

# How the Gifted Cope With Their Emotions

*Annemarie Roeper*

*Annemarie Roeper is co-founder of Roeper City and Country School for gifted children. She currently serves as consultant in the field.*

The following observations which focus on the total personality of the gifted child and the inter-relationship of the different facets which combine to create the unique characteristics of each individual, are based on my years as Headmistress and co-founder of Roeper City and Country School. Having become aware of the gifted child's emotions, motivations, abilities, frustrations, and anxieties from a developmental point of view, these observations have crystalized to form a definite set of characteristics of gifted children. These characteristics are not the result of formal research, but rather based on broad experiences against a background of psychology, psychoanalytic, and educational theory.

Interest in gifted children is primarily focused on their intellectual and creative characteristics rather than on their emotional nature. There is, however, an awareness of the dichotomy between their intellectual and emotional development, the intellectual viewed as advanced and the emotional viewed as normal or slow.

I believe this model to be inaccurate and detrimental in planning for the gifted child. A child is a total entity; a combination of many characteristics. Emotions cannot be treated separately from intellectual awareness or physical development; all intertwine and influence each other. A gifted five year old does not function or think like an average ten year old, nor does this child feel like an average four or five year old. These children's thoughts and emotions differ, and as a result they perceive and react to their world differently.

For example, a gifted three year old may understand what injury means, but not having the experience of a six year old, he may not know the difference between a bad injury and a less dangerous one. In acting out normal feelings of jealousy, he may hit his baby brother with a block, and at the same time believe that he is not

supposed to be jealous. He feels this more strongly than an average three year old would feel. He is also aware that hitting his brother might result in injury. Therefore, this child feels much greater guilt than another child his age would feel about the same kind of behavior.

The gifted child's emotions and intellect are different from those of other children his age; they are not ahead or advanced. And they can only be understood if they are examined as a unit, for giftedness cannot be defined in separate categories such as intellectual giftedness, creative giftedness, or physical giftedness. These categories always act upon each other, although some may be more apparent in individuals than others. In short, giftedness is a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences.

There is a difference between giftedness and precociousness. The precocious child grasps certain concepts sooner than other children, while the gifted child understands their depth and complexities. The gifted think and feel in global terms, experience connections, and see the whole rather than the parts. They conceptualize in more sophisticated categories. This is not a pure intellectual activity, but also an emotional experience. A young gifted child, for instance, may feel that a spoon, a fork and a knife belong in one category, rather than all knives, because one needs all of these in order to eat a meal. A precocious child, on the otherhand, may put things into normal categories sooner, such as knives with knives.

The following is an experience of how two gifted seven year olds developed a close relationship based on their interest in playing chess. One child is Jewish and the other Arabic. Their parents took strong, opposing views during the Six Day War between Israel and Egypt, and these children were confronted with a most painful conflict—they became interested in the War, learned much about it, upheld similar political positions as their parents, yet still remained good friends. The children had a deep commitment to these conflicting relationships: they saw themselves as Jew or Arab, and yet viewed each other as friends. The conflict was unresolvable for them.

If these children were less gifted, they might not have become so involved in the conflict nor drawn any consequences about their own relationship; or they would have seen each other as the enemies and separated over this issue. As gifted children they were able to see each other's viewpoint and, as a result, were unable to find a simple solution because they were very aware of the complexities of the con-

flict. Had these children been average sixteen year olds, they would have seen the problem, become deeply involved in the issues, and probably would have severed their personal relationship. Had they been gifted sixteen year olds, they would have probably dealt with the problem together and arrived at a solution independent of their parents.

Gifted children go through the same developmental stages as other, but in a different manner and, as a result, develop different types of self images. The following types of gifted children are based on my observations. I am aware, of course, that these types are generalizations and that no one particular child may be completely described by any one category. However, these types do describe some common approaches gifted children choose to cope with their emotions.

---

## The Perfectionist

---

Many gifted children become perfectionists and remain so as adults. They do not give themselves permission to fail in anything they undertake, particularly in whatever they define as their specific field of competency. To fail is a right for others, but not for themselves; their emotional need is to be perfect. This, of course, is an unrealistic demand.

