The Social and Emotional Needs of Gifted Children

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My Corner
Amidst this complex and ever changing world, the gifted child needs to negotiate himself/herself well in order to function effectively. We now know that the affect or emotional aspects of children do indeed affect their cognition. Hence a gifted child’s social emotional adjustment does impact upon his/her intellectual or academic and overall development.

Although the school and teachers play a key role in developing the gifted child’s affective domain, the parents play an even more significant role in providing a haven for the child when he/she meets with adversity, and supplying the child with ample emotional support and love throughout his/her life.

There is much to learn about the social emotional characteristics and development of the gifted. Hence in this issue, we shall also focus on related topics. From the past issue, we have looked at the topics of optimism and emotional management in gifted children. The vulnerabilities of gifted children were also examined in an article on empirical research findings. The merits of videotherapy were also shared.

In this issue we shall expand the social emotional development topics and look at perfectionism and underachievement which are common issues faced by the gifted. The topic of underachievement is also examined more closely based on information from various researches. In this issue, we are delighted to have a gifted child herself who shares with us her experiences. This leads us to looking at the issues commonly faced by gifted girls.

The editorial team would like to thank all who have given us your comments. We are also grateful to those who have been so generously encouraging us along the way. In order that we continuously publish articles and information that are useful and relevant, please don’t hesitate to provide us your suggestions for improvement.

Thank you.
Perhaps one of the most frustrating situations for parents is gifted children who can, but won’t or don’t. All children begin school eager and ready to learn and grow but some gifted children in mixed ability classrooms quickly learn to underachieve. It’s easy to understand how this happens if we consider all the things children don’t learn when they earn good marks and high praise without making much of an effort. In mixed ability classrooms, gifted children often don’t encounter challenging work because the teacher typically pitches the curriculum to the middle levels of ability. As a result, the gifted don’t learn to manage their time because they can wait to the last minute and still earn good grades. They don’t learn how to study because they can do well without it. They may not learn empathy for others who struggle because they’ve never had that experience themselves. They may also not learn how to ask for help when they need it, how to tolerate frustration, or how to persevere through difficulty because the work is always so easy. They don’t learn how to cope with disappointments, setbacks, and failure because they rarely encounter them. They may never learn the satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that comes with working hard for a long time to achieve something. Worst of all, some gifted children in mixed ability classrooms come to adopt an entity view of ability, believing that being smart means not having to make an effort. When they finally encounter challenge that requires an effort later in their education, they may have a crisis of confidence because they think that having to make an effort means they aren’t intelligent. Fortunately, academic underachievement is a very well researched topic in education. Several things have been identified that parents can do to prevent and even reverse longstanding patterns of poor effort.

Three Dos

Make Sure They Have Challenge in The Curriculum

The best learning takes place when children have to reach and have the support they need to succeed, but gifted children in mixed ability classrooms often don’t have to reach enough. Parents may be able to negotiate with the teacher to increase challenge in the classroom for the child, but oftentimes parents must look outside the classroom for challenge opportunities. For instance, some parents enroll their gifted children in private music lessons because learning to play an instrument provides a daily experience with effort. Other parents take advantage of the many affordable options for challenging curriculum that can be obtained online. For instance, quite a few top US universities offer accelerated coursework specifically designed for high ability children in a wide variety of subjects (for instance, see http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/glt/program/ & http://epgy.stanford.edu/course/index.html). Gifted children as young as 6 years old are eligible. They work closely with an instructor online and receive regular feedback. Best of all, they get to work at their own pace, making a good effort and steady progress.

Stay Positive about Setbacks and Disappointments

Most of us enjoy watching the Olympic Games. It’s exciting to see talented young people who have been trained for years give their very best performance. We may be even more intrigued, however, to see what happens when disappointments or setbacks emerge, like when the athlete favored to win the 100-metres hurdles pulls a groin, or a gymnast in place for the gold misses a dismount. How do they respond? How do they handle doing less than their best? The Olympic Games clearly illustrate that no one gets really good at something without encountering a number of setbacks and disappointments.

We must help children understand the nature of high achievement. They should not expect top performance every single time. Some of their performances will be better than others. Working very hard for several weeks or months at anything typically results in a plateau, after which there is no perceived improvement for a while. If achievers respond to this change in progress with fear, their anxious thoughts can trigger a cascade of physiologic reactions that interfere with achievement. They need to learn to see such changes as a normal part of the talent development process and to take charge of their self-talk, that conversation we all have with ourselves. When positive, this self-talk can keep us focused, but when negative, it can distract and derail us from the track of higher achievement.

Build Their Confidence

Children are not naturally self confident. They learn confidence over time. There is a relationship between success and confidence. While it’s true that children who are successful tend to build confidence, it’s also true that confident children tend to have more success. To build confidence, make sure that gifted children occasionally have opportunities to compete or learn with children who have slightly less ability. Gifted children who always compete against older children or others who are more competent have little opportunity to build confidence. Also, make your own list of your child’s strengths and review it periodically with your child. In Asian contexts in particular, parents and teachers can be quick to scold or correct and slow to affirm or praise. Children build confidence through affirmation and validation from their parents the people whose opinions matter to them most.
Four Don’ts

In addition to the Dos, there are four strategies parents should avoid when their children have been struggling with effort and achievement. Parents are often tempted to use these because they give the illusion of control or being in charge but in reality they tend to make things worse.

