

Joy and Loss: The Emotional Lives of Gifted Children

by Joshua Freedman and Anabel Jensen, Ph.D.

As Ellen Winner explains in her outstanding book, *Gifted Children*, there is a **myth** that *gifted children are better adjusted, more popular, and happier than average children*. The challenging reality is that more frequently, nearly the opposite is true.

For most gifted children, childhood is more pleasurable and more fulfilling because they derive joy from challenge and reward from work. At the same time, it is a childhood that is more painful, more isolated, and more stressful because they do not fit in with their peers and they set high expectations.

The isolation of unique perception

One of the most common experiences of gifted children is a unique way of perceiving. They make more abstract connections, they synthesize diverse experiences, and they make sophisticated conclusions at an early age. Not that the gifted child's unique perceptions are always "true" to the rest of us, but they are powerful. The result is a child growing up with a reality somewhat different than the reality of her peers -- and often different from her parents, teachers, and allies.

Because they are different in other ways, gifted children are often isolated anyway. Somehow these multiple tendencies toward isolation reinforce one another to the point where the majority of gifted children feel lonely, left-out, or different.

This combination of unique perception and its concurrent isolation yield an emotional vacuum. After all, for most of us, our emotional selves develop by "bouncing off" of all those around us.

- Often parents attempt to redress the child's isolation by providing more adult attention.
- Excessive adult attention increases the problem.
- Inadequate adult attention increases the problem too.
- Gifted children need intellectual and emotional peers -- but many "GATE" programs increase isolation and loneliness through pullout programs.

Gifted children are more likely to be introverted than other children. They tend to spend at least 13 hours per week immersed in their talent.

Isolation is also an advantage for many children. It gives them the opportunity to nurture their own gifts, to focus as intently as they want (and must) to excel. So "alone time" is not to be eliminated -- just balanced.

Social Skills

Another key area that is connected to isolation is often described as "poor social skills." Perhaps caused by the isolation and accentuated by zealous adult attention, gifted children often develop a near blindness to "reading" social cues. It may be also that since their intellectual capacities are so strong, they have less need to develop their emotional intelligences. In any case, a major pitfall for some gifted children is a lower level of empathy and an inaccurate perception of their communications with others.

In her seminal work in gifted education, Karen Stone McCown (the founder of The Nueva School and the Chairman and Founder of **Six Seconds**, <http://www.6seconds.org/>) worked with a group of Nobel prize winners. One finding was that, almost unanimously, they reported that their social-emotional development was shortchanged. They said that they were so self-motivated to pursue their intellectual passions that almost nothing would have stopped that work -- but missing from their lives were the social skills that would help them interact with and connect to family, friends, and the larger world.

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- **Emotional Intelligence** training is essential for G/T students.
- Intellectual capability cannot replace emotional capability.
- No matter how brilliant, humans are still social creatures who absolutely require connections to other people.
- **Attention on social skills and emotional development enhances academic development -- it is not a "distraction."**

Gifted children typically have an advanced level of moral reasoning -- and while they do not always act on this insight (after all, they are children), it can add to a perception of intransigence. Sometimes their intense criticism, or being "judgmental," is a result of this very positive set of skills. While it is certainly reasonable to teach them to present their views with tolerance and care, it is also important to preserve their sense of what's right.

The virtue/vice of perfectionism

Gifted children are usually perfectionists. On the one hand, perfectionism means they are motivated to work toward mastery and they earn pleasure from achievement. On the other hand, it means they are unforgiving of themselves, they resist learning from failure, and they have great difficulty going backwards. Perfectionism contributes to pessimistic beliefs, feelings, and actions. They need to be inoculated with optimistic attitudes:

Optimists know that failure is:

- Temporary
- Isolated
- And can be transformed by persistent effort

Optimism is a learned behavior. It increases productivity, and reduces the traumatic effect of adversity.

This virtue/vice was readily apparent watching a group of gifted 8th graders from the Odyssey School attempt a climbing wall at their leadership camp. To get up the "climbing wall," it was necessary to persevere, and it was often necessary to backtrack (reverse, give up ground, go backwards), and try a new route. While these students were doggedly determined, trying over and over until their mentors practically have to carry their bedraggled selves back to the dorms -- few would go **both** up and down as they climbed. They saw "success" as continuing forward. This is a powerful impulse which prevents learning the valuable lesson of redoing, starting again, reversing, or regrouping.

Gifted children are twice as likely as other peers to report feelings of anxiety, stress, and/or depression.

Perfectionism is potent.

Perfectionists produce better work, they get better grades, they get enormous positive feedback.

Perfectionists also have a markedly higher suicide rate.

Mel Levine works with a broad variety of LD students, and often gives parents the advice to "let them obsess" because once they have tasted deep knowledge, they will long for that depth again. This advice works well for gifted children -- let them obsess, and help them share that obsession in social ways.

People with genius level IQ are among the mostly likely of any group to use drugs.

They are also among the most likely to attempt suicide.

