

## ODE TO THE DILEMMA OF THE MODERN TEACHER

(Continued from page 39)

mother and housekeeper; reader of Life Magazine,  
climbing through the ranks of corporation; or  
killing people in a war.

It was all so nice and tidy;  
and everything that might clutter up the scene was put away.  
And then, oh the greatest miracle of all; it did not exist!  
Poverty, discrimination, corruption, loneliness, fear and anxiety.  
And also creativity, softness, truthfulness and joyfulness  
could not be placed in neat little rows and therefore were not seen.  
How manageable life used to be.

What happened to the smoothness of our lives?  
All of a sudden a light began to fall in the corners and under carpets;  
and we found it all.  
It became highly visible and now it exists:  
The heaviness of hate and the depth of hope;  
the desperation and the loveliness.  
We found it in little disconnected piles,  
covered with dust, rusty for lack of use,  
with a sparkle here or there, reflecting the new light that shone on it.  
And we saw that much of this belonged to the children in our classes.

We saw that John had learned his ABCs and that he had grown big.  
But his spirit lay limply in the corner of his soul.  
And some of us began to dust his spirit and we saw it was colorful,  
and it began to shine by itself  
and it started to stretch and fill out a little.  
It still took up a small place only, beside the powerful ABCs  
and it began to pull on us; it began to demand attention,  
and it began to hope for help.  
And slowly—all that has been hidden from sight  
came out in the open and it attached itself to those shapes and minds and  
sizes in front of us  
and instead of 24 second grade 7-year-olds—there were 24 people.  
People who were filled with many feelings and who stretched out their hands to us  
because they hoped we might help them grow.  
Help them grow to be themselves  
not shape them roughly into preconceived forms  
which might hurt them in the process.

And now they have left their desks and crossed the space between us and them and  
a new sense of apprehension comes over us  
for they might find out things about us that we have hidden from ourselves  
and we began to look at ourselves and we found that our spirit lay limply in the  
corner of our soul.  
It too had been put into preconceived channels and not allowed to grow and glow.  
And we find that it is our spirit that the gifted need  
and our celebration of their uniqueness,  
so they can learn from us  
how to be themselves.

## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

Linda Kreger Silverman and Kathi Kearney

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D. is Director of the Gifted Child Development Center in Denver, Colorado, and Editor of *Understanding Our Gifted and Advanced Development*.

Kathi Kearney, M.A. Ed. is Director of the Hollingworth Center for Highly Gifted Children, Auburn, Maine, and Editor of *Highly Gifted Children*.

**ABSTRACT:** This article provides descriptive data on families of 38 children who scored above 170 IQ on the Stanford-Binet L-M. The families participated in one of two support groups that were formed in Maine and Colorado for parents of exceptionally gifted children. A brief description of the children is presented, followed by a description of the parents: their socioeconomic status, occupations, education, interests, family values, and evidence of giftedness. The remainder of the article describes the impact of the extraordinarily gifted child on family life and the specific issues these families face.

Families of the gifted have been studied for two reasons: to discover how family life creates giftedness or eminence (e.g., Albert, 1978, 1980a; Bloom, 1985; Feldman with Goldsmith, 1986; Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962; McCurdy, 1957), or to see how one child being labeled gifted affects siblings (Colangelo & Brower, 1987; Cornell, 1984). Few studies, however, have examined the impact of gifted children on the lives of parents.

In this article we will describe a unique group of families, all of whom have exceptionally gifted children. These children tested beyond the limits of the intelligence scales, with ratio IQ scores between 170 and 194. Other than Hollingworth's (1942) *Children Above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet*, sparse information exists on such extraordinary levels of ability. But even that classic text revealed little about the families of the subjects studied.

The material presented in this article was gathered from parent questionnaires, discussions within two parent support groups, and numerous individual consultations. After having their children assessed for giftedness, the parents involved joined one of two parent support groups, in Colorado and in Maine. We have attempted to report as much information as possible while protecting the identities of the families.

## Who Are The Children?

"Highly gifted" has been designated as low as 140 IQ (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982); however, the children in our study are 30 to 54 points beyond this range. Hollingworth (1926, 1942) repeatedly described the special needs of children above 170 IQ, and through our interactions with families of such children, it has become increasingly apparent that the parents also have special needs.