Don’t ask Impossible Questions:
Impossible questions are those to which there is no acceptable answer, either to the one asking or to the one being asked. Examples of impossible questions include:

- “What do you mean you forgot?”
- “Why didn’t you turn that in?”
- “How could you fail that?”

Impossible questions are really accusations disguised as questions and they shut down dialogue. Instead, try to create a vividly positive image of your child and affirm your beliefs in their ability to achieve. For instance, you might gently say:

- “I can see that you struggled with that and I’m confident things will get better.”
- “I hear that you’re disappointed. I’m sure you will do things differently next time.”

Don’t Threaten:
“Do you want to fail your exam?” “Do you want to be a street sweeper?” Threatening arouses fear or shame and while it is true that these can motivate, they can also do a lot of damage that makes things worse. Mild levels of anxiety are motivating for many people, but high levels of anxiety or shame undermine children’s motivation, causing them to withdraw, avoid or resist. Gifted children who are struggling to achieve are often experiencing enough negative feelings without our adding to them. They need encouragement and affirmation, guidance that leads them to discover the strategies that build their own confidence and productivity. Instead of threatening, make comments that invite a dialogue:

- “What have you tried so far?”
- “What do you think it will take for you to be successful with that?”
- “Would you like some help with that?”

Don’t Lecture:
A lecture, even if it’s inspirational, is still just one person talking. We are often tempted to lecture children when we have them as a captive audience. Lectures for less-than-expected performance are a particularly bad idea because they shut down communication when what is needed is more dialogue. High ability children are often quite sensitive too, and can perceive adults’ underlying motives and feelings even when they’re masked. If they sense adults’ disapproval or rejection, they may withdraw or avoid. This only makes matters worse.

Don’t Punish:
Punishment is tempting because it gives the illusion of control. Parents are often tempted to punish when disappointed with their children’s performance, especially if the stakes are high. However, punishment is a bad idea for three reasons. First, punishment does not show children what to do. It does not teach anything new. Punishment tells them what to avoid, but it does not tell them how to avoid it. Second, punishment tends to exacerbate negative feelings about poor achievement results. Most gifted children feel badly when they are not as successful as they had hoped. They often feel anxious, guilty, embarrassed or ashamed. Punishment only makes them feel worse, and these heightened negative feelings can lead to depression, anger, withdrawal or avoidance. Finally, and most importantly, at a time when children need a caring adult to draw close and provide more emotional support and guidance, punishment increases the distance in these relationships. Instead of punishing, keep your focus on the goal and closely monitor children’s progress toward it. Start where they are rather than where you think they should be.

Remember, too, that you are the constant in your children’s lives. You are their source of hope. You model discipline, perseverance, and self-control, often without even realising it. It is your job to give your children strong messages about their worth and to develop in them a perspective that they are competent individuals, capable of coping and succeeding with whatever life brings them. Preserving hope is something we should work at every single day. Affirming children’s strengths and their effort, especially when outcomes are distressing or disappointing, helps children to feel more hopeful and hope is the great motivator. It is the power that gives children the confidence to step out and try.

Tips for Parents
1. There are 2 groups of thoughts in ability. One is called “entity view of ability”, which treats ability as something fixed; another is the “incremental view of ability”, which treats ability as flexible and malleable. Studies show that people with different views on ability would pursue different goals. Those who hold the entity view tend to have performance goals and they care much about getting positive feedback from others, whereas those with the incremental view will focus more on making improvement and increasing personal ability, so they are able to deal with failures.

2. According to the learning theory of the developmental psychologist Vygotsky, the distance between a child’s actual ability and what he can accomplish with others’ assistance is called the Zone of Proximal Development, and the best moment for children to learn is within this zone. Therefore, don’t forget to give your children timely support even though they are gifted; gifted children also need support to accumulate successful experience and develop their talents.

Profile of Dr. Maureen Neihart, Psy.D.
Maureen Neihart, Psy.D., is a licensed clinical child psychologist with more than 25 years’ experience counseling high ability children and their families. She is co-editor of the text, The Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children: What do we Know? and a former member of the board of directors of the National Association for Gifted Children. Dr. Neihart serves on the editorial boards of Gifted Child Quarterly, Roeper Review, and Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, and has given more than three hundred lectures and workshops worldwide. She is currently Associate Professor and Head of Psychological Studies at the National Institute of Education in Singapore where her research interests include the social and emotional development of gifted children, home and school-based psychological interventions for children at-risk, resilience, and the psychology of high performance.
Perfectionism has received different interpretations in different contexts. In short, perfectionism is not a black-and-white concept. A child’s perfectionistic tendency should fall on a continuum between two forms of perfectionism - the healthy and the unhealthy. Children who have healthy perfectionism are likely to benefit from the motivating power of the trait even though, to a lesser extent, they may also demonstrate some characteristics of an unhealthy perfectionist. You may think that a child could be better off living without any traces of perfectionism. Research however suggests that, unlike the healthy perfectionists, non-perfectionists often lack the motivation to develop their capacities and potential.

Who are the Little Mr and Miss Perfectionists?

