

Tips for Parents: The Real World of Gifted Teens

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Davidson Institute for Talent Development/Young Scholars Seminar
2003

Source: Davidson Young Scholar Seminar

Covered below are many issues that gifted teens face in school in their social lives and at home. Strategies for helping teens through these difficult times are suggested.

The following is a selection of comments and tips that surfaced during an online seminar about the complex issues of adolescence for profoundly gifted teens and their parents.

1. When School Structure Becomes Stricture:

Gifted teens are really something to behold, aren't they? On the one hand, when I think I have "seen it all"; I am repeatedly amazed and delighted at their innovations, unexpected accomplishments, and undying zeal. Gifted teens that grow up and learn in a suitable environment are indeed the lucky ones. They are the ones who really soar during adolescence and make it all look so easy. On the other hand, I have become very distressed about those who suffer from what I term "school/powerlessness" or "constraint-tolerance burn-out," the result of which is often depression, a rapid decline in grades, apathy, opting for a GED, dropping out altogether, or dangerous forms of rebellion. Inquiries to colleagues across the country indicate they are seeing the same patterns.

Although I don't think school/authority frustrations for the gifted are in any way new, it appears the pressures to conform and tolerate boredom are compounded by the fact that these brilliant teens expect (and rightly so) to have some sort of say in the matter, and yet are not usually allowed to "test out" of traditional high school courses, much less years of unnecessary schooling. And little do they know that most colleges are even more rigid and behind the times. Again and again I hear their angst--they complain of feeling imprisoned, dismissed without recourse.

2. Do Gifted Teens Have a Strong Sense of Direction?

I find that a small portion of my gifted clients (and grown children too) have a very clear and powerful sense of what they are "meant to do," sometimes in early childhood. However, especially for multiply-gifted teens, this is often foggy and a perplexing question mark that can last for many years into adulthood. There are pros and cons both ways, since feeling uncertain about one's direction, or bouncing from one thing to another can feel like one has "wasted" much time. On the other hand, becoming narrowly focused early on can leave one lopsided and short on recourse if the selected endeavor goes sour. As always, even though the notion of moderation is usually as pleasant to gifted teens as nails on a chalkboard, sometimes that is the best bet. In any case, when gifted teens are

really sure of their direction, then they require support for that unless it is clearly unreasonable. Likewise, when they are unsure and interested in many things, letting them know that many gifted people's destiny requires quite a number of detours is the most supportive tack.

One of the most common reasoning errors I see in PG teens who have a definite plan is that they believe it should be like a straight-up rocket to the moon trip. They particularly resist and resent being required to take classes that they believe are a waste of time (not much inclined to think well-roundedness is of any value). I'm not going to say this can't work, but often the result is even more lopsided asynchrony because of the highly selective application of time and energy. These are usually not the kind of young adults who do well in a traditional liberal arts college, because broad-based learning is what they are all about, at least the first 2 years. In any event (I tell this to my graduate students just as often as I tell gifted teen clients), in my view education beyond middle school is approx. 60% learning/application, and 40% jumping through annoying hoops. The percentages are probably the reverse for the first two years of college.

PG teens know, and have known for a long time that they have what it takes to do important work, and they are itching to develop expertise. And many erroneously believe (as I did), that after high school the path ahead would be under my control. Some, yes, but not that much. The good news about college is that there are many more choices than in high school, which is where some students shine and others have a good time at the expense of their goals. Specifically I would recommend two things: (1) try to elicit from your PG teen precisely what makes him so frustrated--not in global terms, (2) then teach him if you can, or get an appropriate mentor or counselor, to train him to be a savvy negotiator. I just finished doing this with 3 PG teens who otherwise might have dropped out of their senior year. The secondary gains when they learn to negotiate adroitly are that they feel far less powerless, and that to do so they must learn a good deal about relationships.

