

# The Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children: Implications for Family Counseling

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*The authors examine the psychosocial dilemmas faced by gifted children and their families and provide family counseling strategies. Definitions and characteristics of giftedness are summarized. Life span and social constructionist frameworks are used for working with gifted clients.*

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Parents of gifted children often consider themselves both blessed and cursed. Although giftedness entails many strengths, there are a variety of external and internal factors that contribute to struggles in the emotional and social experiences of gifted children and their families (Moon & Hall, 1998). The purpose of this article is to provide the information needed to help family counselors become familiar with the unique issues of gifted families and to offer them techniques for counseling these clients. There are many ways of formally identifying or defining giftedness among children that vary from state to state and even within school districts. However, the bodies of literature do seem to agree on several common characteristics among those who are identified as gifted. Therefore, in this article we are emphasizing these characteristics and describe them in detail below.

## DEFINITION OF GIFTEDNESS

Giftedness means different things to different people. Attempts to define giftedness began with Lewis Terman in the 1920s (Walker, 1991; Winner, 1996) and have been revised and broadened since then by many experts in gifted education who have contributed to a conceptualization of giftedness that includes and expands upon the rather narrow definition of IQ. Yet IQ scores or other standardized achievement or aptitude scores remain the prevailing factor in identifying children for gifted programs.

There are shortcomings in using standardized test scores as a sole basis for recognizing high abilities in children. Perino and Perino (1981) described intelligence as having

many factors and held that the IQ score is a unitary factor. A person's test score may be affected by factors besides intelligence, such as degree of motivation or state of health. Although a superior-range IQ score remains a strong indicator of giftedness, it may be too narrow a definition, and other realms of exceptionality need to be considered. Smutny, Walker, and Meckstroth (1997) described the challenge of determining what it means to be gifted. They advised looking for a type and degree of exceptionality. They pointed to the need for using several sources for defining giftedness, including a 1972 definition of giftedness provided by the U.S. Office of Education in a publication known as the Marland report (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1972). This definition of gifted and talented identifies gifted children as those with outstanding abilities in areas of intellectual pursuits, specific academic aptitudes, creative or productive thinking, leadership, visual and performing arts, and psychomotor processing. Psychomotor ability was later removed from the definition (Assouline, 1997).

Smutny et al. (1997) also referred to descriptions of giftedness given by Robert Sternberg, who emphasized how intelligence is applied to real-life situations, and to Gardner (1993) who stressed multiple intelligences. The distinct competencies proposed by Gardner include linguistic intelligence, musical intelligence, logical-mathematical intelligence, visual-spatial intelligence, bodily kinesthetic intelligence, interpersonal intelligence, intrapersonal intelligence, and naturalist intelligence.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

### Dabrowski's Theory

Dabrowski (1967) studied intellectually and artistically gifted children, providing the first empirical study of gifted children. "Recognizing that creative individuals tend to live more intensely, Dabrowski took the intensity of their

emotions, the intensity and emotional extremes, as part and parcel of psychophysical makeup" (Piechowski, 1997, p. 366). This intensity generates pain and conflict for gifted children but also gives them an ability to search for a way out of it. This idea is the basis for Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration. He postulated that the gifted individual's ability to recover from a crisis can result in a higher level of functioning rather than returning to the previous normal functioning (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). The ability to move to a new, higher level depends on the individual's having what Dabrowski terms "overexcitabilities". Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) highlighted the five forms of overexcitabilities, summarized here as:

*Psychomotor Overexcitability.* It manifests itself, for example, in rapid talk . . . intense athletic activities, restlessness and acting out on impulse.

*Sensual Overexcitability.* In children, it may be seen as an increased need for touching and cuddling or the need to be the center of attention.

*Imaginational Overexcitability.* It manifests itself through association of images and impressions, inventiveness, vivid and often animated visualization . . . dreams, nightmares, mixing of truth and fiction, fears of the unknown, etc.

*Intellectual Overexcitability.* It is manifested in the persistence to ask probing questions, avidity for knowledge, analysis, theoretical thinking, reverence for logic, preoccupation with theoretical problems.

