

## ALL OF ME

### A DISCUSSION ABOUT DISCUSSING GIFTEDNESS WITH THE GIFTED

BY CAROLYN M. LIGHT, PH.D., R.N.

*There once was a little girl whose school sent home a letter to her parents. The letter stated that she would soon be tested for inclusion in a "GATE" program and requested permission to do so. Her mother, who knew very little about "GATE" or even giftedness, gave consent and thought little more about it. When the little girl qualified for the gifted program, her parents were sent another letter. It informed them that she would be part of the program and part of a special, self-contained class of gifted children in the upcoming years. Her parents were intrigued, if not somewhat concerned about their daughter being taken from her current class and peers, and being grouped all day with such children. They wondered how it would affect their daughter. They wondered how things would be different for her. They also questioned how they all would be perceived by others. It was then that her mother began to privately research this concept of giftedness. She did not share it with her daughter and she did not share it with many other people for fear of being considered a braggart or, God forbid, a proud or pushy mom.*

*You see, that mother and father had already spent many years trying to explain their daughter's behavior to others. People did not understand why she was so sensitive and easily hurt, so serious and intense; generally unlike other little girls. People did not understand that her parents had no "magic" program that enabled her to read so early nor did they have a "secret" curriculum which taught her to compute advanced math problems. People could not comprehend why she was so active, never napped, and disliked going to sleep at night because she was "thinking". Neither did they appreciate why she asked so many questions or why she needed to single-mindedly devour topics of interest until she exhausted them. People were also very verbal about their*

*misunderstandings, which often made her parents feel uncomfortable. However, in spite of all the negative commentary and questions, the little girl's parents thought she was so wondrous and passionate; so creative and amazing. They had had very few benchmarks by which to measure her and had accepted her as the incredible (and challenging) gift they were given. But they would not tell many people about this new information. And they certainly would never tell the little girl.*

I was that naïve young mother. I had been under the impression, due to several years of misinterpretation, that telling my daughter about this new descriptor would result in an immodest or conceited child. So I said nothing. But as time went on, more research confirmed all of the characteristics and traits I had observed in my daughter were also often encountered among gifted children. My daughter and I began to have wonderful conversations. This passion about understanding her and other gifted children culminated in choosing the topic of gifted children for my doctoral dissertation. This journey became multifaceted and proved to be important not only to her but to me as well. Many things about my own traits, motivation and cognition began to become clearer, even as an adult.

Part of that passion entails not only awareness but the delivery of that awareness about gifted children to others. In conducting lectures to parents and professionals, I consistently communicate the need for children to understand what it means to be gifted. At times it is received as endorsement to do so; at other times it is received with reservation. I frequently speak to parents who, while raising gifted children, begin to contemplate their own childhood experiences. When they are required to integrate the past with the present in guiding their children, many concerns arise. At times this involves confusion about the meaning of giftedness, but often it entails uneasiness about the child becoming prideful if they are told about

their giftedness. This apprehension may prevent parents from acknowledging that part of their child and discussing it.

Additionally, while attempting a literature review to write about this topic I found that there appears to be little scientific research completed about the effects of talking to children about giftedness. Understandably, there are several variables that may be difficult to control in such experimental research, but I was astonished by how little formal study this topic has been given. With this in mind, I will incorporate literature and models which indicate that the development and well-being of gifted children are often dependent upon concepts such as awareness, understanding, validation and support. While there are probably those who continue to support the opinion that informing gifted children will promote arrogance, elitism and social superiority, I am assuming that this is a minority of people who have not yet become aware.

## **AWARENESS**

Let me begin by stating that it is important, if not imperative, to have conversations about giftedness with gifted children. *Not doing* so could negatively affect the child in some area, *while doing so* will most often assist in their development. I am astonished at the percentage of individuals that come into my office with little, no, or incorrect information about being gifted. Parents are bewildered by the child's behavior. Children tell me they are weird. Teenagers report they have not been able to find friends. Adolescent girls may be hiding their abilities because they don't fit in socially. Many do not understand why, and have been trying, unsuccessfully, to cope. I have watched little bodies become more relaxed as they learn more about themselves. They are eager to gain understanding that allows them to feel better about themselves. They are surprised when they are more comfortable accepting the manifestations of their gifted traits. They're even more amazed to find out that many others share their experiences.

*Awareness and understanding are powerful, liberating experiences. Awareness is also a vital part of growth.* It involves recognizing and accepting oneself, and developing understanding and acceptance of others. Awareness can develop only after information has been disseminated. Literature on identity formation indicates that children are able to detect differences between themselves and others in the

toddler stages. Having interviewed hundreds of young gifted children, I can anecdotally confirm that gifted children detect these differences verbally and nonverbally and become aware at an early age. If gifted children become aware that the differences they experience are common to others, it allows them to not only feel better about themselves but also to accept themselves as a whole.

