

Changes in Emotional Resilience: Gifted Adolescent Females

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*Gifted females experience significant changes in social and emotional balance during the school years. This was the beginning hypothesis of a cross-sectional study of first through twelfth-grade gifted females. The study identified 89 subjects and administered a 138-item youth questionnaire. Analysis of the data indicates a significant decrease in the self-regard and self-confidence of gifted girls throughout their school development. Likewise, levels of perfectionism, hopelessness and discouragement rise in the same developmental time block. Relationships with parents and other adults decline while peer relationships take on added prominence. Implications are profound. As emotional vulnerability increases by grade twelve, inner courage and self assurance decline. To combat this, strong identity information and models need to be presented, emotional stability encouraged, and life direction, including career planning, strongly emphasized. **Key words:** gifted females, social-emotional resiliency, relationships*

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Contemporary society accepts and fundamentally appreciates women's contributions more strongly than ever in the past. Educators, researchers, and practitioners are portraying women as fully developed psychologically in comparison to men, with ethical values and judgements that are far from deficient, and as experiencing life in a different way than men (Toufexis, 1990).

Carol Gilligan, a Harvard psychologist prominent in women's

studies, suggests that women have "a different voice" (1982). This differentness is highlighted by the suggested essence of female existence: relationships and the interconnectedness of all persons. These and other differences between genders have been overlooked by many researchers. Indeed, contemporary critics hold that the psychological literature is founded on distorted research because it is centered primarily on studies of men. Thus, women are often at risk emotionally, socially, and perhaps medically in a world where men not only make the rules, but often focus standard-setting developmental, psychological, and medical research upon themselves.

Revisionist scholars have concentrated primarily on the effects of inculturation on female development. To this end, Gilligan and Brown of the Harvard project suggest that girls are guided through a different socialization process very early. Prior to age three, awareness in boys and girls is fairly consistent. By age four, however, they contend that boys begin to break their maternal dependence, moving toward an autonomous independent stance as Erikson (1950) and others have written. Girls, however, may continue to be nurtured toward the relational values of intimacy and empathy. By early adolescence, girls are already confronting value conflict with a society which values the independence that is typically nurtured in males. Female role models are seen as either railing against the traditional male orientation or going along with and trying to find self-fulfillment by playing according to male gender rules.

By the ages of 11 to 14, many girls have discovered that their intimacy, sensitivity, and empathy are valued only in some theaters, few of them achievement or career oriented. Gilligan suggests "that for girls to remain responsive to themselves, they must resist the conventions of feminine goodness; to remain responsive to others, they must resist the values placed on self-sufficiency and independence" (Toufexis, 1990 p. 65.). She adds that at this point of awareness, girls may silence their distinctive voice, responding in a

manner incongruent with their sense of self.

The consequences are critical for any person who buries her internal sense of self. Girls who face this dilemma, reap a harvest of self-doubt, ambivalence, panic, and loss says Lyn Mikel Brown (Toufexis, 1990). It is little wonder that we observe increased levels of these features as well as depression, discouragement, hopelessness, and fear among girls in their later teens. Because of gifted girls' increased levels of awareness, sensitivity, and potential, their conflict and loss are magnified.

Responding appropriately to gifted females in facilitating the development of their potential is a focus of concern for parents and teachers. Each youth has unique abilities and personality traits that need to be understood and given a chance for expression; interwoven through those traits and abilities are the factors of gender and developmental age. Understanding these gender and age considerations is important in understanding gifted females.

Past gender research for specific age groups of gifted youth has focused primarily on self-concept, academic, and career themes. A study by Loeb and Jay (1987) on the self-concept of gifted youth, grades four to six, demonstrates that gifted females find their giftedness an advantage and report that they possess a more positive self-concept and more internal locus of control than non-gifted females. It appears that for girls of this age, being successful in schoolwork results from following the traditional female roles of exhibiting obedience and doing what is expected. However, Callahan (1980) points out that the behavior which helped females do well in school may be a detriment to them later in the competitive professional world.

A study by Li (1988) supports the concept that 4th and 7th grade gifted females have a good self-perception in scholastics. Li's research measures self-perception in the areas of scholastic, social, athletic, appearance, conduct and self-worth. Gifted females had a more positive perception of their scholastic abilities than gifted males or non-gifted females of the same age. The report

questions why, with this scholastic achievement in early life, do females in adult life fall behind males in achievement? One hypothesis suggests that adolescent females cope with conflict between their identity as gifted individuals and their identity as women. As gifted individuals they are expected to develop their abilities and direct energies for their own potential. As females they are expected to be giving and selfless, deferring to their primary relationships.