Perfectionistic children are commonly expected to be structured high achievers who often strive for perfect scores in school. They tend to work persistently with a study routine and are always serious about their school work. Surprisingly, perfectionists can also be the low achievers who always turn in their homework late and refuse to participate in any group activities. Beyond school, perfectionistic children are often notoriously labelled as being antisocial, stubborn, fault-finding, and obsessed with cleanliness.

Some of them are very particular about their physical appearance and cannot tolerate looking anything less than ‘perfect’. Others may be very critical about the behaviour and appearance of people around them. They insist that there is a certain “right” and “wrong” way of doing everything, and people should follow the rules like they do. You may realise that perfectionism is far more prevalent among our children than expected. It is a trait that many of us have commonly overlooked.

Healthy Perfectionists vs. Unhealthy Perfectionists

Children who adopt healthy perfectionism tend to set high performance goals. When they fail to meet the high goals, they are usually able to accept the reality, move on, and learn from their mistakes in the hope of achieving more in subsequent attempts. Failures also prompt them to adjust their performance goals more realistically. When learning opportunities appear, they will not shy away though chances are that further attempts may expose their weaknesses to their teachers and peers. Their high expectations could foster a zeal for improvement as well as resilience in defeat. Very often, these children also tend to be attentive to details and have good organisational skills. Some of them like to keep a to-do list and spend a lot of time refining their work. As a result, healthy perfectionists tend to have a better
image of themselves and perform better with confidence, as well as perseverance. On the flipside, children who adopt unhealthy perfectionism tend to be overly concerned about their mistakes. These children are often thrown into prolonged despair once they fail to live up to the high standards they set for themselves. They believe that others will only love them if they are “perfect”. To avoid failure and looking like a “loser” to others, children who are inclined towards unhealthy perfectionism may opt to withdraw themselves from whatever activities they are asked to engage in. The less they try, the less likely they will fail. Their resentment towards others may also affect their family and social relationships as they do not accept the support and opinions given by others.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A Healthy Perfectionist</th>
<th>An Unhealthy Perfectionist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mum will always love me even if the doggie I draw is not good enough.</td>
<td>Mum won’t love me if the doggie I draw doesn’t look like our Snowy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I can’t solve this problem, I can turn to Miss Chan. I know she is always willing to help and, after all, I can definitely get a reliable solution from her.</td>
<td>If I can’t solve this problem, Miss Chan will think that I’m not attentive in class or I’m simply stupid. I should never let her know that I can’t solve it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The mistakes can tell me what I’m weak at. If I practice more, I can probably get an A next time.</td>
<td>Doing homework is not going to help me get an A. It only makes me feel more stupid when I make more mistakes. I’m a born loser!</td>
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Nurturing Healthy Perfectionists

Particularly for younger children, one of the major factors that shape their perfectionistic tendencies is parental influence. Our use of words, habits, and attitudes may influence our children’s perfectionistic tendencies unknowingly. In families where parents are always preoccupied by work or emotional conflicts, children may strive to be ‘perfect’ and become overly sensitive to mistakes in the hope of gaining parental love.

To help our children become healthy perfectionists, the first step is to understand the concept and reflect upon yourself. We should bear in mind that we cannot change the genetic makeup of our children, but their personalities are malleable and could be molded given the right experience and environment. Below are examples of the questions we should reflect on:

1. Do you acknowledge your children’s slightest improvement and encourage them?
2. Are you more concerned about the final results than the efforts your children put in?
3. Are you very conscious of how others see your children?
4. Are you pointing out your children’s weaknesses more often than their strengths?
5. Do you make your children feel shameful when their performance is below your expectation?
6. Do you tell others about your children’s ability and performance in their presence?

Creating a home atmosphere conducive for mutual communication is also very crucial in helping our children to avoid unhealthy perfectionism. Sharing our experiences can help our children understand that encountering failures is part and parcel of learning. More importantly, we should show them that we still accept and love them even if they are not perfect.

Amid our hectic daily routines, we may have overlooked the importance of sparing time and attention to listen to our children’s sharing. With the challenges and competitions in our children’s learning environment, a strong family bond can offer a “safety net” for our children to moderate their pursuit of an error-free life.

Tips for parents

1. If you want your children to become healthy perfectionists, be a role model.
2. A good parent-child relationship is one filled with love, acceptance, encouragement, and communication.
Foreword

We often hear about gifted children in skipping grades, entering the universities at a young age, or passing exams with flying colours. Many parents may then have the impression that raising a gifted child is a great pleasure. However, the parents of gifted children, have much greater pressure in raising gifted children. This sometimes stems from their expectations of their children, whom they expect to shine given their exceptional intellect. In addition, many gifted children are not interested in learning, do not submit homework, perform worse than non-gifted students, and even have to be retained - we generally call these children “gifted underachievers”.

Professor Reis and Professor McCoach's (Reis & McCoach, 2000) research article, examines to great depth the definition, characteristics, extrinsic factors and reverse strategies for “gifted underachievement”. By introducing the salient points of this article, we hope parents can better understand gifted underachievers and know how to help them.

Defining Gifted Underachievers

Scholars and educators have different opinions on the definition, identification and causes for gifted underachievement. A commonly accepted definition is the evident discrepancy between ability and achievement.