3. Social/Emotional Brick Walls.

The social-emotional issues of the gifted may be understood by many of us who have made the effort to become well informed and/or have lived through it ourselves. Nevertheless, PG people cannot escape encounters with the inevitable brick wall that arises when one's differences collide with social expectations. Human beings have a habit of equating different with abnormal or wrong. Non-gifted people have, and could not be expected to have, experience as a gifted person and vice versa. Hence, the problems, needs, and concerns of PG teens are often interpreted as exaggerations or unfounded bids for attention. Simultaneously, the PG teen is repeatedly invalidated and dismissed, left to deal with their legitimate issues on their own. This is why when I ask my gifted adult clients, "How often have you felt fully understood or unconditionally accepted?" so many of them answer, "Almost never, and then not for long." If for no other

reason, when done well, I find that home schooling can build a foundation of strength that will afford PG individuals a better chance of managing the "hits" that are unavoidable in their lives, especially if they are bent on accomplishing the goals they dream of without giving up along the way. Indeed, I think home schooling these sensitive and challenging young people is a truly heroic endeavor--congratulations to all of you brave souls who take this on for your children!

4. Asynchronous Development: Unavoidable, but can it be fixed? Does it need to be fixed? If so, why? when? and how?

First let me give you my understanding of asynchronous development (AD) and a few examples. AD is one of the very first and most identifiable traits of the gifted. It is primarily an internal process and sometimes becomes observable as an external problem. The internal process is usually a conflict with self-expectation based on an imagined ideal; an ideal image that is often way ahead of time developmentally. What is required (e.g., training, practice, tools, coordination) to actually produce the envisioned ideal product, to achieve the imagined goal to satisfaction, is not yet in place. This idea-skill gap is extremely frustrating for the gifted whose heads are like sparklers, firing off one idea after another. The frustration is compounded by the fact that many gifted youngsters actually excel at some things right off the bat, giving them the false impression that that is how it should be for everything they try. Consequently, they set the bar for everything accordingly, even those things that require years of training and effort.

Sometimes when PG kids skip from one interest to another it is simply because they are ready to move on. But other times the skipping around is because they erroneously decide they have no ability or talent for what they tried to do since it didn't work out well from the outset, and they give up prematurely. The inner drive to excel and to "get there" is so powerful that rapid-fire expertise seems as if it is a reasonable expectation. Although this is totally understandable it is extremely hard on the self-esteem.

AD frustrations can look just plain crazy to those who do not understand giftedness because from their perspective what the pg teen creates is often far beyond their expectations. So, while a parent or teacher may be singing their praises, the teen may be tearing up his/her art project in utter dismay. For example, a 14-year-old PG I will call Nina has a talent for painting that was recognized as early as preschool. From the outside it would appear that this is not the lagging behind sort of AD, but the other way round since the artwork of non-PG age peers wouldn't hold a candle to hers. Yet in her mind Nina can envision a complex scene she would like to paint. But just because she can see her ideal painting in her mind's eye doesn't mean she has the skill or experience to produce it. So, when her art teacher wants Nina to enter some of her recent paintings in a state contest she vehemently declines: "No, never! These are terrible! I don't want anyone to see them. I don't want to see them. Every time I look at them all I see is what's wrong! Everyone thinks I'm so talented. Hah! Not

true--my paintings never turn out right."

Besides the form of AD mentioned, for some gifted people (not just kids), social skills and intellectual skills can seem very lopsided. [Let us bear in mind that many gifted people are socially gifted and excel in the realm of relationship.] When social skills lag behind those of their age peers, PG students struggle to fit in. When this happens the gap can widen all the more because we all tend to do more of (a) what seems to come naturally, and (b) what we are successful with.

5. By the teen years, have these asynchronous concerns disappeared?

No, not necessarily, and perhaps never. Let me give you a real-world example. A few years ago I was invited to give a workshop for PG and highly educated expert scientists and executives in an east coast think tank. The first half of the workshop taught them about the traits, needs, etc. of gifted adults. The second half was an interactive training about personality types in work groups. Though in hindsight I might have expected what happened, I was bowled over when the group composite IQ was undoubtedly off the charts and their emotional/relational skills were stuck at about the 2nd grade level. I had to manage them like a bunch of unruly kids on a playground. These people had clearly developed their minds and scientific expertise while dismissing interpersonal matters. Their jaws dropped in amazement when I informed them that the work they do is far more about relationship than anything else. Could have heard a pin drop! So, I had what amounted to a remedial class on my hands and my work was cut out for me there. In the end most of them finally got it, that there is NO "best" personality type; that each type brings something valuable to the table, and that each type has strengths and weaknesses. Knowing your type and how you make decisions and process experience via personality type can be very helpful to PG teens. It offers them a different lens through which they can better understand themselves and is also quite normalizing at the same time--which is a bonus.