It is normal for the young child to feel omnipotent, but many gifted children carry this feeling of omnipotence beyond the normal stage. While other children discover the limits of their power and ability by trial and error, gifted children are often able to fulfill their wishes without severe limitations. These children are admired for being special and their parents are often in awe of them. The children misinterpret their parents' behavior which is constantly reinforced by the children's ability to manipulate the environment more successfully than an average child can do. It therefore becomes their mandate to accomplish anything they want to do.

If, however, gifted children find that they are unable to live up to these expectations, they consider it to be their personal fault rather than a realistic limitation of their age and ability. They often feel pressured and guilty whenever failure occurs which leads to feeling inferior, for there are many such occasions when they cannot meet their own goals.

Another phenomenon related to the feeling of omnipotence is that the super-ego of gifted children may develop at an unusually early stage because of their sensitivity and awareness. In these cases, the continuation of omnipotence coincides

with an early development of conscience and together they create an unusual alliance. In the more average child, the feeling of omnipotence is limited by reality before the conscience develops. In combination, however, they turn into an enormous obligation. Feelings of omnipotence make children believe that there is no limit to their abilities, while the newly developed conscience forces them to act with moral perfection. In other words, they feel that their ability to achieve has no limitation and that it is their duty to live up to this unlimited capacity. Imagine the burdens these children take upon themselves, feeling responsible for everything and feeling guilty every time they fail to live up to their responsibility.

The environment often serves to support this illusion as teachers and parents have a tendency to take advantage of children's giftedness. The father, who perceives himself as unsuccessful, sees a second chance for himself in his gifted son and conveys to his son the feeling that he must succeed in everything to fulfill the father's needs. The child feels that his father loves and supports him only for his gifts; yet he, too, clearly needs unconditional support just as all children. The child's fear of failure is tremendous for he cannot afford to fail and disappoint his father, nor can he enjoy his successes for he does not own them. His only reward is his father's pleasure.

Another illustration is a nine year old girl who enters a school for gifted children. She received all A's in her previous school and her family was very proud of her. In the new school there are no grade markings; the school uses the open classroom approach and the students work at their own level and interest. Therefore, the girl could not be the best or earn honors or awards for there were none given in the new school. The child cannot endure this structure and philosophy and becomes depressed because her measure for self-esteem, namely the gift to her parents of her success over others, has been taken away from her.

Another frequent consequence of the combination of omnipotence and the conscience extends to the emotions. For instance, gifted children often believe that negative emotions are not possible for themselves; others are allowed to be angry, aggressive, jealous, afraid, but not the perfectionist; those kinds of feelings are deemed imperfect and must be eliminated. Since these feelings cannot be obliterated, they are generally suppressed and relegated to the unconscious. As a result, certain symptoms and feelings remain such as guilt, fear, worries, and phobias.

At times, the denial of negative feelings leads to a complete separation of the af-

fective domain, particularly when positive as well as negative feelings are suppressed and a lack of affect and feeling becomes evident in the child's behavior. On occasion these children develop a feeling of depersonalization, a feeling of not truly existing. For example, a young girl felt that an event only took place when she shared it with someone else. She wrote to her absent friend everyday for only then did she feel her experiences had really happened. She needed others to verify her existence.

When these children do express their emotions, the results are generally underdeveloped and explosive because of inexperience. For example, a very gifted boy still had many fears that he acquired as a small child: adjusting to a new teacher, starting a new project, moving to a new house were all difficult experiences for him and he reacted to them with anxiety and uncertainty. His self expectations were extremely high and he required much adult support. He never fought however, for he thought fighting was silly.

As a young adolescent, he hit another child and was overcome with guilt. One could say that his true feelings were expressed at this moment in spite of his intentions not to allow this to happen, that is, to act aggressively and in opposition to his own image. He was overcome with terror; he cried and could not be consoled for a long time. This kind of behavior was not perfect and it was perfection that he expected of himself.

In other cases, suppressed aggression is expressed against the person's own self. These people may become masochists, placing themselves in situations in which they become scapegoats. In extreme cases, this kind of suppressed aggression, finally expressed, can lead to suicide. A number of gifted children have been heard to say that they wished to be like computers, for computers have no emotions to interfere with perfect thought.

