



IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S WE

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*Exploring the
Power of Peer
Relationships
in Unwrapping
Gifted and
Talented
Education*

UC San Diego

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WE KNEW IT BACK THEN

"This difficulty of the gifted child in forming friendships is largely a result of the infrequency of persons who are like-minded. The more intelligent a person is, regardless of age, the less often can he find a truly congenial companion. The average child finds playmates in plenty who can think and act on a level congenial to him, because there are so many average children."

(Hollingworth, 1936)

Adapted from M. Gross, 2017



LETA S. HOLLINGWORTH



THE NATURE OF TRUE FRIENDSHIP

*Forming
trusting and
lasting
relationships
can prove
challenging if
one cannot
freely exhibit
what (really)
lies inside.*

*True friends
love you for
who you are
and are content
to let you be
you.*

*Even if you are
not—and you
don't.*

WHY BOTHER WITH RELATIONSHIPS ANYWAY?

- Although they can prove frustrating in the best of circumstances, as humans, **we all need to engage in relationships with others** to some extent. *Why?*
- **We are hard-wired to engage in human relationships:** cooperation and collaboration with others helped to guarantee our survival in harsh environmental circumstances
- In fact, neuroscientific research suggests that our **ability/memory improves through the process of teaching others**
- **We are shaped by our social environment** (our definition/understanding of self is more of a social phenomenon than we'd imagined: medial prefrontal cortex)
- **CVESD priority** and an important theme that cuts across education from TK to postgraduate

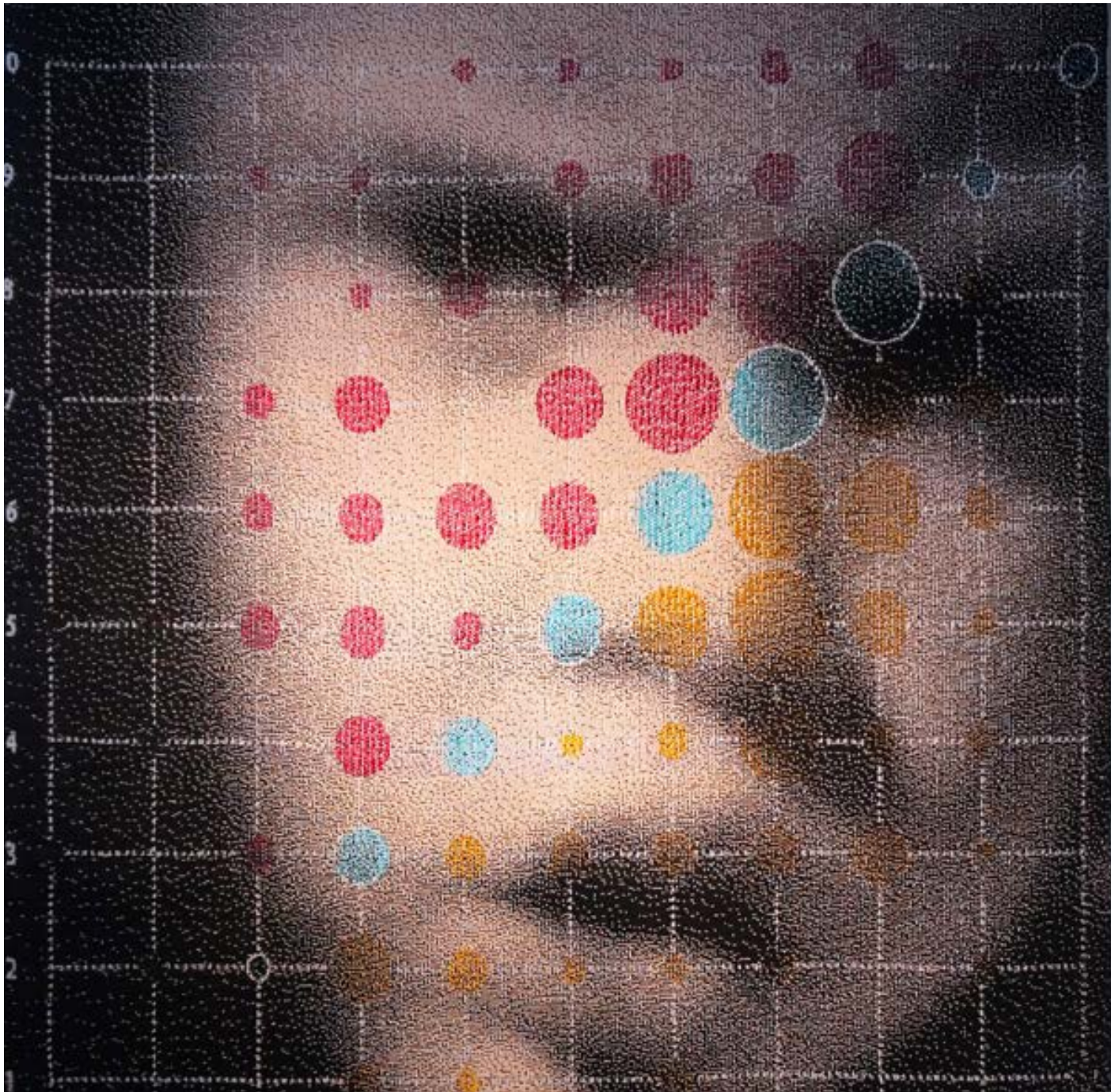
FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION

