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## COUNSELLING THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

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### **Abstract**

*The gifted and talented can be expected to be emotionally at least as well balanced as any others. In fact, most are well equipped to face the world, to cope with expectations and threats, as well as being particularly sensitive to interpretation and prediction of the feelings and behaviour of other people. But because of their exceptionality they do face special challenges, and so to help them a counsellor must recognise and understand these and the effects they can have. Personality and experience affect everyone's reactions to challenge. Some rise to them, seeing them merely as hurdles, while others succumb with poor adjustment, low self-concept and anxiety, all of which can put a break on school success and creativity. Informed, skilled and sympathetic counselling can be effective in helping the most able to become well adjusted adults.*

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The term counselling implies some form of trained intervention, but then, what else is teaching in its fullest sense? This paper is concerned with counselling in the therapeutic/helping sense, the aim of which is to facilitate a fully functioning person who is sufficiently well adjusted to life circumstances to cope with them. Counselling is mostly, but not necessarily, non-directive in nature; that is, it does not praise, blame, or offer advice, but accepts what the client says. Talking about problems helps to put them into perspective and provides a better base to deal with them. As with teaching, there are a variety of theories of counselling though most practitioners take an eclectic approach using either group or individual counselling.

Yet, school counselling is never restricted to the counsellor; warm-hearted teachers will continue to be involved with their pupils when they are needed. In fact, learning about relationships and how to learn is slowly becoming part of the curriculum. The training of primary teachers normally includes educational psychology, though with older age-groups, teachers become specialists and usually are less concerned with their pupils as people and more with their proficiency in the subject taught. This is sufficient for most pupils, but others need more personal help. The counsellor's actual techniques for helping the gifted are the same as those for other youngsters, including good counsellor-parent communication, but with additional sound knowledge of their special challenges and special strengths.

## **Stress**

Stress is brought about by a situation which demands adjustment. Psychologically, we not only respond to present threats, but also to symbols and expectations of stress. Physiologically, whereas shock produces a surge of adrenaline, long-term adaptation to stress produces a higher metabolic rate and blood glucose level, which can lower energy, bring about depression and lower immunity to infection. Children are most susceptible to stress at critical periods in their development.

Stress is not usually due to a single bad event, but to an accumulation. It could be that the gifted suffer more stress in their daily lives because of their underlying situation of being different and so succumb to anxiety about relatively small things. Yet an adaptable intellect - one which has been well exercised in retaining balance and working at its most efficient - should also be more resistant to any ill-effects from the hassles of daily life. To unbalance a well-functioning mind should take stronger stimuli than would be needed to upset other minds. Indeed, it is possible that children with an advanced and wider variety of coping strategies would be better adjusted than their peers. But for the gifted as for all others, their achievement and social relationships are diminished by emotional problems - the only exceptions being perhaps poets and artists.

## **Stress and the gifted**

Most researchers find that the emotional problems faced by the gifted and talented are similar to those of other children. Neihart *et al* (2002) state this explicitly in an overview of the evidence, "There is no evidence that gifted children or youth - as a group - are inherently any more vulnerable or flawed in adjustment than any other group." (p. 268). In agreement, Hodge and Renzulli (1993), also overviewing research evidence found that in comparisons of gifted and nongifted students the gifted were normal in self-esteem, but that their exceptionality sometimes did sometimes bring them challenges. In Australia, Richards *et al* (2003) compared the emotional and behavioral adjustment of 33 intellectually gifted adolescents with a matched group of 25 adolescents of average ability. There was no significant differences between the groups in either parent or teacher ratings, nor in the youngsters' self-reports. Indeed, the gifted reported fewer depressive symptoms, a better attitude towards teachers, greater self-reliance and a greater sense of adequacy. Czeschlik & Rost (1995) found that high intelligence was of positive benefit in the popularity stakes as did Freeman (2001).

Unfortunately, much of the literature on the social-emotional needs of the gifted lacks a scientific outlook, relying instead on case studies, anecdotes, programmes and 'expert' opinion, from which unjustified generalisations may be made (Richards *et al*, 2003). Publications list school phobia, loneliness, depression and suicide, anxiety, and alienation (e.g. Cross *et al*, 1991; Silverman, 1993; Plucker & Levy, 2001). This negative view is further skewed by the inclusion of at-risk sub-groups such as the disabled and the disadvantaged (Davis & Rimm, 1998). Indeed, in her overview of the international scientific research Freeman (1998) found that evidence is often taken from clinical and case studies where the sample may be self-selected, which is then presented without comparison with other children. If, for example, the gifted child invents stomach-aches to avoid school (Gross, 1992) the problems cannot be said to be due to giftedness unless this behaviour is compared with that of matched children, preferably in the same class.

Webb (1993) argues that what is claimed as the effects of gifts are in fact the effects of circumstances such as family problems or poverty. In accord, in Freeman's long-term (2001) study, the gifted from unhappy homes were more likely to be unhappy, as with any children. Their emotional problems, though, were very often blamed on their gifts. Post (1994) found in his study of 291 world-famous men that with few exceptions they were sociable and "admirable human beings". He wrote: "Genius as a misunderstood giant is one of the many false stereotypes in this field" (p.31), although the artists rather than the scientists were somewhat likely to have emotional problems.

