

Column #3 – Giftedness Unwrapped

Dona J. Matthews and Joanne F. Foster

Issue Theme: Affective Development

Emotional Development: The Roots of Giftedness

In the first column of *Giftedness Unwrapped* we discussed some of the thorny issues connected with gifted labeling and identification practices. In the second we presented a strategy we refer to as “mismatch diagnostics”—a multi-measures approach to assessing who requires targeted educational changes that are compatible with the fluid nature of gifted development. In both columns we emphasized the fact that individual learning needs vary across times in a child’s life, domains of focus, and types of learning contexts. In those columns our attention was predominantly on cognitive and educational matters, that is, the importance of understanding the nature of high-level abilities in different domains, and providing appropriately challenging opportunities to learn. However, children’s emotional needs are also an integral part of their development, so in this column we consider the affective aspects of giftedness. We emphasize the practical dimensions of this, describing what parents should be alert for in their children’s behavior, and how they can support their children’s emotional development in ways that foster their giftedness.

Meshing of Mind and Mood

“I never cut class. I loved getting A's, I liked being smart.”

First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama, speaking to an audience of teenagers at a girls' school in London, England, on April 2, 2009.

Some children enjoy being highly competent. They think it's cool. They relish the next challenge, feed on success, treat stumbling blocks as stepping stones, and work hard to achieve the goals they have set for themselves. These students have what developmental psychologist Carol Dweck calls a growth mindset. Like Michelle Obama, these individuals exhibit a positive attitude toward learning: they appreciate that high-level development requires hard work, and recognize that it is worth the effort. Not all children, however, know how to handle the challenges of giftedness with aplomb. For some, being smart brings little comfort or pride, and they experience confusion, resentment, despair, anger, frustration, or any of a range of emotions that can run the gamut from extreme lows to unsettling highs.

Although we see the role of gifted education as primarily about meeting gifted-level learning needs, that does not mean we ignore the affective dimensions of children's development, or think them unimportant. Quite the contrary! In order to support the development of giftedness and talent, educators and parents must pay close attention to children's *feelings*, including their feelings about their giftedness as it relates to their competencies, learning opportunities, social situations, and myriad other factors that have a bearing on their changing inclinations, sensibilities, and daily lives. How those emotions evolve and manifest themselves is something that differs from one child to the next. To maximize the harmonious interplay between the cognitive and affective dimensions of functioning—and thereby optimize children's development—, parents and educators must provide the right

kinds of encouragement, guidance, supports, and buffers for children as they encounter the ups and downs that each day brings (VanTassel-Baska, Cross, & Olenchak, 2009).

Gifted Learners: Possible Affective Problems

“No matter how apparently smart or confident, each child is still a child first and foremost, with all the anxieties that go with being young, vulnerable, and inexperienced in life. Giftedness does not define a child.”

Matthews & Foster, *Being Smart about Gifted Education* (2009)

How do you know a happy and productive child when you see one? Parents and teachers may think that a certain child has all the answers (literally and figuratively), but inside himself, that child may have many uncomfortable feelings whirling about, feelings that may or may not be transparent, and that are likely to influence how he functions. For example, gifted identification often brings with it a change in programming, and this in turn can cause more changes, quite possibly in the social landscape, academic expectations, and perceptions of self and others. Adults who are attuned to children’s transitions, concerns, feelings, and observations are well positioned to see what is happening in children’s lives, and help them anticipate and manage change so as to foster their resilience and competence.

What are some of the commonly observed affective problems associated with giftedness? We discuss a few briefly here.

Self-esteem issues. Gifted learners are at risk of self-esteem problems because of their differentness from others. Exceptionality from the norm increases the likelihood of feeling isolated, whether that exceptionality is physical (e.g., being taller, shorter, thinner, or fatter, than others, or faster or slower to develop) or intellectual (whether having learning problems

or being advanced in some areas). Some children are rejected by their age peers because of their gifted-level abilities.

Fear of failure. Children who experience consistent success can have difficulty handling failure, or realizing that failure provides learning opportunities. Instead, they can become afraid of mistakes, and work actively to avoid pitfalls. Signs that a child might be experiencing a problem with fear of failure include being unwilling to try new activities, steering away from challenges, and preferring safe tasks that lead to easy success.

Fear of success. Conversely, children who experience consistent success can be burdened by the need to prove themselves. They can feel that people's expectations (including their own) are climbing, to the point of getting unreachably high. They may believe that they can't possibly merit the achievements they've already attained. Fear of success often shows up as self-sabotage, which can take various forms such as laziness, procrastination, forgetting essential assignments, or deliberately missing deadlines.

Perfectionism. Although order, precision, and perseverance are part of the perfectionist profile, they are also evident among those with healthy achievement motivation, and contribute to gifted-level achievement. A child who is suffering from perfectionism, however, sets extremely high or unrealistic standards for himself, and then feels disappointed and upset when he can't meet them. Perfectionism can be debilitating. Parents and teachers should be concerned if a child overworks to the point of relentlessness, refuses to hand in assignments that are not perfect, invents excuses for what he cannot do, or feels tremendous anxiety or pressure to succeed.