Two support groups were formed independently of each other to help guide the parents of highly gifted children — one in Maine in January, 1984, and one in Colorado in January, 1985. Upon discovering that their children had astronomical IQ scores, the parents generally were shocked. The support groups helped them cope with this information.

According to the normal curve of distribution, the incidence of children above 170 IQ should be approximately 1 in 294,000 (Dunlap, 1967). This means that the entire state of Colorado should have no more than 2 or 3 of these children. In the past 9 years, however, we have discovered over 80 children in Colorado in this IQ range. Similarly, the state of Maine should have one such child at most, and yet 15 have been found in rural Maine during the same time period. Grossberg and Cornell (1988) indicate that only 0.14% of those in the gifted range should score 164 IQ or above, but in the past 9 years 4% of the children brought to the Gifted Child Development Center, in Denver, Colorado, scored above 170 IQ. These figures add to the growing body of research that has found an unexpectedly high frequency of scores at the upper end of the IQ distribution (Dunlap, 1967; Gallagher & Moss, 1963; Jensen, 1980; McGuffog, Feiring, & Lewis, 1987; Robinson, 1981; Stott & Ball, 1965; Terman, 1925).

The families of 23 children in Colorado and 15 children in Maine agreed to participate in this research. Combined, this group of 38 comprises the largest number of children having IQs of 170 + ever to have been studied. Hollingworth's (1942) famous book, *Children Above 180 IQ*, was based on case studies of 12 children. A more recent report (McGuffog *et al.*, 1987) describes 10 children with IQs in excess of 164. In these studies, as in ours, ratio IQ scores were calculated, because the IQs of the children outdistanced the deviation IQs presented in the manual. Ratio IQs are derived by dividing the child's mental age by his or her chronological age and multiplying by 100. Data collected on the children in the Maine and Colorado groups are summarized in Table 1.

Because there has been some question as to whether females are as innately intelligent as males (cf. Benbow & Stanley, 1983), it may be worth mentioning that in the Colorado group the three highest scores (all above 190) were obtained by girls. In the Maine group a boy obtained the highest score, 194, followed by three girls who scored in the 190 range. This finding resembles Terman's data, in which the three highest scores in his initial study — all above 190 — were obtained by girls (Hollingworth, 1926; Terman, 1925).

Most of the identified children in both groups were firstborns, and about one fifth of the children in each group were secondborns. Three children in the Colorado group were in third, fourth and sixth positions in families with siblings from previous marriages and were reared, in some respects, like only children.

TABLE I  
DESCRIPTIVE DATA ON CHILDREN IN TWO SAMPLES

	Colorado	Maine
Number of Children	23	15
Range of IQ Scores	170 - 194	169 + - 194
Mean IQ of Sample	177	179
Age Range at Time of Testing	3 - 8.5	4 - 13
Mean Age at Time of Testing	4 yr. 10 mo.	8 yr. 4 mo.
Dates of Testing	1980 - 1988	1982 - 1988
Sex Ratio	10 girls/13 boys	7 girls/8 boys
Birth Order: only children	5	3
firstborn with siblings	10	9
secondborn	5	3
third - sixthborn with half-siblings	3	0
Number of Children in Family	1 - 6	1 - 4

The sample from Colorado contained one family with two children in the 170 IQ range; however, other families with several children in the exceptionally gifted range were found within the population from which this sample was drawn. In one family, all three children scored above 170 IQ, although records were available only on one child. Another family that subsequently moved out of state had triplets, all of whom scored in this range. At least four additional families were found with two or more children in this IQ range. The Maine group included three sibling sets, with two children in each family in the 170 + IQ range.

## Who Are the Parents?

This study confirmed previous findings that children with high IQ scores tend to come from upper and middle socioeconomic backgrounds and have well educated parents (Albert, 1980a; Barbe, 1956; Hitchfield, 1973; Hollingworth, 1942; Roedell, Jackson, & Robinson, 1980). The socioeconomic levels of the two groups were slightly different. Upper middle class professional families comprised the Colorado group, whereas middle and lower-middle class families constituted the majority of the Maine group.

## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

In the Colorado group, most of the fathers were professionals (e.g., attorney, physician, teacher) or were in business or management. Several were in technical fields (engineer, computer programmer, electronics technician, electrician, technical sales manager). In the Maine group, the fathers included five professionals, three men who were self-employed, a construction worker, and an army officer.

