

## Parents' Reasoning about the Social and Emotional Development of Their Intellectually Gifted Children<sup>1</sup>

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*The way parents reason about the social and emotional development of their intellectually gifted children affects how they interpret their behavior. Models of parental reasoning in the general population do not account for the particular characteristics that many parents observe in their gifted children. In a year-long qualitative study of ten families, four levels of thinking emerged among the parents interviewed. A new model for parents of gifted children presents these levels hierarchically. Characterizing the lowest level is a complete absence of a framework for parental thinking about giftedness. The highest level evinces a comprehensive, integrated context for parents' understanding of both the intellectual and social-emotional aspects of their children's giftedness.*

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Parents of intellectually gifted\* children can provide the earliest and strongest basis for their children's effective functioning in the world. To do so, they need a comprehensive understanding of their children's intellectual and affective development. Examining parents' reasoning about their gifted children's development can demonstrate how parents make sense of their children's behavior and personalities. That sense-making may form a crucial link to the ways in which parents raise their gifted children. Equipped with an improved understanding of giftedness, parents might respond more beneficially to their children. Educators, by getting a clearer picture of parents' thinking, might formulate better childrearing guidance in the future.

In the general population, parents' reasoning about their children's social and emotional growth influences the interpretations they make about their children's behavior (Bacon & Ashmore, 1986; Goodnow, 1988). Evidence also affirms that parents who think about behavior within a developmental context usually respond to their children more adaptively and supportively than do parents who lack that framework (Dekovic, Gerris, & Janssens, 1991). In the gifted education literature, researchers have not established such a relationship.

This article examines the patterns and complexities of parents' reasoning about their gifted children's social and emotional development. It does not attempt to link levels of parental thought to parental action. Before such a connection can be made, the question that prompted this investigation had to be asked first. Do distinct patterns of reasoning occur among parents of gifted children? That is, if parents of gifted children observe behavior and personality traits that differ from the norm, does their reasoning about their children's behavior also diverge?

### Background/social-emotional issues

Although the general public acknowledges the exceptional cognitive capabilities of gifted children, there is less acceptance that these children possess distinct social and emotional profiles. Horowitz (1987) characterizes gifted development as a continuous, everchanging set of environmental and organismic variables that can yield the expression of giftedness "at various points along the developmental time line" (p. 168). Social and emotional factors play a part in the "developmental equations" (p. 167), but their role is not

well understood. She asserts that due to gifted children's unique development, the normal developmental path is not very effective as a guide.

Researchers and clinicians have asserted that gifted children experience a greater unevenness of development than their peers because their mental growth frequently outdistances their social and emotional capabilities (Altman, 1983; Sebring, 1983; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). As a result, gifted children may encounter a set of problems and conflicts that stem from the different parts of themselves being out of sync (Silverman, 1993). Adolescence, for example, may mean grappling with more than the standard, tumultuous matters of autonomy, independence, social acceptance, and self-knowledge. Many gifted teenagers must also struggle with the added dimensions that their outstanding talents impose upon them (Buescher, 1985; Frey, 1991).

Besides following a route of affective development that sometimes diverges from the norm, gifted children exhibit a number of particular personality traits. For instance, qualities such as intensity and sensitivity (Kitano, 1990; Lovecky, 1992; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982) contribute to gifted children's distinctive growth experiences. In their progression to adulthood, gifted children recurrently negotiate different social and emotional tasks from other children. How do parents make sense of the various attributes and phases they see revealed in their children's behavior?

### Models of parental reasoning

Reasoning is difficult to define. For the purposes of this study, parental reasoning referred to the thinking processes that seemed implicit in the statements parents made during their interviews.

Two current models of parental reasoning regarding child development (See Table 1) have been described in the general literature. Newberger (1980) uses a construct called Parental Aware-

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\* For the remainder of this article, the term "gifted" will refer to those children who are exceptional in cognitive functioning in intellectual areas rather than in the arts, music, drama, or leadership.

ness to measure the parent's level of thinking about the child's responses and behaviors. Based on a Piagetian approach to cognitive development, her model places parental conceptions into four, increasingly comprehensive levels. As the levels ascend, they reflect that the individual has absorbed a greater base of knowledge and experience about the child and can use that information and insight more flexibly.