6. What About Introversion and Extroversion?

Some seeming social ineptness may also be related to introversion/extroversion and the way our society treats those differences. Extroverts get energized or "recharge their batteries" by being with others while introverts draw energy from the inside or by being alone. So it stands to reason that many introverts are not very interested in others (especially things like social chit chat, which is often aversive to the gifted anyway) and also don't have to rely on others for energy renewal. So in some ways introverts have it made because in that way they are quite self-sufficient. However, US society in particular values extroversion and tends to see introversion as a negative instead of just the way in which some people are wired. FYI, most of the CEOs in the country are introverts who have learned extroverted behaviors, which I find fascinating.

Regarding resources for teens about introversion/extroversion, I think the most useful is the more complete personality typology developed by the Myers-Briggs mother-daughter (various books by several authors including David Keirse who

wrote "Please Understand Me: Character & Temperament Types", which is helpful. I use an enhanced version for my gifted/talented executive training workshops I find it is essential for gifted people to be able to work together without being driven crazy or driving others crazy. The dilemma is this: gifted people are intense and highly autonomous while work tasks most often require collaboration and cooperation. If the process is not fully understood and set up properly, conflict and dissatisfaction will abound and little will get done.

7. Intellectualization of Emotions:

I work with intellectualizers all the time, mostly males since socialization pressures them to shove their feelings into their heads (while some of us females are socialized to shove lots of our reasoning into the feeling realm). It's not so easy to relinquish one's primary defense mechanism, but it can be traded in for something more useful in a wider array of situations, particularly in close relationships.

8. Heightened perceptivity: Managing teen life as a giant radar dish

Chronic stimulus overload is the result of having a built-in radar dish that is huge and never seems to get turned off. I often say that most people have a radar dish about the size of a direct TV dish, while PG people have one the size of those in the movie Contact. This provides both a visual and a comparison that underscores the fact that this is not a slight difference, so it can't result in little effect. I recommend counseling aimed at managing this with a gifted-knowledgeable professional, or at least find ways to help your teen practice "noting" things they perceive without the necessity of processing it. I often use the analogy of the "red mailbox": If you (the teen) were driving down the street and there was a red mailbox along the way, you would undoubtedly notice it. However, it is not essential that it go any further than that. Just because it was picked up on your radar screen doesn't mean you have to do anything other than notice and let go, kind of like the idea of "catch and release" in fishing. It would be a big waste of time and energy and attention to stop the car, get out, and analyze the features of this mailbox. This way gifted teens (who usually enjoy these absurd examples) will see that they already have the capacity to modulate their attention and mental/emotional investment, and they just need to practice making conscious choices about what they take in to what level and decide if anything at all can or needs to be done as a result of what was noticed. Many things that contribute to chronic stimulus overload are due to indiscriminate processing of everything. Developing a screening method like this is very important to people who are pre-wired to take in just about everything--essential stress management tool.

I also believe that gifted individuals pick up on and carry what I think Jung might have termed "collective existential angst," which may be what is behind sudden onsets of anxiety, worry, or despair.

When someone has far-reaching, highly sensitive radar, and intense reactions,

the world at large cannot be expected to protect against overload. When I go to the movie theaters with Dolby my ears are in such pain that I either have to leave or use earplugs. Almost always I am a minority of one in this, so complaining to the manager is useless. I also detest overhead florescent lights (headaches and eye strain), and nearly take to my bed if I'm in an inescapable situation (e.g., airplane) near someone who puts on cologne by the handful. The upshot is this, just like your daughter knowing what to stay away from on TV, each pg teen needs to know precisely what affects them negatively and either avoid it when possible, attempt to influence it, or do something else (like the earplugs) to protect themselves. From our end of the world it often appears as though other people are somehow dulled out or their radar is not working right.

