

# **Psycho-social Needs: Understanding The Emotional, Intellectual and Social Uniqueness Of Growing Up Gifted**

**By Lesley Sword (© 2001)  
Director, Gifted & Creative Services Australia Pty Ltd**

## **Abstract**

Gifted children not only think differently to other children, they also feel differently. Their intellectual complexity combines with their emotional intensity to give them a qualitatively different way of experiencing the world. This unique perspective of life has a profound impact on their social relationships with age peers. In addition, personality characteristics such as idealism, expanded moral awareness and introversion set them further apart. For gifted childrens' social and emotional wellbeing, it is imperative that these differences are understood as "normal for gifted" by teachers and parents and that they be helped to find true intellectual peers. In this way they will be able to express their unique selves in the world.

## **Introduction**

As a clinical psychologist working with gifted people of all ages, I know that most bright people don't like the word "gifted"; probably because it has connotations of high achievement and they don't relate to it. I have come to regard it as a clinical label which, like all labels, is associated with a conceptual framework or model that can obscure the individual to whom it is applied. This paper will examine some characteristics that are associated with giftedness, however it is important to remember that how these characteristics combine and are expressed is different in each gifted person.

When we use the label "gifted" we mean people of well above average intelligence. Just as there are people of well below average intelligence whose thinking and feeling are very different from that of the general population, so too there are people of well above average intelligence whose thinking and feeling are also very different; more complex and of greater depth. It is the combination of complex and deep thinking and rich and intense emotion that produces the gifted persons' greater potential for high achievement. The gifted intellect provides a myriad of possibilities and sees ideals and the gifted emotions provide the intense drive towards the ideals. Supporting each other, they produce the strong will to achieve.

## **Intellectual Complexity: Being Out Of Step With Age Peers**

Gifted children are more advanced intellectually than their age peers. They can reason more rapidly and accurately with complex abstract material and this exceptional reasoning ability enables them to be more perceptive and insightful; grasping the essential elements of situations. Insightfulness leads to unusual approaches to problem finding, problem solving and unusual solutions that are often not appreciated by others. Their rapid learning rate is associated with an unusual memory and excellent retention of facts.

This means there is a need for constant mental stimulation and if this need is not met, problems with boredom can result. Intellectual complexity means being able to perceive multitudinous relationships in all things and this leads to a need for precise facts and exactitude. Demand for accuracy, exactness, precision of thought and expression leads them to be argumentative and can be a social liability.

For gifted children, nothing is as simple as it seems and so precision is needed to help sort out relationships and to enable decision making. True/false and multiple choice questions are extremely difficult for gifted children who see clearly that the answer depends on the context - they see endless shades of grey, not black and white. Seeing many layers of meaning in each situation, they quickly pick up mixed messages in social situations that leaves them very confused and embarrassed.

Gifted children have more intellectual curiosity and their need to understand drives them to seek knowledge. They need to make sense of the world, to understand the world, to create their own world. They also have a need to understand themselves, who they are, what makes them who they are, how they work.

As analytical thinkers, gifted children excel at critical examination: they can take things apart in their minds and see all the intricate ways that things could be improved. Acute self-awareness results when this critical examination is turned inward and focussed on themselves and they will be inclined to worry a great deal and be very critical of themselves. Intellectual complexity that is different from age peers can create great inner tension for gifted children. They can feel "different", "out of place" "don't fit in" "an alien". They can experience feelings of isolation and aloneness. This internal tension is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties such as a lack of conformity to cultural expectations based on chronological age, problems in relating to age peers, and preference for older companions. (Silverman 1993)

Lack of understanding of the nature and significance of gifted childrens' intellectual differences can result in their being seen as "weird" or "bad". Without understanding, gifted children may try to ignore or deny their differences and this can lead to social isolation and emotional problems. If they do not understand their intellectual differences they will have difficulty in seeing them as positive and can develop low self esteem. Discussion of individual difference can promote valuing of their differences as a positive resource in gifted childrens' lives. Discussing difference to help gifted children better understand giftedness focuses less on the label and more on the accompanying behaviours e.g. quick learning ability; sensitivity to others' problems. It also prevents the child from equating better learner with better person.

Teachers and parents can use gifted childrens' insightfulness by talking to the exceptional reasoning part of gifted children, asking them to solve their own problems and encouraging them to use insight into problems to promote change. This develops the inner resources for

problem resolution and builds self confidence.