Sameroff and Feil (1985) also rely on Piaget to construct their model. Like Piaget, they insist that in order to graduate to higher levels of thinking, one must be able to consider multiple vari-

ables simultaneously. Before being able to achieve that, however, one must be able to grapple with one variable. Thus, their model also has four levels, each representing a higher level of complexity in parental reasoning.

## Methodology

The data used for this article were part of a larger qualitative study on the social and emotional adjustment of gifted children conducted by the National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented (NRC/GT). The principal investi-

gators purposively selected 20 families\* of diverse ethnic, educational, socioeconomic, and geographic backgrounds. Trained researchers conducted interviews with all family members and made multiple observations of the children at home, in school and in community activities to determine the factors that contributed to or detracted from successful adjustment.

This article drew on interviews conducted with ten sets of parents from the NRC/GT study. The selection of families was based on completed sets of parent transcripts, eliminating one family known personally to the researcher.

Level of Reasoning	Newberger Model	Sameroff and Feil
1	<b>Egoistic</b> - Parents understand the child in terms of their own needs and wants. The parent looks after his/her own needs in the interaction with the child more than looking after the child's needs.	<b>Symbiotic</b> - The parent's concern is with the present realities of the child's behavior. Because the parent does not theorize, there is less differentiating between the child and the parent.
2	<b>Conventional</b> - The parent interprets the child's responses in the framework of cultural notions of child behavior. Parental behavior is guided by the external influences of the dominant tradition or culture.	<b>Categorical</b> - The parent sees that the child is a separate being. The parents tend to label the child's personality traits, judging the child's behavior with rigid categories.
3	<b>Subjective-Individualistic</b> - The child is understood as an individual with his/her own set of needs and is seen as part of the parent-child dynamic. The parent tries to meet the needs of this particular child, not a generalized child.	<b>Compensating</b> - Parents recognize that age has an impact on the child's behavior. A child may act differently at different ages. A broader context for understanding allows parents to widen their interpretations.
4	<b>Process-Interactional</b> - The child is viewed as a growing, complex being who both influences and is influenced by his/her relationship with the parent. Since the parent changes along with the child, both the parent's needs and those of the child must be filled, but a balance between the two must be established.	<b>Perspectivistic</b> - Parents realize that children's behavior represents the particularities of his/her setting and of the treatment which the child experiences. The child is not simply a set of hereditary attributes but is an interacting human who grows in response to the way he/she is treated.

TABLE 1: Two Models of Parental Reasoning

Name	Race	Income*	Education	Marital Status	Location	Age
Anne /child	Caucasian	\$30-50,00	6th grade	N/A	small city	12
Randy /father	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	small city	40-49
Susan /mother	Caucasian		some college	remarried	small city	40-49
Linda /child	Caucasian	\$100,000+	7th grade	N/A	suburban	13
Henry /father2	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	suburban	40-49
Theresa /mother	Caucasian		college	married	suburban	40-49
Sheila /child	Caucasian	\$75-100,000	8th grade	N/A	rural	14
Tom /father	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	rural	40-49
Rita /mother	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	rural	40-49
Leslie /child	Caucasian	\$30-50,000	8th grade	N/A	small city	14
Mark /father	Caucasian		advncd. degree	divorced	rural	40-49
Connie /mother	Caucasian		advncd. degree	divorced	small city	40-49
Matthew /child	Asian	\$75-100,000	7th grade	N/A	rural	12
Ted /father2	Asian		advncd. degree	married	rural	30-39
Grace /mother	Asian		college	married	rural	30-39
Robert /child	Caucasian	\$75-100,000	7th grade	N/A	small city	12
Larry /father	Caucasian		postgrad ed	married	small city	40-49
Jessica /mother	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	small city	40-49
Melissa /child	Caucasian	\$20-30,000	7th grade	N/A	rural	13
Leonard /father	Caucasian		some college	married	rural	30-39
Judy /mother	Caucasian		college	married	rural	30-39
Opal /child	Caucasian	\$20-30,000	6th grade	N/A	rural	11
Gerald /father	Caucasian		college	married	rural	40-49
Cindy /mother2	Caucasian		h.s grad	married	rural	40-49
Doug /child	Caucasian	\$75-100,000	5th grade	N/A	suburban	10
Arthur /father	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	suburban	40-49
Martha /mother	Caucasian		advncd. degree	married	suburban	40-49
William /child3	Caucasian	\$10-20,000	7th grade	N/A	rural	11
Carl3	Caucasian		some college	married	rural	40-49
Rachel3	Caucasian		Masters	remarried	rural	40-49

