

The Unique Inner Lives of Gifted Children

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.
Licensed Psychologist

Pre-Conference 'Bijzonder Begaafd'

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Onderwijs & Talentontwikkeling

www.talentstimuleren.nl

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Gifted Development Center
8120 Sheridan Boulevard, Suite C-111
Westminster, Colorado 80003 USA
www.gifteddevelopment.com

303-837-8378

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“Why do you make everything so complicated?” “Why are you so sensitive?” “Why is everything so important to you?” “Why does it have to be perfect?” These are among the most common indictments of the gifted. Why, indeed. The answer should be “because I’m gifted.” These are the personality traits that distinguish the gifted from others.

To be gifted is to be different. That’s the nature of the beast. So the next time you hear—in a saccharin tone of voice—“All our children are gifted,” it’s OK to cringe. All children are a gift to the world—each child is unique and a blessing, but to say all children are gifted is akin to proclaiming, “All our children are retarded.” You can’t sweep away developmental differences with political ideologies. There are immense individual differences in ability, and these differences need to be recognized, evaluated, understood and accommodated through differentiated services and programs.

Giftedness, like its counterpart, retardation, is a 24-7 lifelong condition. It is not something that comes and goes depending on the economic and political climate of the nation or a particular school district. It is not something that appears when you are in third or fourth grade, and then disappears when you get to middle school or graduate from high school. It is not dependent upon public acclaim. Characterizing giftedness as the potential for future fame makes their early identification impossible; one would need a crystal ball to decide which children require differentiated provisions. The equation of giftedness with the potential for eminence is the legacy of Sir Frances Galton (1869). I call this the “posthumous” definition of giftedness, because you have to wait until the person dies and see how many biographies were written about him before you can declare that he was gifted (Silverman, 1986).

Then what is giftedness and why are the most gifted among us the most allergic to the term? Many of the definitions of giftedness are achievement oriented (Bland, 2012). Few gifted adults consider their achievements sufficient to warrant that term. Other people may call you “gifted,” but it is hubris of the highest order to refer to oneself as gifted. What arrogance! “Do you think you’re *better* than everyone else?” When giftedness is defined in terms of recognized accomplishments, it is understandable why an obviously gifted adult would completely reject the idea.

But there are other ways to look at giftedness. When it is perceived as abstract reasoning or developmental advancement or asynchronous development, the term is more palatable. Parents who read descriptors of giftedness in children often muse, “I’m like that, too. Does that mean I’m gifted?” Yes!

Recognized achievement is culturally determined; therefore, all definitions of giftedness that stem from achievement models are culturally biased. Some cultures do

not prize individual recognition. Individuals in these cultures use their gifts for the good of the group or to better the lives of the generations that will come after them. In all cultures, there are children who progress through the developmental milestones at a faster pace than children their age, who have remarkable abstract reasoning or problem-solving ability, and who develop unevenly and feel out-of-step with others. Combined, they create a qualitatively different life experience.

Do these characteristics sound familiar?

- ✚ Inquisitive
- ✚ Ability to generalize concepts
- ✚ Advanced verbal skills
- ✚ Advanced spatial ability
- ✚ Excellent memory
- ✚ Grasp abstract concepts
- ✚ Love learning
- ✚ Sophisticated sense of humor
- ✚ Prefer complexity
- ✚ Extraordinarily insightful
- ✚ Passion for justice
- ✚ Profoundly aware
- ✚ Intense

These are some of the traits that differentiate the gifted from other groups. A phenomenological definition based on these inherent differences was offered 20 years ago by the Columbus Group:

Giftedness is **asynchronous development** in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Asynchrony is composed of advanced cognition, intensity, uneven development, feeling out-of-sync with peers, unusual awareness, complexity and vulnerability. Uneven development is a universal characteristic of giftedness. The child develops mentally at a much faster rate than physically. She contemplates the meaning of life, but she can't tie her shoes. He can discuss black holes with ease, but he hasn't figured out how to hold his pencil. Emotionally, the child may be all over the map. It's hard to know how old you are when your mind is one age and your hands are another. This complicates social relations as well. "Where do I fit in?"