## **WHY SHOULD WE DISCUSS GIFTEDNESS WITH CHILDREN?**

### **Developing a Healthy Self-Concept.**

The most important reason is that a healthy self-concept, or "self", is essential for positive emotional, cognitive and social development. Healthy self-concept depends upon healthy identity formation, which arises from understanding and accepting oneself. To accomplish this, children need information and feedback from their environment. We are not able to omit informing the child about her giftedness anymore than we would not inform her about her ethnicity, culture, or other inherent parts of her being.

Children grow as a result of incorporation of information, ideas and beliefs. This development is a result of interaction with others, especially parents and other important people in their lives. Using Mahoney's (1995) Identity Formation Model, providing children with information about giftedness enables them to assimilate it and provide validation, affirmation and the opportunity for affiliation. Validation is acknowledgment by others and oneself; affirmation allows for reinforcement of the processes that occur between the child and the outside world. Affiliation involves group identification and allows for association with others who are similar.

Children synthesize information from people and events and incorporate it into the "self". All parts of the child need to be incorporated to assist in complete identity formation. Due to the precocious development of gifted children, identity development is often influenced by advanced information processing as well as early-acquired differences. It has been noted that because of these traits, gifted children's interactions and expressions will cause them to look "different" to both adults and other children. In this growing awareness, our children may struggle with social and emotional issues and thereafter deduce that something is wrong with them. This puts our sensitive children at risk for negative self-concept as well as social exclusion if they are not given proper information. **Provide Information and Understanding.** If children are not provided proper and timely information, they are forced to

"fill in the blanks" with input that comes from other sources. This may be the playmate that has called her names or isolated her for her differences. It may be a teacher who harshly scolds the child for responding too often. It may even be a parent who implements extreme measures to force a child to "behave like other kids". Many gifted children incorporate these negative descriptions of themselves from others' feedback. Helping children understand more about their characteristics will assist in accepting themselves as unique and marvelous beings. It will explain their feelings of difference and allow them to attach meaning to their thoughts and feelings. Giving a child perspective of the range of differences in others like them may help assimilate these traits into their identity.

Another reason to discuss giftedness with young children is the tendency for gifted children to display traits that are not consistent with gender or age expectations. For example, many young, introspective and sensitive boys may be misunderstood by friends or by their own family members. Girls who are more androgynous and competitive may be perceived as "bossy", "tomboys", or worse. Explanation of these characteristics and traits allows for better self-esteem and ability to tolerate comments. It may also give them a voice to defend and advocate for themselves. Children in underrepresented populations, such as females and other socioeconomic or ethnic groups, can begin to incorporate giftedness into their identity early with proper information and awareness. When children understand those characteristics which demarcate them from others, it is easier for them to decide whether or not they want to modify them. They can then be assisted, if necessary, to deal with some of the more negative sequelae such as anxiety, sensitivity or perfectionism.

**Social Development.** It is important to impart appreciation of giftedness to allow children to become part of social groupings. Everyone needs a sense of belonging. In the development of self, group identity is as important as personal identity. It gives the child a sense of connectedness, similar to those groupings that involve nationality, language, religion, or family. Understanding and interacting with those similar to oneself allows for better integration into social networks and a society as a whole.

Understanding traits and characteristics can also assist children in negotiating the social situations that they

encounter. Many gifted children find it difficult to "fit in". Therefore, finding intellectual peers is important if a child is to gain acceptance. These relationships allow for more comfort, freedom and self-expression. Children are able to exhibit who they are without restraint and enjoy social interaction. For example, instead of struggling to fit in with those chronological age mates who don't understand you or tease you, it might be easier to interact with peers that are older. Associations such as these, as well as intellectual and social programs will enable children to relate to others similar to themselves.

## HOW SHOULD WE DISCUSS GIFTEDNESS WITH CHILDREN?

**Things to Consider.** Talking to a child about their giftedness should be approached as any other conversation you would have with that child on various aspects of their life. As always, the content of these conversations is dependent upon the maturity, temperament, behavior and interest of the child. It is helpful to consider the following questions prior to the discussion:

- What understanding do parents, teachers and others have about the child?
- What would be helpful for her to know?
- What can the child comprehend and assimilate?
- What will the child do with the information?
- What is the goal of the discussion?

As children develop and have various experiences and questions, topics should be revisited at the appropriate level. *Do not expect one conversation at the point of early identification to be sufficient.*

Talking to children should entail more than just the dichotomy of gifted versus non-gifted concepts. *Rather than relating scores or numbers to children, it is beneficial to discuss the pattern of strengths and abilities.* Noting the strengths as well as areas of weakness or challenge is important. Descriptions of characteristics, learning profiles and cognitive style can be informative for gifted children and assist their academic and intellectual growth. It may also be important to inform the child of any asynchrony that presents itself as a concern. Informing and assisting children in areas of cognitive challenge, learning disorder or other twice exceptionalities can be vital to a child's understanding of possible struggles, especially when grouped with other high-ability children.

Considering the aforementioned, the discussion should entail enough detail to answer questions, address issues and give

developmentally-appropriate information. Overwhelming a child with detailed points will not improve understanding and may cause confusion. Depending upon the age and past experiences, it may also be valuable to help the child realize that not all children or adults comprehend giftedness and that, like many underrepresented groups, they may encounter misunderstanding. Additionally, while talking about giftedness is important, it should not be the sole focus or standard by which everything in the child's life is defined and measured.

