

## NURTURING SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GIFTED CHILDREN

### **Introduction**

Gifted students have the same developmental tasks as their less able age peers do (related, for example, to identity, sense of competence, career direction, peer relationships, differentiation, autonomy). However, because of characteristics associated with giftedness in clinical and research literature (e.g., sensitivity, intensity, perceptiveness, overexcitabilities, divergent thinking, precocious talent development, advanced moral development), their needs, concerns, and how they experience development may be quite different. Rapid information-processing in itself may contribute to intense emotional responses to environmental stimuli. The characteristics just mentioned may even contribute to difficulties with developmental tasks. In general, it is important that parents, educators, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists be informed about affective development of gifted children and adolescents and apply their knowledge in their relationships with this population.

### **Position Statement**

Gifted youth deserve attention to their well-being and to their universal and unique developmental experiences—beyond academic and/or talent performance or non-performance. Gifted education programs, teachers, administrators, and school counselors can and should intentionally, purposefully, and proactively nurture socio-emotional development in these students. Gifted children and adolescents are not only developing cognitively; they are also developing socially and emotionally and in career awareness. Even cognitive development and academic experiences have social and emotional implications.

### **Pertinent Issues**

#### **Differences among Gifted Students**

Giftedness, as a concept, has a variety of meanings, depending on personal perspective and context. Culture, economic status, and geographic location may contribute to a high valuing of, for example, academic achievement, service to others, creativity, or adaptability. Intellectual ability, as demonstrated in school work, is only one kind of giftedness, but, even for that one area, it is important to consider social and emotional implications. The range of measured intellectual ability among students identified as gifted is as broad as the entire ability spectrum in most heterogeneous classrooms. Although any gifted child may have few available mind-mates at school, an extremely gifted child may be as different from a moderately gifted child in ability as the latter is from a child with low-average ability. Similarly, gifted students differ greatly from each other and from the rest of the school population in psychological and social characteristics. As the level of difference increases, social difficulties can also increase. However, it is important not to make assumptions about social concerns, since gifted children and adolescents at all ability levels vary in interpersonal ease.

#### **Underrepresented Populations in Programs for Gifted Students**

The field of gifted education has long advocated use of multiple criteria and multiple assessments for determining need for special programming. Nevertheless, standardized tests are often the gate to further assessment. Such measures can miss highly able students whose nonmainstream cultural values and behaviors, life circumstances, lack of parental support, depression, lack of language proficiency, skepticism about school, disabilities, behavior, or even illness preclude optimal standardized-test or classroom performance. Missing then are opportunities to affirm and nurture ability and provide social access to intellectual peers.

Other circumstances have social and emotional implications as well. Unfortunately, even when identified, children often need to fit a program, instead of the program accommodating and addressing developmental needs of diverse students. Gifted academic underachievers and gifted children from low-income, recent-immigrant, and/or minority-culture families, for example, may feel uncomfortable and frustrated in a one-mode-fits-all program.

### **Non-Asset Aspects of Giftedness**

Several factors have contributed to high intellectual ability and impressive talent being viewed mostly as assets. In general, research samples have often not been inclusive enough across cultural, socioeconomic, or performance spectra to reflect concerns of a broad range of highly able students. Non-asset aspects of giftedness may receive little attention, including when studies and instruments are developed. The fact that there have been relatively few qualitative studies of gifted populations has also contributed to a limited understanding of unexpressed thoughts and emotions of gifted youth. In addition, egalitarian societal attitudes and education mandates have not encouraged attention to social and emotional concerns of gifted students.

### **Mental Health**

Researchers have not determined that gifted youth are more likely than others to have mental-health difficulties. However, if perceptions of this population are based on only positive stereotypes, educators and counselors may not recognize developmental concerns and counseling needs, which then are not addressed. Characteristics associated with giftedness may actually be risk factors. In addition, some behaviors that reflect these characteristics may be inappropriately viewed as pathology by counselors and psychologists who are unfamiliar with literature related to giftedness.

