

## Exploring social and emotional aspects of giftedness in children

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### Abstract

Parents of gifted children have few guidelines about how to deal with issues resulting from their children's giftedness. Not only intellectual, but also, social and emotional issues provide challenges for parents. Five social/emotional traits of giftedness (divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness and entelechy) are described, and the specific issues that parents must face to enable their children to reach their full potential are explored.

Parents of gifted children often must devise their own means of understanding problems and issues that arise from their children's giftedness. There are few guidelines to follow for children who differ from average children not only in intellectual development, but also in social and emotional development. It is not uncommon for gifted children to find that age peers do not share their interests, play by different rules, and appear to engage in pastimes, such as teasing, that many gifted children find puzzling and painful.

In trying to deal with their gifted children's needs, parents find few resources. Indeed, since gifted children differ from each other as much as they differ from average children, what may work with one may not work with another. Nevertheless, gifted children do appear to have certain social/emotional traits in common including: heightened sensitivity, emotional intensity and reactivity, feeling different, perfectionism and uneven development of intellectual and emotional areas (Erich, 1982; Janos & Robinson, 1985; Kitano, 1990; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Lovecky, 1990a; Roedell, 1984, 1988; Roeper, 1982; Silverman, 1983; Tolan, 1989; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). Some of these social and emotional traits may take the form of particular vulnerabilities for gifted children; for example, both Hollingworth (1942) and Whitmore (1980), working with somewhat different populations of gifted children, suggest that gifted children may have difficulty dealing with their great sensitivity, coping with discrepancies in intellectual, emotional and social development, and finding peers who truly understand and appreciate their unusual and advanced perceptions. Piechowski (1986) describes a model, the concept of developmental potential, that explores five dimensions that have social and emotional consequences for gifted children and adults. These include aspects of emotional intensity, sensitivity, empathy and compassion. Piechowski (1991) suggests that the vulnerabilities of the gifted can result in growth towards self-awareness and self-actualization.

This article is an attempt to define five traits common to gifted children that result in social and emotional vulnerability: divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness and entelechy. While the traits appear to be an integral part of giftedness, their behavioral manifestations may vary depending on such psychological and physiological factors as tolerance for ambiguity, age, degree of introversion/extraversion, preference for types and levels of sensory input, locus of control, etc.

Although the traits themselves are neutral, their behavioral manifestations give them social significance, suggesting positive or negative perceptions by others. The traits are described as if only one predominates in order to clarify which issues result from particular aspects of each; however, the traits, in real life, overlap to some degree.

The development of the traits was based on observations of 80 gifted children who were psychotherapy clients. In addition, 12 children, known to the author, who were not clients, and their families, contributed to the anecdotal material used in this article. Children ranged in age from 4 to 22 years; 40% were girls and 60% boys. All lived in the Northeast with the vast majority in Rhode Island and Massachusetts. Most were middle class, but all socio-economic groups were included. For example, several children lived with single parents on welfare. Ethnically, most were white. Several children were black (2) or had parents who had emigrated to the United States from Asian, Southeast Asian, and Arabic countries (5). Identification of giftedness was based on obtained IQ scores over 130 (one score on a multi-score test like the Wechsler Scales), overall achievement scores on a standardized achievement test over 95%, selection for a school's gifted program or independent evidence of high creativity based on achievement of portfolios, awards, prizes, etc. Of the 92 children, 23 (9 girls, 14 boys) scored over IQ 150. The scores of these gifted children ranged to over 200.

The observations that served as a basis for this article were gathered in the form of journal notes, correspondence with parents of gifted children, and notes made of issues pertaining to giftedness that arose in therapy. Also biographic data of eminent people was used to determine whether the traits could be delineated in the childhood years of these people (for example, Louisa May Alcott, Rachel Carson, Annie Dillard, Camille Pissarro and Martin Luther King, Jr.).



