



## STRESS AND INTELLIGENCE: UNDERSTANDING AND ENCOURAGING THE EXCEPTIONALLY GIFTED AND TALENTED LEARNERS TO COPE WITH STRESS

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### ABSTRACT

*Human beings display a vast range of intellectual abilities and the greater the degree of a person's intellectual difference, the greater the discomfort, such an intellect seems to bring to his or her world, and the world responds by creating discomfort for the individual. Thus, the gifted learners are vulnerable in a society that cannot accept differences, and they are often faced with stress of different kinds. The paper, examines some developmental and behavioural factors leading to stress among the gifted learners. It recommends ways on how parents, teachers and counsellors can reduce stress on gifted students by encouraging flexibility, appropriate behaviour, and thereby assisting the gifted students to develop a realistic and accurate self-concept.*

### INTRODUCTION

Being intellectually or creatively gifted does not assure educational or creative success or productivity. There are risks and pressures that accompany high intelligence that detour potentially high-achieving children toward defensive and avoidance patterns (Rimm, 2000). The determinants of whether gifted children move toward high achievement or fall into underachieving patterns appears to be related to their home, school/or peer environments and stress related factors.

The main pressures that gifted children feel include:

- (1) the need to be extraordinarily intelligent, perfect or 'smartest';
- (2) the wish to be extremely creative and unique, which they may translate as nonconformity; and
- (3) the concern with being admired by peers for appearance and popularity.

Although parents are often accused of pressuring their gifted children, these pressures typically arise because of the children's giftedness. Gifted children often internalize a sense of stress because adults in their environments have admired them for their academic accomplishments, their unusual ideas, and/or their appearance. Not only may the gifted feel pressure to achieve, they may also acquire a dependence on attention and find it difficult to function without continuous praise and reinforcement (Deci, 1986; Horn, Gaskill & Hutchins, 1988).

Stress can affect anyone, and gifted children are no exception. Giftedness can sometimes be the cause of the stress. Perfectionism, sensitivity, and intensity are characteristics of gifted children that may exacerbate stress.

According to Wellisch (2006) a little adversity has been found to build resilience in children, in a similar way to the immune system being strengthened through exposure to a small amount of germs. This is just as well, because it would be an unusual childhood that remains unmarred by even the slightest traumatic event. It is only when one such event is followed swiftly by several others that it becomes a stressful experience, and stress can become a serious problem, resulting in depression and illness.



## **STRESS AND GIFTED CHILDREN**

It is clear that more sensitive children need to cope with a greater number of situations than less sensitive children. They will have to cope with both internal and external stressors (Compass, 1987). Although high Intelligent Quotient helps children to cope with stress (Slee, 1993), it is possible that exceptionally gifted children do experience more stress than mildly gifted children (Miller, 1994). Another possibility is that highly gifted children tend to internalize their stress rather than engaging in acting-out behaviours, and so mask their difficulties (Luther & Zigler 1991). It is only as they get older that their advanced cognitive abilities will help them to resolve normal concerns more quickly, resulting in their eventual superior adjustment (Sowa, 1994).

On the whole, gifted children tend to feel things more than others. It is as if they have all their senses tuned an extra notch or two higher, and at times it seems as if they have more than five senses. Many gifted children start out their lives very alert and mostly awake. They can get wound up and frustrated because they are unable to do very much and yet are very stimulated and excited about their environment. Gifted children are particularly susceptible to stress, which if not checked may result in any number of chronic maladies, stress or burnout. This is characterized by a state of mental and physical exhaustion from prolonged, unrelieved stress that can lead to withdrawal, hopelessness, and inactivity.

## **SOURCES OF STRESS FOR GIFTED CHILDREN**

### **Perfectionistic Tendencies**

Children who suffer from perfectionism are in a constant state of frustration because of the ever-present gap between how they feel they are actually performing and their sometimes unrealistic, sometimes self-imposed achievement goals. This can lead to perfectionist "freeze-up" which is a type of stage fright or fear of failure associated with any new, perhaps threatening challenge.

