

Parent Talk
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Counseling Issues for Gifted Students: More Issues? Special Issues?

Nancy M. Robinson
University of Washington
capable@u.washington.edu

Gifted students are no more intrinsically vulnerable in their social-emotional makeup than any other group of students – and in fact, as a group, they are probably a bit more robust and resilient. On the other hand, neither are gifted youngsters immune to any of the woes of childhood and adolescence except one: mental retardation. Parents of gifted children need to be as alert as other parents to the possibilities of depression, loneliness, anxiety, attention deficit, learning disabilities, delinquency, and the like. Seeking counseling for such issues is often wise and useful, as it would be for any student.

Special Challenges for the Gifted Student

On the other hand, there are some *situations* that gifted students face that other students don't, and coping with these situations can be stressful. Here are some:

- A school setting poorly matched to the level and pace of their learning – typically, ordinary classes that cover old ground, move too slowly, and fail to provide the challenge and satisfaction of mastering something new. Among other things, such settings create relentless, low-level feelings of irritation even in the kindest-hearted students that drain energy that should be directed at growing and learning
- The stress of being “different” -- not finding friends who “talk their language,” share their interests, pastimes, and aspirations. Bright students often feel that something is wrong with them if they are unlike their classmates – typically, for example, they are

less interested in spending time at the mall and more interested in talking about a great book they've discovered or playing a musical instrument. Far too often – beginning in grade school – they try desperately to be just like everyone else and wonder why they feel so disconnected from themselves. Those who are also “different” for reasons of appearance, learning disability, ethnicity, or sexual orientation have an extra burden to deal with.

- Growing up a little faster than expected – because gifted children are often somewhat more mature than their age mates, they may be impatient for the next step – ready for deeper friendships, older friends, more independence, the next grade, even boy-girl relationships. They are “out of sync.”
- Lagging motivation and underachievement – especially because of meeting too few genuine challenges that match their interests and vision, gifted children may be especially prone to underachievement. They may seem “lazy,” they may procrastinate (nothing like creating one's own challenge by starting a term paper the night before it's due), they may simply turn off.
- The stress of “multi-potentiality” – interests and abilities that pull the student in many directions at once. (Actually, although many gifted students *feel* as though they are equally good at a number of things, they are generally not really equally good at all of them, but have little opportunity to find this out.) Not only may students feel confused about their choices, but they may take on too many activities – too many AP classes, team sports, drama clubs, math competitions, yearbook, community projects – and rob themselves of sleep, leisure, family time, and the satisfaction of doing their best at something they love.

- The stress of high expectations – because they are used to doing so well academically, the occasional B or – oh, no, a C! -- can be very unsettling and cause them to conclude that they’re not so smart, after all.
- The burden of perfectionism – high aspirations that exceed everyone else’s, working much harder on projects and papers than necessary, missing deadlines because something isn’t “good enough” yet. Actually, the most pernicious part of perfectionism is not feeling that you don’t measure up to your own standards, but fearing (usually unrealistically) that you don’t measure up to those of others.
- The “instant expert” expectation – avoiding activities that present the possibility of not being the best, or at least, not right away, because too much of their self-concept rests on being so good at things without trying. Many bright students “hate” sports or physical education classes because of this – not because they are especially clumsy but because they are unlikely to be the star.

Some Issues for Younger Gifted Children

As bright as they may be, younger gifted children often do not understand that their classmates are doing the best they can; they are not being “stupid” or oppositional. Your child’s impatience is understandable, and it’s difficult to explain this situation in a way that is respectful to the other children. In most cases, your child is *not* as great at sports, or drawing, or singing – or something -- as some of the other students are, and you can use this fact in your explanation. At the same time, you should be working to find a better educational match for your child.

And again, bright as they are, when they are moved into a class with other highly capable children, or into a more advanced grade, children may be disappointed that they

are not automatically at the top of the class. Children need help understanding that they are using a different comparison standard than before – that they are now the same fish as before but in a bigger pond. It's best to prepare your child before the shift happens.

Furthermore, gifted students sometimes learn about events and develop fears that send them into a tailspin – for example, death, inconstancy of friends, terrorism, suffering by children who are the victims of natural or man-made disasters, the general unfairness of life. Gifted young children have the awareness but haven't yet developed the "calluses" that come from weathering such experiences. Often their classmates are blissfully ignorant of such matters. You may need to minimize graphic sights on TV, but to approach the issue head-on with your child. Sometimes it helps to flood your child with more factual information than she is asking for! A little boredom with the issue may be good medicine.

Special Counseling Needs of Gifted Students

The import of the preceding list of special issues is that the counseling needs of gifted students are somewhat different than those most counselors are used to dealing with. It takes an understanding counselor who will say neither, "There, there, dear – it's all because you're gifted (and therefore there's something wrong with *you*)," or "Buck up, kid, with your assets you should be able to figure this out on your own (because there's *nothing* wrong with you)."

It may be that simply your understanding and warm support will help your student work through these issues. Especially if you are able to advocate for school adjustments, facilitate your student's finding compatible friends, and help to clarify and moderate your

student's unrealistic self-expectations, you may find matters improving on their own. But perhaps not. Professional help may be needed.

You may or may not be able to count on your student's school counselor for the services your student needs, even the basic educational and career counseling that we think of as integral to schools. They are too often overwhelmed by sheer numbers of students and the severity of their problems. Good sources of referrals are the coordinator of gifted programs for your district or school, your physician, and parents of other gifted students who have worked successfully with a counselor. In looking for a counselor for your student, then, either an in-school person or someone in the community, ideally, you'll be looking for someone who

- is well trained in a research-validated approach such as cognitive behavior therapy or interpersonal therapy. (Don't be afraid to ask.) The person you are looking for should have at least a master's in counseling, social work, or a similar profession. Persons who call themselves psychologists will have a doctoral degree.
- has experience with gifted students of this age.
- is reasonably bright and responsive to brightness in others, but not easily overwhelmed by intellect over emotions..
- recognizes your student's yearning for greater challenge and deeper friendships as normal.
- is aware that giftedness by itself does not produce problems, and that high standards and aspirations do not necessarily represent maladaptive perfectionism.

- is willing to consider a broad range of questions, including some career and educational issues.
- is also willing to recommend seeing a physician about medication, if it seems called for.

Counseling/psychotherapy services, if obtained in the community, are unfortunately not inexpensive and may not be covered by insurance, especially because your student may not qualify for a mental health diagnosis that is covered by your carrier. (Talk with your physician about this.) Community mental health clinics are seldom equipped to deal with the kinds of special issues gifted children bring to the table, although they are worth investigating. If finances are an issue, it is worth being an active advocate with your child's school psychologist or school counselor, overworked as they may be. It's clearly worth the cost of being known as a "pushy parent."

So, don't be surprised if your gifted child experiences something of a rocky road. Childhood was never the blissful paradise it is painted to be, and you needn't panic if your ordinarily stable and upbeat child goes through rough spots from time to time. But if your child seems sad, anxious, or stressed for more than a few weeks, then do try to find professional help. And if the first person you find doesn't click with your child, keep looking. You may be able to avert a good deal of distress – and keep your child from making poor, even dangerous choices down the road.