Of the Colorado mothers, 10 listed their occupation as homemaker, and 5 were educators. Additional occupations listed were: salesperson, computer programmer, nurse, social worker, occupational therapist, accountant, legal assistant, and photo stylist. Seven of the Maine mothers were homemakers, two were teachers, one a nurse, one a writer, and one owned her own business.

The occupational training of the Colorado fathers matched their current careers fairly well. Three of the 12 Maine fathers were not currently employed in the fields in which they had been trained. The picture was considerably different for the mothers; only one third of the mothers in both groups were employed in the fields in which they were trained.

The educational level of the Colorado fathers ranged from a 2-year associate degree to a Ph.D. or an M.D., with the average being a bachelor's degree and 1 year of graduate study. At least half of the fathers had engaged in graduate work. In the Maine group, educational level ranged from high school graduate to Ph.D. Six of the fathers held graduate degrees.

The educational level of the mothers in the Colorado group ranged between a bachelor's degree and a Ph.D., with the average being a bachelor's degree plus 1 year of graduate study—matching closely their husbands' educational backgrounds. The educational backgrounds of the Maine mothers ranged from two high school graduates to one with a master's degree. Previous studies have found mother's educational level to be a significant factor in differentiating gifted from average children (Albert, 1980a; Groth, 1975; Roedell *et al.*, 1980; Rogers, 1986). Parents' educational levels matched closely the two samples of parents of highly gifted students in Albert's (1980) study.

The mean age of the Colorado mothers at the time of the exceptionally gifted child's birth was 29.6. The mean age of the mothers of a group of average children in Rogers' (1986) study was 25.4. Other studies have found mothers of the gifted to be more mature than mothers of average children (Albert, 1980a; Freeman, 1979; Hitchfield, 1973; Terman, 1925). Father's age at time of child's birth was not available.

All of the children came from intact families at the time of testing; however, there have been two divorces in each group since the time the children were identified. Given the general divorce rate in the United States, the proportion in this group (9-16%) is low.

The Colorado parents represented a higher socioeconomic group and were better educated than the Maine parents, in keeping with demographic variables

Linda Kreger Silverman and Kathi Kearney

in these two states. In Colorado, the wives were as educated as their husbands, and in seven cases the wives held higher degrees than their spouses.

The pattern of the husband as professional or businessman and the wife as homemaker in a middle class family fits both groups and also matches the picture of families of eminent personalities. Goertzel, Goertzel, and Goertzel (1978) wrote:

*The eminent man or woman is likely to be the firstborn or only child in a middle-class family where the father is a businessman or a professional man and the mother is a housewife. In these families there are rows of books on the shelves, and parental expectations are high for all the children. The to-be-eminent child, his or her grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles, sisters, and brothers are likely to be verbal, inquiring, critical, argumentative, energetic, and experimental. The family has well-defined, strongly held values. (p. 337)*

## Parental Values

The values and attitudes in families of eminent persons (Goertzel *et al.*, 1978) seem to fit the families in our study as well. Parents in both the Colorado and the Maine groups had well defined values, held high aspirations for their children, spent a great deal of time reading, and modeled the need to know.

In the Maine group, seven of the families (representing nine of the children) had a strong traditional religious orientation. The religions represented were Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon. These families stressed dating and marrying within the faith and maintaining the moral codes of the religion. Two additional families (representing three children) did not adhere to a traditional religion, but they evidenced deep commitment to moral, ethical, and spiritual values.

At least eight families (representing 10 of the children) spent a great deal of time together. Five of the children in three families had homeschooling for some part of their education. All of the families valued education highly.

Specific data on family values are not available for the Colorado group, but discussions on moral development did take place within the support group. In the parent questionnaires and at meetings, several parents reported having observed advanced moral concerns on the part of their children. The parents struggled with issues such as how to guide their children's moral development without unduly imposing their own values and attitudes upon their children.

Interests of the Colorado parents also were in keeping with the description of the eminent family portrayed by the Goertzels. As shown in Table 2, reading was the number one interest of the Colorado mothers and came in second place for fathers, after sports. Child-rearing was a second most frequently mentioned interest of mothers—a factor that may play a significant role in their children's

development. Information concerning interests was not available from the Maine group.

into the counselor's office because they couldn't understand the disparity between the score and my grades. (I was valedictorian.)