**Keyterms:**

1) **Ability**
   It refers to the intelligence of a child. It can be assessed with ability and IQ tests, such as the WISC and the Stanford-Binet.

2) **Achievement**
   It refers to a child’s performance. It can mainly be measured with standardised testing (e.g. HKCEE) or classroom performance.

3) **Discrepancy**
   This directly suggests that a person’s performance does not measure up to his/her potential. However, children who are in the top 5% of intellectual ability do not necessarily score in the top 5% on school exams? There is no evidence showing one’s ability and achievement should be positively correlated. However, how much discrepancy is required to classify a gifted child as underachieving? This is open to discussion.

We should note that our values would affect our definition of achievement, and thus the definition of underachievement. Defining a child’s achievement merely with his academic performance has its limitations. Let’s say Sunny has a passion for insects. He spends all his free time on reading books about insects, collecting specimen, doing researches and making analysis. Finally, his knowledge about insects is comparable to that of biology majors at university; but at the same time, he cannot score high on school tests. **Would Sunny be considered as an “underachiever”? Or is he just channelling his effort into something else? All these are factors to consider before deciding if a child is underachieving.**
Characteristics of Gifted Underachievers:

Some characteristics of gifted underachievers:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Personality traits</th>
<th>Low self-concept</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Withdrawn; pessimistic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anxious; depressed</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Impulsive; unattentive</td>
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<tr>
<th>Internal Mediators</th>
<th>Fear of failure/success</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Attribute successes or failures to external factors rather than their own effort or attitude</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Negative attitude towards school</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Excessively perfectionist and self-critical</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Often blames himself or herself for not living up to others’ expectations</td>
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Different gifted underachievers have different traits and not every gifted underachiever would exhibit the characteristics listed above. When you notice your children displaying characteristics similar to those mentioned above, you should try to find out more about their performance at school, and communicate with the teachers, social workers or any other related professionals, so as to prevent “gifted underachievement” from taking roots.

Some External Factors in Underachievement

Professor Reis and Professor McCoach also cited some research paper investigating how environmental influences affect gifted underachievers. Those researches aim to determine external factors causing underachievement.

Unmotivating Curriculum

Most research conducted in school settings have shown that curriculum lacking stimulation is one of the main factors relating to gifted underachievement. A four-year longitudinal study suggests that boredom due to unchallenging regular curriculum in elementary and middle school often contributes to underachievement in high school. One of the important reasons is that a lack of stimulation make gifted students lose the motivation to learn. Some educators have also suggested that a crucial reason why the gifted students lose motivation for learning and competing is that the opportunities provided in the classroom mismatch with the students’ learning characteristics.

The Influence of Family and Growth Environment

Some studies listed the family environment and parenting styles that contributed to gifted underachievement:

- Family members seldom exhibit positive emotions
- Parents hold different opinions when disciplining the children
- Parents are too lenient or overly strict
- Punishment oriented
- Parents treat their children as adults at too young an age

They also mentioned the family environment and parenting styles of those with high-achieving gifted children:

- Authoritative parenting style
- Parents role model the achievement-oriented behavior
- Parents encourage self-motivation, environmental engagement and autonomy

The Influence of Peers

Peers have a strong influence on the gifted who enter adolescence. Studies have shown that high-achieving friends would exert a positive influence on gifted underachievers, and even help to reverse their underachieving pattern. According to a research, about sixty percent of the students interviewed think that negative peer pressure and poor learning attitude of others are the primary forces against getting good grades. Another research revealed that students with friends who care about learning are more likely to have get good grades at school.
Intervention

The ways to intervene fall into two categories, namely, counselling and instructional interventions.

Counselling which can be done on an individual, group, or family basis, focuses on changing the personal or family dynamics contributing to gifted underachievement. The goal of counselling is not to force the gifted underachievers to get excellent academic results, but to help them think whether success is a desirable goal, and thus, help them reverse counterproductive habits.

Instructional intervention alters the learning environment to meet the gifted students’ needs: for example, teaching in small groups, giving students the freedom to choose the learning mode they prefer, and encouraging them to utilize different learning strategies. Teachers can also let the gifted students pursue topics of interest and share the learning outcomes with classmates, and through this, help them establish a habit of achievement-oriented behaviours. If teachers can continue to provide opportunities in class for the gifted students to showcase their talent, they can help these students reverse underachievement. Professor Weiner (1992) suggested four interventions to help different groups of underachieving gifted students:

1. Strengthening their intrinsic reward system
2. Alleviating cognitive and emotional handicaps
3. Modifying passive-aggressive propensities
4. Filling educational gaps

Professor Weiner believed that counselling is more suitable for achieving the first 3 goals mentioned above, and instructional intervention can help to fill the students’ educational gaps. For those unmotivated gifted underachievers who see no compelling reasons to improve, counsellors should help them reset their intrinsic reward system, and encourage them to gain satisfaction from success through hard work.

References


Tips for Parents

1. There are 4 parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglecting. Authoritative parents establish strict rules and expect their children to follow but at the same time, they show care in the development of their children. They will communicate, negotiate and set reasonable rules with the children. Those who were brought up in authoritative families will have higher self-esteem and a more positive view of life. They are also more confident to face challenges and have greater autonomy.