## **Trait Descriptions**

### **Divergent Thinking Ability**

Cris, at age 11, loves to make puns. Ask Cris to get something from the pantry, and she pictures an oak tree with hanging pots and pans. Shadows and shapes assume sinister tones as meanings and perceptions shift with her moods. Cris is highly creative in art and writing. Her poetry is exceptional for her age in form, sensitivity and depth. She is also interested in science, and, on her own initiative, is working after school on an original biology project.

Despite her academic successes, Cris is often unhappy at school. She feels misunderstood by both peers and teachers; she complains to her parents that she is different from others, and has no real friends.

Cris is a divergent thinker, someone who prefers the unusual, original, and creative aspects of any topic (Lovecky, 1990b). This means that Cris, like most divergent thinkers, tends not to think first of the response most likely to be thought by others. In fact, divergent thinkers tend to respond in a manner that reflects their fantasy proneness and pun proneness (Lovecky, 1991). There appear to be two types of divergent thinkers: those whose divergent thinking is circumscribed to certain times and subjects, and those who are primary process thinkers and fantasize much of the time. Cris would be an example of the latter type.

Performance and behavior at home and school are often problems for divergent thinkers. One of the reasons for this is that they are often negatively reinforced for their curious questions, unusual answers, dislike of working in groups, and rather morbid imaginations.

Many children who are divergent thinkers appear to be disorganized and absentminded, particularly in school. While adults can compensate for their absent-mindedness by choosing life styles that reward divergent thinking, it is more difficult for children. Divergently thinking children find many organizational schema difficult to understand. For example, the standards adults use to organize schoolwork are based on a linear model while divergent thinkers tend to see things holistically and make intuitive leaps to correct answers. Furthermore, decision making and setting priorities can be difficult because the thoughts and feelings of divergent thinkers are so intermeshed that all thoughts and feelings seem equally interesting and important. Untangling the knot of thought to find a starting place may be too difficult for these children.

Divergent thinkers like to follow the novelty of an idea, and see where it leads. They may be disinterested in the usual rewards offered as making something happen, or working with a new idea is often more rewarding. Because of this, divergently thinking children appear to adults to be rebellious, unmotivated, inattentive, and disaffected. On another level, the creativity of the child makes adults uncomfortable. While adults admire the creative product, they are apt to have trouble with the concept that the essence of creative thinking is rebellion against an accepted standard.

Divergent thinkers also have to deal with being different without understanding why. Often they feel alone, with no one to understand their uniqueness. If these children can find value in their uniqueness, and some tolerance from society, a strong sense of self and a sense of connection to others can develop.

**Interventions for parents.** The goal of caring adults is to help divergent thinkers find validation for the creative self, to develop this unique self, and to learn to deal with living in a less than appreciative, sometimes hostile world.

The creative self needs to survive negative encounters with others while developing separate from the need to please others. The creative child has to learn to please the self by using talents and skills to meet the demands of task and muse. This can best be fostered by adopting an attitude of play and joy in creativity, by focusing on the creative process more than on the final product, by finding work that the child can love more than anything else and by making sure there is sufficient time allotted to pursue that loved work whether it produces a product or not.

Developing appropriate risk-taking behaviors is also important because risking either too little or too much can both be destructive of creative work. The divergently thinking, creative child needs some protection from the type of criticism that focuses on the negative in performance, or which holds to such high standards that the child will give up rather than risk failure. Equally important is learning to work for the joy of playing with ideas, and the inherent satisfaction of trying something new, rather than working for praise. In helping the child to evaluate creative work, focusing on the strengths and weaknesses of any piece of work is more productive (what about it works, and what does not). The child needs to know that there is something to be learned from any idea, and doing something that does not turn out may lead in the future to another idea. This is the method Wang Yani's father used to help his daughter, the very young Chinese art prodigy, to develop her unusual gifts (Zhensun & Low, 1991).