Of course, it is vitally important that gifted children be helped to find intellectual peers; others who share their curiosity, interests and values.

### **Emotional Intensity: The Energy That Drives The Gifted Intellect**

In the field of gifted education it is often not well known that giftedness has an emotional as well as an intellectual aspect. Gifted children not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently. Michael Piechowski explains this difference in feeling as intensity; an expanded field of subjective experience. "Intensity, in particular, must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic. It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding-a way of being quiveringly alive". (cited in Silverman, 1993. p. 3)

Emotional intensity can be understood as a positive characteristic for gifted children in the context of Dabrowski's theory of emotional development. Emotional development is a function of the interaction between the individual's developmental potential and environment. Developmental potential comprises a person's talents, intelligence, five forms of psychic overexcitability and the capacity for inner transformation. (Dabrowski 1972; Piechowski 1979)

Overexcitability is a heightened capacity to respond to stimuli of various types. The term overexcitability was chosen to convey the idea that the stimulation is well beyond average in intensity and duration. Overexcitabilities can be thought of as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual and emotional energy that can result in creative endeavours as well as advanced emotional and ethical development in adulthood. As such, they are a positive force for the gifted, as they feed, enrich, empower and amplify talent. (Piechowski 1999)

Overexcitabilities are assumed to be innate and appear in five forms:

Psychomotor - surplus of energy, restless, curious

Sensual - sensory and aesthetic pleasure

Intellectual - strong signs of analysis and synthesis, theoretical thinking, probing questions, learning, problem solving

Imaginational - vivid fantasy life, spontaneous imagery, sensitive to imaginary realities

Emotional - intensity of feeling; complex emotions and feelings, extremes of emotion, sensitivity, identification with the feelings of others, difficulty adjusting to change.

(Dabrowski 1972; Piechowski, cited in Silverman, 1993)

Emotional intensity is positively correlated with intelligence and so the higher the intellectual level, the more emotionally intense a gifted child will be. Emotional intensity is expressed by the gifted through a wide range of feelings, attachments. compassion, heightened sense of responsibility and scrupulous self-examination. While these are normal for the gifted and appear very early in gifted children, they are often mistaken for emotional immaturity rather than as evidence of a rich inner life. (Piechowski & Colangelo 1984)

## **Forms And Expression Of Emotional Intensity.**

Intensity of feeling: positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, laughing and crying together

Somatic (bodily) expression: tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing

Inhibition: timidity, shyness

Strong affective memory

Fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt

Concerns with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Relationship feelings: emotional ties and attachments, concern for others (empathy), sensitivity in relationships, attachment to animals, difficulty in adjusting to new environments, loneliness, conflicts with others over depth of relationship

Feelings toward self: self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority

(Piechowski 1979)

If gifted children do not understand that emotional intensity is normal for them, they may see their intense inner experiences as evidence that something is wrong with them. Other children may ridicule a gifted child for reacting strongly to an apparently trivial incident, thereby increasing the child's feeling of being odd. Also, sensitivity to society's injustice and hypocrisy can lead many emotionally intense gifted children to feel despair and cynicism at very young ages.

Gifted children need the significant adults in their lives to understand that it is natural for them to feel deeply and intensely and to experience a wide range of emotions and not interpret their intensity as over reaction or emotional immaturity. It is important to take time to listen to their feelings and appreciate their sensitivities, intensities and passions. However, gifted children need to realise that sensitivity does not mean weakness and so they should not be over protected from the world and from the consequence of their actions.

Teachers and parents can help emotionally intense gifted children to accept their rich inner world of experience and value it as a strength. If emotional intensity is seen and presented positively to gifted children, they can be helped to understand and value their emotions. In this way they will be empowered to express their unique selves in the world and use their gifts and talents with confidence and joy.

## **Idealism Not Perfectionism**

idealism in the gifted is inextricably linked to exceptional abstract reasoning ability. Idealism is an abstract intellectual concept; a vision of what is possible, what could be. It is a positive quality - the driving energy that propels gifted children forward towards achievement. Problems arise when idealism becomes perfectionism: when what could be becomes what should be - an imperative!

