

香港資優教育學院  
The Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education

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Article

**THE WHOLE PERSON:  
Social and Emotional Concerns**

A common myth about gifted students is that they are more likely than their peers to have emotional and behavioural difficulties. In fact, many studies contradict this idea. There is, however, reason to believe that bright pupils will face different sorts of stresses and risks than their peers. During youth, gifted people cannot necessarily find their niche easily, as adults often can, because they have to be in school, typically within their year group; they are required to be in an environment where they are atypical and conformity is at a premium. In mixed-ability classrooms, very bright students may feel that they must monitor their behaviour to fit in with the social and cultural expectations of their peers. The danger here is that by masking their abilities, they may inhibit their development, or possibly lose touch with their innermost feelings and beliefs. As Miraca Gross has pointed out, the capacity to love others cannot develop fully until one has learned to love oneself.

Many pupils become quite skilled at "camouflage," the habit of dissociating themselves from activities that accentuate their giftedness, and cultivating aspects of themselves that are more socially acceptable, such as music, debating, photography, or sports. This can be quite a useful and adaptive strategy as long as pupils do not have to actually give up time for their other interests or feel compromised about their personal identity. It is important to bear in mind that pupils who exhibit exceptional abilities in any particular area are an extremely diverse group; school personnel should not make the mistake of believing the media's broad-brushing of gifted youth as obsessive boffins or social isolates. The majority of them are well-adjusted and as happy as the average adolescent.

Like their peers, gifted young people yearn for intimacy and feel happiest when they are with others. However, they seem to need social companionship less. The research of Csikszentmihalyi et. al. (1993) suggests that gifted pupils are much more introverted than typical pupils. They spend more time alone and enjoy being alone more than is typical. They can tolerate more solitude because they get a lot of stimulation from their own mental lives. Nonetheless, this does not apply across the board, and does not mean they do not crave close friendships and camaraderie. It is merely a reminder that conventional conceptions of happiness are not universal in their appeal, and that to impose norms of social adjustment on individuals who feel a drive to excel or create is likely to make their lives more difficult and less happy.

For some difficulties that pupils may face socially or emotionally, such as bullying or depression, professional interventions are advisable. Such topics are dealt with in greater detail in the Health and Happiness section of this website. But there are also things that schools can do to reduce the likelihood that such problems will arise in the first place. For promoting the emotional well-being of bright pupils, a couple of strategies have proven especially rewarding, namely "bibliotherapy" and "videotherapy." Bibliotherapy, as its name suggests, involves using books--particularly biographies--to assist students in dealing with issues that may seem to them to be their own unique problems. For example, biographies have been used in counseling young men through issues like underachievement, self-inflicted pressure in sport, cultural alienation, and father-son relationships. (For recommended biographical works, see Thomas P. Hebert's article in the Journal of Secondary Gifted Education, 1995, Vol. 6 No. 3 pp. 208-219.) Essentially, the strategy is to use the experience of others to open a discussion about problems the young person is facing, and to demonstrate that people have found ways of coping and overcoming the difficulty.

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Videotherapy uses the same approach, but with films. It's important that teachers and counselors have a comprehensive understanding of counseling strategies as well as the content of the films, and have given thought to how they will be used. Studies have found that discussing films in small groups provides a safe environment for exploration of various approaches to conflicts. The idea is to help students gain insight into themselves and their world, and discover they are not alone. Since many films present gifted people in stereotyped ways, they raise the topic so that pupils have a natural avenue for discussing these stereotypes. They also open the way to discuss issues such as image, self-inflicted pressure, being labeled, friendship, aloneness, and gender role conflict.

### **Sex-based stereotypes**

Research indicates that girls' perceptions of their abilities is generally lower than that of boys: they tend to attribute their success to hard work or luck, not gifts or talents. Some girls, carrying this to the extreme, deny their own intelligence, a pattern known in the literature as the "Imposter Phenomenon." In addition, many girls find it socially difficult to exhibit high intelligence that may be viewed as unfeminine. Cultural notions of femininity, of course, may have a strong bearing on what a girl believes is acceptable, and teachers need to be aware of how messages from home may conflict with those from school and cause tension or confusion for a gifted girl.

There are ways that teachers can help to discourage some of girls' self-diminishing attitudes. They should not (as is the pattern) reward and praise girls for good behaviour and boys for the quality of their work. They should not encourage girls to conform while accepting more aggressive and exploratory (or risk-taking) behaviour in boys. Female teachers themselves can be powerful models of the fact that intelligence does not make you unattractive, and teachers can draw girls' attention to female achievers in their field who send the same signal. Sometimes it can be profitable for a girl to have a female mentor who introduces her to high achievements and intellectual and creative risks. Career counseling can also prove useful.

Most importantly, teachers need to convey that their gifted girls are expected to succeed at difficult tasks, and that they care about their intellectual growth. Encouraging them to take challenging classes and undertake thought-provoking projects reminds them of their teachers' confidence. It can be helpful to point out to girls just how sexist the language and messages of the media, society, and occasionally textbooks can be. Greater awareness of the media's implied or not-so-subtle messages gives girls more power to defend themselves against demeaning depictions.

### **Moral Development**

As noted in the Leadership (internal link) section of this website, researchers have been intrigued since the 1920s by evidence of advanced development of moral reasoning in some pupils. This may be reflected in, for example, a passionate concern for ethical and moral issues, a deep interest in questions of human origins and destiny, or a mature sense of wonder about humanity's relationship to God. Some gifted students find studies of world religions and philosophy very helpful for advancing their thinking about such matters.

Moral education can also be extremely useful to gifted pupils in thinking through some of the dilemmas that they face in their lives by virtue of their differences from other pupils and the fact that their ideas are likely to stretch boundaries. The scholar Abraham Tannenbaum (2000) has

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suggested a number of exercises of potential value to gifted adolescents, which we paraphrase here.

- Encouraging students to keep an ongoing portfolio of entries relating to their specific accomplishments, personal identity, heroes and heroines, and deepest commitments
- Discussion and study of themes relating to the challenges of a creative life, for example "Conflict Resolution," "Surviving and Benefitting from Frustration" (using the failures of real professionals as examples), "Delaying Gratification" (again raising examples of professional patience), and "Risk Taking"
- Studying the theme of alienation and changes in identity using literature as a catalyst for discussion. Tannenbaum recommends addressing issues such as "Dehumanisation" and "Misogyny and Liberation"
- Examining language, knowledge, creativity, and values. For example, looking at types of discourse and uses of language to control people's reactions, considering current issues in medical ethics, exploring issues facing scientists as they attempt to discover truths in an ethical way, and thinking about the consequences of technology.

Looking at concrete examples of bright individuals whose great achievements co-existed with questionable, even despicable, moral practices.

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