### Impact of Extraordinarily Gifted Children On Parents

The discovery of one or more exceptionally gifted children in a family brings with it some extraordinary challenges. Some of these challenges are unique to families of very highly gifted children, and some are intensified issues that all families of the gifted face. Among these issues are:

- gaining an accurate assessment of the child's abilities
- coming to terms with the results of testing
- determining appropriate educational provisions for their children
- handling financial stress — even in upper-middle class families
- dealing with society's lack of understanding of and responsiveness toward this group
- coping with the heightened sensitivity, intensity, and perfectionism of these children
- facing the possibility of an early empty nest because of the extreme acceleration of the children
- discovering and coming to terms with one's own giftedness
- developing one's own aspirations versus devoting oneself to nurturing the children's development

### Gaining Accurate Assessments Of High Levels of Giftedness

One unique problem for parents of highly gifted children is the impossibility of gaining accurate information about the level of their children's abilities, given the low ceilings on modern tests. Most children receive tests that generate only deviation IQs: group IQ tests, WISC-R, WPPSI, Kaufman ABC, McCarthy Scales, Stanford-Binet Revision IV. None of these tests can capture the full range of abilities of the extraordinarily gifted because the children's abilities extend beyond the upper limits of the tests. (For more detailed information on assessment issues, see Silverman, 1989.)

Seven of the children in the Maine group who had been tested on the WISC, WISC-R, WPPSI, or K-ABC intelligence tests scored between 139 and 155, with only two scoring above 145. They were then given the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (Form L-M), which has a higher ceiling than these tests and yields a mental age from which a ratio IQ score can be derived. On this test, these same children scored between 169+ and 194. One child's score showed a discrepancy of more

TABLE 2

### PRIMARY INTERESTS OF COLORADO PARENTS

	Mothers	Fathers
Reading	15	11
Sports	7	13
Child-rearing	8	0
Fine and Performing Arts	8	4
Travel	5	3
Sewing	5	0
Math or Science	4	4
Computers	0	6
History	0	2
Writing	0	2

### Signs of Giftedness in Parents

Other studies have shown that giftedness runs in families (Albert, 1978, 1980a, 1980b; Burks, Jensen & Terman, 1930; Hollingworth, 1926; MacKinnon, 1962); therefore, we attempted to determine evidence of giftedness in the parents. The parent questionnaires asked if either parent or any other family members had participated in IQ testing or had ever been identified as gifted. Responses to these questions were sparse; few of the parents had undergone evaluation as children, and of those who had, only a handful knew the results of testing. Although identification for classes for the gifted was rare, other indications of giftedness included skipping grades in school, placement in accelerated classes or advanced tracks, MENSA eligibility, 800 Math SAT scores, high Army Alpha scores, and being named valedictorian of their high school graduating class.

One mother had a known IQ score of 160. In one family the maternal grandmother had a reported IQ of 150+ and the paternal grandfather had a reported IQ of 160. Three others presented IQ scores, from group and individual tests, ranging from 130 to 142. One mother wrote that she and her husband had been tested several times during childhood but that this information was always kept hidden. Another mother wrote:

*I remember having an IQ test in high school, but I didn't take it too seriously and apparently received a low score. I remember being called*

## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

than 50 points between the K-ABC and the Stanford-Binet L-M (143 as opposed to 194); another had a similar discrepancy between the WISC (139) and the Stanford-Binet L-M (187+). In the Colorado group, similar discrepancies were found for the six children who had been tested on both the WISC-R and the Stanford-Binet L-M. Only one child in the 170+ range scored above 150 on the WISC-R, and another scored as low as 135.

Since the Stanford-Binet Revision IV (S-B IV) was released in 1986, many psychologists have abandoned the "old Binet," (the Stanford-Binet Form L-M). However, the S-B IV is generating dramatically lower scores for the entire gifted range. Discrepancies between scores on the new and old tests average 13.5 points at the low end of the gifted spectrum. Children who scored 135 on the L-M version scored 121 on the S-B IV (Thorndike, Hagen, & Sattler, 1986). When discrepancies exist between instruments, professionals are likely to believe the lower scores and to assume that the parents are just trying to boost their own egos by claiming that their children have higher abilities.

