

# UNDERSTANDING THE SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL NEEDS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

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There is an abundance of literature devoted towards understanding and addressing the needs of students with learning exceptionalities. There are also federally mandated laws that govern testing and the provision of services to support students' special educational needs. There is comparatively less literature examining the complex needs of students who are academically gifted in one or more areas. In most instances, there are also less school resources available to identify and address their needs. This is compounded by the fact that the presentation of some of the intense emotional and behavioral characteristics of gifted students can sometimes mimic other diagnoses and thus their intellectual capabilities are not known much less cultivated. This article addresses the social, emotional and academic needs of gifted children and discusses the implications for school counselors and school counseling education programs.

Whether gifted individuals have unique social and emotional needs has been a topic of much debate. Assumptions that educating a gifted child is easier and that they do not need assistance to learn has perpetrated the falsehood that they do not have unique social and emotional needs (Fonseca, 2011). Early research on addressing the needs of gifted students was mainly focused on the development of academic programming for delivering services (Colangelo, 2002). Psychiatrist Kazimierz Dabrowski was one of the first to provide a framework for how the world is experienced by gifted individuals. His *Theory of Positive Disintegration* proposed that individuals develop through a process disintegration and reintegration. Positive reintegration results in individual growth. He observed that as people advanced, intelligence combined with "overexcitabilities" were predictive of higher-level development. Dabrowski identified five areas of overexcitability: psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal and emotional. Gifted children have been found to be more likely to exhibit one or more of these intensities (Lind, 2001).

McDowell's (1984) review of the literature on social and emotional coping in gifted students highlighted that gifted students often reported they felt different, less confident interacting socially and struggled with finding peers. They also expressed frustration with school work that was repetitive and seemingly useless and that teachers felt their questions created conflict and their purpose was misunderstood.

Peterson (2009) challenged assumptions that gifted individuals do not have unique social/emotional needs. Gifted students are reported to be more prone to perfectionism and as such may hold back from taking risks thus leading to underachievement. This in turn can lead to boredom in class that can result in disruptive behavior. Alternatively, a high expectation for perfection can also lead to increased stress and anxiety. Gifted children's cognitive development also often occurs at a more advanced rate than social/emotional development, which makes fitting in with peers difficult. This cognitive advancement can also have a corresponding high degree of moral development and sense for the need to follow rules, which can result in 'bossiness' and rigid behavior furthering affect peer relations. Fonseca (2011) agreed that much for the social struggles gifted children face stems from their intense emotionality. Their

advanced skill often dictates a strong sense of what they consider right and wrong which can lead to outbursts, tantrums and an inability to see others views, which can cause other students to retreat. The experience of the aforementioned issues tends to be proportional to the degree of giftedness; the higher the giftedness, the greater the social/emotional needs.

The implications for school counselors are tremendous. There are often many barriers to working as an advocate for our gifted students. One major obstacle is that students are not always identified for their intellectual ability. Students can be “twice exceptional” meaning that while they might be advanced in one area, they are identified as learning disabled in. If they are identified as gifted first, they may be perceived as lazy in other areas. Conversely, if they are identified as learning disabled, they may not be challenged in their area of giftedness (Fonseca, 2011).

Another obstacle is that due to the aforementioned “overexcitabilities”, giftedness can mimic as other issues. For example, students with psychomotor overexcitability may act impulsively, talk out excessively and have difficulty keeping still. This can be confused with ADHD. Students with sensory excitability might find excessive noise, the feeling of tags on clothes or certain smells overwhelming and they may withdraw or exhibit behavioral issues (Lind, 2001). This can present similar to autism or emotional/behavioral disorder. Still others might have emotional excitability that can be exhibited as intense reactions to situations (anxiety/depression) or by extreme mood swings (bipolar disorder).

