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# 3 SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL ISSUES FOR EXCEPTIONALLY INTELLECTUALLY GIFTED STUDENTS

by **Miraca U. M. Gross, Ph.D.**

**M**ost findings reported in reviews (e.g., Robinson & Noble, 1992; Schneider, 1987) of the psychosocial development of intellectually gifted children and adolescents present a positive picture of their adjustment. The majority of the findings, however, originate from studies of moderately gifted children, and the picture may be very different for children who are exceptionally (IQ 160-179) or profoundly (IQ 180+) gifted. Schneider, for example, reported that his own study of peer acceptance of gifted students found significant negative correlations between IQ and peer relationships. Janos and Robinson (1985) warned: "The most highly talented are the most vulnerable, probably because they are exceedingly 'out of sync' with school, friends, and even family. They may become superficially adjusted but sacrifice possibilities for out-

standing fulfillment and significant, socially valued contributions” (p. 182).

The paucity of intellectual measures with sufficient “top” for exceptionally and profoundly gifted individuals poses a problem for research about this group. Most such younger children are identified using the admittedly outdated 1972 norms of the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Form L-M (Silverman & Kearney, 1992), a measure that largely taps abstract verbal reasoning ability. Most exceptionally high-IQ adolescents are identified through their participation as seventh- or eighth-graders in regional talent searches using the SAT (Scholastic Aptitude Test) or the ACT (American College Test), measures of verbal and mathematical reasoning. More recently standardized ability tests such as the the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale (4th ed.) and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (3rd ed.), provide insufficient observation of the most advanced levels of intellectual ability.

### **Peer Relationships of Extremely Gifted Children**

No review of research on the psychosocial development of extremely gifted children would be complete without reference to the pioneering work of Lewis Terman and Leta Stetter Hollingworth. Discussing the social and personality traits of the children in his landmark study, Terman distinguished among children at different levels of intellectual giftedness. He noted that children with IQs higher than 170 tended to have “considerably more difficulty in making social adjustments” than did the moderately gifted children, with two-thirds being reported by their teachers and parents as being definitely solitary or “poor mixers” (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930, p. 175).

It is in the case of extraordinarily high IQ that the social problem is most acute. If the IQ is 180, the intellectual level at 6 is almost on a par with the average 11-year-old, and at 10 or 11 it is not far from that of the average high school graduate. . . . The inevitable result is that the child

of IQ 180 has one of the most difficult problems of social adjustment that any human being is ever called upon to meet. (p. 264)

Hollingworth (1926, 1942) was the first psychologist to make a systematic study of peer relationships of children at different levels of intellectual giftedness. She defined the IQ range 125–155 as “socially optimal intelligence” because children in this range typically were well balanced, self-confident, outgoing, and able to win the confidence and friendship of age peers. She observed, however, that above IQ 160, the difference between exceptionally gifted children and their age peers is so great that they are unlikely to find others who share their abilities and interests. Their special problems of development are correlated with social isolation and appear particularly acute between the ages of 4 and 9. She showed that, when exceptionally gifted children who had been rejected by age peers were removed from inappropriate grade placement and permitted to work and play with intellectual peers, the loneliness and social isolation disappeared, and the children were accepted as valued classmates and friends (Hollingworth, 1942).

More recently, Gross’s longitudinal study (1993, 1998) of 60 Australian children with IQs higher than 160 has found that children who were retained in an inclusion classroom or permitted a “token” grade advancement of a single year experienced significant and ongoing difficulties with peer relationships. Many reported that they had few friends or no friends at all, despite their deliberate and prolonged academic underachievement in efforts to gain acceptance from age peers.

Dauber and Benbow (1990) compared the popularity and peer acceptance of students who were extremely mathematically or verbally gifted (students in the top 1 in 10,000 among their age peers) with those of students who were moderately gifted in math or language. Moderately gifted students were viewed both by themselves and by their age peers as being more popular, more socially active, and more socially valued than were the extremely gifted. Students with extreme verbal talent rated themselves as having the lowest social standing of the four groups, a finding that Dauber and Benbow attributed to both society’s higher valuing of mathematical

talent and the fact that, while extreme math ability may be less obvious on social occasions, verbally talented students may be conspicuous due to their sophisticated vocabulary. Moreover, students who wish to mask exceptional mathematical ability for peer acceptance need to moderate their achievements principally in math classes, while students who wish to conceal extreme linguistic precocity have to be much more consistently on guard against "breaking cover."