*Emotional Overexcitability.* The manifestations of emotional overexcitability include inhibition (timidity or shyness) . . . concern with death . . . fears, anxieties, depressions, feelings of loneliness . . . [and] concern for others. (pp. 30-36)

These overexcitabilities, also known as intensities, that contribute to individuals' psychological development in relation to their strength, stand out "loud and clear in gifted children" (Piechowski, 1997, p. 367). Some of the internal characteristics that may lead to emotional difficulties, and are often mentioned in the literature, include high sensitivity, high intensity, and existential angst.

### Emotional Sensitivity

Sensitivity is one of the first and most often cited aspects related to giftedness that deals with the noncognitive or emotional states of the child (Aron, 1996; Lovecky, 1993; Mendaglio, 1995; Perino & Perino, 1981; Walker, 1991; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). These writers hold that gifted children tend to be sensitive, and are often supersensitive.

Gifted children, whose sensitivity lends itself to heightened perceptiveness, are alert to small changes in their environment, and they are very aware of their own unique gifts. This perceptiveness actually can diminish their self-esteem because they focus on how they are different from their peers (Walker, 1991). Because they are more in tune to current events and adult conversation, they may also end up with an abundance of information to process. Their perceptiveness

may cause angst or give them worries that, as children, they may not be able to manage adequately.

Also, gifted children's passion for justice and truth makes them especially aware of hypocrisy. They cannot fathom why injustice occurs or why their parents don't protect them from it. In some cases, this awareness of hypocrisy makes children anxious, and they may exhibit what is considered to be immature behavior because it feels safe to them.

### Intensity

Intensity refers to the depth of feeling and behavior. Again, Dabrowski provided empirical work to explain these intensities as overexcitabilities. "The degree of emotional intensity is a stable individual characteristic and quite independent of what actually evoked the emotion" (Piechowski, 1997, p. 62).

While examining the intellectual, creative, emotional, or behavioral aspects of gifted children, it is the intensity of the characteristic that is notable. For example, whereas a normally empathic child may frown when she sees someone hurt, an emotionally gifted child may be on the verge of tears for hours, or even days, thinking about how unjust the world is for letting hurt exist. The increased intensity in gifted children helps to explain why stronger emotions and reactions such as depression (vs. sadness) and outbursts (vs. mild dismay) may occur.

### Perfectionism and Underachievement

Intensity of thought and feelings can lead to perfectionism, which generally is accepted as one of the most common issues for gifted children. Ironically, gifted children are aware of what is possible (perfection) and may feel defeated before they attempt a task. Defined as the feeling that one's efforts are never enough, negative perfectionism can lead to psychological disorders (Orange, 1997).

Perfectionism can also lead to underachievement, which is best defined by the gifted child's failure to perform at a level equal to his or her measured potential (Baker, Bridger, & Evans, 1998). Gifted underachievers may know that they are intelligent, but they do not feel capable of living up to their *gifted* label. Their low self-esteem may lead them to avoid certain tasks or rebel against those who require that the tasks be done (Rimm, 1997). Underachievement in school can lead to power struggles within the family.

One group that is at risk for underachievement (and that makes up the most common behaviorally disordered group among gifted children) is the group of children who have attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD) (Moon & Hall, 1998). The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 4th edition (*DSM-IV*) (American Psychological Association, 1994) lists 18 criteria for AD/HD in areas of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and inattention. At least 12 of these criteria need to be present for a child to be diagnosed as AD/HD, the onset must be before age 7, and they must be present for at least 6 months.

Many of these behaviors might also be found in gifted children. What may appear to be an inability to sustain attention could likely be boredom with routine tasks, especially if they seem irrelevant. High activity level may appear to be hyperactivity. Likewise, questioning of rules may seem to some to be rude or off task. There is a great potential for misidentification in both AD/HD and giftedness (Webb & Latimer, 1997).

Gifted children who have AD/HD or are otherwise learning disabled (twice exceptional) have very unique concerns in that they may be exceptionally bright but not able to express what they know. This experience can create a feeling of dysfunction or asynchrony in children who may otherwise shine if they could express their talents more effectively.

#### **Asynchrony**

According to the Columbus Group (1991), giftedness is asynchronous development in that advanced cognitive abilities and intensities combine to create inner experiences that differ from the norm. This asynchrony increases with increased intellectual capacity and renders gifted children more vulnerable to feeling out of sync with others (Silverman, 1993a).

