

Developmental Considerations for Students Who Are Gifted

Typical developmental issues that may be faced by some students also exist for some students who are gifted. These issues are sometimes complicated by the exceptional learning needs and characteristics many students who are gifted demonstrate, particularly during adolescence. Students who are gifted may face a variety of challenges, including perfectionism, underachievement, uneven or asynchronous development, and learning difficulties.

Students who may be more at risk emotionally, socially and academically include:

- **divergent thinkers** whose ideas are logical to them, but unusual to classmates
- **creative high achievers**, particularly those with artistic gifts, who may experience feelings of isolation or depression, and may be subject to anxiety, insomnia, feelings of worthlessness, loss of energy or decreased ability to concentrate.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism is a pattern of characteristics and behaviours that includes compulsiveness about work habits, over-concern for details, unrealistically high standards and rigid routines (Kerr 1991, p. 141). Perfectionism can develop at various stages of an individual's life and for different reasons, but for many students it is simply a part of their personality. Too often, it is assumed that parents cause their child's perfectionism with their own unrealistic expectations. However, many perfectionist children are the product of relaxed, easy-going parents with realistic expectations. It seems possible that certain individuals are simply born with the type of temperament that leads to perfectionistic tendencies.

Not all perfectionism is negative. Linda Silverman, a researcher on social-emotional dimensions of individuals who are gifted, believes that perfectionism is the least understood aspect of giftedness. It is often perceived as a problem to be fixed. Silverman suggests that perfectionism is part of the experience of being gifted, and has amazing potential to bring an individual toward either achievement or despair. It would be unwise to try to root out perfectionism completely, for it can be used in a positive way to achieve excellence.

However, perfectionism can become a serious issue for some students who are gifted. To monitor the effects of perfectionism, the learning team needs to ask questions like, "Are these behaviours barriers for this student?" and "Do they prevent this student from experiencing success and happiness?"

The student's parents and teachers can also watch for warning signs that perfectionism is creating problems, such as the student:

- is unable to feel satisfaction because in his or her own eyes he or she never does things well enough

Developmental Considerations for Students Who Are Gifted continued

- sets unrealistic standards for himself or herself based on his or her advanced reasoning ability even though other skill areas may not be as well developed
- feels inferior or defeated if his or her high standards are not met
- becomes so terrified of doing something wrong that he or she is unwilling to try new things and actually accomplishes very little
- develops, in extreme cases, compulsive behaviours that require professional medical or psychological assistance.

Underachievement

In relation to giftedness, the term “underachieving” describes the performance of students who express their giftedness in extracurricular activities or at home, but whose achievement level at school falls far below their cognitive ability. This discrepancy may not be caused by an underlying learning disability, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or any other disorder that may be affecting their achievement. Rather, the students underachieve in school for a variety of reasons.

A common assumption is that boredom with schoolwork is the cause of underachievement, and that the solution is to increase the difficulty of the task and workload for the student. This can be counterproductive for students who are already disengaged. It is important for the learning team to consider the many factors that may be influencing a student’s behaviour.

Some specific causes of underachievement in students who are gifted include:

- poor self-image
- lack of a future vision or dream to work toward
- problems within the family that divert students’ thinking and effort
- feelings of anxiety
- the desire to fit in with their peer group
- the desire to rebel
- the desire to avoid participating in special programming
- feelings of stress based on the need to please others or their own unrealistic expectations
- disinterest in subject-area topics and related learning activities
- work that is too easy or too difficult
- work that is meaningless and repetitive to the student, resulting in little effort
- fear of failure.

Students who underachieve can be disruptive or withdrawn in the classroom. They may engage in power struggles with their teachers, or they may become apathetic, surrendering their passion for learning and not completing tasks. One of the most serious consequences of

Developmental Considerations for Students who are Gifted continued

underachievement is not graduating from senior high school. It is important that students have meaningful and challenging work at school and receive appropriate guidance and support at home.

Asynchronous development

Asynchrony is uneven development in the rates of intellectual, emotional and physical development. Asynchronous development can be a characteristic of students who are gifted. This means students may:

- be more complex and intense than peers
- feel out of sync with same-age peers and age-appropriate learning activities and topics
- demonstrate different maturity levels in various situations, which could result in difficulties adjusting emotionally and socially.

These tendencies can increase with the student's degree of giftedness, and can make students vulnerable to feelings of frustration and/or social isolation. Students who experience asynchronous development need a sensitive and flexible approach to teaching in order to develop to their full potential. The greatest need of students who experience asynchronous development is an environment where it is safe to be different.

Learning difficulties

Some students who are gifted also have learning difficulties, such as learning disabilities, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder and Asperger's syndrome. These students with dual exceptionalities often have difficulty reaching an academic level that matches their measured potential, and their giftedness may be unidentified or ignored.

Students who are simultaneously gifted and have a disability can pose a special challenge for both teachers and parents. It is important that the learning team works to understand the student's dual exceptionality and collaborates to ensure that the student's individualized program planning (IPP) process creates the support the student needs to work to the best of his or her ability. It is important that these students have goals that address both their exceptional strengths and exceptional needs.

References

- Kerr, Barbara A. *Smart Girls: A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness*. Revised ed. Scottsdale, AZ: Gifted Psychology Press, Inc., 1994.
Silverman, Linda Kreger. *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*. Denver, CO: Love Publishing Co., 2000.