Parents of Gifted Youth


The ways in which parents get involved and advocate for their children’s education rely upon parents’ conceptions of academic success. Mothers (n = 547) and fathers (n = 547) of sixth-grade, academically talented students (62% males) completed a questionnaire assessing parents’ definitions of academic success. Definitions were classified as Internal (i.e., emphasized behaviors relative to the student, had individual importance, or were self-satisfying), External (i.e., emphasized behaviors recognized as eminent by others or superior to peers), Both, or Neither. Conceptions were related to parents’ education level, gender, and ethnic group. Parents likely to emphasize internal standards were those without a doctorate or medical degree, mothers, and White parents. These groups may be supportive of programs catering to individual needs and abilities. Fathers were more likely than mothers to measure academic success by external standards including high grades, college acceptance, and employment in a good career, which suggests that they support programs fostering the attainment of eminent achievements and may exert more pressure on their children to achieve.


Parents of academically talented students have been accused of pushing their children to attain high levels of achievement, as well as fostering performance anxiety and perfectionism in their children. Parents’ achievement goals for their children, in terms of the focus on high performance (performance goal) or learning for understanding (learning goal), were examined in relation to children’s perfectionism. Parents (127 sets) and their sixth-grade academically talented children (56% boys) completed the Multidimensional Perfectionism Scale and parents reported their achievement goals for their children. Most parents reported learning goals, suggesting that emphasis on meeting external standards is not predominant among parents of talented students. Children of performance goal parents were significantly more likely to exhibit dysfunctional perfectionism than children of learning goal parents, reporting a combination of high concern about mistakes, doubts about actions, parental expectations, and parental criticism. Parents’ achievement goals can help predict which students might be at risk for adjustment problems and future underachievement.

The Study of Exceptional Talent (SET) at The Johns Hopkins University identifies students who score 700-800 on the mathematical portion and/or 630-800 on the verbal portion of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) before age 13. SET members include a national sample of students identified at age 12 or younger as representing the most exceptional students in their age group with respect to mathematical and/or verbal reasoning ability. From 1980 through 1992, 1132 individuals joined SET; 76% of them were male and 24% of them female. The SET population has a very high representation of Asians compared to the general population, particularly among math qualifiers and female qualifiers. Over 90% of SET participants live in intact families with biological parents. Two-thirds of them are only or oldest children, and two-thirds of them live in families with two or fewer children. A majority of their parents have attained high levels of formal education. One-third of these students’ mothers are full-time homemakers. Thus, these students, as a group, seem to be quite advantaged in their home backgrounds: most parents have the education to provide a rich intellectual environment for their children, and at least one-third of the mothers presumably have considerable time to devote to addressing their children’s needs.