Divergent thinkers need some help in learning to understand social convention. They tend to lack understanding of what many think is important in social relationships such as listening to the opinions of the leaders in the group. For example, in junior high

school Marge wanted to be popular; however, she disregarded the importance of the behaviors that made other girls popular. She refused to compliment someone she disliked, stated that she did not think it important to do what everyone else wanted to do, and would not follow fads. It is their lack of conformity that makes it so difficult for divergent thinkers to fit in socially. Children like Marge want to be free to march to a different drummer at the same time that they want to fit in and be like others. Developing more awareness of what social conformity requires allows divergent thinkers some choice about when to try to be like others, and when to show their uniqueness.

Divergent thinkers need to find the support of some people with whom they share a dream. Often these are people whose creative endeavors are similar to theirs. Being with such people, sharing ideas and work, and finding friendly support can be especially helpful to children who have little in common with most peers and who may find little satisfaction in peer endeavors.

### **Excitability**

Jeff, age eight, literally dances his way into a room. He loves art and music, and is very talented in both. His high energy level keeps peers and adults exhausted, however, and while he can concentrate well on creative endeavors, he tends to give short shrift to his more routine school work. Jeff is disliked by peers because he needs to be the center of focus, because he drifts off in the middle of an activity when something more exciting captures his attention, and because he becomes very silly and disruptive when peers wish to be serious. While his antics are initially amusing, peers soon feel annoyed and frustrated with the constant interruption of their activities.

Jeff relates better to adults. His creative endeavors allow him satisfaction since he participates with adults in them. For example, Jeff plays in the youth orchestra, and has performed with adults to adult standards as part of the city symphony. Adults find him well-mannered, eager to work hard and easy to work with. Few adults understand the difficulty Jeff experiences after one of these performances when he once again spends most of his time with peers.

A high energy level, emotional reactivity, and high arousal of the central nervous system characterize the trait of excitability. All three aspects of the trait are not necessarily present in one person (Lovecky, 1990b).

While gifted adults with this trait often focus their energies for long periods of time, enjoy risk taking and challenge, have a wide variety of interests and do many things well, gifted children with this trait are often difficult to live with. Some have such high energy levels and need so little sleep that finding activities to occupy them can be exhausting. Yet, if they can find enough challenge, they are able to concentrate for long periods of time and organize themselves well.

These gifted children have a high need to explore the environment and enjoy new experiences. Many are stimulus-seekers, needing stimulation to moderate their behavior. However, if not provided with the right type of stimulation, they become bored and overstressed. Their energy is often focused on a wide variety of interests, though these may not be academically oriented. When properly channeled, this excitement at life can be stimulating to others. When combined with creative drive and imagination, these children can produce impressive responses to challenging projects. For Sam it began in fifth grade with a character he invented one day while fooling around during social studies. Always the class clown, Sam was able to amuse everyone with his impersonations of famous historical figures. By the time he was in junior high school, Sam's routine earned him a spot on a local radio show. In high school, he was hosting his own show. The boy who might have spent his time in the principal's office as a troublemaker was often there instead interviewing the principal on issues of school policy.

Because the necessity for stimulation is so high, some gifted children become conditioned to a need for novelty. They enjoy starting new projects and are enthusiastic about the results, but may have trouble with the final details of actual completion since these tend to be less novel. Thus, some children get caught in a cycle of high interest and enthusiasm, followed by a loss of interest and failure to finish. While such children need flexibility to explore things and to experiment with ideas without having to commit themselves to a finished product, care must be taken that they learn to complete some projects. Not only do they need to learn that there are times when details are important, but they also need to experience the satisfaction that completion brings. The challenge of completing details and the resultant satisfaction become the reward for doing things rather than the excitement of novelty.

Some emotionally reactive children, rather than being stimulus-seekers seem just the opposite. They are stimulus-withdrawers, finding stressful the amounts of stimulation other people find comfortable. They act overwhelmed, irritable, and frightened. Some also have trouble turning off thoughts and feelings so they may feel powerful emotions more intensely, and for a longer time than others. The ordinary stresses of school and peer contact may seem too difficult. To these children, rooms feel too crowded, too noisy, too full of light. The recess yard and lunchroom can provide too much stimulation, and these children react negatively with tears, tantrums, avoidance or physical symptoms. Such children are often regarded as troublesome by both peers and adults because they find it difficult to go along with the usual way of doing things.