### **Excessive Achievement Demands**

Pressure cause by the ambitious demands of well-meaning adults who wants their children to do their best at all times is undoubtedly a great source of anxiety for gifted children. Children are often plagued by questions of 'can I keep this up? And 'will only more be expected of me now? And sometimes camouflage themselves with underachievement.

### **Intellectual Social Development Gap**

Gifted children often have intellectual interests and abilities beyond their age peers, but lack the physical and social development to be accepted by older children. The social isolation of a gifted student who feels "out of it" with agemates and ignored by older children can cause stress.

### **Heightened Sensitivity to Adult problems Gifted**

Gifted students tend to have voracious appetites for information about everything happening in their environment, from family problem to global issues, and this can cause stress. They often worry about problems that may not affect them directly, or over which they have no control.

An optional level of stress energizes the system, but excessive stress usually decreases the academic performance of children, and can severely affect development. It is a child's creative thinking - a hallmark of giftedness - that seems to suffer most. Excessive stress and anxiety can leave children unable to relax, displaying tension, extreme, competitiveness, and impatience, and can lead to psychosomatic illnesses like headaches, stomachaches, and depression (Alvino, 2004). Thus, the following checklist can



help parents and teachers determine how "stressed out" a gifted child is. The more symptoms a child has, the more likely he or she is suffering from excessive stress.

- A major change in attitude or temperament (irritability, lack of enthusiasm, depression, carelessness).
- Withdrawal, outbursts, or tantrum for little or no apparent reason.
- Hyperactive behaviour (fidgeting, nervous tics, jumping from task to task, trouble concentrating).
- Suspicious complaints of fatigue and vague illnesses 'convenient' to avoid certain tasks or situations

Education has long considered facilitating affective development in children and youth through curriculum as a central consideration of students' academic success (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Walilberg, 2004). Historically, the field of gifted education has a limited, though well-conceptualized foundation for attending to the social and emotional development of children and youth, which was initially investigated by Terman (1925), who found that gifted individuals did not according to views held at that time, as a group, have social-emotional deficits. Hollingworth (1942) found, however, that profoundly gifted individuals often experience social disconnector, and stress. More contemporary research has explored the gifted individual social-emotional development in the classroom, schools, and communities, including proactive (Peterson, 2003) and responsive approaches for a host of affective issues, including, perfectionism (Speirs, Neumeister, Williams & Cross, 2007), depression (Mueller; 2009), over excitabilities (Mendaglio & Tiller, 2006; Tieso, 2007), interpersonal relationships (Mathews & Kitchen, 2007), self-actualization (Pufal-Struzik, 1999), underachievement (Reis & McCoach, 2000).

Though the role that giftedness plays in moderating deleterious outcomes for children and youth has been considered (Neihardt, 1999), additional investigations are warranted to add to the emerging research foundation of affective development and stress among these individuals.

### **HOW CAN PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND COUNSELORS REDUCE STRESS ON GIFTED STUDENTS?**

Help each gifted student understand and cope with his or her intellectual, social, and emotional needs during each stage of development.

In some ways, the needs of gifted students mirror those of more typical children. Giftedness, however, adds a special dimension to self-understanding and self-acceptance. If gifted youngsters are to develop into self-fulfilled adults, the following differential needs must be addressed: (a) the need to understand the ways in which they are different from others and the ways in which they are the same; (b) the need to accept their abilities, talents, and limitations; (c) the need to develop social skills; (d) the need to feel understood and accepted by others; and (e) the need to develop an understanding of the distinction between "pursuit of excellence" and "pursuit of perfection." VanTassel-Baska (1989) and Delisle (1988) have offered useful suggestions on how to meet these needs. Help each gifted student develop a realistic and accurate self-concept. Giftedness does not mean instant mastery or winning awards. Parents and teachers need to set realistic expectations for efforts and achievements and help the student choose appropriate goals. It is important to recognize and appreciate efforts and improvement.