Lack of synchronicity may also increase inner tension because the child's advanced abilities in one area (e.g., cognitive) are not matched in another area (e.g., physical). Gifted children may feel particularly vulnerable, also, because at times they may seem emotionally advanced and at other times they may seem emotionally immature (Silverman, 1993a). The psychic conflict in self-definition that can result from this uneven development may lead gifted children to give up on themselves (Tolan, 1998).

Another way in which asynchrony is felt by gifted children is in their attempts to reconcile their own intensity and advanced awareness with the knowledge of others. With so many people around them not questioning why things work the way they do, with the same intensity as they do, gifted children may begin to feel isolated and self-doubting, which may lead to withdrawal (Tolan, 1998).

With Dabrowski's theory as a framework, it is clearer why the characteristics presented here are particularly relevant in a discussion of gifted children. The theory provides an explanation of why gifted individuals may exhibit certain social and emotional expressions that are not understood by the popula-

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tion at large and may create conflicts. They also have unique strengths and compensation skills that might enable them to overcome these difficulties.

When gifted children are not supported for their differences and their strengths are not emphasized, there is a risk for a number of problems, including depression. Virtually all gifted children experience at least one period of existential depression that may arise from impossibly high standards, feelings of alienation, or problems of human existence that may weigh on their minds more intensely than on others' (Webb et al., 1982).

#### **FAMILY ISSUES**

There is little literature available regarding classic family concepts and their role with families of the gifted. One such concept is the family life cycle. Families with young children go through one of the most definitive stages of life. Marriages, which may have been more equal prior to child rearing, must readjust to demands of time and financial and emotional constraints, often causing power imbalances (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999). Parents of young children often become passionate about discipline and protection, doing things for the sake of their children that they would not do for themselves. The next period of major readjustment in the family is during the stage of adolescence. This is a time when parents begin preparing their children for the outside world by increasing flexibility

of family boundaries (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999).

Families of gifted children may have an out-of-sync experience with what is the norm. Because of aforementioned levels of intensities and development, for example, it may be difficult to discern between changeable intense moods of adolescence and overexcitabilities characteristic of most gifted children. Parents of precociously independent gifted children may need to work more persistently at maintaining discipline and parental boundaries during the younger years.

How and when a family deals with unexpected changes in the cycle is important, as is the structure and functionality of the family (Minuchin, 1974). Based on the characteristics of gifted children, it is plausible to assume that there is a need for special attention to family issues of gifted children. Unfortunately, family therapists often are not trained or educated about the struggles associated with giftedness, and there is little research conducted to determine the effectiveness of fam-

ily therapy with gifted populations (Moon & Hall, 1998). Empirical research is needed in this area.

### Family Functioning and Structure

Families with gifted children have a unique set of endogenous and exogenous concerns stemming from the aforementioned traits. Pressure from outside sources, such as neighbors or the school system, creates internal dilemmas for the child that, in turn, directly affect family functioning and structure. Our case example illustrates how these external and internal forces may interact with each other.

Also, because parents and siblings of gifted children are almost always gifted themselves (Silverman, 1997), examining how giftedness has affected their own lives is an important component in balancing family issues. Thus, transgenerational issues (Bowen, 1978) may need to be considered regarding family interactional patterns and how other family members have met these unique challenges.

Healthy family relationships and parent-child interactions are the most important factors in the development of gifted children (May, 1994). At the same time, giftedness itself may be a stressor that influences and is influenced by the family (May). It is important, then, to recognize the issues of giftedness that are caused by and have an impact on the family.

### Family Themes

There are several themes that arise for families of gifted children. They include but are not limited to issues of trust, isolation or alienation, reactions from others, and loss. Recognizing and addressing these issues should be a part of the counseling process.

The issue of trust is central for families with gifted children. Raising a gifted child often requires that a family enter realms that may not affect other families. Cooperation with other systems, such as school and gifted programs, are essential in meeting the needs of the gifted. According to Bennett (1999), because of the unique aspects of meeting the needs of gifted children, parents must learn to trust people at several levels. In the beginning, parents must ask, "Do we trust our own assessment of our child's abilities?" and move on to questions of trust regarding the outside assessments that are designed to test giftedness. After identification, there is still the question of trust with the school and with the identified child as to whether his or her needs will be met (Bennett, 1999).

