

Life in the Asynchronous Family

by Kathi Kearney

...Max has not only been highly gifted all of his life, but also somewhat adolescent all of his life...at 14, he can display a ferocious insistence for justice with the passions and tenacity of a 3-year-old...this gets confusing! We were told that at age 9 he displayed "cognitive reasoning skills way beyond his years." I wish he came with a blinking sign on his forehead to let me know just who I am dealing with: the 3-year-old, the 14-year-old, or the 25-year-old.

Last summer an ill-placed golf ball landed in the bedroom of a house adjoining a picturesque lighthouse. (Remind me to ask how this boy could ignore the physics of playing golf in a densely populated suburban neighborhood.) As glass went crashing, his highly gifted buddy was heard to have prayed, "Thank God it wasn't me!" I hear myself asking Max, again and again, "What were you thinking?"

That's the thing - they think when you least expect them to, and go blank at the most inopportune times. My guess is that it's the tension of being caught between all those ages I just mentioned. But I don't think my theory would be supported in a textbook, even though I live by it every day in order to give some organized definition to what's going on. (Estes, 1991, p.3)

While most families watch their children proceed through childhood with Gesell-like efficiency, families of intellectually gifted children often have a very different experience. These children experience great discrepancies between their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. Hollingworth (1942) noted that "To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties" (p. 282). The Columbus Group (1991) proposed an emerging phenomenological definition of giftedness with the concept of asynchronous development at its core:

...Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Tolan (1992) asserts that such asynchronous development "puts the gifted person outside normal developmental patterns from birth" (p.8). Asynchronous development in the child can also introduce asynchrony into the entire family system and into the family's sociocultural mediation with the larger community.

A Vygotskian Perspective

Any mother of a 6-year-old gifted child who has found herself explaining the rudiments of algebra in detail one minute, and despairing that the same child will ever learn to tie his shoes the next, will appreciate Vygotsky's concept of the "zone of proximal development." Lev Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist whose work spanned the time period from the 1917 Russian Revolution until his untimely death from tuberculosis in 1934, viewed learning as a social process of acculturation. He described the "zone of proximal development" as

the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers... Thus the notion of a zone of proximal development enables us to propound a new formula, namely that the only 'good learning' is that which is in advance of development. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86, 89; cited in Bruner, 1985, p. 24)

Thus, the mother (or other adult) acts as a mediator for the child, "[arranging] the environment such that the child can reach higher or more abstract ground from which to reflect" (Bruner, 1985, p. 24).

Parents as Multi-level Mediators

Most parents of normally developing children, of course, do not find themselves mediating algebra and shoe-tying at the same time in the same child. Parents of gifted children, however, may well find themselves in the role of "multi-level mediators" who must not only guide development that is progressing in an asynchronous manner within the child, but must also act as mediators for the child within the larger culture of school and society, since the child's individual pattern of development does not match cultural norms. In the process, the usual patterns of family development may also shift.

Asynchrony Within the Gifted Child

In the early years of the child's life the parents may or may not realize that the child's developmental pattern is unusual. One mother of a highly gifted 4 year old thought nothing of her daughter's phenomenal chess-playing ability until the child began to regularly beat her father at the game; "We all play chess at home - I didn't realize that other 4 year olds don't do this." On the other hand, many parents of extraordinarily gifted children are aware that their children are different even as infants, demonstrating remarkable powers of concentration, demanding cognitive stimulation, and acquiring language at much earlier ages than their peers, often speaking within the first few months of life and reading and writing by 2 or 3 years old.

We do not yet understand the full meaning of such an early initiation into language for intellectually gifted children.

Vygotsky considered the acquisition of language as the most significant moment in the course of cognitive development. When language begins to serve as a psychological

instrument for the regulation of behavior, perception changes radically, new varieties of memory are formed, and new thought processes are created. (Blanck, 1990, p. 47)

Blanck's contention, based on the research of Vygotsky and Luria, suggests that it is not just that the child who acquires language earlier simply "gets there sooner," but that the child's thought processes are *fundamentally changed* with the initiation of this new tool.

A fundamental problem for families with gifted children is the question of what happens when two or more discrepant developmental levels collide. One mother described a scene in the grocery store with her highly gifted 2-year-old son. At a time when most 2 year olds are content to name items in the supermarket, Andrew had already initiated extensive discussions with his mother at home about the nutritional value of various products. As they were proceeding down the cereal aisle, Andrew, seated in the grocery cart, spied three middle-aged women selecting sugared cereals with artificial colors. Before Andrew's mother knew what had happened, three startled women turned around to see the 2 year old standing up in the grocery cart, shaking his finger, and lecturing, *"Put those back! Put those back! Don't you realize that cereal is bad for you? It is mostly sugar, and contains artificial flavors and colors!"* Andrew's intellectual and language development were far beyond that of most 2 year olds. His social cognition, however, had not caught up with his intellectual prowess; he did not yet know that it was not polite to lecture strangers in the supermarket.

