

PARENTING

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TIPS

The Social-Emotional Needs of Gifted Learners

Interview with Dr James T. Webb

Are gifted children more vulnerable to certain mental health problems?

Gifted Children are more vulnerable only to certain types of mental health problems, such as existential depression about life's meaning. Also, gifted children seem more at risk for perfectionism, Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Bulimia, and Anorexia. Otherwise the research suggests that gifted children in general are no more likely than other children to experience serious mental health problems even though several studies have indicated that gifted children often are bullied, teased, and feel like misfits. However, when there is a poor educational fit or when parents do not understand gifted children, there is an increased likelihood of problems.

This may, however, reflect the lack of knowledge among mental health professions about characteristics of gifted children. It also is, in some ways, ironic because one could make a case that gifted children should be significantly less likely to experience mental health problems. That is, one key component of intelligence is the ability to solve problems. If that is true, then these persons should be able to solve problems that precipitate or worsen mental health problems, and thus should lead a life that is largely worry free. That does not seem to be the case.

Do you believe that gifted children have unique social, emotional or psychological characteristics?

Yes, there are unique social, emotional, and psychological characteristics of gifted children that have been noted by researchers for almost a century. And the brighter the child, the more these characteristics influence and permeate the child's behaviors.



Understanding his unique behaviour
was an important step in valuing Virgil's giftedness.

For example, intensity, sensitivity, idealism, interest in problem solving, and questioning are almost universal among gifted children. Most gifted children are highly verbal, start speaking early, and show a conceptual fluidity and mastery. Other gifted children show a similar prodigious ability in nonverbal areas such as mechanics or art. The drive that underlies their ability causes them to display emotional, social, and psychological characteristics that are not always valued by their peers, their families, or even their teachers. And it sometimes leads them to be dissatisfied with themselves as well.

What would you say to parents of gifted kids regarding what they could or should do to promote healthy psychological development and would that be any different that what you would say to any other group of parents?

Gifted children, by definition, are exceptional. Like other parents of exceptional children, parents must educate themselves about gifted children. They cannot simply depend on teachers, pediatricians, or popular child-rearing books to guide them. Because of the myth in society that gifted children will simply make it on their own, parents of gifted children will need to educate themselves more than parents of other exceptional children.

Gifted children have common characteristics such as intensity, but they are also quite diverse in many behaviors. Unless parents understand these behaviors as reflecting giftedness, it is easy for adults to get into power struggles with gifted children, or even for these children to be inaccurately diagnosed as having an Attention-Deficit Disorder or some other mental health problem. It is also easy for these children to become lost in the educational system, with subsequent underachievement.

What would you tell parents are warning signs that they should look for that would indicate they should get their child help or that there is some kind of serious psychological issue operating?

There are quite a few red flags that parents and teachers should attend to. Some of these are:

- inability to establish a relationship even with older children or adults
- boredom and anger
- sudden change in moods or withdrawal from things that previously interested the child
- becoming paralyzed by perfectionism
- a feeling of being personally responsible for the world
- depression
- eating disorders or self-injury

What role do you think educators have, if any, in this whole issue of promoting the psychological health of gifted kids?

Though parents are the most important in the long-term outcome of gifted children, teachers are certainly important. Dr. Paul Torrance, many years ago, studied "Teachers Who Made a Difference" in the lives of gifted children. He found that just one or two teachers who valued the gifted child, and the child's passions and interests, were life-altering. Teachers -- whether in or out of the classroom -- are mentors for how learning can be exciting and good to share, as well as providing models for how a person can be focused on quality, excellence and innovation, yet also live reasonably contentedly in this world that all too often emphasizes mediocrity, conformity, and fitting in.

Source: www.giftedbooks.com

Sourced from links on the site of University of North Texas: <http://www.coe.unt.edu>

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