The gifted can be seen as misfits in a society that values conformity. Gifted children are not average, and often they do not conform to society's ideals. This difference may create social problems, particularly at school (VanTassel-Baska, 1990) but also with the public at large (Walker, 1991). Adolescence may be a time when pressure to conform is particularly problematic, especially for gifted adolescents who are different in many ways from their contemporaries (Perino & Perino, 1981).

Along with conformity, our society values equality. Americans also have supported the notion of excellence and the encouragement of individuals to reach their full potential. These ideals can be seen as contradictory, and for the gifted, they can cause confusion. In general, the public has not been supportive of gifted and talented programs (Walker, 1991). In fact, programs to meet the specialized needs of gifted children often are erroneously perceived as elitist. The same charge rarely is made of programs to meet the needs of children who are learning disabled or who have other specialized needs. This lack of support from society can make gifted children and their families feel isolated (Silverman, 1993b).

Individual characteristics of gifted children may also have an impact on the way others respond to them. Their intensity, sensitivity, and special quirks often evoke strong emotions from others who feel the need to put gifted children in their place or push them down a notch (Webb et al., 1982). Sometimes, adults who are threatened by being corrected or questioned by a child may criticize a child openly by labeling gifted characteristics negatively. Children with traits such as persistence and high energy, for example, may be mislabeled as stubborn or hyperactive. By turning an asset into a liability, some people unwittingly turn major strengths of gifted children against them, causing stress, withdrawal, and poor adjustment. If reframed, these qualities could be considered active displays of strength and exceptional adjustment (Webb et al., 1982).

Lack of support from the community and misunderstandings about the characteristics of giftedness can make parents feel overwhelmed with issues with which other families do not have to deal. In fact, once a child is identified as gifted, the family begins a journey of mourning the loss of a 'normal' child whose needs can easily be met (Silverman, 1997).

### CASE EXAMPLE

Scott showed signs of giftedness at the age of 3. He taught himself how to read and was interested in relationships between numbers. His parents and his brother enjoyed his precociousness and encouraged him to learn through games. He did not show signs of stress until he entered kindergarten, when he was labeled immature because of crying spells, which occurred after he asked his teacher a question and she told him to be quiet and finish his coloring. Along with being labeled immature, Scott experienced social difficulties because of a lack of motor coordination that affected his writing skills and his ability to play sports in which other children excelled. Scott became increasingly frustrated with school to such a point that by second grade he had stopped completing assignments and was withdrawing socially from his peers.

Not all children who are gifted are affected by their giftedness in the same way. Scott's brother, Ryan, who was also academically gifted but was more socially adept, became frustrated with and embarrassed by his younger brother, who

was becoming a social outcast. The whole family was affected by Scott's outbursts and seemingly immature reactions and decided to seek help. Independent testing after third grade revealed that Scott had an IQ of 160 and needed much more academic stimulation. School personnel had not tested Scott previously because his poor handwriting and emotional immaturity had masked his giftedness. After Scott's parents enrolled him in a school for gifted children, many of the academic problems were resolved but they were faced with a new set of concerns.

Although Scott began to like school more and was easier to get along with at home, he had developed a pattern of withdrawal from other children that was difficult to change, even among other gifted children. The rest of the family also felt isolation from their community because of the misunderstandings of their neighbors. Community members were proud of their school and did not understand Scott's unique need to be around like-minded peers in another school setting.

### Family Counseling Interventions

#### Early Intervention/Preventive Counseling

With preventive rather than remedial interventions, counselors could plan developmental counseling programs to facilitate the emotional well-being of children and their families before a crisis occurs (Silverman, 1993b). One obstacle that must be overcome in meeting the counseling needs of the gifted is the failure of professionals in the counseling field to acknowledge their needs (Alsop, 1997). A stronger effort in educating counselors about these special concerns is needed.

Because of the early development of cognitive and adaptive skills of gifted children, it is important that counselors recognize giftedness early on in children's development. The family can rally around Scott and become more cohesive rather than increasing family tension by blaming their struggles on his developmental differences. In Scott's case, he developed an adaptive coping skill that led to isolation. When he talked about subjects that were not understood yet by his peers, they laughed at him. He found it easier to keep his thoughts to himself, beginning a pattern of social withdrawal. If he and his family could have been taught more open communication and adequate coping skills and had understood the nature of his giftedness when he was first identified, it is possible that the cycle could have been interrupted.