**Interventions for parents.** Difficulty with self-regulation, maintaining comfortable levels of arousal, and finding satisfaction in creative and intellectual pursuits rather than novelty, are issues that challenge parents and teachers of these gifted children.

Children who have difficulty regulating both activity level and amount of arousal need to learn how to find a comfortable level of arousal and how to maintain it for a series of activities. These children need adults to help them to recognize the intensification of feeling experienced in response to frustration, stress, or environmental irritants. Once they recognize the sensation that accompanies such intensification, techniques such as relaxation exercises (Belknap, 1986), withdrawing from the scene, and using self-exploration (Roberts & Guttormson, 1991) to reduce anxiety all can help. Gradually, as these children learn to rely more on recognition of such cues by themselves, they can reduce the level of arousal rather than waiting for disaster to strike or for adults to impose external modes of control.

It can be helpful for children who feel upset under pressure, or who leave many things unfinished to use time to help them structure activities. For example, they can set a short time to work on a task that increases arousal level then switch to a different type of task. Also, learning to use creative expression, imagery, humor and problem-solving techniques (Bagley, 1987) can help these children learn to feel more satisfaction from finishing tasks. This may also reduce reliance on novelty for motivation.

Many of these children thrive on competing. They tend to take to heart suggestions that they should give something their all. Unfortunately, they do not always discriminate activities in which this type of goal setting can be productive from those in which it is not. For many the focus is on doing better than others rather than bettering their own performance. Doing the best one can do, being the best one can be is different from winning, and helping gifted children to understand this difference is crucial. In addition, teaching participation in cooperative endeavors with peers of like ability and interests, and teaching negotiation and problem-solving skills is also important (Kreidler, 1984).

Gifted children who tend to be stimulus-withdrawers need help in dealing with the unpleasant feelings that too much arousal can produce. These youngsters benefit from learning techniques to use to calm themselves including journal writing, holding a favorite object when upset, seeking appropriate comfort, and expressing anger physically, but safely. They need to practice, in advance of a problem arising, how to deal with extremes of feeling. Using reason is helpful as long as it is the children learning to examine fears and finding good solutions, rather than adults attempting to talk them out of it. Some children also need to learn to say "no" to participation in events that lead to extreme arousal. For example, Mark had many problems with sleeping at night because his fears and negative thoughts would keep him awake. Since many of the episodes of wakefulness appeared to be triggered by memories of books, movies and television shows he had seen, he decided to avoid certain movies and made choices about what he watched on television. He usually read two books simultaneously so when a passage was too upsetting, he could close that book, and read the other. Over time, Mark felt more in control of his own life and himself.

## **Sensitivity**

Paul, a four-year-old gifted boy, told his parents he wanted to give away some of his favorite toys so that another boy would have toys for the holidays. No one knew where Paul had gotten the idea, but after he insisted for several days, his parents allowed him to give away the toys. Afterwards, Paul sometimes felt happy thinking of his toys having fun with a new boy. A depth of feeling that results in a sense of identification with others (people, animals, nature, the universe) characterizes the trait of sensitivity. Passion and compassion are two different aspects. Passion refers to the depth of feeling that colors all life experience and brings intensity and complexity to the emotional life of these gifted children. Passionate people form deep attachments and react to the feeling tone of experiences: they think with their feelings (Lovecky, 1990b).

Compassion refers to the sense of caring many gifted children show for others, enabling them to make commitments to social causes from a desire to decrease the pain they see others suffering. Compassionate gifted children suffer too, and are apt to relate intensely to the suffering of the world around them. Both Roeper (1982) and Piechowski (1991) describe this empathy and compassion as emotional giftedness.

The passion side of sensitivity refers to an intense commitment to people and ideas. Convinced of the moral right of an action, the gifted child will not give in to any adult rationalization, explanation or attempt to effect a change of mind. These children may also commit themselves to relationships from an early age. Even if hurt by people, they feel that if only the key to understanding could be found, then they would be friends. The focus for this sort of child is on the potential of people rather than on their faults.