2. Passive aggressive behaviours refer to the expression of negative feelings through indirect means. Those with passive aggressive behaviours will express their sentiment through procrastination, inefficiency and forgetfulness, so that they can avoid participating in or finishing some particular tasks. If you notice that your children keep refusing to mean what they say or say what they mean, you have to take it seriously and reassure them that their opinions are valued. Letting your children make decisions in life is a first step to change passive aggressive behaviours.
Have you ever heard your children telling you these? Does being gifted mean being lonely? Parents hope their children excel academically, but at the same time, wish for them to be well liked.

Winnie is a junior secondary student who is assessed to be gifted, but her academic performance is not outstanding. She is not interested in television programmes and fashion, but has a fondness for philosophy and logic. Her childhood is an unhappy one as she is always on her own. She is a “depressed” student in the eyes of her teachers, and a “weirdo” according to her peers. Winnie has a lot of ideas to share, but her teachers are too busy to have to spend a long time listening to her endless sharing. Her classmates are not brave enough to challenge her thought; they are often criticised by Winnie for speaking without logic and that displeases them. She has tried to mingle with her peers, but she often finds herself out of step with them and unable to communicate effectively.

Winnie does not understand why it is so hard to make friends. Her teachers tell her that friends should be frank with each other; however, when Winnie points out that her classmates’ opinions are naïve, impractical and lacking evidence, they do not appreciate her frankness. She loves mathematics and science most, but her answers are often out of her teachers’ expectations. This makes Winnie uncomfortable and she learns that in order to avoid standing out, as she knows that what her peers expect is just a “common” answer after all. Realising that her exam marks often negatively correlate with the number of friends and popularity, between personal performance and friendship, Winnie chooses the latter; after all, the acceptance and recognition of peers is far more important to her than any accomplishment.

Nobody in this world understands Winnie, and she can only find solace in books. In the vast literary world, authors voice out her thoughts, and leads her to endless explorations, mysteries and adventures. She no longer needs to brood over her difference from the others. Now she loves thinking independently and she no longer want to join the “silly” activities of her peers anymore.

All parents know that good interpersonal relationship brings a positive influence on children’s childhood and personal development, so they teach their children to be humble and polite since they were young. However, many do not realise that skills and training are also necessary for making friends. So how can parents guide their gifted children in making friends?
Someone said that the gifted could leave the “constellation of loneliness” only until they meet their mental peers. This may sound exaggerating, but to a certain extent, it is true. But as parents, are we supposed to wait and pray for this to happen?

When your gifted girls go through the struggle of fitting-in and becoming an independent self, they may appear to be exceedingly self-critical. Parents should try their best to understand their feelings and to reassure them that it is normal for bright girls to feel lonely sometimes until they meet people like them. They need to be aware of the challenges they face and the emotional needs stemming from these.

Parents can make good use of the internet and community resources to help their children build friendship with gifted peers with similar interests. Role models of women in both traditional and nontraditional careers (e.g. female aircraft maintenance engineers) and biographies of these women for reading will also serve as guidance for the gifted girls. In addition, parents can encourage their daughters to join task forces on social problems. It helps to channel their strengths and at the same time develop empathy.

Unlike other teenagers in general, many gifted prefer to stay alone. Parents should support their daughters’ desire for knowledge, and let them know it is okay to be devoted and indulge in the quest for knowledge. Parents should also provide ample opportunities for their daughters to pursue academic excellence, and cultivate a passion in a subject.

Meanwhile, parents have to role-model independent, problem-solving behaviors and to be life-long learners who continuously develop their own careers. Parents need to be reflective and place reasonable expectations for sons and daughters. Support from fathers’ participation also very important in the process of nurturing gifted girls, as studies show that fathers have a profound influence on daughter’s ambitions.

Parents should also remind themselves not to praise their girls’ ability too highly, as this would make them fear failure and not dare to try new things. Learning picking up a new skills together for the whole family is useful for practising safe risk-taking. Do not forget that the focus should be on the process of the activity and not the result. Sometimes you can share your experiences of failure with your children; that would help them understand that failure is part of life.

Every child has his/her unique personality; it is not easy to make all of them get along well with one another. Social skills are not inborn; though some children can master the skills more easily, some would only be able to learn through experience. Therefore, parents should try their best to understand the difficulties faced by their children. When taking care of your gifted child, you should also care for your own emotional health. You can join different parent associations for the gifted, perhaps you will meet many others who are facing similar challenges like you do!
Theoretical background

Gifted girls’ constant struggle between the need for achievement and the need for friendship has been studied by many researchers (Kerr, 1994). Particularly, women were observed to have strong achievement interest till the age of fourteen. After which, the desires of love and affection grow stronger till the age of forty (Groth, 1969). But for men, their desire of achievement continues to be strong till retirement. Although there are data showing that girls are now comparable with boys in terms of math and science achievement (Phillips, 1998), the gender gap still exists and is well documented in gifted education research. Stereotyped gender roles continue to make education and research biased, and holds back the life choices of gifted girls and women (Kerr, 2002).