From your vantage points as parents, why are trusting peer relationships particularly important for gifted and talented children/young adults?

SOCIOEMOTIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

■ *Recall that for many gifted and talented individuals:*

- Sense of always being under the **spotlight**
- Look **outwardly** for approval
- Look **inwardly** for culpability
- **Impenetrable suit of armor**: 'everything is okay' (even when it isn't)
- Greatest risk is the **social risk** (exposing one's true self to others) and dedication to **avoidance of rejection**
- **Asynchrony** and **great care/difficulty** in pursuing friendships
- Nature of gifted relationships (can feel somewhat obsessive)
- **Intensity** and concomitant issues (physical manifestations)
- Nonstop processing tendencies, second guessing and sporadic **discomfort in one's own skin**
- **Perfectionism** and related: **Impostor Syndrome**
- Tendency toward **Introversion** (but not always)



I SECOND THAT EMOTION

To help gifted and talented children better cope with intensity, it is important that teachers and parents explain that heightened response to their surroundings is both unique and normal. This will facilitate understanding of self and peers in the quest to establish relationships. Channel it positively.

SOCIOEMOTIONAL CONTEXT FOR THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

- *Recall that for many gifted and talented individuals:*
 - **Idealism and low tolerance for ambiguity (rigidity):** this includes relationships among peers and with adults
 - **The ‘gifted label’:** how others perceive the individual as well as self perception (both positives and negatives associated with treatment by and expectations of others)
 - **Need for better understanding about what it means to be gifted and to better comprehend the nature and extent of abilities**
 - **Getting the giftedness ‘off one’s chest’**
 - **Advanced development and accelerated development of self identity and sense of self**
 - **Pressures to fit in and conceal one’s true nature:** acceptance is conditional/self in conflict/loss of sense of self



A FRIEND IN NEED IS A FRIEND INDEED

We know intuitively that if you do not feel a sense of confidence, competence and solace, it is virtually impossible to concentrate on anything else.

Neurochemistry suggests that when we are anxious or stressed, adrenaline and cortisol compels us to focus on an immediate perceived threat.

Enduring a seemingly endless cycle of what ifs makes creativity and enthusiasm take a back seat to anxiety and fear. Others help us to understand the consequences of living alone in our own heads and oft rescue us from progressive downward spirals.

BUT THEY WON'T TELL ME...

The consistently awkward discussion of social relationships seems exponentially so when dealing with gifted and talented individuals. A reflexive (and perhaps defensive) response like 'fine' or 'oh, mom, *really*' is associated with the gifted individual's need to project well-being outwardly (although perhaps bothered inwardly). But you do need to know, do you not?

Practical tip: Talk about social relationships in the abstract. Jim Delisle suggests using historical figures or characters from fiction as a starting point. One might be surprised just how quickly the conversation turns inwardly.



I'M A
LOSER ...
AND I'M
NOT WHAT I
APPEAR TO
BE

Impostor Syndrome is related to perfectionism and common among gifted and talented individuals. The Impostor believes that success is the result of an unlikely succession of flukes and lucky breaks and a looming dread of being 'found out' as a fake.

FORMING FRIENDSHIPS GIFTED STYLE

- Gifted and talented individuals tend not only to seek out friends who are intellectually compatible and similarly mature, but who also have **similar conceptions and expectations of friendship**
- For many gifted and talented individuals, **large group activities can prove exhausting** and drain them of energy (trying to fit in becomes increasingly difficult)
- Generally, **gifted and talented individuals take caution in approaching potential friends**. They seek to take a step back, observe, contemplate versus reacting to situations impulsively or viscerally



MARCHING TO THE BEAT OF ONE'S OWN DRUM

Gifted and talented individuals often require an 'EI Boost' to assist them with the finer points of social convention. Helping them to understand factors important in social relationships allows preservation of what makes them unique and offers opportunity for a better 'read of the room' in forming friendships.