\*Total family income; if divorced, based on home child lives in most of the time.

TABLE 2: Family Demographics

\* All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

Table 2 contains descriptions of each parent's race, education, age, and marital status, as well as the family's income and location.

Some common themes of concern among the parents emanated from both the initial coding of the data and the peer debriefer input. A further analysis, which uncovered an underlying structure to the array of parent beliefs, yielded a new model of parental reasoning about gifted children's development.

An advantage to this design was that the research question about parents' reasoning was developed after the interviews had already been conducted. That way, the parental thinking expressed during the discussions with interviewers revealed reasoning processes that were not influenced by a researcher's a priori conceptions of parental reasoning. A disadvantage was that the analysis was limited to the transcripts. No follow-up questions could be asked of the parents for clarification of their reasoning.

## Results

Parents focused on socialization, adolescence and personality traits in their discussions of the social and emotional lives of their gifted children. Even though there were many common factors in their observations, there was also a diversity in their perceptions and labeling of their child as gifted.

### Gifted Definitions and Labels

Three categories of definitions emerged from the parents' descriptions. The first group declined to use the gifted label altogether and hesitated to depict their child as unique. A second group of parents also either resisted or simply chose not to use the gifted label while simultaneously acknowledging remarkable qualities about their child. The third group consisted of parents who seemed comfortable using the term gifted.

Regardless of whether the parent used the gifted label, each readily reported cognitive abilities in their children that they acknowledged were exceptional in one way or another. However, only two of them included any aspect of the child's social and emotional development when defining the child's giftedness (or advanced abilities). Interestingly, the parents discussed many psychosocial problems that are associated with gifted children in the gifted education literature. But the question as to whether some of these problems might be linked to the child's cognitive capabilities was rarely raised by the parents.

### Socialization

Parents generally defined socialization as their children's ability to make friends both in and outside the classroom and to interact effectively with other adults. Some parents felt that their children were socially well adjusted. Others perceived problems. Among the latter group, two types of rationales arose. One set of parents attributed their children's problems to the children themselves. The other set blamed factors that lay outside their children's control.

Randy was one of the parents who felt that family circumstances, rather than his child's personality or social skills, accounted for his 12 year old daughter's lack of friends. He and his wife, Susan, felt that Anne has had difficulty because their family has moved a lot and lives in a rural area. Both he and Susan characterized themselves as outsiders in a community that doesn't welcome newcomers very readily. The father concluded that his daughter's unpopularity was also because his family has different values from the rest of the community. Randy said that Anne's intellectual abilities had nothing to do with the situation.

Although Sheila's parents also worried somewhat about their daughter's lack of true friends, they were not too upset. They laughingly described themselves as poor models for making friends. They preferred to do most of their activities with their children. They considered their family to be tight-knit and independent with distinct family values. However, they were content with these differences. "We're sort of non-conformists...I guess we've got our own value system and our own idea about what we ought to be doing," Tom said.

Grace was at a loss to explain most of her son's social patterns, but interpreted at least one as being cultural. Although both children, Matthew and April, were born in the United States, she and her husband were born and raised in Taiwan. In the past, Grace felt sure that school problems were because Matthew's first language was Chinese. "He had this...frustration because when he (was) in kindergarten, he knew that outside they speak a different language, because at home we speak our own language....So when he went out to play with other kids, (he thought) how am I going to speak to them? So he...had some trouble....Originally when he went to school, he decided he wouldn't speak our language, just speak English." Grace no longer used language to explain, and had no answer as to why,

Matthew prefers to be alone.