Perfectionism can be observed in very young gifted children because of the lack of synchrony between their intellectual and physical development. This lack of synchronicity creates great

inner tension, as when a five-year old child perceives a horse through eight-year-old eyes but cannot replicate the horse in clay with her five-year-old fingers and so screams in frustration. (Morelock 1992)

The gap between a child's advanced intellectual capability and more age-appropriate social and physical skills can lead to unrealistic expectations for performance by both gifted children and their parents and teachers. Young children become frustrated when their limited physical capabilities prevent the construction of the complex projects created by their extremely capable intellect. Adults expecting social maturity to match high level intellectual development may label a highly articulate, logical child as a behaviour problem when he or she exhibits an age-appropriate tantrum. (Roedell 1984)

Often adults in gifted children's lives, directly or implicitly, reinforce perfectionism by placing on them, expectations of high performance all the time in everything. Because gifted children are often emotionally sensitive to the expectations of others, they feel obliged to meet them. Unfortunately, they often meet them at the cost of denial and suppression of their own passion, their own self. (Grant & Piechowski 1999)

Perfectionism can also be applied to the gifted self. Ideal standards of thinking and behaviour are set that propel gifted children towards higher level self development. However, problems can arise when they are not able to live up to these standards and blame themselves for not being good enough. Gifted children rarely compare themselves with their classmates. Instead they tend to think of what they know in relation to what there is to know on any given subject and find themselves lacking. They are highly self critical and over reactive to the criticism of others. They express dissatisfaction with themselves; they see what "ought to be" in themselves and they can be unhappy with "what is". They have a vision of perfectionism that they measure themselves against and they can become despondent sometimes even depressed, at their perceived failure. (Silverman 1993)

Teachers and parents can foster idealism by explaining it to gifted children and that resources, including time, are not unlimited and therefore perfection is not possible. Also, that while ability may be innate, skills are built up over time by experience. It is important that gifted children are encouraged to explore the process of learning and not only focus on the outcome. It is also helpful to present mistakes as learning experiences and to teach them how to set priorities it is not possible to be a perfectionist in all things at once.

### **Expanded Moral Awareness: The Potential For Advanced Emotional And Ethical Development**

Moral concern can be observed in even very young gifted children and is an expression of intellectual intensity. When combined with sensitivity and empathy, which are expressions of emotional intensity it is transformed into moral commitment.

Smutny (1998) explains how gifted children feel deeply for others. "They sense the joys, pains, sorrows and hopes of family members, friends, classmates and sometimes become distressed when they cannot alleviate the problems of others.....gifted children will often weep at the cruel treatment of an animal. They will frequently ask questions and express concern about world problems - poverty, war, environmental devastation". (p10) This empathy for the

suffering of others makes gifted children particularly vulnerable to the many forms of insensitivity they see on television, at school or in the world around them. Often these children feel powerless to act and this sense of helplessness can lead them to despair and being critical of themselves as they feel a responsibility for these situations.

Because of their intellectual complexity, gifted children are able to consider the possibilities of how things in the world might be. At the same time they can see how far short the world is falling of their ideal and they feel keen disappointment and sometimes despair. When they try to share their concerns with others, they are often met with reactions such as denial, minimising, puzzlement or hostility. (Webb 1998)

DeLisle (1992 ) points out that today's generation of children is the first one in history to receive news about the world, about crises, at the same time as world leaders. "With the flash of a news bulletin.... undigested raw material is laid before the eyes and minds of children who mat be left on their own to consider its ramifications". (p169) Gifted children, who have a heightened moral awareness can respond to this with concern, fear, anxiety and a sense of profound helplessness.

It is important for educators to explain and explore some of the world's problems and possible solutions. As gifted children are concerned about political and social problems, values and moral ethics, they need to be exposed early to areas of the curriculum, such as Science and Social Studies and Philosophy, where these issues can be explored. (VanTassel – Baska 1998) Educators of gifted children should nurture consciousness, concern, personal responsibility and commitment so that these students will feel equipped to use their talents towards the resolution of global problems. (Passow 1988) Gifted children can also be encouraged to undertake projects or community service to alleviate their sense of helplessness.

### **The Gifted Introvert: The Rule Rather Than The Exception**

In western society, extraverts outnumber introverts 3 to 1, are more vocal than introverts and are more understandable than introverts. However, it appears that introversion increases with intelligence so that the majority of gifted children are introverts. (Silverman 1988)

Introversion and extraversion are personality types: two complementary ways of operating in the world. The extravert's main interests are with the outer world of people and things while the introvert is more involved in the inner world of concepts and ideas.

