Affective Needs

The Social-Emotional Needs of Gifted and Talented Children

Every person has four areas of development: intellectual, physical, social, and emotional. School districts address the intellectual and physical needs aptly, but may do little when it comes to developing the social and emotional needs, particularly students who are identified as gifted and talented. Being identified as gifted and talented is abnormal by definition, so why do so many adults—educators and parents—expect these high potential students to interact with others and express their emotions in the same ways other students do?

Before gifted students can begin performing at their highest academic level, adults must become aware of their needs. Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs suggests five interdependent levels of basic human needs (motivators) that must be satisfied in a strict sequence starting with the lowest level (physiological, safety, love/belonging, esteem, self-actualization).

His underlying theme is people are 'wanting' beings; as they satisfy one need, the next need level emerges on its own and demands satisfaction and so on until the need for self-actualization (realizing one's full potential) is reached. Maslow's theory states that once a need is satisfied, it stops being a motivator until one reaches the highest need—self-actualization. Self-actualization needs are different than the other four. They continue to be motivating factors as they are fulfilled. Therefore, students who reach self-actualization become positively addicted to the process of reaching their full potential. By failing to address and fulfill the social and emotional aspects of G/T students, they may remain focused on satisfying lower level needs.

According to The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC) and The Council for Exceptional Children, the social-emotional behavior patterns include:

**Uneven Development.** Motor skills, especially fine-motor; often lag behind cognitive conceptual abilities, particularly in preschool gifted children (Webb & Kleine, 1993). These children may see in their "mind's eye" what they want to do, construct, or draw; however, motor skills do not allow them to achieve the goal. Intense frustration and emotional outbursts may result.

**Peer Relations.** In preschool and the primary grades, gifted children (particularly highly gifted) attempt to organize people and things. Their search for consistency emphasizes "rules", which they attempt to apply to others. They invent complex games and try to organize their playmates, often prompting resentment in their peers.

**Excessive Self-Criticism.** The ability to see possibilities and alternatives may imply that youngsters see idealistic images of what they might be and simultaneously berate themselves because they see how they are falling short of an ideal (Adderholt-Elliott, 1989; Powell & Haden, 1984; Whitmore, 1980).

**Perfectionism.** The ability to see how one might ideally perform, combined with emotional intensity, leads many gifted children to unrealistically high expectations of themselves. In high ability children, perhaps 15-20% may be hindered significantly by perfectionism at some point in their academic careers, and even later in life.

**Avoidance of Risk-Taking.** In the same way that gifted youngsters see the possibilities they also see potential problems in undertaking those activities. Avoidance of potential problems can mean avoidance of risk-taking and may result in underachievement (Whitmore, 1980).

**Multi-potentiality.** Gifted children often have several advanced capabilities and may be involved in diverse activities to an almost frantic degree. Though seldom a problem for the child, this may create problems for the family, as well as quandaries when decisions must be about career selection (Kerr, 1985; 1991).

**Gifted Children with Disabilities.** Physical disabilities can prompt social and emotional difficulties. Intellect may be high, but motor difficulties such as cerebral palsy may prevent expression of potential. Visual or hearing impairment or a learning disability may cause frustration. Gifted children with disabilities tend to evaluate themselves more on what they are unable to do rather than on their substantial abilities (Whitmore & Maker, 1985).

For a complete discussion of behavioral patterns, please refer to http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e527.html
**Over Excitability.** One social/emotional aspect of the G/T learner is known as over excitabilities or super sensitivities. Not to be taken in a negative light or dysfunctional clinical manner (such as over-eating or other excesses), they can simply be viewed as: more of something. Developed by Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, he identifies five of these intensities:

- **Psychomotor** Surplus of energy; enhanced excitability of the neuromuscular system, quite normal in gifted children but often confused with ADHD.
- **Sensual** Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure; could be a craving for or avoidance of. These are the children who can't stand the tags on their clothes, having their food touching, etc.
- **Intellectual** Heightened activity of the mind; children who are very curious, always asking why, possibly searching for meaning.
- **Imaginational** Capacity for living in a world of fantasy, often have imaginary friends or play imaginary games, sometimes considered off in their own world.
- **Emotional** Intensified feelings and emotions; these are the children who want friends and family to bring food for the local food bank to their birthday party instead of presents for themselves.

Gifted children can exhibit any one or even all of these over-excitabilities. It's important to be aware of these intensities and develop them to their full potential in your child without letting him/her become unbalanced and incapable of dealing with daily activities.

**What Parents Can Do to Support the Socio-Emotional Needs of Gifted Learners**

Gifted students have a need to be involved in and pursue their passions/interests, but they also need time to reflect and ponder for no particular reason. Parents can better support their students with some of the following tips:

- Understand and appreciate what giftedness is and how these children are different and similar to others.
- Assist to develop clear and explicit expectations and support the setting/writing of realistic goals and review bi-monthly.
- Remember that gifted children's emotional and social developmental stages may not match their intellectual development.
- Encourage and praise their efforts often. Many times they feel no one values what they do.
- Encourage extra-curricular activities in or out of school (opportunities to be well-rounded and to engage with students in their school setting that may not be in their classes).
- Volunteer in community service activities to support awareness of global issues, but also to develop their social skills, working with others who may not be on their learning level.
- Remind them that their contributions are noble and needed to support understanding world problems.
- Listen to their concerns without trying to fix them.
- Help them learn to navigate socially with diverse groups.
- Teach/model how to say “no” to avoid being overwhelmed by taking on too much.
- Help them to understand they won’t be perfect and that mistakes are a part of learning.
- Teach students how to advocate for themselves. Students need to be able to articulate their needs/goals for themselves by the time they're in middle school.
- Help/encourage positive relationships between student and teacher.
- Create opportunities for success (at school and home).