---

### The Child/Adult

---

Some gifted children see themselves as adults and feel in complete charge of themselves. Anything that interferes with this vision is a threat to their self image. They observe the weaknesses of adults and feel that they can trust only themselves.

These children are often identified as underachievers. They do not allow themselves to be learners because they cannot accept the position of being a peer to other children. They do not accept adult authority and often have behavior problems, not because of any aggressive behavior, but

because they need to maintain the illusion of being in charge. The demands of teachers and parents seem to interfere with what they consider their rightful position. They do not understand why they cannot refrain from reacting strongly to being considered a child.

*The need to be in charge is unconscious.* These children cannot emotionally afford to give up power and do all they can to maintain a position which is unrealistic and vulnerable. They view the world as a threat; their need to be in charge is a struggle for survival, one they defend with all their power. For them it takes too much trust to be a child.

These children also react to the insecurities and weaknesses of parents who often promote the idea that the child is, in fact, superior. They feel unprotected and on their own while confronted with an unknown world. Thus, child/adult type children have two antagonists: the dangers and unknown problems of the world which they cannot really master, and the continued threat to their unrealistic positions and self image by their environment which treats them as the children they are. This may cause paranoia as they come to believe that no one is trustworthy but themselves.

Other children react differently: they may not perceive as readily parental weaknesses; nor believe unrealistically in their own superior strength and ability; and feel that there is no other possibility than to accept the position of the dependent child. Therefore, they may not battle with their surroundings. Confronted with the limits of their own abilities, they know that it is impossible to be an adult.

The Child/Adult is in many ways like the perfectionist with one important difference. The perfectionist has a tendency to diminish their feeling of self and their rights to their emotions; they may donate their gift to their parents, subordinating their own emotional need. Child/Adults, on the otherhand, defend their infantile selves against the world and feel that they are the only ones capable of doing so.

---

### The Winner of the Competition

---

Gifted children go through the same psychosexual developmental phases as do other children, but often in a different manner. An example is the four year old boy who loves his mother and wants to take his father's place. Most children go through this period of competition, but realize that father is there to stay and has abilities that the child has not yet acquired. The gifted child, however, may feel he is truly the Winner of the Competition, particularly when parents are in awe

of him: the child feels smarter and more capable than his father and sees himself as the mother's partner, which makes him feel like an adult.

Consequently, he is forced to frantically maintain this position and compete constantly with his father. He carries this competitiveness everywhere, believing he must do better than all his peers to show his mother how great he is. His needs for support by his father are relegated to the unconscious. Yet, he has many fears: can he really remain in this position; will his father take revenge?

Unconsciously, the child does not really want to be victorious over his father; he would, in fact, prefer to be cared for by his father and be a child. Yet, the temptation is great. The father may support the competition because he is jealous of the child and feels the son has taken the mother's affection away from him.

The roles again are reversed, and as such, the Winner of the Competition is similar in many ways to the Child/Adult. However, the Winner of Competition generally has a well established, realistic concept of himself and may feel parental support. Nevertheless, he experiences an even greater conflict than others in passing through the Oedipal period, and the resolution of the conflict may be delayed into a stage where it is inappropriate and no longer expected. While the Child/Adult fights for his basic security, the Winner of the Competition fights for an *imagined* right.

---

### The Exception

---

There are gifted children whose feelings of omnipotence interfere with their development of conscience. Most children learn early that their wishes cannot always be fulfilled because they may conflict with the needs of others. This experience forces them to realize that others have legitimate needs and rights which may or may not correspond to their own needs. Through this process, children learn to identify with others and develop empathy. For some gifted children, however, their ability leads to great personal power which is never reconciled with the needs of others. As a result, these children do not develop feelings for others and tend to use their abilities to fulfill only their own wishes and needs. Their giftedness leads to an impairment of the normal development of identification, empathy, and conscience. They remain fixated in a period of infantile self-centeredness.

These gifted children live on very shaky ground. They must maintain the illusion

---

*Parents often unconsciously support this self-centeredness by believing that their children are so special that they do not need to live within normal social limitations.*

---

of being outside the rules and regulations governing the lives of normal people since it is this difference upon which they base their self-esteem. If they had to see themselves realistically, to give up this image, they would lose the foundation for their self-esteem.