Alfred Binet (1908) developed the concept of *mental age* to describe the differences in development of children who developed faster and slower than others their age. Over the years, mental age has proven to be useful in understanding children with developmental delays. When a 17 year old demonstrates mental abilities at the level of an average 9 year old, it is abundantly clear that the individual needs intense accommodations. This type of asynchrony elicits societal support. However, when a 9

year old demonstrates the mental abilities of an average 17 year old, societal response is remarkably different. No matter what the parent tries to do for the child, any accommodation will be met with derision.

In 1911, Alfred Binet created a way of measuring intelligence that compared the child's mental age with his or her chronological age. Later, the mental age was divided by the chronological age and multiplied by 100 to create an intelligence quotient (IQ). While IQ scores do not predict who will be famous, they provide a practical estimate of the degree of asynchrony—the degree to which mental age (cognitive ability) diverges from chronological age (which correlates with physical competence). The higher the child's IQ, the greater the asynchrony. Greater asynchrony means greater vulnerability. The more the child differs from the norm in either direction, the more difficult it will be to fit in, to belong, to get one's needs met in a regular public school classroom. Children four standard deviations below the norm are not in regular classrooms. It is questionable if the regular classroom can meet the needs of children 4 standard deviations above the norm.

The definition of giftedness as asynchronous development was informed by parents who were struggling to meet the needs of their children. Stephanie Tolan described the gifted as an “amalgam of many developmental ages.” They appear to be different ages in different situations.

Kate...may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds? (Tolan, 1989, p. 7)

The concept of giftedness as asynchronous development has taken root in the literature on the profoundly gifted (e.g., Wasserman, 2007) and the twice exceptional (e.g., Beljan, 2005). The most asynchronous children are those who are both profoundly gifted and learning disabled. Giftedness masks disabilities and disabilities lower IQ scores, concealing giftedness; the child often appears “average” in school. Among the disabilities that appear frequently in the gifted population are:

- ✚ Central Auditory Processing Disorder
- ✚ Sensory Processing Disorder
- ✚ Dyslexia
- ✚ Visual processing weaknesses
- ✚ Spatial disorientation
- ✚ Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder
- ✚ Asperger Syndrome

The higher the individual's IQ, the more abstract reasoning is available to compensate for weaknesses. This is good news and bad news. High levels of abstract reasoning may prevent a disability from being detected. A brilliant child may struggle to read or struggle with handwriting, but manage to keep pace with average peers in elementary school. Dyslexia or dysgraphia may not be discovered until the student is in college. There is immeasurable suffering and self-condemnation when an individual experiences difficulty with skills that *ought* to have come easily based on his or her

intelligence. Teachers and parents who do not understand the problem are likely to exacerbate it by depicting the child as “*lazy*” and “*not willing to put forth effort.*” If they only knew how much effort it takes to keep the letters from dancing all over the page.

As asynchrony is not a competitive concept, defining giftedness as asynchrony is not likely to invite envy. More asynchrony is not better. No parent is going to say, “*My child is more asynchronous than your child!*” This definition is based on different developmental needs, rather than on giving a child an edge in the competition. It would be far easier to explain this view of giftedness to legislators to gain their support.

While many are now aware of the concept of asynchrony, one facet of the definition has been overlooked: intensity. Asynchrony is much more than uneven development; it also involves emotional intensity, complexity and depth. The turbulent inner lives of the gifted can best be understood through the lens of Dabrowski’s theory. Michael Piechowski worked closely with Kazimierz Dabrowski and introduced the gifted community to the theory. He writes that cognitive complexity, emotional sensitivity, heightened imagination, and magnified sensations combine to create “a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding—a way of being quiveringly alive” (Piechowski, 1992, p. 181).

Four of the five overexcitabilities are mentioned in this passage: Intellectual OE, Emotional OE, Imaginational OE, and Sensual OE. The only one that is missing is Psychomotor OE. The overexcitabilities can be thought of as heightened neural sensitivity in 5 domains. They are considered inborn, and help to explain inherent intensity in the passions and reactions of the gifted.

I developed “The Kids’ Guide to Overexcitabilities” as a way of discussing these characteristics with 9- to 12-year-old children.