Each of these parents saw their family's lifestyle as contributing to their children's limited social lives. Other families saw the conflicts as stemming from the child. According to his father Arthur, 10 year old Doug is much too bossy in groups to get along smoothly with other children. Arthur said that Doug was not mature enough to control his over-assertiveness. "If a 10 year old is trying to take an adult position with a group of 10 and 11 year olds, those 10 and 11 year olds are going to turn and walk out....they don't want an authoritarian peer, and I think that is something that he struggles with."

Three parents ascribed their offspring's social isolation to issues of intellectual differences. Jessica stated that her son Robert had been given independent research projects in early elementary school that excited him. He was bored with the regular school work, so he looked forward to reporting what he'd discovered to his classmates. Unfortunately, the other students did not understand the work he presented, and Robert ended up extremely frustrated. Robert's father, Larry, recognized that Robert was having trouble relating to his peers because of his intellect and was afraid that his son could grow up socially isolated.

Linda's mother, Theresa, believed her daughter's social isolation was caused by her giftedness. At Linda's middle school, being very bright means that she is labeled "a semi-nerd." At her school, "it's like a caste system and you can't walk the line normally....They (the gifted kids) can't walk beyond that line and so the doors aren't open." Theresa contrasted that experience sharply with Linda's much happier time at a university summer enrichment program. "[There] the doors are open always."

Although these families saw their children's social relationships as troublesome to varying degrees, there were also parents of gifted children who believed that their children got along well with others. Judy and Leonard said that their 14 year old, Melissa, was "in sync" with her chronological peers because of her maturity. Gerald characterized his daughter Opal as being "like any other 11 year old child. She's always, you know, in her actions around the house, with other people, with other children, uh, she's always been her age." No explication of how she came to be that way was offered. Gerald did feel that Opal excels at doing things that other kids her age can't, but he maintained that "you would never imagine

there was anything special about her.”

Mark highlighted that same ability, to be undetected by others as gifted, about his daughter Leslie. “[S]he fits in well whereas a lot of gifted children don’t. And some gifted children use their intellectual gifts to, I don’t know, stand apart almost....She doesn’t. She uses it to fit in.” Leslie sees patterns of interaction among adults and her peers and knows how to find a niche for herself in those patterns, Mark contended. Her ability comes from within herself. “She makes comments that keep the conversation flowing like you’re supposed to do, and she’s done it ever since I can remember.”

Part of Leslie’s social success is due to her being different from typical teens, said her mother, Connie. Unlike other girls her age, Leslie does not get involved in the volatility of young teen friendships. When Leslie reported that two girls at school had a fight and weren’t speaking, her mother asked Leslie which girl she was speaking to. “Well, I kinda talk to both of them, you know?” Connie thought that her daughter’s diplomacy was a wonderful quality.

## Adolescence

Many parents observed a duality in their gifted teenagers. In some respects, they are going through “normal adolescent stuff,” as Rita called it. In other ways, they run special risks. The parents seldom articulated any relationship between the special problems their children face and their giftedness per se.

Melissa’s parents were concerned that their daughter might become lazy academically during adolescence. They had already seen signs of this happening. Her father was apprehensive about Melissa losing what he called her “adjustability” during the teenage years. He felt she might lose her self-control and her ability to handle adverse life situations. Her adjustability lies in her coping skills, Melissa’s dad asserted, and it would be a terrible shame if she lost her grip.

As a preteen, Anne responds to social pressures like other preadolescents, her mother reported. “At this age, convention is so important and it’s very hard for her to fulfill what she thinks other people think she should be....She’s trying to impress certain other people who aren’t her friends in order to, as she sees it, climb socially....She would like to be accepted in groups that she’s not (in) and so she’s trying to be cool in order to fit in with them...” Her mother understood Anne’s turmoil as typical of adolescence.