Yet this same child's intellectual advancement, ironically, also left him outside normal social interaction with same-age peers. His desire for precision in language was incomprehensible to other 2 year olds during social discourse; they simply did not understand the language he was able to use so fluently and well. A frustrated Andrew listened to his playmate repeat, *"Truck! Truck!"* each time Andrew brought out his favorite toy. Finally Andrew, his patience at an end, snatched the truck away with the words, *"It is not a truck! It is a front-end loader!"*

Andrew's parents face a dilemma unique to parents of gifted children. They must recognize, first, that Andrew's pattern of development is both unusual but is normal for him. Second, they must respond to all those ages at once. Andrew's family must be constantly aware not only of the rapidly changing "zone of proximal development" in Andrew's cognitive, social, emotional, and physical structures, but they must also decide how to mediate when discrepancies occur, and what to do when several developmental levels collide. Taking the truck away from another toddler is socially expected behavior for a 2 year old; Andrew's underlying reason for doing so was not.

When Andrew and his friend play, how much should Andrew, at age 2, be expected to adapt to his friend's zone of proximal development in language? Is it even possible for him to do so? Who is a "more capable peer" for Andrew? With older children, should an emotionally sensitive 8 year old who reads at a college level be allowed to read *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or is it too riveting? Should a 14-year-old college freshman be allowed to date 19-year-old classmates? The answers are as individual as the children and their

circumstances. In some cases there may not be any good answers, when "zones of proximal development" within the same child are at widely disparate levels.

Asynchrony in the Family System

Giftedness is a family affair. Discrepancies in an individual child's development affect siblings, parents, and extended family members as well as the child, and educational options have repercussions that can reverberate throughout the family system and across generations. This should not be surprising; recent work with families of children with disabilities (Fewell & Vadasy, 1986) illustrates the impact of a child's exceptionality on the entire family system. Indeed, this impact was deemed so great and the importance of family support so crucial to the young child with disabilities that a new federal law (P.L. 99-457) mandating free public services for infants and toddlers with disabilities also mandates that an "Individual Family Services Plan" be developed, drawing on the family's own strengths and needs.

Effects on siblings

The asynchronous development of an intellectually gifted child adds a variable that can change or radically alter the child's place in the family system - for example, when a younger sibling surpasses an older one in achievement. School acceleration, an increasingly popular educational option for gifted children, introduces potential minefields of asynchrony into the family. While it is often the best educational option available for a gifted child, families need to be sensitive to the perspective of siblings.

The 12 Gilbreth children, described in the popular book, *Cheaper By the Dozen* (Gilbreth & Carey, 1948/1963), understood this all too well. In the chapter entitled "Skipping Through School," they described one predicament:

The standard reward for skipping was a new bicycle. None of us used to like to jump grades, because it meant making new friends and trailing behind the rest of the class until we could make up the work. But the bicycle incentive was great, and there was always the fear that a younger brother or sister would skip and land in your class. That would be the disgrace supreme. So whenever it looked as if anyone down the family line was about to skip, every older child would study frantically so that he could jump ahead, too. (p. 60)

As the Gilbreth children note, older siblings may feel that their 'place' in the family or the school is at risk as a result of the rapid advancement of a younger sibling.

Younger, equally gifted siblings in a family of gifted children and adults sometimes feel that they can't keep up, not realizing that it is often their chronological age, rather than their intellectual ability, which keeps them from participating in the activities of older siblings and adults in the family. Six-year-old Anna had a 9-year-old highly gifted sister who attended a local college. At the same time, her father was working on a master's degree and her mother was taking courses part-time toward her bachelor's degree. One day, Anna's mother discovered Anna sobbing in her room. When asked what was wrong, Anna blurted out, *"I'm the dumb one in this family. I'm the only one in this family*

who's not in college!" Anna was far from 'dumb'; with an extremely high IQ and formidable musical talent evident even at the age of 6, she was certainly gifted. But her perspective as the younger sibling in a family where all the other members were college students, including the 9-year-old, led her to think otherwise. Her mother wisely talked with Anna about the talents and abilities already evident in Anna's life and about the limitations of chronological age and physical development.