The family needs to see itself differently from the norm. They have their own construction of who they are. Early intervention that takes giftedness into account will allow the family to thrive in a way that is relevant for them, if not necessarily relevant for the majority of families.

#### Social Constructionist Model

Ecosystemic counseling takes into consideration the external systems such as school, peer relationships, and neighborhood of the family (Moon & Hall, 1998). These sys-

tems are especially important because of the tremendous impact they have on gifted children and their families. It is through these systems that life scripts are developed for the child.

Postmodern social constructionist theory is based on second order cybernetics, which places the therapists in a posture of a *not knower* who will use the client's reality as the basis for change (Atwood, 1997). There is no set of absolute rules that governs what is normal for the family. The counselor and family work together to examine scripts that overlap within the family and to uncover hidden scripts that may be useful in reconstructing the family's reality in a way that benefits all family members. Atwood (1997) described the steps that counselors might take when working within a social constructionist framework. Those steps and their application to Scott and his family are outlined here:

*Join with the client's meaning system.* The counselor should begin by adopting a stance as a nonexpert, ready to learn from Scott and his family. This goal can be accomplished by providing a safe environment and listening carefully to the stories of each family member. Additionally, an understanding of the unique development of gifted children and their families is crucial. If the family stories include information that is congruent with gifted development, this fact can be validated and normalized for the family. Such information might include examples of high-intensity or asynchronous development, which may seem to be a conflict for the family unless it is normalized as being typical for families of gifted children.

*Explore the past and how it has contributed to the current meaning system.* Exploring the past will reveal Scott's system of viewing himself as separate from his peers and his family's frustration over not being able to get all of his needs met in the current educational system. The pattern of communication between Scott, his parents, and his brother also will have been affected, as revealed through their interviews. Current scripts and family language also will be evident, as will past coping skills that have been effective in areas other than just problem areas. At this stage, a counselor could engage family members in a dialogue of what giftedness has come to mean to them. Families can then be helped to rewrite their family scripts (White, 1989).

*Put the past in perspective.* Reframing or letting go of past scripts can be facilitated by educating the family members about giftedness and offering suggestions about why others might respond in negative ways. Focusing the family's energy toward creating new goals based on their own reality will also help in putting the past into perspective.

*Invite clients to expand meaning systems through reflective influence questioning.* In Scott's case, the family referred to his system of coping as "withdrawal". Using the family's language, the counselor might ask about situations in which

withdrawal did not exist. This line of questioning will help the family explore the process of developing coping mechanisms that they can also apply to other situations. Another example involves the parents' fear of seeming pushy by confronting educators. By asking the parents what the payoffs are for risking confrontation, they may be better able to reframe their feelings of pushiness as a constructive way of meeting Scott's special needs.

*Amplify and stabilize the new meaning system.* Ryan could create a new meaning system by reframing his brother's anger as his frustration over not being understood and could then develop a new way of responding that would not exacerbate Scott's anger. By asking Ryan how he is going to carry that same type of adaptation into new situations, the counselor hopes for second-order change in which Ryan applies this behavior to new circumstances rather than just changing it this once.

One suggestion for creating a new meaning system for the family is to develop a more supportive social network with like-minded people. Scott and his family might join an organization such as Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted to continue feeling empowered and supported by like-minded people.

Counselors can continue to be enlisted as advocates, when needed. In Scott's case, he may need a professional counselor to meet with school staff members to develop an individualized learning plan to address his special needs.

This model can be used to explore any of the individual or family issues that may be of concern to Scott's family or others like them. It is a flexible and nonjudgmental therapy that does not force families into coercive norms with which gifted children and families often contend.

## CONCLUSION

To work therapeutically with gifted children and their families it is important first to recognize the unique attributes of the gifted. These characteristics include a high level of intensity, sensitivity, and moral concern that makes them unique in development and expression of emotion and may create a level of asynchrony that is common among gifted children.

Working within a gifted developmental model and a social constructionist model, the counselor will be knowledgeable about the social impact of being gifted while also allowing the family's reality to dictate how they will or will not respond to given social pressures. This approach allows the counselor to help the family construct a new reality that will lessen the difficulties without directing them to fit into societal norms that cast them as outsiders. Multiple family groups can also help to reduce social isolation and underlying concerns by providing support and education. Family counselors as advocates will help draw in support that can help to form a more positive interaction between family and community.

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