The Kids’ Guide to Overexcitabilities

Psychomotor Overexcitability

- You have lots of energy
- You love movement
- You love fast games
- You talk a lot
- You can’t sit still
- You bite your nails

Sensual Overexcitability

- You love to touch things
- You love food
- You love music
- You love sunsets
- You love shopping
- You hate label to your clothes

Imaginational Overexcitability

- You can picture things vividly
- You have a great sense of humor
- You like to invent things
- You love fantasy
- You worry a lot
- You like to stretch the truth

Intellectual Overexcitability

- You are very curious
- You love to read
- You love learning
- You want everything to be fair
- You can concentrate for long periods
- You always want to be right

Emotional Overexcitability

- You care a lot about other people
- You love animals
- You are very sensitive
- You try to be and do your best
- You are easily frustrated
- You are shy and nervous sometimes

I was surprised at how well adults related to the same list.

Another concept that facilitates self-understanding is the appreciation of perfectionism. As perfectionism correlates strongly with giftedness, it must serve a positive function. Yet, it has been disparaged throughout the psychological literature. I have found that all gifted individuals are perfectionists, and all introverts are perfectionists. A gifted introvert is a perfectionist squared.

Although the typical view is that perfectionism stems from a deep well of inadequacy, I believe that in most of the gifted population it originates from a desire to do one's personal best. Individuals with high Sensual OE are attracted to beauty, and they may spend endless hours making something beautiful. They do so out of their own aesthetic needs rather than to please others and gain approval. Recently, it has come to my attention that perfectionism is not so negatively-tinged in *Architectural Digest* and other magazines of that genre. "For the perfectionist" is a selling point. Are you only allowed to be a perfectionist if you're wealthy?

The gifted have rich, turbulent inner lives, laced with idealism, self-doubt, perceptiveness, sensitivity, moral imperatives, and a desperate need for understanding, acceptance and love. They feel everything intensely and see electrically charged layers of meaning. This was expressed eloquently by a high school student:

We are not “normal” and we know it; it can be fun sometimes but not funny always. We tend to be much more sensitive than other people. Multiple meanings, innuendos, and self-consciousness plague us. Intensive self-analysis, self-criticism, and the inability to recognize that we have limits make us despondent. (American Association for Gifted Children, 1978, p. 9)

Gifted children need to be recognized as a special needs group, like any other exceptionality. They are wired differently and must come to terms with their unique traits. Unfortunately, they are the only exceptionality that can pretend to be like everyone else. Some learn early in life to hide their giftedness so that they are more acceptable. Elizabeth Drews’ (1972) wrote, “Our children are taught to don masks before they recognize their own faces. They are made to put their tender, pliable forms into prefabricated shells” (p. 3).

Developmental advancement can be a positive experience in an environment where individual differences are accepted. Where sameness is prized, the gifted are at risk. It is emotionally damaging to be unacceptable in the place one must spend 6 hours 5 days a week for 13 critical years of one’s development.

Asynchrony is both a blessing and a curse. If giftedness is only perceived within a competitive framework, then this asynchrony is a curse. Many gifted individuals do not fit well into society. They cannot “play the game” and pretend to be something they’re not. Sensitive to injustice, they cannot ignore the power plays and moral infractions. Many gifted adults leave corporate America to set up their own businesses—not to make more money, but because they would have had to sacrifice their moral integrity if they stayed. Advanced, asynchronous development does not give someone an edge in the race toward personal gain. The intensity, perfectionism, complexity, and sensitivity of this population are actually disadvantages in societies where these traits are not valued.

To grasp the deeper significance of giftedness, it is necessary to see beyond the narrow lens of competitiveness. From a global perspective, the development of every single person’s gifts benefits society. Every person has a unique contribution to make. In 1995, in her keynote address for the Hollingworth Center for the Highly Gifted Conference, Stephanie Tolan quoted Kierkegaard as saying that we all are born with “sealed orders” that we must discover and follow. No two individuals have the same sealed orders. Why compete if we all have a different role to play? The gifted are equipped with the perfect asynchrony—the exact combination of strengths and weaknesses they need—to fulfill their own sealed orders.

We, too, have sacred orders. We have been called to help gifted children appreciate themselves, to follow their own paths, and to develop into emotionally healthy adults. Society needs their passion, their idealism, their creativity, their sensitivity, their problem-solving abilities. They are our future. We who cherish them have been entrusted with guiding and guarding the future of our planet. With our help, their gifts will become blessings to themselves and to the Universe.

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