Arrogance. Sometimes children who are very smart are perceived by others as having inflated self-regard, as feeling superior to others. Occasionally it happens that parents and educators do too good a job of building up a child's sense of self-worth – and too poor a job of helping the child keep learning what he doesn't know yet— and a child is actually arrogant. More often, however, what looks like arrogance is masking something else. Gifted learners can be afraid that they are not as smart as others think they are, and so feel they have to prove themselves— and that defence mechanism can come across as arrogance. A child may use something that looks like arrogance to mask his difficult feelings—blaming others, for example, when he feels embarrassed because he got something wrong, or acting impatient because he wants to move onto something challenging.

There are, of course, many other emotions that may be part of the giftedness mix, and that can come to the fore (or be kept hidden by the individual) depending on the situation. References to good sources for more information about social/emotional dimensions of gifted development can be found on our website (www.beingsmart.ca).

Supporting Affective Development and Fostering Giftedness

Although we consider here some of the emotional problems that gifted learners may experience, we are *not* saying that they are more emotionally vulnerable than others, or more inclined to have problems in the affective domain. On the contrary, most advanced learners manage just fine, and learn to cope very well with the challenges they encounter. However, for those who experience emotional turmoil along with giftedness, and for their parents, and also

for those who want to ensure happy developmental outcomes for children, we offer a few suggestions.

Talk and listen to your child about whether he feels welcome, respected, and appreciated at school. Ask him whether he enjoys learning (and why or why not), and whether he has ample opportunities for positive interactions with others. Chatting openly about matters like this –and listening carefully and respectfully to what your child has to say—, and doing so on an ongoing basis, provides valuable insight into his sense of well-being.

Help your child adapt to changes. Life is full of them, so it's good to get used to the idea that things don't always stay the same. Discuss transitions, model how to accept new situations, and explain the variations in educational programs or other aspects of their lives—as well as the “hows” and “whys” of adjusting to them. As children learn to anticipate and manage change, it becomes less daunting, and even welcome.

Foster healthy self-concept. Teach children not to compare themselves with others, but rather to aim high for themselves. Self-concept is a complex facet of an individual and, in truth, merits more than a mere mention here. However, given our space constrictions (and with a promise that we will discuss self-concept more fully in a subsequent column) suffice it to say that when a child feels good about his accomplishments, enjoys purposeful and meaningful engagement in learning, and sees his giftedness as something positive, this ultimately translates into greater self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-esteem. Parents can work with children to enhance their feelings of motivation (*I can do it, and I really want to do it!*) and achievement

(*hooray, I did it!*) by encouraging them to follow their interests, work hard, find the relevance in activities, embrace challenges, and see things through.

Nurture resilience. Resilient children—those who welcome challenges and know how to work through failure to successful learning outcomes— are better able to handle the problems that life will inevitably present. One of the best ways to nurture resilience is to help children acquire a growth mindset, as we discuss above in connection with Michelle Obama, and as Carol Dweck describes in her work on this topic.

Become well informed about nurturing high-level development. Find out what you can do to prevent problems before they arise, and address them when they do. However, remember also that sometimes parents need help, and that there are situations that call for the guidance and assistance that only an expert with specialized training can provide. There are many different types of counselling professionals. A family doctor, or a school administrator or guidance counsellor may be the right person to consult for referral suggestions. Parents who recognize this need, and are prepared to accept help with their children's serious problems, are better prepared to meet their developmental needs more effectively.

Healthy emotional development that results in personal well-being is not incidental to giftedness, but instead should be seen as providing a solid foundation for a child's optimal cognitive development. Think of how an orchid grows. Before there is any hint of a flower, an orchid lies in wait as a root being nurtured in the soil - for a loooooong time. Finally, one or two stalks shoot upwards. Only then—once there is a solid underlying structure of nourishment—

do blooms start to come forth. If the foundation is healthy enough, the flowers will be abundant and magnificently beautiful, and they will thrive and continue to proliferate.

It is wonderful, but not enough, for parents and educators to encourage children's cognitive development. We also need to tend to their affective needs, helping them develop solid roots and a strong emotional foundation, including the motivation required for continued and positive growth.

References

Dweck, C. S. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, Random House.

Foster, J. F., & Matthews, D. J. (2009). An open letter to Michelle Obama. *Education News*. April 6, 2009. Retrieved April 26, 2009 from <http://ednews.org/articles/36205/1/Open-Letter-to-Michelle-Obama/Page1.html>

Horowitz, F. D., Subotnik, R. F., & Matthews, D. J. (Eds.) (2009). *The development of giftedness and talent across the life span*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Matthews, D. J., & Foster, J. F. (2009). *Being smart about gifted education: A guidebook for parents and educators*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press. www.beingsmart.ca

VanTassel-Baska, J. L., Cross, T. L., & Olenchak, F. R. (Eds.) (2009). *Social-emotional curriculum with gifted and talented students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.