Parents often unconsciously support this self-centeredness by believing that their children are so special that they do not need to live within normal social limitations. For example, a mother of a highly gifted high school student felt that it was demeaning for her child to follow the rules that all students, regardless of age, must be seated on a school bus. She felt it might interfere with her son's creativity. The boy developed into a very clever delinquent who had no understanding for the rights of others.

The Exceptions are like the Perfectionists because they both unrealistically perceive their abilities. They are unlike the Perfectionists, however, in that they underestimate their responsibilities. The Exceptions are like the Child/Adult because they feel superior to adults but, unlike the Child/Adult, the Exceptions see themselves as beyond the system. The Exceptions are also similar to the Winner of the Competition in that both feel superior to the parent of the opposite sex. However, the Exceptions feel that competition is not required for normal expectations do not apply to them. Their journey through the developmental phases is altered by their fixation on the feeling of omnipotence.

---

### The Self Critic

---

Some gifted children tend to view themselves critically and find themselves wanting. Their emotions, actions, thoughts and behaviors do not live up to their expectations. It is as though they can separate from themselves and evaluate themselves objectively.

The Self-Critics spend their time and energy criticizing themselves and their work. They feel compelled to do a task over and over again, and are overwhelmed with all their obligations because everything has to be checked and rechecked.

Their behavior becomes compulsive. They often fail at tasks because they have so much difficulty carrying out their intentions. These children feel it is their obligation to straighten the world around them, and at the same time, see themselves as incapable of doing so. They have given up their feeling of omnipotence early but overextended their conscience. Yet their insights, deep awarenesses and even self-criticism originates from their giftedness. This type differs from all the types previously described because they do not believe in their giftedness, but only in their responsibilities.

---

### Well-Integrated Child

---

There are many gifted children who pass through the developmental phases in a normal manner. They are the children who feel supported by their parents in a manner which allows them to see themselves as autonomous human beings who own their own giftedness. They view themselves realistically, understand that failure is a part of learning, and that positive and negative emotions are a basic part of life. They overcome their feelings of omnipotence in a normal manner and develop a more realistic conscience at the proper developmental phase. However, these children are also aware that they are different from other children as the consequence of their giftedness.

They are often more aware of the world's problems and feel compelled to stand up for their convictions while suffering loneliness and isolation for taking such risks. At these times, the Well-Integrated Child needs the continued support of the family, not as much for their actions but for the resulting feelings created by the reaction to their surroundings. When these feelings are recognized by children and family as appropriate, the children's emotional needs are supported and they can use their gifts to cope with their negative feelings according to the normal phase through which they are passing.

These children are free to develop constructive activities and to grow emotionally as well as cognitively and creatively. They realize that they have a legitimate right to their own feelings as well as to their gifts. On that basis they develop empathy with the feelings of others. Their energies are free to develop their abilities for they recognize their positive as well as negative feelings as both normal and human. This does not mean that they will not encounter difficulties, failures and problems, but only that they are better equipped to cope with them. These children can enjoy their gifts.

---

*They are often more aware of the world's problems and feel compelled to stand up for their convictions while suffering loneliness and isolation for taking such risks.*

---

Although giftedness is usually defined by one aspect of the personality which is most apparent, I am reluctant to separate that one aspect for fear of not considering the total person. Nevertheless, it is helpful to be aware of the particular aspect which is most apparent when attempting to understand a child.

My observations raise the following questions: Can a person be emotionally gifted? Can a person have particular emotional strength which makes this aspect of their personality the most outstanding one? Does the ability to integrate the emotions with the intellect, creativity, and physical growth depend on the response of the adults, or is this also an innate capacity of the child?

I believe there are people who have such a gift. They are the people who have the capacity to integrate their emotions, intellect, and creativity against enormous odds. They are people who deal realistically with life and move normally through their developmental phases. I have observed children who are particularly sensitive to their own and to other people's feelings and who dare to act upon this awareness.

Some gifted children show enormous empathy with others, surpassing at times the compassion of adults who are more limited by society's expectations. As a result, adults may not understand a child's reaction. For example, during a chess tournament, John, the obvious winner, began to make careless mistakes and loses the game. When asked what happened, he replied, *I noticed my opponent had tears in his eyes. I could not concentrate and lost my desire to win.* John's empathy was greater than his ambition. Many adults, especially those who supported John, were disappointed. Yet, one could argue that his reaction was a more mature one than theirs for his self esteem did not depend on winning the competition.