On the other hand, giftedness permits people to learn and use information in unusual ways. Given parental support and encouragement, personal motivation, and opportunities to learn and apply their knowledge, gifted students may enjoy the process of creating new ideas, especially if they believe that it is all right to think differently than age-mates.

**Help each gifted student be a whole person**

Gifted youngsters are children first and gifted second. While their learning styles may be special, they are individuals with emotions, likes and dislikes, and unique personalities. They will not wake up one day and be “not gifted.” They should not feel responsible for solving world problems, nor does the world owe them tribute. It is up to each student to make life meaningful. Understanding these realistic limits to the bounty of giftedness can reduce stress on confused students. Gifted students have strong emotions that give personal meaning to each experience. Emotions should be recognized, understood, and used as a valid basis for appropriate behaviors.

**Show acceptance and encouragement**

Encourage students to work purposefully, thoughtfully, and thoroughly and do the best they can. It is not necessary to excel in every situation. Help them develop priorities to decide which tasks require the best efforts and which require simply “good enough.”

Accept and reward efforts and the process of working on tasks. Sincere effort is valuable in itself and deserves reinforcement. The means may be more deserving of merit than the ends. Efforts are within the gifted students' control; the outcomes (high grades, prizes, honors, etc.) are not. Show love and acceptance, regardless of the outcome. These youngsters need to be cherished as individuals, not simply for their accomplishments. They must know that they can go home and be loved—and continue to love themselves—even when they do not finish first or best.

**Encourage flexibility and appropriate behavior**

Curiosity is frequently mentioned as a characteristic of gifted learners. Many individuals agree that gifted students seem to question rules automatically, asking “How come?” Concerned adults can reduce stress on gifted students by helping them distinguish between hard-and-fast rules that should be followed and those that can safely be questioned or altered and helping them understand why rules sometimes change from time to time.

Many people recognize that new ideas come from reshaping and discarding old notions of right and wrong and want students to be inquiring, creative, and resourceful thinkers. But society, schools, teachers, and academic subjects have rules. In our society, flagrant rule breakers may be penalized and shut out of opportunities for further growth and enrichment. Our students will become better thinkers by learning that rules are man-made guides to behavior, not perfect or divine, but they are to be learned, understood, and followed appropriately in certain situations. For instance, not every student will like every teacher, but showing respect is appropriate behavior even if the student privately thinks otherwise. Wise adults can model problem-solving methods that result in workable solutions and help gifted students learn when and how to use their novel perceptions, creativity, and independent thoughts appropriately and effectively.

**Be available for guidance and advice**

Some gifted students appear to be more mature than their chronological age indicates. They have advanced verbal skills and can talk a good line. Nevertheless, they are still children and need realistic, clearly stated guidelines about limits, values, and proper behavior. These young people may not have enough information or experience to make wise and effective decisions. They may not understand decision-making processes, and they need wise adults to listen and guide as they talk, through the problem, the alternatives, and the pro's and con's and try out choices. Knowing that they can be independent and still talk through their thoughts with others without losing face reduces stress for these students.

Gifted students need to hear adults openly state some of their perspectives to understand expectations and acceptable limits. While these students are very perceptive, they cannot read minds. Gifted students may know more facts about their interest area than



do their parents and other adults. However, they have not lived longer; they need loving concern and guidance.

### **Conclusion**

Children's ability to adjust to stressful events is more related to their self-esteem and self-efficacy than to their cognitive problem-solving skills. Thus, it is important to quickly identify gifted learners who are at risk of stress reactions. Like all other children, gifted children experience everyday problems and traumatic life events.

The responses of the gifted learners to these stressors might be atypical because of their earlier self - awareness, and so they might be more vulnerable to experiencing stress reactions. On the other hand, their precious cognitive skills can help them to resolve their worries at an earlier age than averagely achieving children.

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