


Navigating the Challenges and Opportunities of Parenting the Gifted and Talented Child

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Context: A Starting Point


- Being gifted is a gift—unless you are the one experiencing it first hand (both blessing and burden)
- Gifted have a tendency to look outwardly for approval and inwardly for blame
- May experience unique pressures to 'perform' as if the spotlight is always on—even when alone
- The gifted individual employs a somewhat bifurcated approach to life (rational and emotional)
- Solutions must be epiphany based to mitigate perceived threat against the social personality and related pushback
- The greatest risk is the social risk, and the greatest challenges for educators and parents alike are socioemotional
- Gifted tend to be great starters, but at times lack discipline for follow through (beginnings are always fun!)
- It becomes magnified through the lifespan and pronounced during adolescence
- Things come naturally—without having to work hard.

A Gifted Child Speaks

Just because gifted kids or any kids are different doesn't mean we are wrong or bad. Just because we aren't average, doesn't mean we are bad. Gifted kids always seem to stand out, and get singled out. It sure seems safer and better to be average and be like everybody else in school.

Socializing in school just sucks because most often nobody seems to understand what I am talking about. It always seems to be over their head or they don't understand what I'm talking about so I need explain it to them, and then I get called a know-it-all. It makes me misunderstood.

From crushingtalent.com



Your Concerns

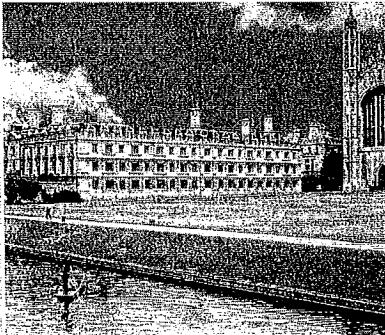
- We know that the popular sentiment that the gifted can fend for themselves because they are smart and resourceful is the stuff of myth and legend
- Typical issues associated with development are magnified and increase exponentially with age – from Pre-K to postgraduate. It does not get better without purposeful intervention.
- Giftedness is a gift so long as you are not the one struggling with it—it is both gift and burden. Even more so as one ages.
- What are some of your concerns that extend beyond the classroom walls? What will your child need to be successful in finding balance and a sense of well being in general?

The Gifted and Talented Postsecondary Experience: Out of the Frying Pan...

For many gifted and talented individuals, the university represents somewhat of an idealized panacea, in which, among like-minded persons, the student is to become free from the trappings of giftedness.

However, our experiential understanding of postsecondary life leads us to believe that the university is merely a reflection of the greater society, and thus it is as much Pandora's Box as it is panacea.

Things never get easier, do they?

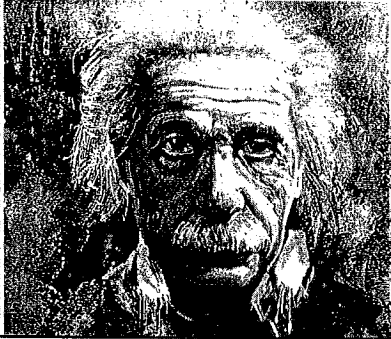


A Host of Challenges

- Fear of making the wrong decision
- Coping with 'not being the best'
- Coping with 'failure' – and leaving
- Having to work—possibly for the first time
- Cultivating sound habits of mind and practice
- Developing resiliency skills and realistic understandings of the environment to make the most of the experience
- Finding out where one belongs and creating a viable network of support
- So what do we do between *you* and *me*?

Some Perspective from Tolan

"Whoever gifted adults may be, they are not people with talents that should be developed, but they are people with unusual minds. Gifted children do not disappear when they graduate from high school or finish college or graduate degrees. They become gifted adults. If they enter adulthood blind to their unusual mental capacities, they may go through their lives fragmented, frustrated, unfulfilled and alienated from their innermost beings."

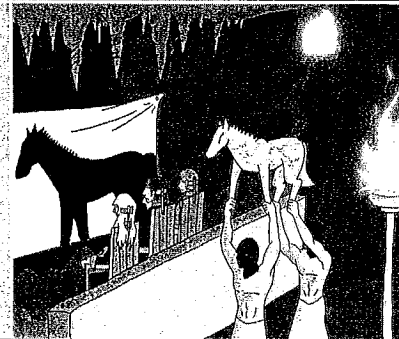


Into the Light: Understanding the Gifted Using Plato's Allegory of the Cave

In many ways, the gifted and talented are akin to the imprisoned featured in Plato's Allegory. Their perceptions are shaped by shadow, distortion and exaggerated interpretation emerging from their unique neurobiology and socio-affective characteristics.

Thus, one of the most important duties parents of the gifted have is to help bring them into daylight and offer them a quality of life with a lesser degree of anxiety and intensity.

The same neurochemistry that fuels all we love about the gifted in the classroom and at home can wreak havoc internally. That is why counseling the gifted takes all the king's horses and all the king's men.