The burden of becoming a change maker

There is a common feeling among gifted children that they have some added responsibility to "live up to their potential." Perhaps because in many ways, it is absolutely true. True or not, it leads to a special sense of burden.

The "capital c" creative (the highly gifted as identified by Dr. Winner), are the ones mostly likely to revolutionize their field. These are the Einsteins, the Beethovens, and the Picassos. They are the change makers. In her research, Winner found that change makers:

- 75%-85% experienced major adversity as a child.
- Make no distinction between work and play.
- Are genuinely independent — conformity is less important.
- Possess a strong belief in self.
- Take risks.

Gild adversity with optimism

Giftedness often forces a choice between intimacy and excellence.

This uniqueness is neither "good" nor "bad," but clearly it engenders unusual emotional needs. Certainly we would never give our child experiences of major adversity to make her a change maker -- but clearly we need to help these children reframe the experience of adversity.

In our experience as teachers of gifted students, we frequently saw parents who would go to great lengths to keep their child from failing -- after all, a "gifted" child should never "fail," right? We saw parents fax homework, drive 50 miles to deliver forgotten lunches, offer to drive 200 miles to pick up

a child who no longer wanted to be on a ski trip, etc. Those words, "gifted" and "failure," just don't go together. Of course from a comfortable distance, we can see the ridiculousness -- but in the moment, do we allow our children to fail?

Another emotional implication of Winner's findings is that because conformity is less important, gifted children are frequently content in some aspects of their exclusion. The hurt comes because others (adults and children) generalize so readily. Just because Bobbie likes being "weird" because of his obsession (literally) with butterflies, he **does not** like being "weird" in all ways. It is easy for Bobby to make the distinction -- he is excellent at abstract analysis -- but others are less clear. Soon Bobby wears "weird" as a mask, he plays out the role and protects himself from the hurt that comes when others define him.

Compounding Factors

- The conflicting messages of "conform" and "be who you are" come to a head for some gifted students earlier than for many others. This can increase issues of self-esteem.
 - For many gifted students, academic work in childhood was not a significant challenge, but work in upper grades, middle, or high school, they may experience academic failure for the first time.
 - As academic subjects increase in complexity, frequently learning differences/disabilities become apparent. In less sophisticated tasks, gifted children can often cover up or compensate for an inability (which could come from a learning disability), but those compensations may not work as learning becomes more complex.
 - Some gifted students resent their own giftedness. They want to be cool, they want to fit in, and they conclude (correctly) that their intellectual capability reduces the probability of this happening. Adults usually make it worse by denying this harsh conclusion.
 - Gifted kids are terribly competent at knowing when adults do not tell the whole truth.
 - Gifted children typically are greater risk takers. This can lead to both more success and more danger.
 - "Gifted" does not mean "reasonable." Frequently adults forget that these great thinkers are children, and that as children, part of their job is to push the limits. Even though the children see the connections, anticipate the consequences they still want/need to win, they still want/need to be right, they still want/need to have it their way. Some gifted kids are particularly skilled in this area!
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One Solution

Provide meaningful choice

(print this and put it where you will see it every day)

Choice yields profound results -- from increased esteem, more sophisticated high-order thinking, more perseverance at low-order tasks, even increased classroom attendance.

For gifted kids, choice gives them the power to define themselves and know that they are exercising their own strengths -- including their own free will. This generates a level of future-orientation and big-picture thinking that forms a life-saving protection from the confusion and despair of the moment.

Choice does not mean "do whatever you want." It means "within these limits, do whatever you want." Sometimes the limits are rigid: "Do you want to brush your teeth now or after the movie?" Sometimes they are wide open: "Research any aspect of US History and present it in a meaningful format."

Note that, "You can choose to clean the dishes or you don't get allowance" **is not**, in fact, meaningful choice. But, "You can choose to clean the dishes or wash the car" **is** a meaningful choice.

"Gifted"
does not mean
"good student."

Confession / About the Authors

Some readers may find that talking about gifted children as "them" is judgmental. Really, we are also talking about us. There is a strange stigma in our society about admitting you were a gifted child (which does not in any way mean you are a gifted adult). But besides teaching in a school for gifted children for six years (Josh) and running a school for gifted children for 14 years (Anabel), we were both identified by teachers or family members as gifted children, and we both recollect those early years with both great pleasure and a certain sorrow.

Credits

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Anabel Jensen, Ph.D. is the President of [Six Seconds](#), a nonprofit educational service organization, which supports the development of emotional intelligence in families, schools, corporations, and communities. Joshua Freedman is the Director of Programs and Products for the same organization. They have recently co-authored two books on emotional intelligence:

Self-Science (a curriculum which was used at the Nueva School for the Gifted for 30 years)

and

Handle With Care: The Emotional Intelligence Activity Book.

Ellen Winner, *Gifted Children: Myths and Realities*. New York: Basic Books, 1996. This is an outstanding book that should be in the library of every parent and educator of a gifted/talented child.



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