Play patterns among gifted siblings is another arena where asynchronous family development is sometimes evident. Hollingworth (1942) noted the tendency of highly gifted children to "organize the play into a complicated pattern' with some remote and definite goal" (p. 274). If these children are placed in heterogeneous, rigidly age-graded classrooms in school with no opportunity to associate with gifted peers for academic and social activities, it may appear to their teachers that they do not "socialize well" with other children. In addition, if they complicate the play to the point where other children literally cannot play with them, they will not be surrounded by playmates at recess. But within the family, they may spend hours and hours with gifted siblings of varying ages participating in imaginative, extremely complex play. During the 19th century, this would not have been unusual, since children spent much less time in school and much more time at home. Twentieth century society, however, features a much different pattern of expectations for family life. Thus, such closeness and creativity among gifted siblings sometimes is perceived negatively by schools and mental health professionals, placing the family on an asynchronous track according to the norms of contemporary culture.

Effects on Parenting

The asynchronous development of the gifted child and the educational strategies used to respond to high intellectual ability can have unexpected effects on parents individually and on the marital relationship. Three areas deserve particular consideration.

- ***The "early empty nest"***

Acceleration, often a strategy of choice for highly gifted students, also usually means that the child will leave home earlier and will enter the adult world sooner. In some ways, the family life cycle is compressed and shortened. If the mother chose to stay home full-time to raise her family, she may find that the gifted child's academic acceleration has also accelerated her own need to advance in her career or begin a new job. Both parents will need to make adjustments within the marriage relationship that come with children leaving home - but they may need to do it much earlier than they expected, and sometimes earlier in their own development as individuals and as a couple than would be ideal.

- ***Extended financial dependence***

Unfortunately, the 'early empty nest' does not always bring with it early financial independence from parents. In fact, the 'early empty nest' may increase financial dependence at the same time that the gifted adolescent or young adult needs to begin his or her separation from the family. Some very young accelerants are not old enough to obtain working papers, although their college financial aid packages assume that they will seek summer and school-year employment.

Graduate school for a very bright student is encouraged and expected in today's society, and for many careers it is an absolute necessity. The cost is often astronomical, even with the aid of grants and scholarships. As a result, the gifted young person often remains partially financially dependent on the family, at a time when most of his or her chronological age peers are working at steady full-time jobs. The extended (and often necessary) financial dependence of a gifted child affects the other siblings and the life cycle of the family. While other parents are actively saving for retirement, families of gifted children often find themselves continuing to help pay for college. Such a situation results in family asynchrony on many levels, as the realities of life in the gifted family differ substantially from those in the larger society.

- ***Postponement or denial of grandparenting***

Lengthy graduate studies coupled with the energy necessary to establish oneself in a career and lead to a postponement of marriage and childbearing. (In this situation, accelerants benefit: The time they save allows graduate study and career establishment at a younger age, and also allows them to establish families earlier should they wish to do so.) The many options available for bright women in today's society means that some of them do not marry, some have no children, and many others marry and have children much later than their mothers did. While other families are enjoying new grandchildren, families of the gifted may feel that this part of the family life cycle is being delayed or denied.

Asynchrony in the Larger Society

Families of gifted children find that they not only must deal with asynchronous development on the home front, but that the advanced and uneven development of their children means that they must become mediators between their children and the larger society, gradually teaching their children how to use these mediation skills themselves. Institutions such as schools, government bureaucracies, informal networks in the neighborhood and community, and the images in popular culture seldom reflect the reality of the inner life of gifted children and their families. Hollingworth (1942) felt that the problems that arise from uneven development pertained

...chiefly to the period in the life of the gifted child before he is twenty years of age; for the problems of the person of superior intellect tend to be less numerous as he grows older and he can use his intelligence independently in gaining control of his own life. (p. 267)

Since the years prior to age 20 are precisely those years when the gifted child is most likely to be home, families of gifted children are likely to find themselves on the frontlines as they face the realities of their child's and family's asynchrony within the larger society. As one mother expressed succinctly, the most difficult thing about raising her highly gifted son was "explaining the world to him and explaining him to the world."

Schooling

By far the most difficult, continuous, and frustrating activity required of parents of gifted children is finding appropriate educational environments. Parents of the gifted are thrust into an advocacy role, one that is almost always dependent on the good will of local school officials and the status of the latest educational "reform." Unlike families of children with disabilities, parents of the gifted do not have the benefit of a federal mandate protecting their child's right to a free and appropriate public education. Instead, they are put in a most difficult position which requires them to constantly advocate for their child and for the very existence of educational programs for the gifted; to ignore the situation and hope everything turns out all right; or, for those with financial means, to "do it themselves" through enrichment classes outside of school, summer programs, tutorials, and homeschooling. The inequity of this arrangement for economically disadvantaged families is obvious, but the added family stress such choices place on families of gifted children from all socioeconomic levels reflects the extent of the discrepancy between the needs of the gifted child and the reality of most American schools today.