Swiatek (1995) studied social coping strategies of highly gifted students identified through the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth. She found that the most highly gifted were most likely to deny their own giftedness. Swiatek suggested this denial could have arisen through a reluctance to believe the validity of their extremely high SAT scores, through a perceived pressure to perform extremely well academically, or through a belief that they might be more socially acceptable if they conformed to the standards of age-peers. As in Dauber and Benbow's study, students who were highly gifted verbally perceived themselves as less socially accepted than did their mathematically gifted counterparts.

### Friendship Studies

Several studies have found that gifted children prefer the companionship of gifted age peers or older children. This finding is congruent with friendship choices in children generally. Most children tend to choose friends on the basis of similarities in mental age, rather than chronological age (Gross, 2001; in press).

Janos, Marwood, and Robinson (1985) queried an exceptionally gifted group (IQ 163+) and a moderately gifted group (IQ 125-140) of elementary school children about their friendships. Exceptionally gifted children were significantly more likely to report that most of their friends were older, that they had too few friends, and that being smart made making friends harder. Parents of the exceptionally gifted children were more likely to report that their child had only one close friend or none at all.

In Britain, Freeman (1979) compared two groups of gifted children: a "target" group with mean IQ of 147 and a comparison

group of mean IQ 134. Children in the target group said they felt "different" from other children 17 times more often than did children in the comparison group. Furthermore, 83% of the target group reported having few friends compared to 30% in the comparison group, while 7% said they had no friends at all, compared to only 1% in the control group. The friends that the target group *did* have were described as being older, rather than the same age or younger.

A recent Australian study comparing the conceptions of friendship held by average, moderately gifted, and exceptionally gifted children has found that children's conceptions of friendship form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age (Gross, 2001; in press). However, it is mental age, rather than chronological age, that seems to dictate children's progress through the developmental stages.

In this study, a strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. At ages when their age peers of average ability were looking simply for play partners, gifted children were beginning to look for close, stable, and trusting friendships. Children with IQs higher than 160 tend to begin the search for relationships of complete trust and honesty—friendships based on unconditional acceptance—four or five years earlier than their age peers. Indeed, the majority of exceptionally gifted children aged 6 or 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship that did not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12. In third and fourth grade, even moderately gifted children had the conceptions of friendship that characterize average-ability children at least two years older.

The differences between the gifted and their age peers were much larger in the earlier years of school than in the later years. This supports Hollingworth's finding that the loneliness and social isolation experienced by many gifted children is most acute before the age of 10. It is at this level of schooling that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship. Indeed, with increasing age and changes in life circumstances, the field of friendship choices widens. To quote Terman (Burks, Jensen, & Terman, 1930), "Someone has said

that genius is necessarily solitary, since the population is so sparse at the highest levels of mental ability. However, adult genius is mobile and can seek out its own kind" (p. 264).

### Motivational Orientation

Rogers (1986) synthesized a range of studies on learning styles and motivational orientations of intellectually gifted children. Her review suggests that gifted students in general are intrinsically, rather than extrinsically, motivated; prefer to study independently, rather than in mixed-ability groups; and dislike being given responsibility for the learning achievements of classmates.

In Australia, Gross (1997), comparing the motivational orientation of academically gifted seventh-grade students with a heterogeneous population of age peers, also found the gifted students to be significantly more task-oriented, focusing on the task and mastery strategies, rather than on the desire for high grades or academic recognition. Similarly in Canada, Kanevsky (1994), comparing differences between the problem-solving strategies used by young children of average ability (mean IQ 104) and those used by highly gifted age peers (mean IQ 153), found ability-related differences in motivational orientation. Highly gifted children were more likely to display intrinsic motivation, enhancing their enjoyment of the problem-solving exercises by monitoring and maintaining the level of challenge available to them, whereas children of average ability appeared more extrinsically motivated by the researcher's interest in their progress.

Case studies of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children often identify, as a dominant affective characteristic, a passionate desire to learn more and improve in the child's talent field. The father of one subject with an IQ above 180 in a study by Morelock (1995) described his son's hunger for intellectual stimulus as "a rage to learn." Several of the extremely gifted children in Gross's longitudinal study gave evidence of this same drive by planning their own programs of radical acceleration through elementary and secondary school over a period of several years, personally negotiating each grade advancement with their teachers and school principals (Gross, 1993, 1998).