It is easier to write about the problems of the gifted than the non-problems. It not only makes a better story, but it is difficult to write about something that is not normally there. Consequently, so much of this paper on counselling must be concerned with dealing with problems of the gifted and talented, thus not reflecting the overwhelming evidence of their normal psychosocial well-being.

### **Some special stresses on gifted and talented children**

The gifted do experience some potentially stressful challenges which other children do not share. These usually come from people's attitudes to them and from inappropriate education - two overlapping and interacting factors - which present as follows.

***Stereotyping*** The gifted suffer particularly from a wide spectrum of distorting stereotyping and its expectations, from being incompetent in every day life to being perfect at everything. Children can either attempt to fit in with the stereotype they are given, or reject it. A typical problem created by others happens when an intellectually gifted child (usually a boy) becomes known as the 'little professor'. At six this reputation can bring glory, when classmates look up to him and teachers and parents find him 'cute'. Even though it is perhaps a little worrying that he has no friends, this is only to be 'expected' because of his superior thinking abilities and consequent boredom with others. But by the age of 15, having developed few social skills and being afflicted with the normal problems of adolescence, the gifted youth may in fact have been prepared for a life of loneliness.

The author's British follow-up study, started in 1974, of labelled gifted, non-labelled gifted and a random control group, took a deep counselling-style approach (Freeman, 2001). When the children were young, it was clear that the description of 'gifted' by the parents was often associated with the stereotyped behaviour expected of a gifted child and not just with ability. But statistical analysis showed that emotional problems were not associated with the possession of a gifted IQ score - rather with other circumstances of the child's life. Fortunately, over the years, many of the emotional differences between the groups disappeared. This may have been either because the labelled youngsters had grown out of their childhood problems or because as adults they had left the pressures and expectations of home and school behind them.

***Family attitudes*** All long-term studies on the development of exceptional talent have shown the cumulative effects of the interaction of family attitudes on the gifted child (e.g. Bloom; 1985; Heller, 1991; Freeman, 2000). Problems can arise because a child's gifts produce reactions in others which may be too difficult for the child to adjust to. For instance, in a family where the child is considerably more advanced than the siblings, the parents may become confused so that they act inconsistently and perhaps produce an exaggerated rivalry in the siblings.

The parents of gifted children can themselves have resulting emotional problems, either feeling inadequate or trying to gain social advantage from living vicariously through their

child. This may happen because a child is brighter than his or her parents, who may offer too much reverence to their exceptional youngster, feeling that the normal structuring of good parenting is inappropriate for such a 'genius'. Parents may also raise their all-round expectations, even though the child is only gifted in a specific area. Since no child can perform at a high level all the time, both fear of failure and feelings of failure and of disappointing the parents will inevitably occur, with possible poor emotional consequences. Whatever problems already exist in the family, these can sometimes be intensified when there is a gifted (and so unusual) child present (see Freeman, 2000).

It is the secondary effects - the problems caused by other people - which become more obvious during the adolescent years. This is not because the disturbing factors were not present earlier, but because the child's reactions to them are often more acceptable at an early age - an angry 8 year-old is not as difficult to cope with as an angry 15 year-old.

***Lopsided development*** Although it happens to most children, abilities in the gifted may develop at different and extreme rates (Terassier, 1985). This can bring difficulties of developmental coordination and balance, or parents may also raise their overall expectations, even though the child is only gifted in a specific area.

***Vocational challenges*** Youngsters who have a heightened perception of what could be done can set themselves impossible expectations. An example is a young child whose hands are not big enough to span an octave on the piano. She knows what it should sound like, but has to make a little jump between thumb and little finger, rather than bringing both down together - so that the sound is wrong. This can be intensely frustrating, stressful and discouraging. Without adequate emotional support, even the most talented child may simply give up.

Although some youngsters have specific gifts and thus can see their career route quite clearly, such as perhaps in music or physics, there are others who seem to be able to do almost anything to a high level. For them the stress of deciding what to do can be severe. Before he left school, one highly talented boy in the Freeman (2001) longitudinal study had acquired degree-level music qualifications, but he also had top marks in science. His dilemma was whether to study music or medicine. After great anguish, he decided to take the sensible option, medicine. The distress did not stop. He has now given up medicine and runs a music agency.

Schools do not always prepare their gifted pupils emotionally for university life, although many of the students will be exceptionally young when they get there. Freeman (2001) found that the transition from the relatively structured and disciplined school day to the freedom of university life sometimes brought emotional problems. Quite a number in her sample complained of feelings of inertia, and of lack of concentration and motivation, once they had passed the magic barrier to all that had been held up to them as the ultimate goal in life - university.

