

CHAT Meeting Minutes – November 14, 2017

Dealing with Perfectionism, Stress, Anxiety & Underachievement in Gifted Learners

Speakers: Panel discussion hosted by a parent of a gifted student, an elementary school teacher & parent of a gifted student, and a middle school counselor in BSD7. Interactive discussion with other thoughts provided by attendees.

These minutes reflect the key takeaways / notes from a member of the CHAT Leadership Team.

Perfectionism – The key is helping gifted learners understand the whole learning process and that failure is one part of the learning process. Growth comes from experiencing failure. Academic risks need to be taken. It's ok – we need failure to find that growth in life. We will all experience failure at some point in life. You can work through bumps in a road. "Yet" is also an important word to use – you might not be good at it "yet" but with practice and time, you will improve. You can get there.

Parents, educators, and other adults often send gifted children a message that "they are so bright" – try to focus less on the product & more on the process. The kids can feel an expectation of what they have to produce, even just from the words that people use around them.

If you have a child super focused on perfect grades, you can suggest to the teacher to not grade their work in elementary school, or not highlight a grade on the page that goes back to the student. The student will still know that they got some wrong, but maybe it can help shift their focus. In middle school, make sure your child isn't focusing on PowerSchool – you can check PowerSchool for them.

Question: What happens when your child's response to perfectionism is to do nothing & shut off? Why bother – if I can't do it perfectly, I won't do it at all.

Answer: There is a big difference between gifted & high achieving. Our school system is built for high achieving children, or high achieving gifted children, but it is not built for gifted & underachieving children. At the high school level, a parent can do more work with the Gifted Education Office and/or the high school gifted coordinator – to try to pick the classes that are more in-depth & not just more work. More work isn't going to be interesting to the gifted underachiever, but more in-depth might be. You need to find some way to light the child's fire, but it has to come from the child. Try to investigate what it is about for him – what's driving the underachievement. Ask what the most interesting part of the assignment is – and let them focus on that and doing a great job on that part & then just getting through the rest. Focus on building skills and ignore the grades.

There is a lot of pressure that comes from people noticing that the gifted child is different, or "smart". Finding activities where they can just have fun & not focus on being the best is really important. Need to allow your child to experience situations where they may be uncomfortable & let them fail. It could be anything – art or climbing or anything. It's also important to focus on what your child needs, not what others are doing.

In high school, they will need to be advocating for themselves – and learn how to do that even if they are introverted. Parents need to be communicating with counselors. They need to have the right people teaching the AP & GATE classes.

Stress – screen-time is used by some kids as a way to calm an agitated brain, but it is addictive and anti-social, so not a healthy way to handle it. Getting outside in nature, exercise. Unhealthy coping can consist of overt yelling or temper tantrums, but it can also be withdrawn, depressed, isolation. Each child reacts differently to stress, so coping strategies will be different depending on the situation. Introverts withdraw, may self-harm. Extroverts become angry. The solution is often to change behavior patterns – exercise, breathing techniques, journaling or drawing or music – to get their thoughts out. They need to be able to choose one of these healthy coping strategies when they start to feel stress – but it has to be what they are interested in, what works for your child.

Image of a tray that reflects what's on their plate – at some point it becomes too much & the tray tips – something has to give. You also have to think about capacity, and use that as a way to think about when they might be approaching a tipping point.

Also, just be engaged & talk to them. Do you like this, do you not like this, what would you like to change?

Anxiety – often goes with depression and perfectionism – it can become a cycle. Anxiety can build just by having the gifted label on them and the expectations that come along with that. High school classes have high achieving & gifted kids in them – and sometimes they don't mix. Gifted kids can often feel like freaks. They often don't know how to talk to their teachers; they have a perceptual idea of what a teacher is & it is hard to dismantle it so they feel comfortable sharing their feelings. Helping people understand you, means that you have to understand yourself first. Also you may need to figure out how to normalize "giftedness" and take away the feeling of an expectation. Clustering, having other kids who think the same way, can also help with anxiety. There is a lot of power in having a close set of peers who are dealing with similar issues – they aren't alone. Something like the CAP mentor program (b/c it is possible to continue with the same mentor over multiple semesters) can also help, to establish a relationship with someone who isn't a teacher, parent, etc. The mentor program through the Gifted Office hasn't helped as much with this, as the mentor is usually only for a semester.

Research is mixed on whether there is a correlation between giftedness and anxiety. Some research says there is a correlation, and others says anxiety in gifted kids is about on par with anxiety in the rest of the population. But all agree that anxiety is on the rise. One major difference with gifted kids is that they may be relatively more intense than normal, so when they experience anxiety, it may be felt more intensely.

Getting Kids to Care When It's Not Challenging – one strategy is to let them make it more interesting. Maybe there is a way for the child to go back to the teacher and modify the assignment to make it more interesting / go deeper. Most teachers would be open to it. But the child needs to advocate for themselves. An example in Communication Arts – whole class will read an excerpt, maybe your child wants to read the whole book & do a report on it. Another point of view – if the child comes & says they don't want to do some assignment because it's boring, the parent may want to tell them that they need to do it anyway – life isn't always super interesting & challenging, a lot of the tasks you have to do in daily life are actually very boring. And you can't just opt out of things. If they want to make it more challenging after completing the assignment, great. But they need to do the work assigned first, even if it is boring.

Have Parents with Gifted Kids Felt Weird Interacting with Other Parents Who Don't Have Gifted Kids?

Yes. Some parents just ignore any drama with other parents, and don't get into conversations that would cause a problem. Others take the opportunity, when it comes up, to debunk the myth that gifted kids are just fine and have no issues.

Developmental Path for Gifted Kids – There is clearly a different pace of development between intellect and emotions in gifted kids, generally speaking. At college, or at some point in their adult life, emotional intelligence will catch up. But in between, there could be cycles when the emotional side develops & then delays. They may feel like no one understands them – not even their parents. When faced with an emotional meltdown from a gifted child, one strategy is to acknowledge that the child's feelings are legitimate, but then to tell them that they have to be able to interact in the world, and there is a system / culture in this world that they have to navigate, and meltdowns aren't going to work, so let's figure out a better way to deal with the issues.

Depression – 3 main areas where the counselor has seen depression originate in gifted kids: 1) they have very high expectations for themselves, 2) peer pressure / social acceptance – not finding their group or any peer that they identify with (middle school has an advisory period where they cluster gifted kids to try to help with this), 3) asynchronous development – when people think they have it all together, but then they don't. Kids can name a bunch of positive things that have happened in their week, but they are still sad. And depression in gifted kids does not always look like the "withdrawn child" – it is often someone who looks like they are functioning, but who is severely depressed emotionally, every day. Having them meet with a counselor is important to help them develop coping strategies. Many who are gifted & introverted are not telling their parents about being sad. Getting them to a counselor when they don't want to go – you can't make them engage in a therapeutic discussion, so having another adult that they can talk to could also work – it doesn't have to be a counselor to open the door.

Existential depression – some gifted kids feel the weight of the world, feel these really big problems very deeply & feel like they can't make an impact.

Academic fit – know from tons of research that it is highly correlated to their social emotional state. Might need a team meeting with the school to make sure there is a good academic fit, and that the child is engaged. A student can really blossom with the right teachers in the right environment.