The dedication and commitment of passionate gifted children bring them into conflict with adults, but also bring a sense of alliance with the universe. This sense of passionate commitment is powerful, and far outweighs all the conflict that might occur before the goal is attained.



Many sensitive gifted children are highly empathic. They not only know what others feel, but appear to experience the feelings themselves. This is particularly true of intensely negative feelings. While most children know when a parent is angry, these gifted children feel the anger inside themselves, experiencing it as the other person does. In fact, they may think they are angry themselves, but be unable to find an antecedent event that triggered the feeling. This great empathy may mean that they feel so many feelings that they cannot distinguish whose feelings are whose. To use their great empathy without risking being overwhelmed by strong feelings, they need to learn how to separate their feelings from those of others and to understand that they need to feel “with” rather than “for” the other person.

Experiencing the suffering of another person without any means of separating oneself from the pain may mean that too much pain is experienced. These gifted children may try to ease the suffering of the other person by trying to make them happy. If they cannot do so, they may withdraw instead.

Those children who try to cope by making others happy tend to take on too much responsibility for interpersonal interactions. They come to see themselves as responsible for how others feel. Negative affect in another is seen as their own personal failing. Some try to avoid any negative situations by being exceptionally good at all times. Those children who withdraw from feeling too much pain from others may actively avoid people and situations that tend to produce negative feelings. This results in isolation and disconnection from common bonds with others. Learning to separate their feelings from those of other people, and to cope with feeling the suffering of others can lead empathic gifted children to use their understanding of themselves and others to foster relationships.

**Interventions for parents.** Adults who deal with sensitive gifted children need to be aware of the depth of the children’s feelings and to have some understanding of the problem of feeling other people’s feelings and suffering. Since these aspects of sensitivity often lead the gifted child to feel responsible for others’ feelings, particularly those of parents and siblings, parents must help the child understand that in relationships, all involved have a responsibility for what happens, and are responsible for their own feelings.

In working with children who have not yet learned to separate other people’s feelings from their own, adults can help them to cope by learning to build appropriate interpersonal distance. Actual physical distancing techniques may be the needed first step. For example, the child is asked to leave the room and assess what is being felt now, and what was felt prior to start of the problem. Next the child thinks about what the problem really is, and brainstorms some solutions. Finally, the child returns, and the people involved discuss their feelings and the proposed solutions.

Learning the difference between compassion (caring) and empathy (accurate understanding of another’s viewpoint) can also help develop interpersonal space as the child struggles to see things from others’ perspectives without feeling responsible for their feelings. Sometimes mental imagery helps; for example, building a transparent, magic wall allows one to see and hear others, but keeps out a sense of invasion by other’s feelings.

Some compassionate gifted children can be termed “gifted givers.” They give altruistically, without expecting a return and without measuring the cost. To them, giving is a natural thing to do when confronted by someone’s needs. These gifted children often have a lot to offer others; giving is very rewarding to them.

In dealing with a “gifted giver,” adults need to understand the joy and sharing of self involved, because to discourage this kind of giving from the child means to take away a part of the self. However, these children can learn to examine why they give in any particular circumstance, and how to assess when they should and should not give. Some need to learn about the interpersonal consequences of giving too much, others about receiving. These children may need to understand that their giving may incur a sense of obligation in others so that receiving means another person must then return the giving. It is helpful for gifted givers to understand that there are times when they must receive the giving of others because receiving allows others also to experience the joy of giving. Some gifted children give so much that their families take their giving for granted. These children, and their families, may need to learn the essential difference between being selfish and having a self.

## **Perceptiveness**

Emily was five years old when she noticed the poorest children in her class appeared to get the least from Santa. This seemed unjust to Emily, particularly as she had also noted that parents did not give children Christmas gifts; that was Santa’s job. Years later, Emily remembered this disillusionment as an important marker in her developing awareness of fairness and justice. In ninth grade some of her growing sense of injustice was given voice in a poem she wrote for the school paper satirizing the administration of her high school for its bigotry towards minority students. The poem was not printed, and Emily was punished for “disrespect.” The irony of the charge was not lost on Emily.

