5 AFFECT REGULATION AND THE GIFTED

by **Margaret K. Keiley, Ed.D.**

In recent years, educators, psychologists, clinicians, and researchers have addressed the educational, social, and emotional needs of intellectually and academically gifted children and adolescents (Colangelo & Davis, 1997; Feldhusen, VanTassel-Baska, & Seeley, 1989; Horowitz & O'Brien, 1985; Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991). As in research on other populations (Crick & Dodge, 1994), the focus of research on gifted individuals has been mainly on their cognitive functioning (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986) followed by investigations of their psychosocial functioning (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Robinson & Noble, 1991). Although the affective domain has been heralded as foundational in the development of personal and social talents (Gardner, 1983; Kelly & Moon, 1998; Moon, in press) and an essential component of motivation and social and emotional functioning (Garber & Dodge, 1991;

Martin & Tesser, 1996; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), very little attention has been paid to affect regulation in the gifted. Some research on the emotional development of gifted children has focused on identifying endogenous and exogenous factors related to giftedness that can cause social and emotional difficulties in this population (Moon & Hall, 1997; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Neihart, 1999; Robinson & Noble, 1991; Webb, 1993).

Affect Regulation

Emotions supply information about the impact and relevance of individuals' experiences; what is desired, valued, wanted, or needed (Frijda, 1986; Tomkins, 1963). Emotions are, therefore, crucial in decision-making processes. Affect regulation involves monitoring, tolerating, and coordinating the physiological, behavioral, or experiential aspects of emotional experience (Garber & Dodge, 1991; Keiley, Liu, Moon, & Sprenkle, 2000). Affect that is undercontrolled is a hallmark of externalizing behaviors, such as oppositional defiant disorder, conduct disorder, and violence. Affect that is overcontrolled distinguishes many internalizing disorders, such as anxiety, phobias, and depression (Hinshaw, Lahey, & Hart, 1993). In general, affect is regulated in order to reduce adverse conditions or to increase favorable ones, thus allowing individuals to understand, organize, and act upon that experience (Frijda, 1986; Mayer & Salovey, 1997). Affect management involves both internal relational processes of self-regulation and external relational processes of social regulation (Garber & Dodge). Internally, individuals attempt to modulate affective experience in order to have the time and space in which to decide what external or social regulation processes they want to activate (Magai, 1999). Optimally, individuals are able to tolerate affect with a minimum of controlling strategies aimed at either themselves (internally focused) or at others (externally focused), which enables them to access the information that affect contains about their current experience (Tomkins, 1963), information that is crucial for both effective decision making and the development of talent.

Affect Regulation in Gifted Children

Until recently, most research on gifted children has focused on academic and social issues, rather than on emotional ones, with the exception of studies of the prevalence of affect-regulation difficulties (Colangelo & Davis, 1997). Reviews of research in this area present conflicting views of the emotional characteristics of intellectually and academically gifted children (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Moon & Hall, 1997; Moon, Kelly, & Feldhusen, 1997; Neihart, 1999; Robinson & Noble, 1991). Some studies suggest that these children are highly motivated, well-adjusted, socially mature, open to new experiences, independent, and possess high self-concepts and a high tolerance for ambiguity. Other studies suggest that gifted children may be vulnerable to social and emotional difficulties related to their giftedness. In addition, certain subpopulations of gifted children (lower socioeconomic status, single parent, African American, gifted children with disabilities, and the highly gifted) have been found to be at risk for poor social adjustment (Ford, 1996; Moon, Zentall, Grskovic, Hall, & Stormont-Spurgin, 2001). Less is known, however, about how these subpopulations of gifted children regulate affect (Ford & Harris, 1995; Frasier, 1993).

Reviews of research on the emotional needs of gifted students (Janos & Robinson, 1985; Robinson, & Noble, 1991; Webb, 1993) suggest that they may be at risk for developing internalizing disorders. They have been found to be vulnerable to isolation and loneliness, which are precursors to depression and anxiety reactions (Kaiser & Berndt, 1986; Jackson, 1998; Kline & Short, 1992). Their intensity, sensitivity, and emotionality can also contribute to anxiety, phobias, and interpersonal problems (Fiedler, 1999; Piechowski, 1997; Silverman, 1993; Webb). Internal, parental, and societal pressures to achieve can result in a fear of failure or in an obsessive-compulsive perfectionism (Weisse, 1990). The negative manifestations of perfectionism that have been identified as pertinent to the gifted are those related to affect regulation (e.g., eating disorders, depression, underachievement, substance abuse, and suicide; Hayes & Sloat, 1992; Hillyer, 1989; Nugent, 2000). If gifted students do experience failure, they may have few strategies to manage their negative affect since they have little experience in dealing

with failure. For example, academically gifted junior high students have been found to demonstrate more negative affective, stronger physiological stress reactions, and more irrational beliefs in response to experimentally inducted failure than a comparison group of nongifted peers (Roberts & Lovett, 1994). Gifted students who experience failure may find themselves feeling either anxious or suicidal and depressed (Delisle, 1986; Jackson, 1998; Silverman). Some evidence exists that gifted males may experience more depression than gifted females (Bartell & Reynolds, 1988; Kline & Short). In another study, however, gifted females reported expressions of higher levels of negative affect than the males on a projective story-completion task (Keiley, Moon, Sprenkle, & Liu, 1999).