Because none of the current instruments properly assess the full strength of the abilities of exceptionally gifted children, alternative methods of evaluation must be sought. In the *National Report on Identification* (Richert, 1982), the consensus of the national task force was as follows:

*It was recognized that new instruments and methods need to be developed for identification of gifted students in specific populations, such as disadvantaged, ethnic minorities, students with limited English-speaking ability, exceptionally gifted students and handicapped students. (pp. 77-78, emphasis added)*

This recommendation is already being implemented with all of the specific populations listed except one—the exceptionally gifted. In this case, an old method of identification is more appropriate than newer methods. Our recommendation is that when a child obtains *three* subtest scores at or near the ceiling of any current instrument, he or she should be retested on the Stanford-Binet Form L-M. Ratio IQ scores should be computed for all children who score beyond the norms in the manual, and perhaps for those who score above 155 on the 1972 norms, because at some age levels the highest score in the norm table is 158 (Terman & Merrill, 1973).

## Reactions to Testing

Finding out that one's child is profoundly gifted elicits responses similar to those of parents of the profoundly retarded. Mothers frequently cry, and fathers often question the validity of the test results. All parents feel an overwhelming responsibility for these children, and some feel inadequate to the task of meeting their needs. Sometimes denial is present (Boyer, 1989). A few fathers have made remarks such as, "She may be smart but she's also cute." When one family was told of the problem of ceiling effects that depressed their child's score, the mother

## Linda Kreger Silverman and Kathi Kearney

responded, "That's OK; he's gifted enough. I don't want to know how much higher it is." Limited finances are usually a major concern. Unlike families of the retarded, these parents cannot rely on federal or state resources or societal support systems for assessing or serving their young.

Some parents react in a straightforward, problem-solving mode. One father responded in this way: "How did they do? What does that mean? What do we need to do about it? We'll do it." In this family, the siblings were both exceptionally gifted and achieved similar scores. The parents believed that the testing experience helped to bring their children closer together. Other parents, however, have been filled with dismay at the results. Most parents who bring their children for testing hope that the neighborhood schools will be able to serve their children's needs, and an astronomical test score can throw off all of the family's plans. One mother even worried herself into an ulcer over the situation.

Integrating the information that one has a child with exceptional needs takes a period of adjustment (Dirks, 1979). For some families, this can be a long, drawn-out period, as they try to balance the child's greater need for stimulation, the needs of other family members, and financial considerations.

## Determining Appropriate Educational Provisions

Schooling has been a major concern for almost all of the families in both groups. The issue addressed at the first meeting of the Colorado group was, "What are you doing about school for your child?" Problems in schooling affected 13 of the 15 children in Maine. Most of the parents found it necessary to advise the schools about the types of adaptations needed for their children. Because school personnel rarely knew what to do with these children, the parents had to become informed themselves of the potential options, and then they had to educate the educators. Some parents were told by administrators to place their children in private schools because the public schools could not accommodate children such as these.

The provisions attempted by these families included homeschooling, radical acceleration, private schools for the gifted, enrichment classes, correspondence courses, and dual enrollment at two levels (e.g., elementary and junior high, or high school and college). Many of the families became involved in advocacy groups, working to increase public awareness, encourage the development of full-time special classes in the public schools, and lobby for appropriate legislation.

Acceleration was the primary mode of adaptation for the Maine group, whereas many parents in the Colorado group chose private schools. The picture in Colorado changed over a 3-year period as the public schools began to offer more self-contained classes for the gifted. Three families in each group homeschooled their children for at least a year. Fathers in two of the Maine families were directly involved in teaching their children. Two of the families in the

## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

Colorado group formed a joint homeschool for their five children; both mothers were trained as teachers.

Determining the proper placement for their children has been an ongoing source of stress in these families. Many of the children were barred from early entrance to public school and were prevented from accelerating. Educators strongly urged parents to keep their children with same-age peers even though the children preferred older playmates. When the children were unhappy at school, there was a spill-over effect on the entire family. Often, the child would start the year eager and happy in a situation, then quickly move beyond the curriculum so that a new plan would have to be formed midyear. Trying to meet the diverse needs of a child with a 9-year-old mind and a 5-year-old body is no easy task.