An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to see quickly to the core of an issue characterize the trait of perceptiveness. Adults with this trait can understand the underlying meaning of personal metaphors, exercise insight and intuition, and see beyond the superficiality of a situation. Truth, justice, and fairness are often issues for these gifted adults. In childhood, perceptiveness manifests itself as intuition, insight, and a need for truth (Lovecky, 1990b).

Perceptive gifted children have a clear sense of honesty and dishonesty. Thus, the differing aspects of themselves that people can show at different times, and are readily accepted at face value by others, are puzzling. The tendency of many people to be nice to someone in person but talk negatively about them when they are not there, makes little sense to these gifted children. To them, truth is more important than feelings, and they seek and tell the truth, sometimes with little regard for how others might feel.

Perceptive thinkers appear to adopt either of two cognitive/emotional positions regarding their relationships with others. These are not necessarily permanent positions as perceptive thinkers can move from one to the other over time. In the first, gifted children wonder why what they see as true is different from what others see. They focus on the perceived cohesion of the others' viewpoint and wonder what is different about their own. Because they want to connect to others, they perceive this difference as a defect within themselves. Since they have no idea that others are less perceptive than they, they tend to believe what they are told by others and to suppress the doubts they feel. Over time they learn to distrust their own perceptions. Jodi, for example, readily accepts the blame for much of what goes wrong in her life. Because she has so much insight into the underlying causes of problems, she can see ramifications for any action she takes, and she accepts a great deal of personal responsibility for making "wrong" choices.

The second type of perceptive thinker views the world from a standpoint of rightness, not understanding how others can be so lacking in perceptiveness since it is perfectly obvious what is right. They expect adults to be examples of virtue and to practice what they preach. Their view of truth is absolute. This rigid concept of right and wrong is a common developmental issue for all children, but is a particular problem for gifted children who can be insightful, even while being rigid.

The foolishness and unfairness of adults in authority can be particularly difficult for these gifted children to tolerate. To them, it makes no sense that anyone would not want to know the truth, have a mistake corrected, or know the best way to do something. Part of the problem is their intolerance of ordinariness. For these children, everything is important, and they tend to paint the world in larger than life terms because that is how they feel. Rumer Godden discusses this idea when describing her early attempts at writing, much of which was quite melodramatic (Godden, 1987). Helping gifted children learn to tolerate the ordinary, without embracing it, is the challenge for parents and teachers. Hollingworth (1942), in her work with exceptionally gifted children, helped them focus on ways to "suffer fools gladly" by emphasizing tolerance of the ordinary in life.

To perceptive children, the pursuit of truth, the drive to know what truth is, and the need to understand justice and fairness, can supersede awareness of others' needs. The long term goal for gifted children is to do what they know is right, despite opposition, while at the same time not using all their energy in railing against fate and other people for not recognizing what is so clearly evident. Having the capacity to really understand what underlies expectations for self and others can help gifted children to deal better with the conflict they feel. For example, at about age 12, Annie Dillard (1987) began to explore her own capacity for perceptiveness by wondering how much noticing of herself and others she could do. Too much and she was too paralyzed in her actions; too little and she would miss a whole level of experiencing that provided richness to her life. Finding the balance was what she saw was required.

**Interventions for parents.** The existential dilemma faced by perceptive gifted children is how to learn to be trusting (but not naive) in a world whose limits and defects they see all too clearly. Trusting relationships, based on mutual respect, that teach children to examine what people really mean and to judge the applicability of coping strategies for particular situations, need to be fostered. Within the context of such relationships, differences of opinion can be explored in an effort to understand how other people experience truth, what most hold as basic truths, and how truth is derived as an absolute. This includes discussion of the difference between absolute right, including moral right, and fairness in dealing with others.