As a gifted student, Anne has a hard time dealing with what she sees as failures in school. “She breaks into tears...explaining to me that for the first time since she’s been in school practically...She’s not going to get straight A’s. She’s just so devastated.” Her mother said that Anne is sometimes depressed because of the pressure she feels from her numerous activities. “She’s doing (horseback riding), dance three nights a week, and she recognizes herself that she’s just really too tired.” In some ways, then, Anne’s capabilities have become a source of stress to her.

Other parents questioned whether their children exhibit typical behavior or not. Theresa confided, “I think that she (Linda) is really intensely sensitive and more so as she gets older. I don’t know, maybe that’s adolescence.” Theresa pinpointed a trait that characterizes many intellectually gifted children, but she was unsure whether it was common to adolescents.

## Gifted traits

Parents identified a number of prominent traits that they observed in their children. One characteristic was adulthood. At first, Tom attributed his daughter’s early adulthood to the way he and his wife treated her. Sheila was “almost like having another adult...around the house ‘cause my wife and I have...treated her that way.” Later, he realized that it was because of Sheila’s abilities that he and his wife could respond to her at an adult level. He also acknowledged that he might not have treated his daughter the same way had she not exhibited such competence.

For Jessica and Larry, Robert was so articulate that they sometimes were persuaded by his strong vocabulary and deft argumentation to treat him like an adult emotionally. “He’s so smart you think he ought to know things like an adult, but he’s still just a kid and sometimes that’s easy to forget.” Another parent, who felt similarly about her son, speculated that *this mindset* may have contributed to the pressures her son feels to succeed.

Perfectionism, procrastination and a low tolerance for frustration are related behaviors that confound parents. Matthew’s mother cannot make sense of her son’s response to his homework. “He thinks it’s not good; he wants to...tear the whole thing. He wants to complete it again....I said, ‘You’re wasting time.’” She interpreted Matthew’s frustration as a waste of energy and did not recognize it as the perfectionistic

behavior of a highly intellectual child.

Procrastination is often seen as an offshoot of perfectionism because the student is so worried about being perfect that nothing gets started. Anne’s mother said that by putting work off, “she makes it into a family emergency,” drawing the entire family into the school project at the last minute. Without a consistent explanation for her daughter’s repeated incidents of procrastination, Susan is left only with her own feelings of frustration.

Robert’s mother said that he has had a low tolerance for frustration since he was a young child. Now twelve, “he STILL cries...when something doesn’t go right on the computer, or a few nights when he had some problems with algebra.” Jessica assumed that it was “an emotional release” for Robert. Whether or not she saw his behavior in a broader context was not made clear from her limited comments.

## Discussion

The Newberger and Sameroff/Feil models did not adequately characterize the reasoning of the parents in this study. Instead, other patterns of thinking emerged. Many parents separated their children’s social concerns and personality characteristics from their identities as gifted. Moreover, most parents didn’t know how they should respond to their children’s behavior because they lacked a framework for understanding the developmental issues that affect gifted children. Some developed partial pictures of their children’s social and emotional lives. Others imputed aspects of their children’s conduct to one cause or another but often did so without a sense that certain behaviors may be typical or common among gifted children (while not among average children). Several were at a loss about how to place certain behaviors or feelings their children displayed in any kind of cohesive context.

When trying to make sense of their observations and experience, some parents drew connections between the cognitive and affective elements of giftedness, whereas others did not. From these data, a new model that describes the spectrum of reasoning among parents of gifted children emerged. The four successive levels of parental reasoning represent broader and more complex contexts for parents’ understanding of their children. The model ranges from no gifted frame of reference at all (i.e., neither intellectual nor affective) in Level 1 to a