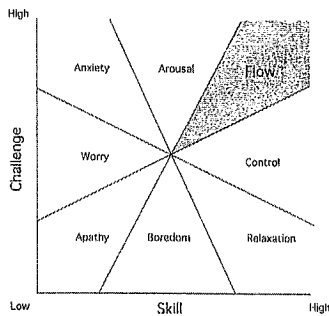
Cognitive Factors Effecting Postsecondary and Career Pursuits

- Neurological Characteristics and Physiology:
 - Brain thrives on complexity and problem solving
 - Emotional/affective nature of the learning experience
 - The chemistry of learning, memory and problem solving
 - Nature of the 'Gifted Brain'
 - 'Brain on Fire' – always on. Always worried. Attention turns.
 - Multimodal thinkers/organizational skills. But disorganized.
 - Hypersensitive brains. Prone to giving up easily. Too easily.
 - Vivid impressions and lasting recollections. Praise and criticism.
 - 'Cognitive Flypaper'. Not knowing when to quit.

Socio-Affective Factors Impacting Postsecondary and Career Pursuits

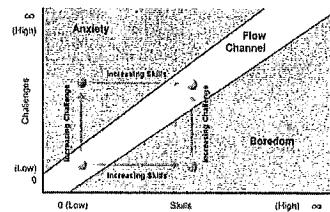
- Gifted/High-Achieving/Creative Pupils in the Conventional 21st – Century Classroom
- Relevant Affective/Socio-emotional Characteristics
 - Intensity (and feeling unheard/lost)
 - Perfectionism (taking it hard)
 - Asynchrony (catching up, finally?)
 - Hypersensitivity (reluctance to admit/disbelief in own giftedness)
 - Anxiety (times 20 and on your own)
- Social Constructivism/Collaboration
- Distorted/Exaggerated Expectations (of self/others)
- Look outward for approval, inward for blame/self doubt
- Metacognition: Need for Process/Problem Solving
- Lack of organizational skills/study habits (what does it mean when I have to apply myself?)

Understanding Flow: Passion of the Gifted and Talented in School and Home



Immersing one's self in flow can be a double-edged sword, especially when one must come to grips with the fact that non-stop flow is not possible. Dealing with routine and boredom is a skill quite desperately needed in the classroom and at home.

Understanding Flow: Passion of the Gifted and Talented



Flow is a neurochemical state and better represented as a channel that one enters and exits throughout the day. A little goes a long way.

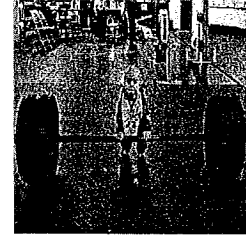
Challenge 1: Multipotentiality

- Leonardo da Vinci, for example
- Multiple interests and abilities across domains
- Capable of success in many professions
- May cause stress and anxiety; confusion and over scheduling for fear of 'missing something'
- Social alienation; purposelessness; apathy and depression
- Many university students compelled to choose a specialization (major) before being allowed to sample disciplines
- *Multipotentiality* or lack of decision-making skills?



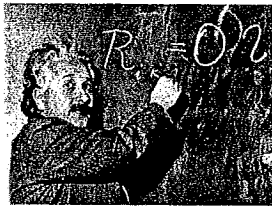
Challenge 2: Perfectionism/Unrealistic Expectations

- Own worst enemies
- Exaggerated expectations of self and others
- Cannot forgive themselves/ mismatched efforts
- Anxiety, fear of failure and underachievement
- Risk burnout and indecision
- Must pursue personal fulfillment (versus expectations of others)
- Emphasis on particular life pathways or careers



Challenge 3: Underachieving Gifted and Talented

- Patterns of underachievement that are contextually and time sensitive
- Need for strong mentorship and focus on strengths and interests
- Recognize potential and need for special attention in postsecondary and career planning
- Research suggests that 65 percent of underachievers blossomed later in life (in college or thereafter) – incentive for focused counseling

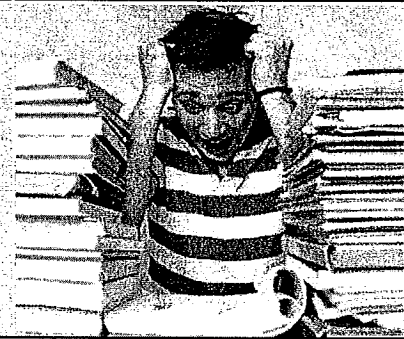


Executive Functions and the Gifted Individual

Executive functions are 'those cognitive processes that allow people to plan, organize, make decisions, pay attention and regulate behavior' (Felder, 2017).

Recalling the manifold impacts that gifted neurochemistry has on the socioemotional/affective domain, it is no wonder that problems in this area can lead to negative self-concept and exacerbating perfectionist tendencies.

These impacts are by no means linear. If left unattended, they will magnify logarithmically throughout the lifespan, making giftedness more struggle than gift.



Challenge 4: Cultivating and Supporting Executive Function (EF)

- The frontal lobe's 'CEO'
- Dependent upon three types of brain function: (1) working memory; (2) mental flexibility; and (3) self control
- Executive function must be **cultivated** (skills not innate) and are hindered by toxic stress that **disrupts brain architecture and development of EF**.
- Skills must be developed in diverse environments, including home and school.