## Financial Stress

Exceptionally gifted children are costly to rear. The extra costs start sooner, last longer, and mount higher than they do with less gifted children. These children have many interests, any of which, with proper guidance, might lead to high levels of adult achievement. But private lessons are expensive, and which interests are the best ones to nurture? Some families had to choose to develop one child's talents at the expense of the talents of other siblings. Then there is the question of private schools. Is it better for mother to go back to work so that the family can afford to send a child to a private school, or for her to stay at home and provide extra stimulation to a child who is bored in the regular classroom? What if there isn't enough money for all the children to attend a private school? Is it fair to send "the one who needs it the most" at the expense of the other siblings?

The Colorado families at one time had access to as many as seven private schools for the gifted, ranging in price from \$2,500 to \$6,000 per year per child. Almost no scholarships existed at these schools. Parents had to decide whether to save money for these children's college education or spend it on their development in early childhood.

The families in Maine had no access to private schools for the gifted. Acceleration became the most explored avenue, which led to early college expenses with no scholarship assistance for underage students and difficulty in obtaining federal financial aid. Enrichment opportunities, such as music lessons, were used to supplement school offerings, but these were too costly for some families. In the rural environment, additional costs were incurred for transportation as well. One family from a small town felt guilty that they could not afford to provide all the books that their child requested.

Bloom (1985) described the financial sacrifices faced by the families he studied. One family purchased a grand piano for their son instead of a much needed family car. The financial strain of the needs of exceptional children are

Linda Kreger Silverman and Kathi Kearney

difficult for even upper middle-class families to bear. What Hollingworth (1940a) wrote a half-century ago is still true today:

*To subsidize a young person through a first-rate preparation for a learned profession, and to establish him or her therein, costs thousands of dollars. A great many highly gifted children are at present shut out from the careers appropriate to their powers, for lack of money. (p. 101)*

Perhaps one day state and federal assistance will be available to these families, and a scholarship fund like the one Leta Hollingworth (1939) envisioned decades ago.

## Lack of Societal Support

Both monetary and emotional support are available to parents of children with other exceptionalities; the more extreme the exceptionality, the greater the amount of support. Just the opposite is true for the gifted. From the time their children are small, parents of extremely gifted children face a series of obstacles. Onlookers react with disbelief and disdain when a 3-year-old reads the menu or the food labels at the grocery store; they assume that the child's precocity is the result of a "pushy parent." Parents find that they have to refrain from discussing the accomplishments of their children with their neighbors. Schools resist modifying the curriculum for an exceptionally precocious child. Educational rules and regulations become a set of barriers to the child's progress. In some cases, parents have had to fight to have laws changed — such as the legal age for school entrance, the grade at which Carnegie units can be gained, compulsory school attendance laws, replacement of college credits for high school credits, high school diploma requirements, the age at which the General Equivalency Diploma (GED) examination can be taken, and so on. Early college entrants find themselves without the kind of financial support available to older students. One child who became a National Merit Finalist at age 11 received invitations to attend several major colleges, but not one offered her financial assistance.

Society as an impediment instead of an aid to the highly gifted has led to some rather amusing parental responses. To meet the needs of their child, parents of the exceptionally gifted sometimes resort to "benign chicanery." This is a survival technique that was highly recommended by Leta Hollingworth. In her autobiographical sketch, she described herself as "honest except for those benign chicaneries which are occasionally necessary when authority is stupid" (1940b, p. 35). And in one of her last articles, Hollingworth (1939) commented:

*Perhaps the arts of benign chicanery are absolutely necessary to a child of highest intelligence, compelled to find his spiritual way through mass education (p. 145).*

## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

The benign chicaneries we have observed include adjusted birth certificates, parents "separating" so that a child could qualify to attend school in a certain district, "moving" to a state with a more lenient age requirement for school entrance and then moving back and transferring the child, and creatively interpreting children's ages to enable them to attend activities designed for older students ("I just listed her mental age instead of her chronological age!").

## Living with Intensely Gifted Children

Intensity and sensitivity are characteristics that were mentioned in 16 of the 23 parent questionnaires in the Colorado group, and perfectionism was noted in 11 cases. These three qualities appear to be generally descriptive of this population (Silverman, 1983; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). What is it like to live with intense, sensitive, perfectionistic children? And what if the parents also fit this description? One would hardly expect to find calm, peaceful households in these cases. Add to these personality factors the findings that half of these children are "highly energetic," a third of them need very little sleep, and most are argumentative. Welcome to living opera!