Level of Reasoning	Description of Reasoning Level	Example of Parent Reasoning at Particular Level
1	<b>No Framework</b> - Parents may observe or describe unusual cognitive or social-emotional aspects of their child, but they do not put them into the gifted framework in any way. No theoretical context for giftedness.	<b>Grace</b> - doesn't understand many of Matthew's behaviors; sees him as exceptional in certain ways, but doesn't have picture of him as gifted.
2	<b>Intellectual Framework Only</b> - Parents recognize child's giftedness in intellectual/creative terms. No realization that behavior/traits may be affected. Theoretical context limited to the cognitive.	<b>Randy</b> - knows that Anne is bright; doesn't understand her moods; doesn't connect social problems with giftedness at all. <b>Gerald</b> - accepts her as intellectually advanced but no social-emotional gifted profile.
3	<b>Full Intellectual and Partial Social-Emotional Framework</b> Parents make some connections between the child's cognitive and psychosocial characteristics. Some behaviors are not recognized as being a part of their giftedness.	<b>Theresa</b> - sees that Linda's giftedness affects the way she's treated at school, yet unsure about her hypersensitivity (doesn't link it to her giftedness). <b>Jessica</b> - accepts giftedness and sees how it affects Robert's interaction with peers, but doesn't link to his low frustration threshold.
4	<b>Comprehensive Framework: Intellectual and Social-Emotional</b> Parents recognize certain traits/behaviors as "typical" of gifted children. Broad theoretical framework.	None of the parents in this study exhibits this level of reasoning.

Table 3: Model of Parental Reasoning (Gifted)

comprehensive and integrated intellectual and social-emotional framework in Level 4. Table 3 presents the reasoning levels as well as some examples of parents who demonstrate such reasoning.

### Implications

Every child can be understood from a variety of perspectives. No single model can explain the entirety of a child's development and identity. Thus, this new model about parents' reasoning is limited to its view of the child as gifted. Certainly, the child can be understood in different ways. Yet the child's giftedness, in both its cognitive and affective aspects, is important for parents to consider when they interpret their children's behavior and personalities. Without a comprehensive framework for understanding giftedness, parents might be more prone to misinterpret some of their children's behavior. The more thoroughly parents understand the social and emotional aspects of their children's giftedness, the more readily might they be able to respond productively to their children.

An example of the model's possibilities lies in the potential reframing that might occur in parents' thinking about their gifted children. For instance, a child whose incessant questions are perceived by a parent as an attempt to undermine authority, can be reinterpreted more benignly once the parent realizes that such persistent curiosity is typical of gifted children. Armed with that knowledge, the parent may respond more acceptingly of the child. In addition, use of the model encourages a broader, longer-term look at the child. Rather than reacting reflexively to children, parents might respond more reflectively by considering what part giftedness might play in their children's actions.

Although this model can be used to help parents rethink their children's conduct, it should not be used to justify or excuse inappropriate behavior. Rather, it should help parents make more informed choices when guiding their children. Ultimately, parents' own values and principles will determine how they wish to use the developmental framework of giftedness in childrearing.

A greater number of parents in this study identified the intellectual aspects of giftedness than recognized the social and emotional differences of their gifted children's lives. Research is needed to explore whether this imbalance exists among parents of gifted children in general. If such an imbalance exists, it would be important to examine the reasons why. Do parents have a readier access of comparison for their children intellectually than affectively? For instance, parents may touch base with teachers who advise them of their children's special cognitive abilities. Or, parents may read books which discuss cognitive development. Perhaps it is just easier to see notable differences in intellectual capabilities among young children than it is to see affective differences.

In contrast, parents may lack available sources of comparison about affective issues. Even if they compare their own children within the same family, parents may dismiss differences as matters of individual personality. They may have difficulty discerning what would be considered "normal" in this particular, gifted child.

Dekovic, Gerris, & Janssens (1991) have asserted that parents who have a broader theoretical context for understanding their children's development also use better techniques in childrearing. Does the same correlation exist

among parents of gifted children? If parents possess a more integrated framework for interpreting their gifted children's lives, do they also have a better foundation for understanding both their children's immediate behavior and long-range development? Are parents then able to respond to vexing behaviors with better resources, or at the very least, feel less stress in wondering whether this behavior is "normal" or not? Given a fuller framework, parents might be able to make better, conscious choices about how to help their children cope with their affective needs.

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