In summary, the Perfectionist is one who combines the early phase of omnipotence with the later phase of superego or conscience development. I have seen this constellation influence the developmental growth of children, ages three to twelve. The Child/Adult is one who combines the feeling of omnipotence, with an unrealistic mission for total independence. I have seen this attitude

present in very young gifted children.

The Winner of the Competition is one who combines the feeling of omnipotence and the Oedipal phase, often extending the Oedipal stage beyond the usual age. I have seen children struggling with this at age ten, eleven, and twelve. In the case of the Exception, the feeling of omnipotence remains an overpowering force which keeps normal growth from occurring and the adult person who lives with this interstructure remains infantile. On the other hand, the Self-Critic overcomes the feeling of omnipotence early and remains fixated on the strong superego development.

All of the above suffer in their self development because the developmental phases have been met unevenly. Their giftedness has altered the manner in which the children go through the developmental phases. This, in turn, has made an impact on their personality and self-image. Well-Integrated children on the other hand, proceed through the developmental phases in a normal manner and meet the experience they encounter against a background of emotional strength and balance.

It is my belief that concern for the emotional development of the gifted should become part of the educational process. I am hoping more research will be done in this area and that parents, social workers, psychologists, administrators and teachers will become interested in this aspect of the gifted child.

\*Presented at the Fourth World Conference in Montreal Canada in August 1981

#### REFERENCES

- Freud, A. *Normality and Pathology in Childhood: Assessment and Development*. London: International University Press, 1965
- Greeneacre, P. *Emotional Growth: Psychoanalytic Study of the Gifted*. London: International University Press, 1971.
- Hesse, H. *Beneath the Wheel*. New York: Bantam Books, 1968
- Kohlberg, L. *Collective Papers on Moral Development and Moral Education*, Blue Book, Cambridge: Moral Education and Research Foundation, 1973. *Collective Paper on Moral Development and Moral Education*. Yellow Book. Cambridge: Moral Education and Research Foundation, 1975.
- Kohut, H. *The Analysis of the Self*. New York: International University Press, 1971.
- Maier, H. *Three Theories of Child Development*. New York: Harper and Row, 1965.
- Miller, A. *Prisoners of Childhood*. New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1981.
- Roeper, A. "Some Observations About Gifted Pre-School Children." *Journal of Nursery Education*, Volume 18, (3), 1963.
- "The Young Gifted Girl, A Contemporary View." *Roeper Review*, Volume 1, (1), 1978.
- "Normal Phases of Emotional Development and the Young Gifted Child." *Roeper Publications*, Volume 12, (4), 1977.

## Developing the Whole Child: A Developmental Approach to Guidance with the Gifted

Rita R. Culross

*Rita Culross, Assistant Professor and Psychologist at the University of Houston at Clear Lake City, teaches courses in the gifted and creative child. Dr. Culross has served as a consulting school psychologist to gifted programs in the public schools.*

Interest in gifted education has led to a host of new procedures for the identification of gifted students, the development of appropriate curricular programs, and the evaluation of those programs (Tannenbaum, in press). There has been little attention, however, to the guidance needs of the gifted child, and no attention to developmental guidance (Culross, 1981).

A developmental approach to guidance and counseling is one that is concerned with the ongoing growth of the child and not with *pulling out fires* as they occur within the child's life. (Dinkmeyer and Caldwell, 1970). Unfortunately, the prevailing view in gifted education has been to address problems of underachievement (Whitmore, 1980) and inadequate emotional adjustment (Webb, 1981) rather than to direct attention toward meeting the needs from which those problems develop. As long as the counselor simply intervenes instead of preventing, the mental health needs of gifted children will remain unmet.

No one teaches reading by providing instruction only after children develop reading problems. Yet, this is precisely the view of guidance and counseling projected in many of the survey texts in gifted education (Gallagher, 1975; Clark, 1979). They discuss counseling as a remedial activity for gifted students who already developed problems and never discuss guidance at all.