From his review of the literature on creative and eminent adults, Albert (1978) concluded:

*The consensus of these studies is that the creative person-to-be comes from a family that is anything but harmonious — one which has built into its relationships, its organization of roles, and its levels of communication a good deal of tension if not disturbances at times, what I term a "wobble." (p. 203)*

Although exceptionally gifted families may be a bit "wobbly," from our observations they are also very exciting and alive. Mothers of these children tend to be highly verbal and energetic. They need great stamina given their children's high energy levels and their penchant for not sleeping. One mother commented recently at a conference: "When other babies were getting 12 hours of sleep, I was lucky if he slept 6 hours. I figured he was smarter than other children his age because he had been awake twice as long." Parents of intensely gifted, non-sleeping children tend to be very tired.

## The Early Empty Nest

Acceleration has the almost inevitable result of children leaving home earlier for college. In our studies, parents who accelerated their children believed that they had done what was best for their children and had no regrets. But it also meant that the parents would experience a sense of loss — of being cheated out of a year or more of parenting. They began to see the implications of acceleration in family terms, not just in educational terms, and it often hit them all at once. The parents had put so much energy for so many years into advocacy, fighting

## Linda Kreger Silverman and Kathi Kearney

city hall, arranging appropriate placements, activities, and transportation — and then all of a sudden their children were "grown up" and gone. The family life cycle was compressed. One mother, who realized one day that her already accelerated son would complete 4 years of high school credits in 3 years, exclaimed, "Another year just evaporated!" Early empty nest requires a major adjustment for many families of exceptionally gifted children.

Rhodes (1988), from the Program for Exceptionally Gifted Girls at Mary Baldwin College, suggested that networking with other parents in similar situations helps parents deal with early separation issues. She has noted that parents of the highly gifted are often their children's best friends — sometimes, only friends — and this "overinvolvement" can make the separation especially difficult. She recommends that mothers develop a "growth plan" for themselves at the same time that they are helping their accelerated child plan for his or her future. She also advises parents to gradually wean themselves from the problem-solving role in their adolescent's life, placing more and more of the responsibility for decision making on the young person.

In this way, the young person learns that he or she is a competent problem solver, and the parent becomes more of an advisor when needed. As the parents shift from foreground to background in the gifted adolescent's life, the transition to early college entrance becomes easier for both the child and the parents.

## Gifted Children, Gifted Parents

The realization that one has extraordinarily gifted children often means facing one's own giftedness, sometimes for the first time. A child asked a professional expert, "How do you get gifted?" The speaker went into a whole explanation about nature and nurture, and the child told her she was wrong. "First I was tested, then my brothers and sisters were tested, and now even my mother thinks she's gifted. So our parents get it from us."

One father, deeply moved by the testing experience, sought counseling to understand his own abilities. As a child he had shown the same signs of extraordinary precocity as his son, and yet his had never been recognized. His gifts went unutilized. When his son was tested, he realized his own pattern of underachievement and began to set new aspirations for himself. Many of the mothers of these children still deny their own giftedness, crediting their husbands' genetic endowment as the source of their children's abilities. Sometimes, convincing these mothers that they too had something to do with their children's talents is difficult. If their conception of giftedness is based on achievement, they cannot recognize their own giftedness. After all, whoever heard of a "gifted mommy"?

## Nurturing Self, Nurturing Others

As the occupational training of the mothers in our sample revealed, about one third of the women were using their training in their current employment.

Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

Although the mothers in the Colorado group were as well educated as their husbands, almost half of them chose the occupation of full-time parent—at least during the time of this study. All but five of the Maine mothers were full-time homemakers. None of the fathers in either group had made that choice. What does foregoing her career in favor of the needs of her family mean for a gifted woman? Hollingworth (1926) was deeply concerned with the choices gifted women had to make.

*Stated briefly, "the woman question" is how to reproduce the species and at the same time to work, and realize work's full reward, in accordance with individual ability. This is a question primarily of the gifted, for the discontent with and resentment against women's work have originated chiefly among women exceptionally well endowed with intellect. (pp. 348-349)*

Having exceptionally gifted children often does not leave a woman enough time to devote to the full development of both her children and herself. Some women are exceptionally energetic and able to maintain a career while rearing a family, but this arrangement is most effective when support systems are available, such as a husband who is a devoted father, extended family, grandparents who live close by, live-in help, or excellent childcare assistance.