Furthermore, barriers within the education setting due to assumptions that are made can confront school counselors. Cross (2002) outlined several commonly held myths that are of particular relevance and may negatively impact the social and emotional development of gifted students. One is that parents and educators alike often stress that students need to be in same age classrooms with their peers for them to advance socially and that if they are grouped based on their common intellectual ability that they will not be able to interact with others in the general population. In fact, Saylor (1993) found that students who entered school early or skipped a grade did not report experiencing feelings of isolation from their classmates or emotional difficulty and had less behavioral issues than their like age peers.

Another claim is that all students should be well rounded and as such gifted children are often pushed away from their primary focuses into other interests (Cross, 2002). There are two problems with this. One is that those students are given the idea that something is wrong with them. Secondly, Fonseca (2011) suggests that gifted students can be introverts or extroverts in how they need to process and cope with their experiences. Extroverts need social contact in order to revitalize however they might struggle with meeting their need due to some of the difficulties gifted students encounter with peer relationships. Introverts are often pushed to socialize for fear of lagging social skills and as a result may not get the solitude needed to decompress.

A third myth is that no kids are gifted because everyone is special and unique in their own ways. This is particularly relevant in our society that is geared toward being egalitarian – everyone is a “winner”. While this is very true, Cross (2002) makes a key point in that giftedness should not be viewed as an assignment of value. Gifted students are not *better* than other students in an existential sense. They do, however, have abilities that go beyond the norm and have needs that need to be met.

Several studies have discussed ways to meet the needs of gifted children. Delcourt, Cornell, and Goldberg (2007) conducted a two-year study assessing academic and emotional changes in elementary students. They compared those in gifted programs, high achievers for which no program was available and students in regular education classrooms. The results revealed that the students enrolled in gifted programs had higher achievement scores than high achievers not in a special program. The study also compared the setting in which gifted services were delivered i.e. a separate school, separate classes, pull out program or within class. The least successful setting for gifted students was within class.

Interestingly, regardless of setting students were in they all reported similar comfort with peers and social relationships.

Benson (2009) examined the needs of gifted eighth students transitioning from middle school to high school. Students were surveyed and while the majority of students felt academically prepared, far fewer felt ready for the transition and reported increased anxiety. Their major concern was allocating time for homework and other activities while maintaining success. A panel discussion between the gifted eighth grade students and gifted high school students resulted in a tremendous increase in the reported comfort with the impending transition and a decrease in feelings of anxiety.

One other option available for meeting the multifaceted needs of gifted children is the attendance of a summer residential program. An example is the Governor's School Model which focused on providing advanced curriculum while meeting social needs. While students were challenged with a rigorous curriculum, student and parent surveys revealed that the opportunity for students to develop friendships and interact with like-minded peers was an even greater benefit (McHugh, 2006).

Sadly, there is often resistance encountered meeting the needs of gifted students in school settings due to myths and misconceptions. School counselors are called to be advocates for the students they serve and being aware of gifted students needs is critical. Yet there is very little mention of giftedness in counselor education textbooks or training in educational programs (Peterson, 2009). As such, there is a significant potential for misdiagnosis and lack of recognition. In her review of the book *Gifted Grownups: The Mixed Blessings of Extraordinary Potential*, Hershfeld-Flores (2000) quoted the author's estimate that approximately 20% of our prison population is gifted. That is an alarming statistic and illustrates what is at stake if counselors are not educated regarding their needs.

There are some wonderful resources available for families and students:

- National Association of Gifted Children: [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org)
- Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted: [www.sengifted.org](http://www.sengifted.org)
- The Davidson Institute on Talent Development: [www.davidsongifted.org](http://www.davidsongifted.org)
- Hoagies Gifted Education: <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org>
- Book on Models of Counseling:  
<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1593632061?ie=UTF8&tag=7steahe-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=1593632061>
- Local Counselors Specializing in the Needs of the Gifted:  
<http://www.davincilearning.org/index.html>  
<http://www.edconsultnh.com>

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