### **SHOULD I USE THE "G" WORD?**

While attaching labels to children is a controversial subject and can potentially lead to a "one-size-fits-all" mentality, it is difficult to completely avoid. I believe that explanation, perhaps using a descriptor, is imperative for understanding and conceptualization. Since most gifted children are already aware that they are "different", the proper classification can help them understand and ascribe positive descriptors. Although attempts to use arbitrary categorizations such as "red birds" and "bluebirds" have been made, gifted children are adept at knowing the meanings behind the groupings. This is especially true if children have been part of a large-scale identification process at school.

While a label such as giftedness does not depict the breadth of a child, describing it can allow for understanding, validation and group affirmation. Concerns about elitism may also be addressed during such discussions by incorporating family values. For example, conversations about empathy will enable children to appreciate that all children develop and perform at different rates. This is even further punctuated if a discussion includes a possible asynchronous learning or developmental status. Discussions about tenacity and perseverance are also in order so that children do not equate being gifted with lack of effort.

### **WHEN SHOULD WE DISCUSS GIFTEDNESS WITH CHILDREN?**

The decision regarding when to discuss giftedness with a child is perhaps most dependent upon the child and the circumstances. In most cases, knowing that gifted children become aware of their differences at an early age and that differences are visible to others (and may be

mentioned to the child or in the child's presence), it would follow that early discussions are in order. This is especially true after some type of formalized assessment has occurred. Timing and consideration of the child's cognitive and emotional state must be taken into account. Is the child curious and intent on knowing more about the testing? Is the child struggling in some area? The purpose of discussing it must be considered, as is defining what is important for the child to understand at this time.

### **WHO SHOULD DISCUSS GIFTEDNESS WITH CHILDREN?**

When discussing giftedness with children, concern for the social and emotional well-being must be paramount in the mind of the adult. Well-informed, caring adults are indispensable in the lives of gifted children. Many adults have pre-formulated ideas about giftedness and may be "working out" such issues in their own lives. Therefore, awareness of research and information on giftedness, as well as awareness of self is extremely beneficial.

Parents are usually the primary disseminators of information to their children and should be considered as the first source to discuss giftedness with them. Unfortunately concerns may inhibit parents from approaching the subject in a timely manner. Parental attitudes toward their own giftedness as well as how they perceive the child in context of their family, cultural or socioeconomic units may make parents concerned. Questions arise such as: "What if my child is smarter than I am?" "What if my teenager wants to go to college when I need him to work and supply family income?" These are essential dilemmas to consider before approaching the subject with gifted youngsters.

It is important that we, as adults do not impose our biases or fears on their children. If need be, consultation and support can be obtained if the discussion seems difficult or problematic. Psychologists, teachers or other professionals involved with the child may assist with this endeavor. Additionally, adult-guided discussion groups, mentors and others may be sources of ongoing information for the child fully.

### **IT'S ONLY A CONVERSATION**

In this age of considering and celebrating the whole child, it is imperative that we not ignore a major portion of the gifted child's identity as we nurture our children through various stages of development. In our society, parents are rarely hesitant to openly

acknowledge, discuss and celebrate their children's athletic capabilities, enthusiastically encouraging them to intellectual ability and accomplishment often causes parents to retreat into fear that the child will become, or be perceived as, conceited and arrogant. While this is less often the case, I, for one, am willing to take that chance. As someone who interacts with gifted children daily, I encourage efforts that allow our children every opportunity to develop and possess a positive self-image. Our children must endure peers that do not understand them, media that misrepresents them, and adults that may resent them. The very least they should be afforded is honest information and continual affirmation that will assist them to develop fully and be appreciative of their unique qualities. Initiating such a conversation is the first step.

### **References**

Gross, Miraca U.M. (1998). The "me" behind the mask: Intellectually gifted students and the search for identity. *Roeper Review*. 1998 Feb 20(3).

Kauffman, D. Should we tell them they're gifted? Should we tell them how gifted? [Online Electronic media] Available: [www.hoagiesgifted.org](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org).

capitalize on their abilities and strengths. However, celebrating advanced

Mahoney, A. S. (1995). It's all about identity. *Counseling & Guidance Newsletter*. Volume 5, Issue 2.

Mahoney, A.S. (1998). In search of the gifted identity. *Roeper Review*. Volume 20, pp. 222-26).

Neihart, M. (1998). Preserving the true self of the gifted child. *Roeper Review*. Volume 20, pp. 187-191.

Reis, S. M. (1995). Talent ignored, talent diverted: The cultural context underlying giftedness in females. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 39(3), 162-170.

Silverman, L. (1993.) A developmental model for counseling the gifted. In L. Silverman (Ed.) *Counseling the gifted and Talented* (first edition pp. 51-75) Denver, CO: Love Publishing.

Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E.A., and Tolan, S.S. (1982). *Guiding the gifted child: A practical source for parents and teachers*. Dayton, Ohio: Psychology Press .