It appears that as females become adolescents, their perception of their giftedness changes. As gifted girls became older they were shown to choose different strategies from boys in coping with their giftedness, especially between the ages of 13 and 15 (Buescher, Olszewski, & Higham, 1987). The girls more often hid their accomplishments, downplayed the value of their talents, and associated less often with peers who were also gifted.

The abilities and talents of gifted youth point toward potential high fulfillment in career aspirations, yet attaining achievement in a vocation appears to be different for gifted females and males. Career aspiration tests given before and after a one-day career guidance workshop reflected a change in career goals of 11th grade gifted girls to more prestigious occupations (Kerr, 1983). The gifted boys did not show a change. According to Kerr, it appeared that while gifted boys already had high career aspirations and did not need additional input, gifted girls did. Additionally, the college experience of women has been described as not encouraging career and educational aspirations (Hall & Sandler, 1982).

In a study by Post-Kammer & Perrone (1983), post-college gifted adults, ages 24 to 35, reported on fulfillment of their occupational goals. More males (79%) than females (70%) reported feeling they had completely fulfilled or reasonably well fulfilled their occupational goals. The biggest difference between males and females lay in the percentage of those who felt work was second only to close relationships or marriage as a source of satisfaction. Seventy-three percent of the females reported they felt this, but only 57% of the males. This study demonstrates the value females place on the relational part of their lives in comparison to personal fulfillment of a career.

In this study, dimensions of the social and emotional amplitude were explored through three stages of school: grade school, junior high, and senior high. Our

initial hypotheses stated that gifted females change significantly socially and emotionally as they progress through the school years. Specific themes investigated were self-confidence, perfectionism, relationship with parents, relationship with peers, discouragement, and hopelessness. The study also presumed that gifted females have strong views of what they want and need and how they want to receive emotional support from adults and peers.

Method

Subjects

There were 89 gifted females in the study, 58 in the 9th through 12th grades, 15 in the 5th through 8th grades, and 16 in the 1st through 4th grades. These students were designated gifted by their respective school districts and were enrolled in pull-out educational programs. All were enrolled in gifted programs in public or private schools in the states of Ohio, Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, Illinois, and Connecticut.

Instrument

Each subject completed a 138-item questionnaire¹. The questionnaire had social and emotional items related to themes of school adjustment, interests and activities, family and adult connections, social and leadership issues, planning and goals, thinking styles, and feelings. Each item on the questionnaire had the possibility of five different responses: *rarely or never* (1), *a little* (2), *sometimes* (3), *often* (4), and *almost always* (5).

Procedure

Questionnaires were distributed in classrooms and workshops. Subjects were given as much time as needed to complete the questionnaires and were encouraged to expand in an open-ended format for any question. Confidentiality was stressed both before and after administration of the questionnaire. No personal identification was recorded on the instrument, and questionnaires were folded and taped shut before returned.

Data Scoring and Assessment

Scoring and assessment of the questionnaires were performed by a team, none of whom had been involved in administration of the tests or had any contact with the student subjects. A

one-way analysis of variance was conducted to compare the three age groupings for the different question clusters. The independent variable was grade level grouping and the dependent variables were the youth's combined responses to the questionnaire items for each of the six question clusters. The Student Newman-Keuls test was used for the post hoc and multiple comparisons. Questions combined in a cluster for evaluation were subjected to the Cronbach's alpha test for reliability features.

Question Clusters	Alpha Coefficients
Self-Confidence	.55
Perfectionism	.55
Relationships with Parents	.52
Relationships with Peers	.66
Discouragement	.66
Hopelessness	.75

Table 1

Results

Estimates of internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) were calculated for the question clusters relating to perfectionism, self-confidence, relationships with parents, relationships with peers, discouragement, and hopelessness.

Alpha coefficients for these clusters range from .52 to .75 (Table 1). Included in the self-confidence cluster were questions concerning hiding feelings, hiding sensitivity and hiding intelligence, and acting tougher than they were. Some of the discouragement cluster questions focused on loneliness, fear, and feelings of being appreciated.

Using the one-way ANOVA, significant differences were found between the means of age-level groupings for self-confidence ($p < .05$), perfectionism ($p < .01$), relationships with parents ($p < .01$), and discouragement ($p < .01$) (Table 2). The Newman-Keuls post hoc tests revealed that the gifted girls in grades 9-12 had significantly less self-confidence ($p < .05$), more

¹ For copies of the Youth Questionnaire, write to Kline and Associates, 529 E. Stroup Rd., Dayton, OH 45429.

