The Psychosocial Concerns and Needs of Gifted Students

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Myths

1. Gifted students are maladjusted, socially immature, and prone to emotional problems

2. Gifted students are superior to other students, not prone to social and emotional difficulties, and can solve any problems they encounter on their own

Reality:
Neither generalization holds for all highly able students
The debate continues...

1. View that there are significant qualitative differences that make gifted individuals more vulnerable to social and emotional difficulties

2. View that gifted individuals may be more resilient to psychological difficulties

These views may describe different populations: First view from clinicians who see problems, second from studies of high achievers in selective academic programs.
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.
Defining giftedness:

Many definitions in the field but gradual shift from focus on innate intelligence to recognition of:

— Developed abilities
— Multifaceted components that include psychosocial
Howard Gardner
Theory of Multiple Intelligences
Françoys Gagné
Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent
Daniel Goleman

- Intellect cannot fully function without one’s emotions being under control
- Much about the control of our emotions and our social interactions can be taught to students
Rena Subotnik, Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, & Frank Worrell, 2011

“Psychosocial variables play an essential role in the manifestation of giftedness at every developmental stage. Both cognitive and psychosocial variables are malleable and need to be deliberately cultivated.”
Psychological and personal characteristics as risk factors

- Overexcitabilities
- Psychological type (introversion)
- Low self-efficacy
- 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 intense responses to stimuli in the psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginational, or emotional domains
  – Can lead to inappropriate behavior, social and emotional difficulties

Psychological Type (introversion)
- Can relate to deep thinking
- But can cause isolation, feelings of loneliness
- Can affect social development
• **Self-efficacy or self-esteem**
  – Belief in one’s own abilities to be successful and to achieve goals
  – Related to confidence, motivation, self-esteem, feeling in control
  – Low self-efficacy or self-esteem can contribute to social and emotional issues
• Mindset
  – Fixed mindset: achievement attributed to ability
  – Growth mindset: achievement attributed to effort
  – Growth mindset helps overcome obstacles
• Perfectionism
  – Healthy vs unhealthy
  – Unhealthy perfectionism affects achievement and causes 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 personal characteristics and/or lack of interaction with peers
  – Social skills can be taught
  – Access to intellectual peers helpful
• Twice exceptionalities (2e)
  – High abilities co-existing with disabilities
  – Often masked as they hide each other
  – Social and emotional challenges often co-exist for 2e individuals
  – Assessment is crucial for understanding underlying issues
  – Teach to the strength!
  – May also need counseling
Possible problems that can accompany gifted traits *

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Possible Problems</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acquires/retains information quickly</td>
<td>Impatient with others; Dislikes basic routines or drill and practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inquisitive; Searches for significance</td>
<td>May ask too many questions; May feel overwhelmed with multiple interests and talents</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intrinsic motivation</td>
<td>Strong-willed; Resists direction</td>
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* Adapted from Seagoe, Clark, Webb, and others
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<td>Enjoys problem-solving; able to conceptualize, abstract, and synthesize</td>
<td>Resists routine practice; Questions teaching procedures</td>
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<tr>
<td>Passionate and intense</td>
<td>Overexcitable; May over-react to situations</td>
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<td>Seeks cause-effect relations</td>
<td>Dislikes unclear/illogical ideas (e.g., traditions or feelings)</td>
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<td>Emphasizes truth, equity, and fair play</td>
<td>Worries about humanitarian concerns</td>
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<td>Seeks to organize things and people</td>
<td>May be seen as bossy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Large vocabulary; Advanced, broad information</td>
<td>May use words to manipulate; Bored with school and age-peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>High expectations of self and others</td>
<td>May be intolerant; May succumb to perfectionism or depression</td>
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<td>Creative/Inventive; likes new ways of doing things</td>
<td>May be seen as disruptive and out of step</td>
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<tr>
<td>Intense concentration; Long attention span and</td>
<td>Neglects duties or people during periods of focus;</td>
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<tr>
<td>persistence in areas of interest</td>
<td>resists interruption; stubbornness</td>
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<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensitivity, empathy; desire</td>
<td>Overly sensitive to criticism or peer rejection</td>
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<td>to be accepted by others</td>
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<tr>
<td>High energy, alertness, eagerness</td>
<td>Frustration with inactivity; May be seen as hyperactive</td>
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<td>Independent; prefers individualized work</td>
<td>May reject parent, peer, or teacher input or direction</td>
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<td>Diverse interests and abilities</td>
<td>May appear disorganized; Frustrated over lack of time</td>
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<td>Strong sense of humor</td>
<td>Peers may misunderstand; May become “class clown” for attention</td>
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Environmental Influences on Psychosocial Adjustment: Family, School, Community
Family support

- Provide acceptance for who you are
- Offer support for goals and interests but not pressure
- Provide access to resources
School support

- Provide academic accommodations for high 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.”
Community support

- Value high academic achievement and excellent schools
- Provide an appropriate peer group and role models
- Offer resources for enrichment and academic pursuits
Meeting psychosocial needs through special schools, academic programs, and extracurricular activities
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
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
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- Overexcitabilities
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Counseling Needs of Gifted Youth

- Academic advising and planning
- Access to supplemental resources and opportunities
- Specific access to opportunities for interaction with intellectual peers
- College and career preparation
- Help to cope with life events that cause stress
- Help with identity and social issues related to being gifted
- Professional help for serious psychological issues such as depression, anxiety, anorexia, suicidal tendencies