Adult’s perception

In an analysis of research on adult perceptions of girls’ intelligence, Myra and David Sadker (1994) stated that "study after study has shown that adults, both teachers and parents, underestimate the intelligence of girls" (p. 95). Teachers, regardless of their own gender, think that smart boys are more competent than gifted girls in critical and logical thinking skills and in creative problem solving abilities, while smart girls are more competent in creative writing. Girls may internalise these lowered expectations very early in life (Reis, 2002).

Loss of self esteem

Many researches indicate that gifted females begin to lose confidence in elementary school and this continues throughout college and graduate school (Kramer, 1991; Perleth & Heller, 1994). Some of these girls increasingly doubt their intellectual competence, perceive themselves as less capable than they actually are, and believe that boys can rely on innate ability while they must work harder to succeed (Reis, 2002).

Smart not to look too smart

Dumbing down is the consequence of trying to fit in for many gifted girls. In a study with over 600 children, it was found that girls typically adapt to the ability level of their peers (Silverman, 1993). Being identified as being or talented may create social problems for some girls (Kramer, 1991). In another study of almost 500 students that examined how students viewed their gifted peers, gifted boys were found to be the most popular and gifted girls the least. The girls were perceived as generally moody or sad, boys as funny and humorous (Luftig, 1991).

References


Something about me
A reflection by an 11 year old girl

I had always known that I was much brainier and more mature than peers around my age. I just felt that I was kind of different. I never had many friends since I first started school because I’ve been prejudiced against all along for just being smart and not having to work really hard. Somehow I just wish I never had my IQ assessed at all.

What giftedness means to me

As soon as I was assessed and told that I was a gifted child one year ago, I became unhappy and worried because I didn’t really want to be different from my peers.

Being academically gifted can be a blessing to many people, but for me being gifted is simply a curse. This is because there is some kind of pressure most of the time for being gifted. Some adults and teachers expect more from me. I thought being gifted doesn’t mean that one can’t make any mistakes like others; it’s just that you might be more of a “perfectionist”.

Speaking of being a perfectionist, I never realised that it is a characteristic of giftedness until recently. Most adults don’t always understand that when I say my work is awful I literally mean that “my work is awful”. I don’t think I intend to sound humble by saying that, but most of the time I sincerely mean that. I don’t just criticise my own work to get attention. I wonder who would do that when they know deep down inside themselves that their work is brilliant?

One of the things that makes me love being gifted is that I am interested in all subjects at school except physical education. I’m not as competent as my peers. At times I find it difficult to connect myself, both mentally and academically, with my peers. However, when it comes to schoolwork or projects, I am quite serious and always determined to do well. I can be lazy sometimes just like everyone else but when I work hard on something like essays and projects I would do my best. I do my work so well that my classmates would simply tease me by saying, “I bet your mum did it for you!” Well, disparaging remarks like this used to upset me when I was younger, but now they sound like compliments to me.

Nevertheless, the weird part about being all-rounded is that it’s funny when you like a subject that no one else does in your class. Therefore, you can’t really help showing it. As I grow older I realise that I have to hide a lot of things in order to blend in.

To fit in or not

Fitting in is a hard thing for a lot of kids but it’s especially so for me. Of course I love making friends but it was very difficult for me when I was younger because I felt that I was different from my peers ever since I went to kindergarten.

Friendships are certainly not just about sleepover parties, hanging out and that kind of thing. I do keep that in mind but sometimes when you’re in a certain environment where everyone is like that and thinks that way you can’t help following them. When I started primary school in grade one I was terrible at connecting with my classmates. However, I enjoyed communicating non-stop with teachers and finding out more about the subjects that I didn’t really feel interested at first. This is not easy of course but I know I have to like them.

When I skipped from grade 1 to 3, I felt weird but also gradually learnt that I shouldn’t have always put my hand up in class even though I was definitely sure that I had the right answer for I finally understood the word “jealousy”. During that school year not only did I have a miserable time I also changed classes in the second term. That was one of the hardest things I went through when I was younger.

The situation in grade 4 was not much different from that of grade 3. However I managed to make a couple of friends then, and enjoyed my school life a bit more. I learnt how to be more sociable. However, it hurt when I realised even my so called best friend did not want to be friends with me anymore just because I was good at my schoolwork. My mum came up with the idea that I would probably be better off in a school where my talents would be more valued, or the degree of jealousy from my classmates would be less.

I ended up in another IB school – a school that emphasised a lot on Chinese cultures and respect for one another. I thought that my first day at this new school was going to be the best day of my life but it actually wasn’t.

The situation was a lot different compared to what I went through in my previous school. People didn’t really care if you were brainy and that they were somehow much less mature than most 10 to 11 year olds.
I was only 9 and I was confused. People there constantly sneered at those who didn’t have what they had. Unfortunately, I didn’t really care about those subjects they were mostly interested in such as expensive fashion, music, gossip, crushes, celebrities etc. I really tried my best in many ways to follow them in that I had tried to feel or look interested in whatever they did though I really wasn’t. Being a poseur is hard work and it makes you feel weird anyway. Looking back now, I realise that it made my life miserable to be a follower for it’s very exhausting indeed.

Sometimes, I think that it’s smart not to act too smart in front of friends. After all, I think that having friends at the moment is more important. I long for friendships and appreciation for who I am and what I do. I have always wanted to be accepted by my peers. I would be much happier if only they could accept and appreciate me as I am.