Means and Standard Deviations for Question Clusters

Question Clusters	F Value	Grades 1-4		Grades 5-8		Grades 9-12	
		M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Self-Confidence	3.83 *	3.98	.55	3.78	.44	3.60	.49
Perfectionism	4.96 **	2.97	1.18	3.27	.98	3.75	.85
Relationships with Parents	5.48 **	4.37	.72	3.90	.74	3.53	.97
Relationships with Peers	1.26	3.90	1.08	4.31	.44	4.08	.67
Discouragement	5.54 **	2.33	.77	2.47	.55	2.86	.62
Hopelessness	1.35	2.28	1.06	1.73	.55	2.05	.98

* = $p < .05$

** = $p < .05$

Table 2

perfectionism ($p < .05$), worse relationships with parents ($p < .05$), and more discouragement ($p < .05$) than gifted girls in grades 1-4. Additionally, there was a significantly higher level of discouragement ($p < .05$) for gifted girls grades 9-12 than gifted girls grades 5-8.

Even though the hopelessness cluster of questions, which included "I have thought how to end my life," did not significantly vary between grade-level groupings for gifted girls, it is important to note that the mean of the responses to these questions was high considering the distress they described. The mean for this cluster indicated that hopeless thoughts were present for many of these gifted girls at a level that would be an impactful negative influence during their school years.

When gifted females were asked how adults usually respond to them under varied situations, 52% of the gifted females, grades 9-12, reported that usually adults responded by ignoring them when they are depressed, while 24% reported usually being helped to find a solution. When angry and frustrated 43% of the females reported usually being ignored and 29% were listened to. Causing trouble usually brought a response of anger from adults for 62% of the females while 19% reported being ignored. Questioning instructions yielded a listening response from adults for 43% of the females and an angry response from adults for 24%.

Gifted females, grades 9-12, were asked what response they would like from parents, teachers, and friends when they were upset. Forty-eight percent wanted mothers to listen to their problem and feelings, and 33% wanted mothers to leave them alone. For 86% of the females, listening to their feelings and problems was the response they wanted from friends. However, 55% of gifted females wanted to be left alone by fathers, and 48% wanted to be left alone by teachers.

Discussion

This study examined patterns of social and emotional change that occur during the school-age development of gifted females. A secondary investigation involved inquiry into the actual and desired adult responses to gifted adolescent female behavior. Self-perceived abilities and confidence for girls clearly declined progressively from elementary and primary grades through junior high school, and further declined through senior high school. By high school, the females feel significantly less willing to reveal themselves to those around them, hiding their intelligence, sensitivity and feelings, and trying to act tougher than they are. They do not value or believe others value their abilities and feelings as much as they did when they were younger.

Along with lower self-confidence, the perfectionism traits of gifted females become more accentuated in high school as compared to earlier grades. They want to be the best more often and yet perceive their accomplishments and their efforts with less personal acceptance. Therefore, they often endorse higher standards for themselves but feel they are falling short of those standards.

It does not seem surprising that in high school they also feel more discouraged, more afraid, more worried and less appreciated than in grade school. The pattern takes on alarming proportions when girls feel despair or loss of meaning to the point of not wanting to live. Simply put, gifted girls are more vulnerable to the stressors of depression, worry, and fear as they grow older. Moreover, this is all happening in conjunction with less positive benefit from time with parents than they had in the lower grades.

The findings of adult responses to gifted high school females indicate that adults ignore high school females much

of the time in reaction to their expression of depression and frustration. Yet, during this most vulnerable age, quite the opposite is needed from adults. When upset, gifted females want to be listened to, especially by mothers and peers. This suggests that adolescent females need more skills in presenting their feelings in an appropriate manner, and adults need better skills for listening.

Junior high school is a pivotal time for the females because shifts toward negative feelings, low confidence, and perfectionism take place suggesting the beginning of emotional vulnerability. However, the senior high age is by far the most at-risk time for gifted females according to these findings.

Why does this happen? Conjecture suggests that first, as they grow toward maturity and into high school, gifted girls feel pressured to adopt values, goals, and aspirations compatible with society's preference for traditional male competitiveness and individualism. This agenda may appear to be the best way to approximate success. Secondly, they adopt stated and strong preferences for relationship development over other agendas. Thus, if their first priorities are relationship based, as is often reported (Post-Kammer & Perrone, 1983, Gilligan, 1982) and as we have found in this study, they will subsume other goals and potentials when those agendas conflict with the agenda of maintaining positive relationships.