However, other research suggests that gifted children and adolescents experience either the same or less risk for internalizing difficulties than nongifted children. They have been found to show essentially the same amount of interest and enjoyment in class activities (Gentry, Gable, & Springer, 2000), experience fewer stressful life-changing events (Metha & McWhirter, 1997); demonstrate the same or fewer internalizing symptoms (Galluci, Middleton, & Kline, 1999; Merrell, Gill, McFarland, & McFarland, 1996), and experience similar amounts of depression and suicide ideation (Baker, 1995; Metha & McWhirter; Pearson & Beer, 1991) as their nongifted peers. Similarly, gifted secondary school students have been found to have emotional adjustment scores in the normative range (Garland & Zigler, 1999; Nail & Evans, 1997).

Less evidence exists about the externalizing problems and disorders that the gifted may have. Most studies have shown that, when compared to their nongifted counterparts, gifted children and adolescents showed less physical aggression, restlessness, and lack of respect, all behaviors associated with conduct disorder (Fiedler, 1999; Ludwig & Cullinan, 1985). For example, a study with a large sample second and third graders found no differences in the incidence of any form of behavior problem between gifted and regular education students (Cornell, Delcourt, Bland, Goldberg, & Oram, 1994). Another study (Brody & Benbow, 1987) found similar incidences of discipline problems when comparing gifted and nongifted adolescents.

Research on stressors unique to giftedness is also mixed. An interview study of gifted fifth and sixth graders yielded a number of negative affective reactions to perceived stressors related to giftedness, including confusion, embarrassment, annoyance, and guilt (Ford, 1989). However, a study comparing the prevalence of everyday stressors, such as feeling different, boredom, and perfectionism, in groups of gifted and average-ability adolescents found no differences between the groups (Baker, 1996). There is some evidence that gifted students may have buffering traits, such as high self-efficacy (Merrell, Gill, McFarland, & McFarland, 1996), sensitivity (Mendaglio, 1995), and effective coping strategies (Tomchin, Callahan, Sowa, & May, 1996), that can reduce the negative impact of the stressors they experience. This suggests that, although gifted children and adolescents experience stressors related to their giftedness, they may also have advanced ability in managing the negative affect these stressors produce. In other words, their experience of unique stressors related to their giftedness, intensity, and sensitivity may be balanced by their greater resilience, resulting in the development of emotional strength and skill (Bland, Sowa, & Callahan, 1994).

Many intellectually and academically gifted children have families that are child-centered with close, nurturing, and supportive relationships (Friedman, 1994; Moon, Jurich, & Feldhusen, 1998). This suggests that families of the gifted may be doing a good job of facilitating the development of affect-regulation strategies in their children. On the other hand, one of the major difficulties that parents of the gifted experience is a feeling of inadequacy, an inability to help with their children's emotional, social, and cognitive development (Silverman, 1993). At times, the child-centered organization of the gifted child's family can overwhelm their resources, skew relationships, and produce marital conflict (Colangelo, 1997). Disorganization and conflict have been observed among low-income families of gifted children, families of underachieving gifted children, and families of twice-exceptional gifted children.

Sowa and May (1997) described empirically derived, dysfunctional patterns of adjustment in families of the gifted. If a sense of belonging is emphasized to the detriment of a sense of self, gifted children may feel obligated to comply with family rules, rather than explore and express their own ideas and feelings. These compliant gifted children relinquish their sense of agency in order to fit into the environment and are at risk for not developing their potential. If an

exaggerated sense of individual importance is stressed by families, gifted children may display behavior that is so strange and inappropriate that they do not fit into their environment, are rejected by their peers and teachers, and must rationalize their distress about being rejected. These detached gifted children may relinquish relationships with others in order to fit into their families. The description of these two family types fits into the framework about the differing family environments that are associated with internalizing (compliant, withdrawn) and externalizing (detached, rejected) children currently under investigation by researchers interested in the development of affect regulation and dysregulation (Garber & Dodge, 1991; Katz & Gottman, 1993; Lyons-Ruth, 1996).

Two areas of research on affect regulation in the gifted need attention. First, delineating the *specific* affect-regulation strategies of gifted children who are and are not having difficulties with their social, emotional, or behavioral adjustment would assist in the development of programs and treatments aimed at assisting these children in their adjustment. Second, proposing and researching a model of affective talent development would help in the identification of affectively talented children. Although several scholars have theorized that awareness and management of feelings are crucial in the development of personal and social talents (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Gardner, 1983; Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Piechowski, 1997), very little research has been conducted on affective talent development processes.

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6 THE APPLICATION OF DABROWSKI'S THEORY TO THE GIFTED

by **Kevin J. O'Connor, Ed.M.**

Many gifted children experience high levels of intensity and sensitivity and may appear at odds with their peers. They may question their "normality" or have it questioned by parents and teachers. Piechowski (1997) has suggested that this line of inquiry may extend into adulthood, as many gifted adults feel the same pressure to be "normal" and continue to question their potential, possibilities, and personality ideal. Dabrowski's (1964) Theory of Positive Disintegration has been discussed as one way of understanding the social and emotional development of gifted children. Relatively little research has addressed the use of Dabrowski's work with gifted students; however, the studies that have been completed indicate that this may be a promising direction for consideration of the unique social and emotional characteristics that some gifted children and adults may exhibit.