



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

Social Skills of Gifted Children

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Gifted children are often accused of being social misfits. However, most of their social problems arise when they do not fit with the surrounding children: gifted children lack true peers rather than lacking peer relationship skills. This means, then, that one of the main ways to foster these children's relationships with other youngsters is for them to have access at least occasionally to like-minded peers. As children of all ages and ability levels choose friends who share their interests and can interact with them reciprocally, gifted children are most likely to form friendships with other gifted children. This means that subject or grade skipping at school or early entry to the next level of schooling can be crucial measures - not only for some children's academic stimulation but also for their social inclusion. It also means that in the years prior to school, children are particularly vulnerable to social difficulties as most children who share their developmental level are already at school and so are inaccessible.

The social difficulties that have been observed in some gifted children include the following:

- * Because of their advanced language and conceptual skills, some are highly directive ('bossy') in their play with others, which is not always well received by their play mates.
- * Typically, gifted children have play interests in advance of surrounding children with the result that they cannot share similar play activities, resulting in the social isolation of gifted children.
- * Some expect of others the same high performances that they demand of themselves, which other people find too demanding.
- * Many seek out adult company when like-minded peers are not available.
- * Some might need to learn to be tactful about parading their skills in front of less able classmates; however, the more common difficulty is that children are too reticent about displaying their talents as they know that these will be disparaged.
- * Some are disparaged by average learners, whereby they feel that in order to fit in socially, they must underperform.
- * Some gifted children are placed in leadership roles because they have the intellectual, social or problem-solving skills to lead successfully. However, leadership is conferred voluntarily by followers - and surrounding children might not receive positively the placement of gifted children in leadership positions, while the gifted children themselves often do not want this role. Also, one must guard against the 'Robin Hood' effect of robbing time from gifted children as they support less able students: all children have a right to be working at their developmental level.

Some experience many of these same social difficulties at home - say, if their parents or other siblings are not gifted, or if their advanced skills are given a higher priority in the family than are other individuals' needs.

It is not inevitable, however, that being developmentally 'out of sync' with the majority necessarily leads to social or emotional difficulties. However, not understanding themselves or the implications of their giftedness can lead to unnecessary confusion and distress as children grow up.

Beyond giving them access to children who share their interests and passions, the following are some specific things that parents can do to assist gifted children's understanding of their social needs.

- * Parents will need to accept that many gifted children will develop deep attachments to them and subsequently to other responsive adults, but might lack a breadth of attachments. This makes these children highly reliant on their parents, such that they experience more than the usual separation anxiety that afflicts many typical children during their early years. Only increased support will give the children the confidence to separate, while provision of an educationally interesting program (say, at preschool) will draw them outside the family circle. If either element is lacking, their separation problems are likely to persist.
- * Because from a very young age gifted children are aware of being different, they need to have explained to them that their brain learns differently from the average, and that other children are not being deliberately obstructive when they are uninterested or appear unresponsive to the ideas of their advanced playmates.
- * Children's self-esteem must hinge not on others' evaluations of their attainments (either positive or negative judgments) but on the satisfaction that they accrue from developing new skills.
- * The children need to learn to tolerate relationships with varying levels of intimacy: from acquaintances, to children who are at times good company, to those who are superficial friends and, finally, those who are soul-mates.
- * The children will need to come to understand that while their skills are valued by classmates and, indeed, that they themselves are quite well liked nevertheless it can be difficult for them to receive from age mates a close and warm sense of companionship. By early adolescence, some young people find that they are more attractive romantically than they are ready to be. Feeling less close to others is part and parcel of being advanced and, if one were to lose this aspect (which could be seen to be a disadvantage), one would inevitably lose the excitement and fulfillment that advanced skills can bring.
- * It is well documented that particularly during adolescence (but also even from early childhood), many young people experience a tension between being popular and achieving highly. For this reason, it can be useful to locate mentors for gifted children and adolescents so that they feel more comfortable about achieving at high levels, although again a peer group of like-minded and similarly able age-mates would be a significant support.
- * The children need to hear one of society's last major secrets - which is, that virtually everyone has only one or two close friends at any one time. If they observe that their age-mates congregate in groups whereas they themselves are more isolated, with just one or two close companions, you can console them with the research findings which tell us that, when you ask individual group members, they report that most other members are purely acquaintances and that, in fact, they feel close to no one. Appearances can be deceiving.
- * Gifted children's reliance on their few close friends means that we need to accept as real their grief if those friendships are disrupted for any reason. Like any of us, they will need time to locate another true friend and may, in the meantime, feel particularly saddened at their loss.
- * The children need reminders that it is possible to be different and normal at one at the same time. It's a bit like teeth: it is statistically normal to have teeth with fillings but, at the same time, medically abnormal because teeth do not erupt already filled. Normality and abnormality can co-exist. Gifted children are both statistically abnormal and psychologically normal.
- * If the children display actual problems with the sub-skills that make up social competence, parents and educators can coach them in the skills of gaining group entry, displaying tact, cooperating with others, following as well as leading, and resolving interpersonal conflict so that relationships with peers can recover after disputes.
- * Ultimately, some children may need to accept that their life will alternate between trying to attract others out of a fear of loneliness, and trying to send them away when they become bored (Joad 1948, in Gross 1993). Being alone is not a problem as long as solitude is sought but, even then, many

individuals experience occasional loneliness and that only spurs them on to locate potential companions so it need not signal a serious problem.

For further reading on these issues, you could consult *Gifted Young Children* (Porter, 1999, Sydney, Allen and Unwin).

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