Another contributing factor is the expectations of adults toward females as they mature. Cultural expectations suggest that females should be selfless, nurturing, giving, passive, dependent and "feminine". They are encouraged to manage a household and subjugate their careers to those of their spouses (Rodenstein, Pflieger & Colangelo, 1977). In expecting less assertive qualities from females than from males, relegating career to a secondary place, and assuming the female to be the nurturing caretaker of the family, adults create an impossible series of conflicts for females by telling them that they should pursue a career and be the best they can be, and at the same time that they should fulfill all the traditional roles of marriage, family, and nurturance. Because the gifted female possesses heightened awareness and sensitivities to the world in many areas, she discovers a world of ambiguity and does not see a meaningful place in the adult world for her abilities and interests. Loss of goals, dreams, expectations, and ambitions, including relationships, can be tragic. Indeed, when

any person, male or female, lacks a vision for the future and how it can encompass their uniqueness and dreams, they are emotionally at risk.

To the degree that these suppositions are true, we are doing a disservice to our female youth as they enter puberty and young adulthood. We need to provide a major human-relations action program for positive gender identity in young secondary-age females. This program should include a contextual adult action plan to promote: awareness of body, awareness of feelings, positive self-encouragement as stress management, positive reinforcement of others, "I" messages, body language, reflective/active listening, problem solving, and helping and cooperation (Kline, Kline, and Overholt, 1990). Emphasis on mastery of these assertive living skills empowers confidence in young gifted women. Newly discovered personal power enables them to respond to their own agendas, thoughts, and feelings, less encumbered by the manipulative interests of adults or peers. The result is an emotional resiliency that is potent and lifelong.

Two additional important issues were prompted by this inquiry. One is the question of how to respond appropriately to the range of giftedness that is being addressed when discussing gifted females. For example, to be labeled gifted usually requires a score above 130 on an IQ test with the range above 130 as high as over 200. That is a possible range of over 70 IQ points within the gifted designation alone. Surely there are other significant differences in the social and emotional levels of people within the gifted spectrum. Within this wide range can be found varied needs and emotional patterns which are reflective of the uniqueness of each gifted female. Her individualized distinctiveness is related to her level on the continuum of giftedness (Kline & Meckstroth, 1985). A second issue is the importance of informing each gifted female of her abilities, talents, gifts, and the details of what each may represent. This information needs to be imparted in many ways, in varied situations, and by different significant people in her life. Whatever the minor possible drawbacks to this self-understanding, the multiple benefits of self-knowledge and appreciation greatly outweigh the problems. The gifted female already knows she is different. To deal with what that means, she needs to know why and in what ways she is different. Only then can she begin to understand her place among

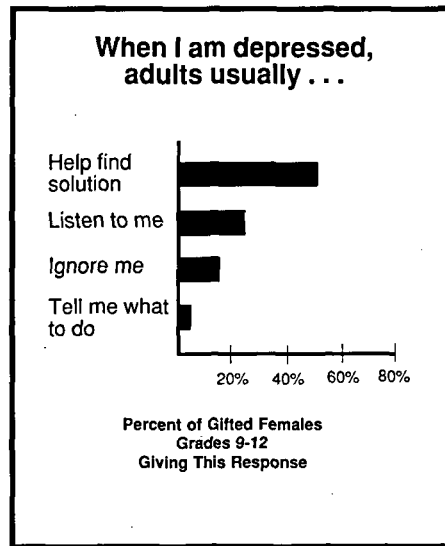


Chart 1

other females, in relationships with males, and as a contributing, important, and fully-vested member of society.

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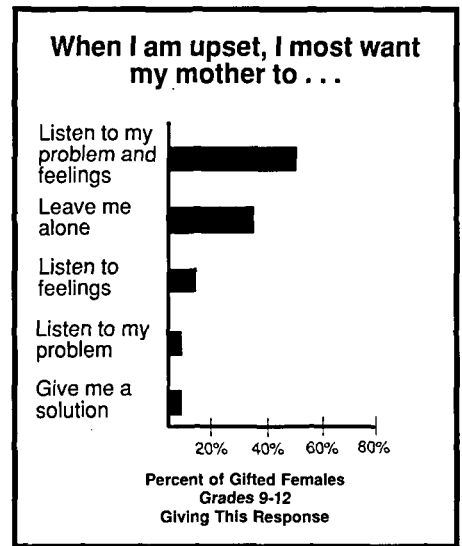



Chart 2

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