***Gender*** has emerged as the strongest single variable across many studies of exceptional achievement, and it has a decided emotional root. Not only do boys and girls respond differently to their educational experiences, but also to their measured abilities. Even today, gifted girls in mixed-sex schools sometimes feel that if they show their brilliance they will not be seen as feminine. What is more, while boys tend to react to failure by becoming disruptive, girls tend to react by becoming withdrawn, and so it is the boy's response which is likely to attract the most teacher attention (Galloway & Goodwin, 1987). When selection of children as gifted is made subjectively, whether by teachers or parents, more boys are chosen than girls. However, mentoring and action to improve self-esteem have been found to be

effective in promoting a more realistic presentation of girls' abilities (Noble, et al, 1999; Heller & Ziegler, 1996).

**Pressure to succeed** The gifted are sometimes under extra pressure from parents and teachers to be continually academically successful leaving them feeling intellectually unexercised. Youngsters are sometimes pushed into the competitive race for advancement - a race in which their other abilities may wither by working too hard in too narrow a field, as well as sacrificing leisure interests. Too much competitive striving can build up a ruthless, aggressive outlook. The dilemma for educationalists is that development of a playful, creative approach to their work and general outlook may thus be stunted (Cropley, 1995, Sternberg & Lubart, 1995). Additionally, their time to find out about life at their own pace and in their own ways can be drastically reduced - a situation often complained about by the subjects of the follow-up of 1964-1968 Presidential Scholars in America (Kaufman, 1992). Although the ex-scholars continued to do well, they often described how they relied on school-type achievement to provide them with an identity.

**Defences** In their exceptionality and their sensitivity, the gifted sometimes construct complex, inhibiting psychological defences against expected hurt (Freud, 1937). A common variety is to hide behind academic, intellectual walls of their own making, implying that they are too clever to have normal relationships with ordinary people. Alternatively, when school lessons are too easy, they see themselves as wasting time, and so never learn the routines of work discipline, which can be difficult to pick up later resulting in poor university results. Freeman (2001) found in her in-depth study, that in their exceptionality and sensitivity, the gifted sometimes constructed extremely complex, inhibiting psychological barriers to relationships with others.

**Boredom** is a particular problem for the gifted child with a curious mind in a normal classroom, who may try anything to relieve this unpleasant experience (Freeman, 1993). Boredom is not apathy; it is a real emotion, which comes from low spirits and from the anger of frustration. It drains energy, and is demoralising and maladaptive to the individual. It can also become a habit, developed in early childhood, so that an individual learns to expect it, and so interprets too many experiences in that way. Functioning at an unnaturally low level all the time can result in stress and anxiety. Gifted children, like any others, need the enjoyable stimulation of variety, as well as the excitement that can come from playing with ideas, but when lessons are too easy, they lose the satisfaction of tackling and resolving problems. To compensate, they may deliberately provoke disturbance, either in their own minds or among others in the classroom - just to taste the spice of stimulation.

Because the gifted and talented learn more quickly and in greater depth, the primary educational problem is access to appropriate educational provision. It is not only the content of what they receive which is important, but the manner in which it is presented, which may not be in accord with their style of learning or interests. Like all other children, the gifted need *consistent* challenge, and may spend too much time 'filling-in' with exercises, because they have finished before the rest of the class. Normal classroom work can be too easy for them, so that they can develop poor work habits along with the dangerous habit of being bored.

**Specialist education** The gifted may be given separate specialist education, such as at a music school, which brings its own particular stresses of intense competition and long hours of work. Or they may be grade-skipped by a year or more, which often enhances the normal emotional problems of growing up - others may forget the child's chronological age so that

he or she evolves a self-image of being both small and inadequate. These problems are not so apparent for small children, but later, in adolescence, the social expectations of classmates may not be in tune with those of parents. Particularly for boys, their apparently late physical development (and never being picked for the sports team) encourages their image as 'egg-heads', hopeless at everything that is not school learning. The success of acceleration is very dependent on the context in which it is done, e.g. the flexibility of the system, how many others in a school are accelerated, the child's level of maturation, and the emotional support the child receives. In some schools it may be the only route, but unless a child is particularly mature it is not in general to be recommended.

### ***Counselling for the emotional welfare of gifted pupils includes –***

- Educationally, the particular needs of the gifted change as they grow up. These include the problems of acceleration and possible alternatives, such as enrichment or part-time withdrawal. Arranging out-of-school activities for highly able pupils from different schools in the area, such as weekend activities, competitions, or summer camps, where they can meet and relax with others like themselves.
- Psychologically, helping youngsters to deal with boredom, expectations that may not be welcome, perfectionist tendencies and being true to themselves as gifted individuals. Giving them trust to share their feelings and ideas.
- Arranging a system of mentoring. This means that a carefully selected adult with particular expertise takes a special interest in a highly able youngster. The child may, for example, work alongside a scientist in a laboratory doing original research. This often has additional positive emotional effects.
- Coordinating facilities for enrichment in education, including extra courses, specialist advisors and events for gifted pupils. If the level is high, pupils can be self-selecting, avoiding the hazards of selection by test identification.
- Working towards a school atmosphere in which attention and provision for the gifted and talented is a normal and natural aspect of differentiated education for all pupils.
- Concern with vocational guidance - it cannot begin too early - and provision and encouragement for youngsters to pursue interests which might be different from traditional ones.
- Encouragement for the gifted to a healthy balance between their activities in the curricular and extracurricular to help improve their interpersonal skills.

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