Terman (Burks et al., 1930) found that the majority of his subjects with IQs higher than 170 were reported by their teachers and parents as preferring to work or study alone, rather than with other students. Terman believed strongly that this preference for working independently reflected a natural cognitive and affective orientation. Gross's (1997) study of academically gifted students called this interpretation into question, however, suggesting that the preference for working alone depends on one's situation.

Gross (1997, 1998) found that highly gifted students admitted to a full-time ability-grouped setting designed to telescope six years of secondary schooling into five years swiftly developed a "cohort effect." The group was characterized by peer bonding, affectionate guidance, and mutual encouragement with classmates who were similar in their abilities and interests; were task-oriented, rather than ego-involved; and had been presented with a common, but intellectually challenging, goal (Gross, 1998). Yet many of these children stated that, in the elementary school heterogeneous classroom, they had preferred to work independently and had actively disliked being required to act as tutors for less-able classmates. Collaborative work became a delight, rather than a chore, when the students with whom they were now permitted to work were intellectual peers, rather than simply agemates.

### School Response to Exceptionally and Profoundly Gifted Students

As we have seen, the problems of social isolation, peer rejection, loneliness, and alienation that afflict many extremely gifted children arise *not* out of their exceptional intellectual abilities, but as a result of society's response to them. These problems arise when the school, the education system, or the community refuses to create for the extremely gifted child a peer group based not on the accident of chronological age, but on a commonality of abilities, interests, and values. Ability grouping is an essential interventive response for the highly gifted, and the earlier this occurs, the more effective it is likely to be in preventing social isolation.

Whether or not acceleration occurs within a homogeneous classroom of mental-age peers or for individual children, it is now

generally recognized (Benbow, 1998; Cronbach, 1996; Hollingworth, 1942) that, for highly gifted children, some form of acceleration is essential if they are to find not only significant numbers of students of their own mental age with whom they can form healthy and productive social relationships, but satisfying intellectual experiences, as well. Since the early 1970s, the findings of the Study of Mathematically Precocious Youth have provided powerful arguments for the intellectual and social benefits of academic acceleration for highly gifted youth (Benbow, Lubinski, & Suchy, 1996). Moreover, the multiplicity of talents displayed by these young people (Rogers & Silverman, 2001) coupled with their social and emotional maturity (Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Janos, Robinson, & Lunneborg, 1989) makes them excellent candidates for radical acceleration, a series of grade advancements that results in their entering college three or more years earlier than is customary.

Hollingworth (1942) and Terman and Oden (1947), in their follow-up research on the young adults in Terman's gifted group, argued forcefully that, for extremely gifted children, a single grade skip was not sufficient; they strongly advised several grade skips spaced appropriately through the student's school career. Gross (1992, 1993, 1998) found that, for children with IQs higher than 160, a token grade skip of one year, even when supplemented with in-class enrichment or pull-out, was no more effective, academically or socially, than retention in the heterogeneous classroom.

In Gross's study, the majority of exceptionally gifted children who had not been radically accelerated displayed low levels of motivation and social self-esteem, were more likely to report social rejection by their classmates, and were required to perform in school at levels several years below their tested achievement. Some could recall a time in their lives when deliberate masking of their abilities had not been an automatic survival mechanism, accepted as a painful, but necessary part of living. By contrast, the 17 students who had been radically accelerated developed warm and fulfilling friendships with the older students with whom they learned and socialized through their childhood and adolescence (Gross, 1993, 1994, 1998). Nine of Gross's radical accelerants have already entered university, at ages between 11 and 16. All are experiencing

high levels of academic success and have full social lives (Gross, 1998). None regret having taken such an accelerated pathway through school.

## Conclusion

Exceptionally gifted students are those for whom the education system must make exceptions. The social and academic environments that form the core of students' everyday experiences play a critical role in their social and emotional adjustment, as well as their ultimate productivity and life satisfaction. Despite common wisdom and stereotypes to the contrary, exceptionally and profoundly advanced students do not show inherent social deficiencies more frequently than anyone else. It is the mismatch with the environments we afford them that isolates and discourages their efforts to relate to others. This situation is a responsibility we must take seriously.

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