People have both introversion and extraversion in their personalities and so are not limited either to the inner world or the outer world. But they have a natural preference for either introversion or extraversion rather like a preference for right or left handedness. The preference can be slight or quite marked. Introversion and extraversion are aspects of human personalities and should not be labelled right or wrong, nor should one be judged better or worse than the other.

#### **Essential Differences Between Introverts And Extraverts**

##### **Introverts**

Get energy from inside themselves

Real world is the inner world of

##### **Extraverts**

Get energy from interaction outside

Real world is the outer world of

ideas, understanding and meaning

People of ideas and abstract invention,  
difficult to understand, often shy

Have a public and private self

Intense and passionate, tend to bottle  
up emotions

Feel drained by people, need privacy

Have a few close friends

Quiet in large groups, fear humiliation

Can concentrate intensely

Mentally rehearse before speaking,  
need time to make decisions

Learn by observing, live life only when  
they understand it

Go from considering to doing and back  
to considering

Silverman (1993)

people and things

People of action and practical  
achievement, easy to understand,  
often sociable

Are the same in public and in private

Expansive and less impassioned,  
unload emotions as they go along

Feel energised by people; feel drained by  
being alone

Make lots of friends easily

Outspoken in groups, take risks

Can be distracted easily

Think out loud, make decisions quickly

Learn by doing, understand life after they  
have lived it

Go from doing to considering and back  
to doing

Because of their focus on their inner world, introverts tend not to learn by trial and error. They understand through observation and prefer not to act or respond without thoughtful consideration. Introverts will take in information and perhaps ask a few clarifying questions. They will not frequently interrupt with questions and comments as most extraverts are prone to do. Introverts need time “to digest” information before responding to it. They characteristically pause before action. This pause, often called hesitation by others, gives them time to study and classify a new situation so the action taken will make sense in the long run.

Introverts prefer to work with people individually rather than in large groups. They are likely to go deeply into their work and are reluctant to call it finished and when they do display their work they tend to give only their conclusions, without details of what they did. They need time to reflect, time to ponder possible solutions to problems and time to let emotions settle down before they can talk about them.

Tensions can develop when the introvert is in the minority in the classroom; where the prevailing climate is set by the predominant extraverts. If too much togetherness with others is demanded the development of ideas is inhibited. Also introverts need time to reflect on a question before answering and in an analysis of taped classroom discussion, it was found that teachers tend to wait less than one second for students to reply to their questions. (Rowe 1974 cited in VanTassel – Baska 1998)

Parents and teachers need to appreciate personality differences and understand that they lead to differences in points of view. They should not try to turn introverts into extraverts; introversion

is perfectly normal and does not need “curing”. Using this understanding they can foster discussion so that explanations of personality both affirm and challenge children. Introverted gifted children need to be provided with opportunities to talk without pressure and be given quiet space, time out, privacy and time to reflect. Introverts have a deep, inherent need for privacy, they get embarrassed easily by either public censure or praise. It is also vital to understand the importance of maintaining their confidentiality.

If introversion is understood and accepted, gifted children have a place in which to be themselves. But if children suspect that their teachers or parents want them to be different, to go against their introversion, then the children lose trust and confidence in themselves. When others are accepting of their introversion, gifted children will be able to learn how to extravert when necessary because they know that they are always free to be introverts.

## **Conclusion**

As teachers and parents we often focus on the intellect at the expense of the emotions. However, neglect of the emotional lives of children impacts on their intellectual achievements as emotions are critical to the learning process and to the full development of the individual. Gifted children have powerful resources to support themselves emotionally but they need help to apply their critical thinking, reasoning ability, inventiveness, imagination and willingness to explore to their own emotional intensity and sensitivity. They have not yet lived long enough to develop the objectivity that this would require. Parents and teachers are in the best position to help gifted children to alleviate their fears, frustrations, sadness and self - doubt by teaching them to use their prodigious intellectual abilities to support their emotional richness. (Silverman 1988)

It is vitally important to their intellectual achievement and to their emotional development that gifted children understand themselves and that they feel accepted, understood and supported by others. This means that the adults in their lives must accept and value their own intellectual and emotional experience so that they can be positive role models for gifted children. Gifted children need the help of significant adults in their lives to accept their intellectual differences and their rich inner world of experience and value them as strengths. In this way they will be empowered to express their unique selves in the world and use their gifts and talents with confidence and joy.

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Lesley Sword  
www.giftedservices.com.au

Gifted & Creative Services Australia  
20 Kestrel Court Vic 3201 Australia

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