Source: Harvard University, 2017

Routine, Ambiguity and Anxiety

Neurochemically speaking, departure from routine is difficult for the gifted individual, especially if the pathway is ambiguous or where the chance of success is undetermined.

Ambiguity tends to activate the survival mechanism (fight, flight or freeze) and the associated adrenaline and cortisol that signals the brain to focus can produce an unpleasant experience we are trained to avoid.

Thus, the trick is to remove the danger from the unknown and to provide a sense of stability and predictability moving forward.



Executive Functions (A Partial List)

- Inhibition of impulse (lengthen the fuse)
- Previewing consequences
- Holding and manipulating information in working memory
- Sustaining attention
- Planning in the short and longer term
- Saliency determination
- Task initiation
- Depth of processing
- Tempo control (speed of work)
- Automaticity (skills that do not require conscious effort)
- Satisfaction (real, not temporary)
- Organization and time management
- Flexibility
- Self monitoring
- Metacognition
- Emotional self regulation

Supporting the Development of EF

- Remember the 'epiphany-based' brain
- Make success less abstract and addictive by helping to establish short-term achievable goals that aggregate up
- Clarity is paramount – ambiguity not so much
- Praise with specificity to stem the flow of cognitive lava and to control the impulse to overreact
- No 'one-size-fits-all' – this is a build to suit

Challenge 5: Improving Resilience

- Improve frustration tolerance (lengthen the fuse—pause before reacting)
- Use the great 'thinking brain' (rational approach to emotional problems)
- Form a realistic view of self and abilities (and reinforce)
- Scaffold and support weaknesses (offer structure in building abilities) – break things up
- Set up opportunities for success (cognitively and emotionally addictive—build competence and confidence)

Proactive Strategies for Emotional Readiness

- Active listening versus questioning or informing (power balance)
- 'Attending' to the speaker and affirming attention to needs (complete physical connection and affirmation of what one hears)
- Summarizing what one hears and resisting the urge to 'fix' – being heard is often more important than being 'fixed'
- Avoiding unsolicited self discussion or disclosure. The listener must be 'taught' by the speaker as the former may have not experienced feelings with same intensity
- Facilitated heterogeneous small group discussions designed to identify commonalities; promote affirmation; develop skills in articulating concerns; and provide information about available resources

Source: Peterson, 2003, and others

Proactive Strategies for Emotional Readiness

- Entering the world of the gifted person with fidelity and without judgment
- Facilitated group projects that encourage and enhance collaboration and resiliency by incorporating structured 'downtime' to play and socialize
- Parent mutual support groups—not solely to support the needs of students, but to serve as resources and sympathetic ears (can be, but do not necessarily have to be facilitated) – informal and formal
- Speakers and panels to address specific socioemotional concerns or anxieties about postsecondary education/career

Source: Peterson, 2003, and others

Suggestions for Parenting the Gifted and Talented

- Appreciate the interconnectivity between the cognitive (intellectual) and socioemotional elements of your children's lives and recognize the catalysts for perfectionist behaviors
- Talk about perfectionism and what it means to him/her
- Help your children set realistic expectations and understand perfectionism to be a personality trait that can be harmful
- Set realistic expectations for yourself
- Guide the establishment of priorities, including mental and physical well being
- Learn to celebrate mistakes and point out successful—but imperfect—role models
- Use mistakes as learning experiences and as information to move forward (not ends)
- Establish high, but realistic standards –but offer that not everyone will understand or conform to them
- Discuss negative emotions and intense frustration as normal when expressed and managed in healthy ways
- Enhance self-evaluation skills (realism)
- Inherent value of dignity and self-worth (unconditional)

Source (in part): RIAGE, 2016

Parenting the Gifted: Responses to Stress

POSITIVE

- Change the source of stress and confront it as needed (change the thought—walk away—exercise)
- Talk about stress to rid yourself of the frustration that accompanies it – find a good listener
- Shift perspectives on stress and attempt to see the humor in stressful situations (or at least contextualize them appropriately)
- Acquire skills that enhance the ability to work in stress-free ways (time management, organization)
- Ignore the source of stress (albeit temporarily)

NEGATIVE

- Withdrawal and permanent avoidance (escapism through dangerous avenues, including substance abuse)
- Selecting strategies to avoid failure
- Aiming 'too low' to achieve perfection or reduce anxieties
- Purposeful overloading of activities, commitments and tasks (actually has dual purposes)
- Watch for signs of burnout and 'hitting the wall'

You Know it Ain't Easy...

- Help with understanding the intellectual, socioemotional and existential through stages of development – especially during transitional periods
- Help develop a realistic sense of self-concept
- Help your children become whole people, and help them understand themselves holistically
- Show patience, acceptance and encouragement
- Encourage flexibility and appropriate behavior
- Help with understanding following rules versus conforming
- Let them live their own lives inasmuch as is possible – know when to stand back
- Be available!

Questions and Discussion

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