why you chose the book, what you liked about it, and why you think your child will enjoy it--while stirring in a little mystery to arouse your child's curiosity. Perhaps there is a character in the book who reminds you of the child or of one of her friends, or a situation that reminds you of an experience your family has had. You may want to mention this, without explaining further, to whet the child's interest.

Enjoy an open-ended discussion. Ask your first question and listen to your child's response. Your purpose is not to tell him what you think, but to learn what he thinks. Allow him the time to formulate an answer and articulate his opinion. There are no right or wrong answers, only the child's current answer--it may change upon further consideration. If this first question is fruitful, ask follow-up questions. It does not matter if you never get to your next question, as long as the discussion flows freely.

Much more specific and detailed information on this process is found in my book, *Some of My Best Friends Are Books*, cited below. To provide examples, here are abbreviated versions of a few annotations in the book's bibliography, with some of the suggested questions:

Early Elementary: Kindergarten to Grade 2

Hannah, by Gloria Whelan

Hannah is nine in 1887; she is blind, and has never gone to school. But when the new teacher, boarding at her house, asks if Hannah can go to school, her mother relents. The first day does not go well. Carl, the oldest boy in the one-room school, teases Hannah and trips her, and she gets lost trying to find her way home alone. The new Braille device that could help her learn to read costs five dollars—too much for her parents. Then comes the potato harvest, with a prize for the person who gathers the most potatoes. The contrite Carl, who has won the prize for the last two years, has an idea that surprises Hannah.

Differentness. How is Hannah made to feel different from others? In what ways have you helped someone who is different feel comfortable in a group?

Relationships with others. What are all the reasons you can think of that Hannah's mother does not want her to go to school? Do you know of someone who sounds gruffer than he or she actually is? What does Hannah do that helps people learn to like her?

Resilience. How was Hannah able to keep herself so strong-minded and able to overcome obstacles?

Sensitivity. What exactly happens at school that causes Hannah to try to go home alone? How could she have reacted differently?

Upper Elementary: Grades 3 – 5

Millicent Min, Girl Genius, by Lisa Yee

Millicent is 11 years old, will be a high school senior in the fall, and has talked her parents into allowing her to take a college course in poetry this summer. They have agreed that she will tutor Stanford Wong in English, with the hope that he can pass sixth grade and play basketball. Millie misunderstands him because she assumes that all gifted people are interested in academics. She also misunderstands her new friend Emily Ebers, neglecting to tell Emily about her outstanding academic record, and then slow to believe that when Emily learns about it she is upset not because Millicent is so smart, but because Millicent was not honest with Emily.

Aloneness; Introversion. Sometimes Millie is lonely, and sometimes she enjoys being alone. What makes the difference between the two for her? For you?

Arrogance; Differentness. Does Millicent’s writing make her sound arrogant to you? Do you think she is arrogant?

Identity; Using ability. What different kinds of giftedness are exemplified by the characters in this book? Millie knows most about intellectual giftedness—how does this contribute to her cluelessness? What can you learn from her?

Relationships with others. Is it better, as Maddie says, to be liked than right? How do you decide to be liked or right in different situations?

Middle School: Grades 6 – 8

Fever, by Laurie Halse Anderson

In the hot, dry August of 1793, people in Philadelphia began dying of yellow fever. When Matilda’s mother is stricken and Matilda and her grandfather decide to go to friends in the countryside, they find that the city has been quarantined. They both become ill, recover, and return to a nearly deserted and anarchic Philadelphia. Matilda survives by finding Eliza, the free black woman who had cooked for her parents’ coffeehouse. Finally, in late October, the frost arrives and the fever abates. On November 10th, President Washington returns to the capital city. By then, Matilda is already picking up the pieces of her life. This thoroughly researched and fast-paced novel evokes the fear and horror of the disease, but also the courage and sacrifice of people who helped each other survive.

Drive to understand. In the early years of our history as the United States, the Industrial Revolution had not yet reached America, and everyday life was much as it had been during the Colonial period. What changes would occur in Matilda’s life by 1830 or 1840?

Moral concerns. Was it right or wrong for the rich and powerful people to leave the poor and powerless behind in Philadelphia? Was it right or wrong for Matilda and Grandfather to leave her mother?

Senior High: Grades 9 - 12

The Gospel According to Larry, by Janet Tashjian

In a prologue, the author is approached in a grocery store parking lot by a young man who convinces her to read the manuscript that he hands to her. What follows is the manuscript—Josh Swensen’s story of how his life changed after he built a website to protest consumerism. Josh is bright and thoughtful, a critical thinker with a sense of humor and a serious goal: to make a contribution, to change the world. But the website takes on a life its own; the media frenzy tears Josh’s world apart and he must re-evaluate his goals.

Differentness; Identity. What strengths in Josh’s character help him to go forward after the media learn that he created the website? In what ways is his differentness his strength? How is he able to be so comfortable with it?

Intensity. If you are as intense about your interests as Josh is, you may find it useful to think about his comment that he has been “caring more about my message than about the people in my life.” Do you agree with Josh’s conclusion? Are there situations when interests might reasonably take precedence over people? What interests cause you to experience intensity, and how do you balance your interests with people?

Sources of book suggestions for gifted children:

Books

Halsted, Judith Wynn. *Some of My Best Friends Are Books: Guiding Gifted Readers*, 3rd ed. 2009. Great Potential Press. www.giftedbooks.com

Hauser, Paula & Gail A. Nelson. *Books for the Gifted Child* (Vol. 2). 1988. Bowker.

Websites

Children’s Literature Web Guide: www.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown

Hoagies Gifted Information Page: www.hoagiesgifted.com

Outstanding Books for the College Bound:

www.ala.org/ala/yalsa/booklistsawards/outstandingbooks/outstandingbooks.htm