9. Fitting in at the expense of authenticity.

Just like most of you, I have never been in a non-gifted brain, so I have no idea what that is like (though I ponder this often, and firmly believe the busy-beehive gifted mind can be both a blessing and a curse. Believe me, there are moments when I would love to have an empty head and to disengage my perceptive radar. But none of us would really choose that. Nonetheless, just as non-gifted people assume our minds and ways of gathering and processing stimuli are like theirs, we do the same, assuming they think and perceive as we do. This is understandable, of course, but there are 2 big problems with that assumption: (1) it supports dumbing down and holding back because if we believe this we must therefore truly be "over the top" and too much of everything compared to others, and (2) it leads to a great deal of angst and disappointment about humanity because this belief would mean the "others" perceive, process, cogitate, and integrate life as we do and therefore when they seem apathetic or behind in some way it is simply because they don't care or don't want to try hard enough.

The big payoffs for letting go of this assumption are (a) personal empowerment and (b) relief--(a)"yes, I am quick and aware and challenging and excitable, etc., thanks for noticing." And, (b) Whew! Believing there is freedom in sameness is such a burden and utterly impossible. I don't need to set that goal for myself anymore and that doesn't have to mean I am a loner."

Pg teens are not unlike others in all ways, so they can often fit in on several levels. But in some very important ways they are never going to be the same in any way whatsoever, which means they must make their peace with that fact. I suppose the vast majority of us will always be somewhat starved for a group of "our own kind," and that is a powerful yearning, especially in adolescence. That is why DITD is such a vital resource and connection for gifted teens to come in contact with likeminded others.

Many of the teens I work with daydream of what it would be like if they could take parts of their peers and roll them into one best friend who would fully understand and accept them. That is just as true for gifted adults. But we are scattered throughout societies and because gifted people don't have flashing red beacons

on their heads or wear T-shirts that say "Hey, I'm profoundly gifted," finding true peers is very difficult. So, until globalization gets us together more often here is what I usually suggest for those who feel they are on the outside--aim for a Mega Mall group of friends and acquaintances because it is extremely unlikely that you will get all your needs met in a single individual. When I go to high school reunions members of lots of groups, the brainy ones, the social ones, the athletes, the singers, the dancers, the leaders, the goof-offs, and the conservative rebels all claim me as their own. Had I ever thrown a party and invited friends from each group it probably would have ended in a row!

It is also important to learn early on that relationships end for everyone, and that for gifted people when they do it may just be because it is time to move on. The same is true for most mentorship relationships, so the "it must be my fault" assumption is also no good. Of course if building and maintaining friendships is a regular problem, a good gifted therapist may be the answer--social skills training may not be seen as important, but when pg teens feel alone, it can be a tremendous help to create that balance between compromise and authenticity.

Although I am not very fond of the whole Venus/Mars business by John Gray, I often refer to his concept when I speak to parent and/or professional groups in this way: "If women are from Venus and men are from Mars, then gifted people (men and women) must be from Pluto." The point is the reality of living a xenogenic life--almost always, in varying degrees, feeling like or taking care to not look or act like a foreigner. Statistically we know that throughout their lives PG people will be a minority of one more often than not. This is especially difficult for PG teens since adolescent developmental tasks involve solidification of identity and emancipation during the same time period when social pressures are at their peak. It is indeed wonderful to get a glimpse of what your teen is "really like" given the opportunity to spend time with true peers. The first time this happens gifted teens and adults alike experience profound and exceedingly positive "shock and awe." With true peers there is no need to dumb down, water down, slow down, hold back, cover up, fake it, explain yourself over and over, wait for others to catch up or to "get it."

10. Family Talk about Being Gifted:

I think this is one of the most difficult tasks parents of gifted teens must deal with. Just dealing with a teen can be quite a handful. And, by the time a PG youngster becomes a teen he/she has had many, many experiences with others that have shaped their thinking and attitudes, toward self and others. No matter how outwardly confident a gifted person seems, research is pretty clear that the biggest hurdle they face is self-doubt.

One of the things I think is very important when raising a PG teen is to do precisely what you reported--talk openly about giftedness often. I don't know of any savvy pg teen who would want the subject of being gifted-different to come up at all, much less be open and honest about it, with peers or anyone not

completely trusted to respond kindly and with acceptance. This is such a normalizing, relieving experience and can even lead to some good laughs when done well. But to do well with this parents need to be very honest with themselves and make sure their responses to their teen are not tainted by an unspoken resentment of them, or hidden wish that they were more like the others, or jealousy. This is why I so strongly encourage gifted parents to really come to grips with their own giftedness and get the help they need to heal old wounds.

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