Soon it was the end of the school year and in that school you graduate primary school after you finish grade 5. I was desperately happy when I left primary school and moved up to secondary school because I knew that the older students were in some way much nicer - at least much friendlier and easier to get along with.

As I predicted, things did get better for me. In fact I managed to make a few “hang out” friends in my grade. The most important things I’ve learnt are to be more sociable, and do not just fit in others. I still remind myself up to now of that when I feel incomplete when my friends I made from other grades in my last school have certain things that I don’t. I feel more complete that way.

About my studies

I think that I have high standards and expectations on my schoolwork. Or rather, I have sometimes set unrealistic goals. I don’t know why but I can’t help being a perfectionist. Some people think that being a perfectionist equals being perfect but it’s not. It’s just that you have many unrealistic goals and you want to try your very best to achieve them.

Also, I try my best to create outstanding work to get good marks in report cards, etc.

I have learnt that the bad thing about trying to create outstanding work that’s far beyond your ability is that you might not be able to manage your finished product as what you expected it to be, and it might turn out to be a big failure in the end. Once, I did a poster on technology and it took me 5 hours and I ended up being exhausted the next day. Although I knew I would have gotten the same high mark even if I worked an hour or two instead. I must admit, however, I really enjoyed doing it so much that I couldn’t stop when I could have.

My biggest failure is that I have bad time management. For example I do my work to a rather high standard but I have to use a lot of time. However, the bad thing is that I end up not finishing my other pieces of homework as well as the first piece.

About friendship

I don’t usually have any expectations on friends. On the contrary, it seems like I have expectations on myself in making friends though. I try to make friends with everyone in the year which is pretty impossible since not everyone of them like each other in the first place. Also I try not to offend anyone and make sure that I’m nice to everyone but I do make mistakes and sometimes offend people without meaning to or without any intention at all.

I hope that one day my classmates, not just my teachers, will like my work.

Reflections
1. What developmental challenges is she facing now?
2. If you were her parent, how would you guide her?

Profile of Beatrice | Beatrice, 11, was allowed to skip grades when studying in a primary school in Hong Kong for her outstanding learning performance. After attending Form 1 in the United Kingdom, she returned to Hong Kong and continued her studies in a mainstream secondary school. Beatrice has many interests and strong learning abilities. She is good at mathematics, writing and design, and she hopes to meet like-minded friends. At each different key stage, Beatrice learns to face adversity and keeps growing up.

Tips for parents
1. Research has well demonstrated the fitting-in behavior of many gifted girls that draw the attention of educators and parents. From time to time, parents’ concerns are more on the academic aspect of their children, but in reality, the social and emotional needs of many gifted children indeed have to be addressed.

2. Tremendous research data from overseas reveal that grade skipping/acceleration is beneficial to many profoundly gifted children. For the moderately gifted children, they can also benefit from a well designed enrichment curriculum.

3. To grade skip a child, a family needs to consider the child’s ability in different domains (academic, social and emotional) and the readiness of different systems (family, school and the child). Advice from experts should be sought and a comprehensive assessment that includes aptitude tests and related skills as well as social maturity of the child should be carried out.
After watching KJ, what do you think about the protagonist Wong Ka Jeng? Are you turn off by his arrogant attitude? Can you understand his alternative perception about life? Do you sympathise with his experience of failing to get along with his peers? Or are you moved by his disappointment when his music teacher did not pick up his call?

Enigmatic Gifted Children

Although giftedness is not highlighted in the film, the audience will certainly think that Ka Jeng is a gifted child with musical talent. His sorrow is not mentioned in the film but it is not difficult for the audience to sense his loneliness. He was so confident in front of people, but so bashful when facing his teacher. His emotional intensity was expressed when he played his piano and talked about his father. As the conductor of an orchestra, he pushed the members hard to excel - was that for pursuing perfection and zero error, or was he hoping to lead them to his realm of music? He might have good intentions, but he failed to understand other members’ feelings as well as accepting the differences between them. The others were tired of his relentless pursuit and haste to make progress. His thinking was miles apart from theirs.

It has always been hard to comprehend gifted children’s asynchronous development. Not everyone can grasp their profound and complex intellect, and the gifted themselves also find it difficult to know why they are not understood. Some gifted children set very high standards for themselves, and sometimes even demand other people to follow their standards. However, what they consider sensible may sound unreasonable or unnecessary to others. From another viewpoint, being isolated, i.e. distanced by those who cannot understand their thoughts, is a result of social problem that gifted children often face.

Friends and Friendship

Was Ka Jeng accepted or tolerated by his family and orchestra members only because he could bring them success and glory? After winning the prizes, it seemed that not music was his only connection with others. Without music, he was nothing; after the performances and competition, he was left alone again.

Gifted children long to have friends, and they need the support of friends. To them, friends are not only about having fun together, so it is not easy for them to find like-minded peers to connect with. Sometimes they would rather be alone; until the day they find a bosom friend, will they then experience the joy of friendship.
Gifted Children are Children too

Ka Jeng’s learning experience was not illustrated in the film, we could only infer from what his brother said that Ka Jeng did not attend class, and it seemed that the music room was the only place for Ka Jeng at school. Why didn’t he attend school?