Furthermore, giftedness in parents (especially giftedness that was not acknowledged in childhood) can also affect the advocacy process. Tolan (1992) describes the *emotional intensity [that] occurs when parents, often unaware of it themselves, experience feelings on two levels - as parents and as the powerless children they themselves once were. They may feel an overwhelming need to fix for their children what they could not fix for themselves.* (p. 9)

At a time when these parents most need to help their gifted children access appropriate educational opportunities, deal with asynchronous development, and understand the social and emotional concomitants of giftedness, they must also face their own giftedness, often for the first time.

Bureaucracies

Most Americans experience some degree of asynchrony with the ubiquitous bureaucracies that are part of modern life. Families of the gifted, however, are in for some particularly interesting surprises. Chronological age limitations are the norm in contemporary life, and some of them are sensible, such as those restricting driving and drinking. Other restrictions make little sense, and may range from a mere annoyance (a preschool child reading on a 5th grade level is refused permission to participate in the library's readathon designed for school-aged children) to outright discrimination (under many state laws, a seventh grade student who takes math courses at the high school is not eligible to receive high school graduation credits). Nor are such difficulties limited to government or school bureaucracies; one mother of a gifted 4 year old recounted her battle with a popular toy manufacturer which had refused to let her son join the company's club for older children, although he consistently played with the building materials designed for 9 and 10 year olds, with exceptional skill.

The Community

Contrary to prevailing stereotypes of the 'pushy parent' many families of gifted children

feel that they cannot share their child's progress through the developmental stages of childhood within the community's informal network of neighbors and relatives. They express this reluctance privately and with sadness, and usually only within the confines of the immediate family or in the safety of the company of other parents of gifted children. This situation is similar to the experiences of families of children with disabilities (Fewell & Vadasy, 1986) Both groups of parents are often denied what is a normal developmental experience of parenthood for other families.

The religious community to which the family belongs usually has no formal arrangements for the instruction of intellectually gifted children as they develop spiritually. Yet, Hollingworth (1942) noted:

When we observe young gifted children, we discover that religious ideas and needs originate in them whenever they develop to a mental level past "twelve years mental age." Thus they show these needs when they are but eight or nine years old, or earlier. The higher the IQ the earlier does the pressing need for an explanation of the universe occur, the sooner does the demand for a concept of the origin and destiny of the self appear. (p. 280)

The gifted child with deep, fundamental religious questions needs the support of the religious community and the family as he or she struggles with issues that form part of the foundation of the personality. In many cases, the child will be struggling with concepts that are difficult even for adults. Some church and synagogue communities have responded to advanced spiritual development in the gifted child by providing multi-age religious instruction classes, allowing these children to attend adult classes, allowing the child to join the religious faith at a younger age than is customary, or providing an opportunity for the child to explore individual religious questions and concerns in discussion with the minister, priest, rabbi, or imam. Advanced spiritual development is fraught with asynchrony; there will be issues which the gifted child will comprehend intellectually and spiritually, but will be less prepared to handle emotionally.

Images in Popular Culture

It should not be surprising that many images in popular culture do not reflect the inner realities of gifted children or adults. Popular culture today is a creation of mass-marketing, a distinctively 20th century invention. Corporate financial decisions often drive the development of new products or the sponsorship of television programs, and such decisions, to be profitable, must appeal to the widest possible audience. It is surprising under these circumstances that a television show such as "Doogie Howser, M.D." thrives. In the first episode of the ABC network program, aired on September 22, 1989, Doogie, the 16-year-old physician, writes in his journal, "Kissed my first girl. Lost my first patient. Life will never be the same again." That these images exist at all in popular culture today, and provide such rich opportunities to demonstrate the complex realities that discrepancies in development mean for gifted children growing up, is encouraging.

The Asynchronous Family: A Celebration

Raising any family today is not an easy task. Families of gifted children face some unusual challenges, and also some unexpected joys, as they play the hand they are dealt. Language use, the complexity of relationships, moral and spiritual development, and the family's relationship with the larger society are all changed by the presence of intellectually gifted children and parents within the family crucible.

Mediation will be different in these families, for the 'zones of proximal development' are continually changing, shifting, expanding, and colliding with each other. The key to coping may well be acceptance - acceptance that the asynchronous development which is a hallmark of intellectual giftedness is normal for that child's individual developmental trajectory. With that kind of acceptance comes not only a deeper understanding of the resulting asynchrony in the family life cycle, but a celebration, as we recognize the uniqueness of the individual and the diversity and power of family life to transform and to mediate as well as to comfort and protect.

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