It can be helpful for these children to learn when truth is important and when feelings count more. Since many have trouble making that judgment, parents can be helpful in role playing and thinking aloud about the feelings engendered by the words used. As children learn that feelings also count, and that there can be other opinions that are equally valid, they also learn that there is room for compromise and negotiation.

Also, gifted children should learn that direct action is not always possible. There are times when children and adults cannot speak up or prevent an injustice. In those cases, other strategies that focus attention on a problem may be possible. For example.

Amnesty International uses witnessing and reporting from a distance to document such atrocities as slavery, Apartheid, concentration camps, and other violations of human rights. It is important for gifted children to learn how such techniques have led to later change, for example, in South Africa. Also, letter writing, fund raising and other such mundane appearing strategies, often not so visibly successful to gifted children looking for solutions that are larger than life, can accomplish much.

Fostering a sense of interconnectedness with others in the world through the teaching of empathy and ethics is vital in developing the high sense of justice and truth these children possess (Roeper 1989).

Some gifted children have trouble understanding the behavior of age peers. It makes no sense to young gifted children that other children might not want to be shown the best way to do something, or might prefer to do things the way they always have, even if it is not very fair.

These gifted children often profit from an approach in which they study peers as an anthropologist might to discover the rituals and beliefs of other children. For example, it can be very useful for children who are sensitive to teasing to see that most children do not share their sensitivity, and may, in fact, regard teasing as a sort of game. This "Margaret Mead" approach also may help them to understand how fairness and truth may look to peers. Perceptive children may need help with adult relationships as well, particularly in understanding that adults, who are less perceptive than they, may be threatened by what they see. The story of the emperor's new clothes may be useful in discussing what might have happened were the emperor less willing to know the truth.

## **Entelechy**

The fourth grade class was planning Valentine's Day. Mrs. Ray told the children not to give Jimmy, the class problem, any valentines. Anne bought Jimmy the biggest one she could find, and put it on his desk. It was the only one he got. She did not open her own, but waited until she and Mrs. Ray were alone. Anne took all her valentines, dropping them unopened in the trash in front of Mrs. Ray. The teacher and Anne stared at each other briefly, then, without saying a word, Anne left the room. After that, Mrs. Ray no longer picked so much on Jimmy.

Derived from the Greek word for having a goal, entelechy is a particular type of motivation, need for self-determination, and an inner strength and vital force directing life and growth to become all one is capable of being (Lovecky, 1990b). Gifted adults with this trait are involved in making their own destinies, believe in themselves, and continue on despite obstacles. Because of their tremendous personal courage, they may inspire and sometimes shame others.

Gifted children with entelechy are highly motivated, singleminded in the pursuit of their own goals, and very strong-willed. Abraham Lincoln, for example, was so determined to get an education that he read while doing physical labor and walked miles to borrow books. In a frontier community, he refused to hunt or kill animals (North, 1956). Children high in entelechy, like Lincoln, find the independence, strength of will, and inner spirit to surmount obstacles that would daunt most others.

These gifted children also may experience a sense of destiny. The actions they take have much greater consequences than anyone anticipates, and because they took the action, they become part of a force that determines the future. This does not mean these gifted children know what will happen, or even feel that they are part of planning the future; however, because of their gifts, the actions become much more than they seemed at the time. For example, Samantha Smith, a 10 year old girl, in 1982 wrote a letter to the then Soviet leader, Andropov, because she was worried about nuclear war, and was invited to visit the Soviet Union including a camp for gifted children on the Black Sea. The purpose of the invitation was to suggest that people of both nations wanted peace (Smith, 1985). Though Samantha Smith died only a few years later, her journey was one of the many actions that combined to make a real difference in recent world events. Other young people with a sense of destiny have integrated lunch counters, stood on picket lines, refused to fight in wars they considered immoral, worked for peace, and refused scholarship money and jeopardized academic standing to work for human rights (Hardy, 1990).