Why did the teachers and classmates accept that Ka Jeng can have such a “privilege”? Why didn’t his father care about his missing class? All these are not explained in the film and would the audience think of the other side of Ka Jeng apart from his sucess and glory?

Many gifted children have behavioural problems because they are misunderstood especially in terms of their emotional needs, or they are not adequately challenged in their learning. Even if the parents deliberately evade the problem because they have no idea how to deal with it, or they are over-protective, they should not set no boundaries or give their children all the rights just because they are gifted. Children will eventually leave their parents and enter the society one day. Sharing with others in good or bad times are skills that we have to learn. As parents, we have to understand their feelings and set an example for them.

Awaiting for Guidance of a Mentor

Circumstances make Ka Jeng’s talent, but this boy who praised himself “the best pianist” was not really happy. When he talked passionately about the teacher he idolised but got a cold response of “she doesn’t like you very much” from others, he could only answer “it doesn’t matter” absently. When he was talking about not finding an answer to the questions of the meaning in life, he cried! When being asked about his parents’ relationship, he hesitated, but finally gave an analysis of humanity instead. He looked really hurt. This highly sensitive gifted boy attempted to explain the mystery of life at such a young age; it is not surprising that he is considered to have thought too much. From his parents’ divorce to his conclusion of humanity, others would only think that his emotional response is too intense, but no one knows that it is always his love of pondering things that pushes him to a dead end, and finally unable to let things go.

While everyone focused on Ka Jeng’s talent, did anyone consider his feelings? Most would forget that Ka Jeng is only 17; he still needs teachers to guide him, friends to share with him, and his family to care about him and explore the world with him. Gifted children, actually, do not need high praises, but mere support, understanding and care, so that they can have someone to rely on when sad and to share with when joyful.

Information Corner

KJ, directed by Cheung King Wai, was a documentary which took 6 years to filmed from 2002 to 2008. It was awarded the 2009 Golden Horse Award for “Best Documentary”, “Best Editing”, “Best Sound Effect”, as well as “Best Film” by Hong Kong Film Critics Society and Hong Kong Film Award “Best New Director” in 2010.

KJ Trailer
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffZukgD8Sws

Tips for Parents

1. Gifted children have to first understand themselves, learn how to reflect, and develop a positive and enthusiastic attitude as well as an altruistic view of life through different experiences.

2. Affective education topics suitable for gifted students include: understanding giftedness, accepting and embracing individual differences, leadership, study skills, life skills, etc.
### Teacher Professional Development (March to November 2010)

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<td>Thematic Seminar: “Developing EQ in Gifted Learners”</td>
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<td>June-August 2010 (Event 1 &amp; 2) October-December 2010 (Event 3)</td>
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<td>Intermediate Course: “Nurturing Gifted Learners on Leadership, Creativity and Critical Thinking”</td>
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### Student Programmes and Services (March to November 2010)

#### Humanities
- English Script Writing
- More about Chinese Script Writing
- Introduction to Social Science
- Futuer Curator Training Course

#### Mathematics
- Maths Ignition
- Mathematic in 18 lessons
- International Mathematical Olympiad Training

#### Leadership
- Workshop on Public Speaking
- Effective Leadership and Social service Projects
- "L"-Wisdom-Leaders for the New Generation

#### Science
- Software Development Course
- Environmental Science Course
- Wu Chien-Shiung Science Camp
- Enhancement Programme for Gifted Students in Physics (IPhO)

#### Personal Growth and Social Development Series
- Brain-based Learning Workshop
- Personal Growth Workshop

#### Multi-disciplinary
- University-based Multi-disciplinary Study Project
- Harmonies in Nature: A Dialogue Between Mathematics and Physics

#### Thematic Talk
- Academic talks in each domain are held regularly

The above information is subject to confirmation. Please visit our website *(www.hkage.org.hk)* for details.
We will like to add a brand-new section “Your Say” in our next issue. A topic on giftedness will be raised in each issue for parents to express their views or share their stories. Our first topic is: “Salute to Teachers”. Have you ever met any good teachers at school? How did they help your gifted children?”

Parents are welcomed to share your experience through email (ps@hkage.org.hk) or leave your message at our “Blog”. Some comments will be selected and published in the next issue of Nurturing the Gifted. You will receive a souvenir if your contribution is selected.

**Things to note:**

1. Each piece of sharing should not exceed 100 words. Your descriptions should be within scope of the topic.
2. You can share your views in Chinese or English.
3. HKAGE reserves the right not to publish any of the sharing/submission.
4. The deadline for submission is 1 September 2010.

**Enrolment method:**

1. Please submit your sharing to ps@hkage.org.hk using the subject “Your Say”. The selected participants will be notified by email; or
2. Browse through our “Blog” for parents (http://hkage.org.hk/blog/) and reply to the article titled “Salute to Teachers” (向老師致敬). Please leave your email address in your response for contact. We look forward to your contribution.

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For details, please surf: http://hkage.org.hk/en/pz_te.html
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In view of the enthusiastic response to Nurturing the Gifted, we would like to have some of your inputs on our upcoming subscription service. If your organisation/school is interested to subscribe to Nurturing the Gifted, please fill in the form below and fax it to 35863429.

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