Helping adolescents adjust to giftedness

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Young gifted people between the ages of 11 and 15 frequently report a range of problems as a result of their abundant gifts: perfectionism, competitiveness, unrealistic appraisal of their gifts, rejection from peers, confusion due to mixed messages about their talents, and parental and social pressures to achieve, as well as problems with unchallenging school programs or increased expectations. Some encounter difficulties in finding and choosing friends, a course of study, and, eventually, a career. The developmental issues that all adolescents encounter exist also for gifted students, yet they are further complicated by the special needs and characteristics of being gifted. Once counselors and parents are aware of these obstacles, they seem better able to understand and support gifted adolescents. Caring adults can assist these young people to "own" and develop their talents by understanding and responding to adjustment challenges and coping strategies.

Challenges to Adjustment

Several dynamics of giftedness continually interfere with adjustment gains during adolescence. Buescher (1986) has found that, during the early years of adolescence, gifted young people encounter several potent obstacles, singly or in combination.

- **Ownership:** Talented adolescents simultaneously "own" and yet question the validity and reality of the abilities they possess. Some researchers (Olszewski, Kulieke, & Willis, 1987) have identified patterns of disbelief, doubt, and lack of self-esteem among older students and adults: the so-called "impostor syndrome" described by many talented individuals. While talents have been recognized in many cases at an early age, doubts about the accuracy of identification and the objectivity of parents or favorite teachers linger (Delisle & Galbraith, 1987; Galbraith, 1983). The power of peer pressure toward conformity, coupled with any adolescent's wavering sense of being predictable or intact, can lead to the denial of even the most outstanding ability. The conflict that ensues, whether mild or acute, needs to be resolved by gaining a more mature "ownership" and responsibility for the identified talent.
- A second basic pressure often experienced by gifted students is that, since they have been given gifts in abundance, they feel they must give of themselves in abundance. Often it is subtly implied that their abilities belong to parents, teachers, and society.
- **Dissonance:** By their own admission, talented adolescents often feel like perfectionists. They have learned to set their standards high, to expect to do more and be more than their abilities might allow. Childhood desires to do demanding tasks perfectly become compounded during adolescence. It is not uncommon for talented adolescents to experience real dissonance between what is actually done and how well they expected it to be accomplished. Often the dissonance perceived by young people is far greater than most parents or teachers realize.
- **Taking Risks:** While risk taking has been used to characterize younger gifted and talented children, it ironically decreases with age, so that the bright adolescent is much less likely to take chances than others. Why the shift in risk-taking behaviors? Gifted adolescents appear to be more aware of the repercussions of certain activities, whether these are positive or negative. They have learned to measure the decided advantages and disadvantages of numerous opportunities and to weigh alternatives. Yet their feigned agility at this too often leads them to reject even those acceptable activities that carry some risk (e.g., advanced placement courses, stiff competitions, public presentations), for which high success is less predictable and lower standards of performance less acceptable in their eyes. One other possible cause for less risk taking could be the need to maintain control—to remain in spheres of influence where challenging relationships, demanding coursework and teachers, or intense competition cannot enter without absolute personal control.
- **Competing Expectations:** Adolescents are vulnerable to criticism, suggestions, and emotional appeals from others. Parents, friends, siblings, and teachers are all eager to add their own expectations and observations to even the brightest students' intentions and goals. Often, others' expectations for talented young people compete with their own dreams and plans. Delisle (1985), in particular, has pointed out that the "pull" of an adolescent's own expectations must swim against the strong current posed by the "push" of others' desires and demands. The dilemma is complicated by the numerous options within the reach of a highly talented student: The greater the talent, the greater the expectations and outside interference.

  Gifted adolescents consistently report dramatic episodes of being pushed to the point of doubt and despair by insensitive teachers, peers, and even parents. Teachers in secondary schools, in particular, have tried to disprove the talents of individual students, saying, in effect, "Prove to me you are as gifted as you think you are." Coping with the vagaries of

adolescence while also proving oneself again and again in the classroom or peer group significantly drains energy allocated for the normal tasks of adjustment and leads to frequent frustration and isolation.

- **Impatience:** Like most other adolescents, gifted students can be impatient in many ways: eager to find solutions for difficult questions, anxious to develop satisfying friendships, and prone to selecting difficult but immediate alternatives for complex decisions. The predisposition for impulsive decision making, coupled with exceptional talent, can make young adolescents particularly intolerant of ambiguous, unresolved situations. Their impatience with a lack of clear-cut answers, options, or decisions drives them to seek answers where none readily exist, relying on an informing, though immature, sense of wisdom. The anger and disappointment when hasty resolutions fail can be difficult to surmount, particularly when less capable peers gloat about these failures.
- **Premature Identity:** It appears that the weight of competing expectations, low tolerance for ambiguity, and the pressure of multiple potentials each feed very early attempts to achieve an adultlike identity, a stage normally achieved after the age of 21. This can create a serious problem for talented adolescents. They seem to reach out prematurely for career choices that will short-cut the normal process of identity crisis and resolution.

Coping Strategies

How can talented adolescents cope with the myriad obstacles to developing their talents? A study of young adolescents who participated in a talent search program Buescher & Higham (1985) suggested various strategies. Table 1 depicts the strategies suggested by the adolescents, arranged according to their assessment of acceptablity for use.

Table 1. Coping Strategies Suggested by Adolescents

(In Order by Weighted Ranking; 0 = Least Acceptable to Students; 10 = Most Acceptable):

(0) Pretend not to know as much as you do.

(1) Act like a "brain" so peers leave you alone.

(2) Adjust language and behavior to disguise true abilities from your peers.

(3) Avoid programs designed for gifted/talented students.

(4) Be more active in community groups where age is no object.

(5) Develop/excel in talent areas outside school setting.

(6) Achieve in areas at school outside academics.

(7) Build more relationships with adults.

(8) Select programs and classes designed for gifted/talented students.

(9) Make friends with other students with exceptional talents.

(10) Accept and use abilities to help peers do better in classes.

The strategies were influenced by such factors as age, sex, and participation in programs for gifted students. For example, over the course of 4 years (ages 11 to 15), "using one's talent to help others" moved from second place to first, by way of third. "Achieving in school in areas outside academics" appeared to rise in popularity until the age of 14 but then dropped to third place. Students participating in special programs for the gifted were less likely, as they grew older, to mask their true abilities. Other studies have indicated that gifted females appear to be somewhat vulnerable to the pull of cultural expectations that drive them toward seeking peer acceptance rather than leadership and the full development of their abilities (Olszewski-Kubilius & Kulieke, 1989).

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