Another perspective on this issue is presented by Piechowski (in press):

*Clearly, it is nearly impossible to invest oneself in a demanding career and equally in raising a talented child, unless we view it as a division of labor between the career-absorbed father and the gifted child-centered mother.... The great achievers and the eminent as a rule have a parent or mentor especially devoted to them (Albert, 1980b). No doubt it takes considerable dedication and integrity to live for the child but not through the child, to cherish and guide rather than to want to own. Thus the nurturing generations appear to be necessary to the achieving ones. The idea behind this view is simply to acknowledge the great importance of those who nurture the talents of their children. (p. 25, emphasis added)*

We have met many mothers who feel a deep sense of fulfillment in their role as parents, despite the many other paths their lives might have taken. Gifted themselves in many other ways, these mothers have made the choice to become gifted nurturers. Our society has not highly valued this choice. It is time to recognize the enormous contribution to society made by mothers who devote their lives to the development of their gifted children.

Implications and Directions for Further Study

From this study and others, it is apparent that the population includes a much larger number of extraordinarily gifted children than anyone realizes. The exceptionally gifted population does not fit the normal curve; it has its own

distribution (Jensen, 1980). Given this information, deviation IQ scores, based upon the normal curve, are inappropriate when applied to this group. Mental ages and ratio IQs have been abandoned in current assessment procedures, but until some other method of assessing the highly gifted becomes available, we have to resurrect both these constructs and the tests with sufficient ceilings to capture the full extent of these children's abilities.

This increased awareness of the high number of exceptionally gifted children also has implications for families, schools and society. It is the only extreme exceptionality that remains essentially unserved in our schools. It is the only extreme exceptionality for which no financial assistance exists for parents. No efforts are being made to gain a census of this population or to develop appropriate assessment tools; test constructors openly admit that their tests are unsuited to this group (Silverman, 1986). We have to promote awareness of the plight of these children and their families, and make active efforts to remove the legal and traditional obstacles to their progress.

More has to be known about exceptionally gifted children and their families. We need to study the personality patterns of their parents and learn more about the extent of giftedness in the entire family. We need to understand the impact of highly gifted children on the family system and on the life plans of parents. And we need to study, acknowledge, and support the generation of nurturers that gives rise to the next generation of achievers. This is a whole new territory to be explored.

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## Parents of the Extraordinarily Gifted

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# Living Out the Promise of High Potential:

## Perceptions of 100 Gifted Women

Kathleen D. Noble

*Dr. Kathleen D. Noble is a licensed psychologist in private practice in Seattle, Washington, specializing in the affective needs of gifted women. Formerly on the faculty of the University of Washington, she founded and chaired three conferences there on "Women of High Potential."*

**ABSTRACT:** *In 1986, a unique conference for and about gifted women was held at the University of Washington, and was attended by 142 women, aged 19 to 75. Participants were asked to respond to a propositional inventory about the experience of being gifted and female, and their answers were examined in light of current research about the challenges confronting highly capable women. This article reports the results of that study, offers guidelines to help psychologists and educators enable gifted women to develop and express their high potential, and suggests research directions to expand the body of knowledge about girls, women, and giftedness.*

Over the past 40 years attention paid to the psychological, educational, and vocational requirements of previously underserved populations—individuals with special needs—has increased exponentially. With few exceptions, however, educational, research, and clinical interest in the special needs of gifted adults, especially gifted women, has lagged far behind. Consequently, we know little about gifted women's psychological development, the unique challenges they encounter in their personal and professional lives, and the cost to themselves and society of not having their marked abilities recognized and nurtured.

What little data exist suggest that at the elementary school level at least one half of all children identified as gifted/talented/highly capable are girls; by junior high school, less than one half are still so identified (Clark, 1983; Silverman, 1986). By adulthood, the majority of gifted women will "disappear." They will settle for far less than their full potential, while most of their male peers will go on to positions of leadership in education, science, industry, the arts, and other sectors of society (Kerr, 1985). Why do so many gifted girls and women disappear? And what can be done to ensure that women of ability recognize, claim, and live out the promise of their high potential?

Although there is a dearth of literature to help us answer these questions, some patterns and trends have been identified. This article addresses these