The Psychosocial Concerns and Needs of Gifted Students

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Disagreement in the field of gifted education as to whether gifted students are:

- More vulnerable to social and emotional difficulties or
- Resilient to psychological and social difficulties

Views may not be incompatible but may describe different populations

- Clinicians see youths experiencing difficulties while
- Much research is done on successful gifted students in competitive environments
What does the research tell us?

- Most gifted students are well-adjusted
- But they can experience the same social and emotional problems in response to life events as other students.
- Some problems result from students’ high abilities, developmental issues, and/or feeling different.
- Most prevalent cause is mismatch of needs to academic services, school climate, and lack of true peers.
- There are also psychological and personal traits that can increase risk in combination with a problematic environment
- And some groups of gifted students are more at risk than others for problems.
Special gifted populations face additional risks

- Verbally talented students are more at risk than mathematically talented students
- Extremely talented students are more at risk than moderately talented students
- Gifted females or males can be more at risk depending on cultural norms
- Twice-exceptional students face special social/emotional difficulties
- Disadvantaged students may face special issues due to lack of role models or inadequate support from peers or family
- Low-income students may not be able to participate in programs that cost money or hesitate to develop long-term goals for financial reasons
Psychological and personal characteristics as risk factors

- Overexcitabilities
- Psychological type (introversion)
- Low self-esteem
- Fixed mindset
- Unhealthy perfectionism
- Asynchronous development
- Poor social skills
- Learning differences/disabilities
Overexcitabilities (sensitivities, intensities)

- Theory based on Dabrowski’s work
- Suggests that gifted individuals exhibit more tense responses to stimuli in the psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, or emotional domains
- Can heighten passion for subject, high achievement
- But can lead to inappropriate behavior, social and emotional difficulties
- Must learn self-control

Psychological Type (introversion)

- Can relate to deep thinking
- But can cause isolation, feelings of loneliness
- Can affect social development
- Interaction with peers who share interests helpful
**Self-efficacy or self-esteem**

- Belief in one’s own abilities to be successful and to achieve goals
- Related to confidence, motivation, feeling in control
- Low self-efficacy or self-esteem can contribute to social and emotional issues
- Take steps to achieve success and build on them
Mindset

– Fixed mindset: achievement attributed to ability
– Growth mindset: achievement attributed to effort
– Growth mindset helps overcome obstacles
– Fixed mindset can contribute to social or emotional difficulties
Perfectionism

- Healthy vs. unhealthy
- Healthy can lead to high achievement
- Unhealthy can lower achievement and cause emotional distress
Asynchronous development

- Out of sync abilities
- High abilities co-existing with more average development in other areas
- Can cause emotional distress and make educational accommodations difficult
Social skills

- Poor social skills can result from the characteristics just outlined
- Also results from lack of interaction with peers
- Social skills can be taught
- Appropriate academic placement and intellectual peers helpful
High abilities co-existing with learning disabilities
(twice exceptional students)

- Gifts and disabilities often mask each other
- Assessment is crucial for understanding underlying issues
- Some disabilities involve social problems
- Other social/emotional issues caused by being different
- Teach to the strength, build social skills, and get counseling
## Strengths that can result in problems for gifted children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Possible Problems</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquires Information quickly</td>
<td>Impatient with others; Dislikes drill and practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inquisitive</td>
<td>May ask too many questions;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Resists direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Creative and inventive</td>
<td>May be seen as disruptive</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large vocabulary</td>
<td>Peers may not relate</td>
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</tbody>
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### Strengths that can result in problems - continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Possible Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High energy</td>
<td>Frustration with inactivity; May be seen as hyperactive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent; prefers individualized work</td>
<td>May reject parent, peer, or teacher input or direction</td>
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<tr>
<td>Multiple interests and abilities</td>
<td>Frustrated over lack of time</td>
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<tr>
<td>Strong sense of humor</td>
<td>Peers may misunderstand; May become “class clown” for attention</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizes truth, equity, and fair play</td>
<td>Worries about humanitarian concerns</td>
</tr>
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Environmental Influences on Psychosocial Adjustment: Family, School, Community
Families

Unsupportive:
- Pressure to achieve
- Lack of compatible goals

Supportive:
- Accepts you for who you are
- Offers support for goals and interests
- Provides access to resources
Schools

Unsupportive

- Lack access to advanced content and challenging opportunities
- Lack peers who share interests and abilities

Supportive

- Provide accommodations for advanced abilities and achievement
- Offer an intellectual environment
- Provide access to intellectual peers

“How many times do I have to tell you... you’re not supposed to read ahead.”
Communities

Unsupportive

– Devalue intellectual pursuits
– Lack educational resources

Supportive

– Offer excellent school options and excellent schools
– Provide appropriate peer group and role models
– Offer resources for enrichment pursuits
Supplemental programs and activities can provide support for social and emotional needs.
Smorgasbord of opportunities to extend learning

- **Academic options**
  - Alternate school options
  - Subject/grade acceleration
  - Online courses
  - Independent study
  - Work with a mentor
  - Part-time college
  - Full-time early college
  - Academic summer programs

- **Extracurricular activities**
  - Competitions
  - Science projects
  - Internships
  - Art and music lessons and activities
  - School and community clubs
  - School and community leadership opportunities
  - Sports
Possible impact
of special schools, academic programs, and extracurricular activities.

– Connect to intellectual peers
– Develop a sense of belonging
– Improve social skills
– Experience rigorous coursework
– Build academic confidence
– Encourage intellectual risk-taking
– Pursue passions in depth
– Garner recognition
– Develop leadership skills
– Enhance goals for the future
Benefits of CTY Summer Programs

**Academic Benefits**
- Academic rigor and challenge
- Quality instruction
- Gains in learning
- Acceleration
- Positive academic role models
- Skill development
- Heightened students' interest
- Academic confidence
- Setting higher academic goals
- College-related benefits

**Social Benefits**
- Friends with other bright students
- Sense of belonging
- Social-support network
- Social adeptness and confidence

**Personal Benefits**
- Maturity and independence
- More open-mindedness
- Life-long knowledge and self-discovery

Findings are based on 30 years of data from research studies, program evaluations, surveys (parent, student, and alumni), student interviews, and unsolicited letters/e-mails. (www.cty.jhu.edu/research)

Johns Hopkins University, Center for Talented Youth
Summary
Some solutions to help your child resolve social or emotional problems

- Advocate for appropriate educational placement
- Utilize supplemental educational opportunities and activities
- Help develop social skills
- Provide opportunities for interaction with intellectual peers
- Provide opportunities for interaction with age peers around interests
- Seek exposure to role models and mentors
- Provide support from parents and teachers
- Assess abilities, interests, etc. for understanding and for guidance
- Provide counseling for personal issues, academic programming, and college and career planning
- Seek professional help for any serious psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, anorexia, suicidal tendencies
Resources for social and emotional issues

Organization:
- Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG)

Books:
- *Mindset* by Carol Dweck
- *Emotional Intelligence* by Daniel Goleman
- *Social-Emotional Curriculum with Gifted and Talented Students* by Joyce VanTassel-Baska, Tracy Cross, and Richard Olenchak