ALONE AGAIN (NATURALLY)

SAVE IT

GILBERT



O'SULLIVAN

MAM

MAM 66

INTROVERTS UNITE

Many gifted and talented individuals are introverts, preferring time alone or in the company of a few close friends. Introversion is not negative, but rather should be thought of using one's time for reflective introspection and re-energization. They may also choose to spend time alone developing their gifts and talents.

SLOW AND STEADY WINS THE RACE (PROBABLY)

Gifted and talented individuals are frequently measured in their approach to **friendships—testing the waters; constructing scenarios; and using a ‘step-wise’ approach**. Remember that the big risk is the social risk and the risk of rejection. Rejection is felt quite intensively over a longer period of time.

Slow and steady, progressive, steadfast and deep. But the **intensity** of these relationships make endings that much more difficult and inevitably tragic. The point is not to make relationships last forever, but rather to develop a realistic sense of relationships and endings, so the gifted individual will continue to seek companionship/friendship moving forward (ability to bounce back).

GIFTED FRIENDSHIPS: AGES AND STAGES

- **Early Childhood:** Gifted boys and girls play together more than their non-gifted peers. It is at this age that many of the socioemotional characteristics become manifest.
- **Pre-Adolescence and Adolescence:** Gender issues become relevant. Being a member of a group or 'tribe' becomes increasingly important. Many gifted 'go underground' with talents or find safe havens in school communities.
- **Young Adulthood:** Many profoundly gifted individuals do not make close friends until college or graduate school. Many are jaded. Advisement and modeling can play important roles.
- **Adulthood:** Forming close friendships can prove challenging without an historical foundation upon which to build. Many of the socioemotional characteristics prevalent in childhood rear their heads.

FORMING FRIENDSHIPS DEVELOPMENTALLY: GIFTED STYLE

- **Stage 1: *Play Partner*.** Friends are people with whom to play games and perhaps to share toys.
- **Stage 2: *Person to Chat to*.** Friendship is not solely defined by play, but by sharing of interests and conversations around those interests.
- **Stage 3: *Help and Encouragement*.** In addition to the above, friends are understood to be those who offer help and support, although the reverse may not be true.
- **Stage 4: *Intimacy and Empathy*.** As in (3) above, but reciprocated.
- **Stage 5: *Sure Shelter (Old Testament, not Rolling Stones)*.** Realization that friendships are enduring and rooted in emotionally deep connections with mutual interests, respect, support and trust.



THIS IS THE END

Building both conflict management and resiliency skills goes a long way toward preserving friendships among the gifted and talented. Much coaching is needed, especially in avoiding avoidance (hiding feelings that fester) and fighting the instinct to assign blame universally (you ALWAYS...)

THE GOOD, THE BAD AND THE UGLY

We all wish to see our children happy and secure, all of the time. We certainly want them to find solace and a mechanism by which to stem the flow of cognitive lava. Comfort. Calm. Zen.

But don't forget that negative experiences—especially in dealing with friendships and relationships—help to guide gifted and talented individuals in a variety of ways, including emotional availability, openness, respect for the interests of others and empathy.

We need not avoid the negative, but rather we must learn to work with it in a realistic and productive way.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO TO HELP

- Provide a space to **express emotional responses** (especially to friendships/relationships), be it through discussion, art or music – talk about how it feels
- Work with children/young adults to help **understand emotions and to accept them** (finding comfort with emotional responses)
- Help children and young adults come to understand **connections between feelings and actions, and the consequences of actions**
- **Volunteerism** is one avenue to channel heightened emotional sensitivities (learning to work with others; gaining empathy; and being a part of a larger solution)

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

- Gifted and talented individuals will often seek **different types of friends for different interests and purposes**. It is not odd for a gifted individual to have several small groups of friends that suit diverse parts of a personality.
- **Understand Introverts and Extraverts:**
 - **Energy:** Introverts tend to re-energize alone or in small groups and feel drained with people they do not know. Extraverts thrive in a group setting and are drained of energies when alone.
 - **Inhibition:** Extraverts are likely to say what is on their minds often without thinking, while introverts tend to think quite a bit before speaking

ADVICE FOR PARENTS

- **Understand gifted Introverts and Extraverts:**
 - **Trying Something New:** Extraverts are usually ready to jump in to the deep end of the pool with both feet. Introverts typically will observe and test the waters
 - **Making Friends:** Introverts are typically with a few very close friends and tend not to be interested in making new friends unless there is a disruption to the status quo. Conversely, extraverts thrive on networking and enjoy friendships with people in various roles

QUESTIONS/COMMENTS

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