Many of these children elicit helping responses from adults who admire the child's spirit, and see something special within. The mentoring and appreciation of their traits that ensues can help these gifted children survive very difficult lives, yet the very specialness of the gifted child may become a liability. Though these children usually don't see themselves as very special, some adults treat them as if they do. To insecure adults, the child who exhibits so much spirit and inner confidence can be threatening. Because they feel demeaned by the confidence of the gifted child, some adults attribute their internal discomfort to the child's "specialness," and attempt to denigrate or deny the child's gifts. Consequently, adults may be experienced as either people who are exceptionally willing to help, or people who find fault, make life difficult, or humiliate no matter how hard these gifted children try.

The ability of children high in entelechy to draw helpful people to them results in unlikely friendships. Some children appear to have a type of charisma that permits successful organization of peers into group ventures. These children are the ones to whom peers turn for support, and they may provide the cohesiveness that allows various factions to work together peacefully. They also help others rise above petty jealousies and rivalries because they encourage others to be their own best selves.

These children may find that too much responsibility is expected. While seemingly thriving in the middle of activities and peer relationships, they can be lonely because their interactions center around the needs of others. They are often taken for granted by peers, seen as the one who will always be there, do all the necessary but unglorified work, and is willing to be responsible. The developmental issues for these children are finding inner resources that do not depend on the needs of others for validation, developing a sense of self not bound up in other's exceptionally positive or negative evaluation, and maintaining a positive thrust towards self-determination.

**Interventions for parents.** These gifted children have a particular need for trusted adults who can help them understand the puzzling responses they get from others. The extreme contrast between the positive responses of those seeing them as special for particular traits, and the negative responses of others for these same traits, means children will have difficulty seeing themselves clearly. Focusing on developing a balanced view with strengths and weaknesses defined by them rather than by the more extreme views of others is more likely to build a good self-concept.

Many children high in the trait of entelechy are so strong-willed they may act in self-defeating ways, becoming trapped in negative interactions with others, and needing help in learning to use the strength of will more positively. For example, Clay decided to forego his high school graduation awards ceremony rather than wear a tie. Since he was the first child and grandchild to graduate with honors, his family was disappointed, but Clay remained adamant. His family attended the ceremony without him.

A strong-willed person is one whose view of how things should be is very clear, and who has a deeply felt need for self-determination. In working with such a child it is helpful to recognize both the positives and negatives of being strong in will. It can mean being stubborn and rebellious, but it also means having the potential to make commitments, and be assertive. For example, Langston Hughes, the black poet, refused to drop out of high school to support his mother and brother as was expected of him. He did so, not from selfishness, but from knowledge that he could do more if he had an education (Meltzer, 1968).

As gifted children learn to understand the meaning of the battles in which they engage, there is room to listen to others' points of view. Understanding what is positive about a particular position, and how to effect a positive result in an interaction through empathy, problem solving and negotiation rather than focusing on getting their own way, can help children unlock themselves from extreme and uncompromising positions.

Children high in entelechy need specific help in finding true friends. This involves knowing what they want from friendship, as well as, learning what they should be expected to give. Those with leadership potential need to learn that others will always expect too much, and that as leaders, they must set limits and sometimes say "no." The pleasures of their own company, and the self-affirmation that can come through caring for their own very special needs are areas that these gifted children need to explore.

## Conclusion

If gifted children are to achieve their potential, social and emotional aspects of giftedness must be recognized and developed, for functioning in one area requires functioning in others. Longitudinal studies of gifted children indicate that the most life satisfaction has been obtained by those whose parents were supportive of their needs (Bloom, 1985; Oden, 1968; Subotnik, Karp, & Morgan, 1989). Today's parents are no less desirous of knowledge about the special social and emotional needs of their gifted children. To be effective in helping children deal with issues that will develop due to their giftedness, parents need to understand how divergent thinking ability, excitability, sensitivity, perceptiveness and entelechy impact on their lives.

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\*In order to preserve confidentiality, all clinical examples used in this paper are composites of several children. All are based on events and feelings revealed by children but with no identifying details incorporated. With two exceptions, for which written permission was obtained, no example is exactly like any real child seen in therapy.

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