In regard to social and emotional concerns, several studies have found that gifted students are not likely to ask for help, protecting an image of competence and not wanting to disappoint adults who are highly invested in their success. That phenomenon and the possibility that adults may not be inclined to consider non-asset aspects of giftedness suggest that teachers, school counselors, and parents need to be informed about these dimensions and be alert to concerns. Furthermore, like others who are unaware of complex concerns of gifted students, teachers and counselors may have attitudes about high ability that preclude effective work with them. Regardless of gifted students' performance level, it is important that significant adults approach them respectfully, try to understand how they experience their world, and not be in awe. Awed adults may not recognize or acknowledge vulnerabilities and may not be objective.

Because of various characteristics associated with giftedness, scholars have noted a need for differential counseling services. However, with relatively little research attention to pertinent counseling issues and little clinical literature about appropriate counseling approaches, not much is known about the extent counselors should differentiate their services for gifted youth across cultures and socioeconomic, age, and ability levels. Nevertheless, a few models have been described in the literature (see Pertinent Resources).

### **Recommendations**

NAGC strongly recommends that curriculum geared to helping gifted children and adolescents with social, emotional, and career development be part of gifted-education programming both in and outside of the regular classroom. Proactive affective curriculum at all school levels can provide psychoeducational information about the overlay of giftedness on these areas of development. Teachers can make assignments that attend to psychosocial aspects of literature and social science. Semi-structured discussion groups can focus on developmental challenges. Career and talent development, which may be a concern much earlier than in the general population, should be one focus of this curriculum. Even in connection with competitive activities, gifted students can benefit from discussing feelings related to those experiences with an adult who employs active listening skills. Both high achievement and underachievement can be viewed through a developmental lens and approached accordingly. Important also is attention to personal strengths and

resilience. Such strengths may be overshadowed by performance or non-performance and not otherwise affirmed. Finally, these affective concerns should be highlighted when advocating for services, funding, and legislation.

### **Research**

Researchers, school counselors, and other helping professionals can be part of a continuing process of exploring social and emotional development of gifted youth and adults—for example, in connection with perfectionism, underachievement, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, substance use and abuse, and response to life events (e.g., loss and grief, divorce, serious illness, accident, relocation). Other areas in which giftedness has been only rarely, if ever, examined are sexual abuse, obsessive-compulsive disorder, extreme parent-child conflict, difficult developmental transitions, Asperger’s syndrome, and physical disability. The subjective experience of asynchronous development (e.g., with cognitive outpacing social and emotional) also warrants additional research attention.

### **Counselor Preparation**

Given the salience of giftedness in social and emotional development and the likelihood that career and academic concerns have implications for well-being, school and other counselors need to be prepared to work with highly able students. Giftedness should be considered in case conceptualizations and treatment plans. Counselors in any venue can use information related to giftedness to normalize sensitivities and intensities, put developmental challenges and transitions into perspective, and make sense of classroom or social difficulties.

## Pertinent Resources

- Betts, G., & Kercher, J. (1999). *Autonomous learner model: Optimizing ability*. Greeley, CO: Autonomous Learning Publications and Specialists.
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- Peterson, J. S. (2008). *The essential guide for talking with gifted teens*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
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- Piechowski, M. M. (2006). *'Mellow out' they say. If I only could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright*. Madison, WI: Yanusa Books.
- VanTassel-Baska, J., Cross, T. R., & Olenchak, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Social and emotional curriculum with gifted and talented students*. National Association for Gifted Children/Prufrock Press.
- Webb, J. R., Amend, E. R., Webb, N. E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F. R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other disorders*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

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The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) is an organization of parents, teachers, educators, other professionals, and community leaders who unite to address the unique needs of children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those children who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.

All position papers are approved by the NAGC Board of Directors and remain consistent with the organization's position that education in a democracy must respect the uniqueness of all individuals, the broad range of cultural diversity present in our society, and the similarities and differences in learning characteristics that can be found within any group of students. NAGC Position Papers can be found at [www.nagc.org](http://www.nagc.org).