

Connecting

for high potential • • • • • Spring 2010



NAGC receives similar questions from teachers and parents; however, rarely is there an opportunity to explore how the “other side” might face the issue. Interestingly, both groups benefit from the same information even though they look at it from different perspectives and have different roles to play in helping gifted children reach their potential. Our ongoing goal is for teachers and parents to develop a broader understanding of their students’ potential and thus create stimulating learning environments.

Topic for this month: “A friend is a friend is a friend, indeed”

A Teacher’s View

Sometimes it’s the small things we notice that make all the difference. For me it was the yellow stickers on the lanyards of some of my female students. I didn’t think much of it at first but after it became clear that some students had them and some did not, I just had to ask. “Oh, it’s nothing Mr. D, just a cool thing some of us started.” What they really meant was “a cool thing for the ‘cool’ students.” I’m sure my use of the word cool dates me, but that is how I interpreted it. Recently, our dean of students made us aware of some “girl” issues among the population. One student in particular was feeling a bit ostracized by a group she felt should be her friends. It was hard to pinpoint any one particular incident, but their subtle messages of non-inclusion were getting through to her. The yellow stickers were there plain as day. “You are not one of us,” they stated.

What, as an educator, should I do? How do you tell a young adolescent that she’s passing up at least a dozen other friendships within the “less cool” crowd? These are potential friends, I’m sure. How has this conflict affected her self-efficacy, her schoolwork, and her time at home?

A Parent’s View

Parent #1: My daughter has always been a whiz. Before she began school, a psychologist told us we should request early entrance because she was so advanced academically. We resisted —worried about her social immaturity. Well, four years later, she’s still not in step socially. Several of her classmates have figured out how to bait her, and she’s becoming more and more of a target. Since the group of students has stayed basically the same, isn’t it crazy to hope that a friend will suddenly emerge?

Yes, she gets frustrated easily. Yes, she’s quite rigid and forceful in her beliefs, plus she’ll argue forever.... qualities not appreciated by others. No matter how my husband and I try to help her, things keep getting worse. What can we do?

Parent #2: My son is kind and thoughtful of others, but he has been deeply hurt by so-called friends who aren’t loyal, true, or accepting of his passionate interests. Because he’s also a talented athlete, he’s “befriended” when a good player is needed, but later betrayed when he isn’t included in regular social events, or worse, is teased for being smart or helpful. Why is it so hard for him to find a real friend?

Does giftedness contribute to difficulty with peer relationships and social success? While gifted children can have problems with peer relationships for many of the same reasons as all children, there are obvious areas, both in and out of the classroom, that are intensified by giftedness. Because gifted children are often more sensitive and emotionally aware than other children, they can easily become hurt by unkind comments and/or rejection by others. Sometimes, within a child’s obvious peer network, there really isn’t anyone with the same interests, level of knowledge, or sensibilities. It takes an aware, careful, and well-informed observer to sort through the dynamics of relationship problems.

In addition, reading social cues is more an art than a science, which makes it difficult to explain “social skills” in terms that can be clearly understood by a child who is struggling with peers. For example, it is a real challenge to clearly illustrate when it is okay to be different and when it is best to invisibly and seamlessly blend into a group. Children can, without even being aware,



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commit some of the faux pas of good peer relationships. Making friends and being a friend takes a combination of complex social skills that are often taken for granted. Gifted children, as well as other children with learning differences, can benefit from explicit discussion and modeling of the “art” of social caring. Here are some ideas and places to begin the conversation:

1. Gifted students and friendships

AT SCHOOL

- In the primary and elementary grades, gifted children have moments when they are unavoidably “out of step” with age mates. It is at this age that a gifted child is most likely to have difficulty finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship. These children need help in finding places where they fit. Read the research in “Play Partner’ or ‘Sure Shelter’ What gifted children look for in Friendship” by Miraca Gross at www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx
- Competition and rivalry can surface early. Access the *Teaching for High Potential* article Big Ships, Small Ships, Friendships, & Competition at www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx

AT HOME

- If you’re concerned your child doesn’t seem to have friends, try to find out if this is a sensitive issue. Is it by choice (s/he enjoys solitary pursuits), by chance (there aren’t many like-minded children in the community), or because s/he lacks social skills? More guidelines for discussing friendships are in “Focus on Friends” from the February 2010 issue of NAGC’s Parent & Community Network at www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx
- Examples and suggestions can be found in the helpful chapter “Meeting, Making, and Keeping Friends” from Richard Lavoie’s book, *It’s So Much Work to be Your Friend*.

2. The “language” of relationships

AT SCHOOL

- Friendships are where a child can learn the art of compromise, negotiation, mutual respect, and sensitivity to others. Good classroom learning extends beyond curricular topics. Including social and emotional development, in this case, the importance of friendships, can be successfully accomplished by using strategies offered by Jean Peterson in her book, *The Essential Guide to Talking With Gifted Teens*.
- In learning about friendships, it is also important to talk about bullying, which – once established – can distort children’s views of normal social behavior. You’ll find a series of interventions and strategies in *Bullying Among the Gifted: The Subjective Experience*. [www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx]
- Characters in current popular pre- and teen fiction and film are providing kids with mean, cliquish, manipulative models. Become familiar with what’s being read and said, then add your rating to commonsensemedia.org and encourage your students to do the same. [www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx]

AT HOME

- Dr. Temple Grandin, a well-known autistic person, says her social relationship skills have been learned solely through visualization and intellect. “When I encounter a new social situation I scan my data banks for a model to guide me in the new situation ... I use these scenarios to guide me in different situations.” Her list of 10 confusing rules (because they aren’t uniformly applied) is in the book, *The Unwritten Rules of Social Relationships*.
- Poor nonverbal communication skills will limit a child’s success both in and out of school. Most children learn social skills informally but, for some, it’s necessary to explicitly teach nonverbal communication skills. Authors Duke, Nowicki, and Martin offer informal evaluations, as well as proven strategies to address the 4th “R” (think about reading, ‘riting, ‘rithmetic, and Relationships) in *Teaching Your Child the Language of Social Success*.

3. Finding friends

- Read what NAGC says about the commonly held myth that gifted students are happy, popular, and well adjusted in their school environment at www.nagc.org/CHP.aspx
- No matter how brilliant they are, children won’t learn how to be in successful peer relationships unless they have safe opportunities to hone their skills. Make sure a child is able to spend time with kind, like-minded people on a regular basis. If no one fits the bill at school, look beyond classroom walls for “interest peers.” Differences in age can melt away when like-minded people share a passion.

Strong communication between teacher and parent can help assure that a child has ample time to connect favorably with others.