

Tips for Parents: Gifted Children's Friendships

This Tips for Parents article is from a seminar hosted by Miraca Gross, who provides a must-read on how parents can help facilitate productive friendships for their gifted children and prevent them from becoming "loners." Gross stresses the importance of understanding the difference in a child's emotional and social development (compared to their age-peers) and how crucial this is to how parents cope with their child's upbringing.

- **Author**
Gross, M.
- **Organization**
Davidson Institute for Talent Development
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Linda Silverman wrote in *Counselling the Gifted and Talented* that "When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often 'a friend'. The children's experience of school is completely colored by the presence or absence of friends" (Silverman, 1993).

Exceptionally and profoundly gifted children differ from their age-peers not only in their intellectual development but also in many aspects of their social and emotional development. Emotional maturity is much more closely linked to mental age than to chronological age and this is particularly noticeable with children of very high IQ.

In general, children choose friends on the basis of similarities – like drawing to like. Gifted children generally gravitate towards "maturity peers" – children who are at similar stages of intellectual and emotional development. In general, they prefer to work and socialise with age peers who are also maturity peers. However, when ability peers of their own age are not readily available, as is usually the case with EG and PG children, they may seek the company of children several years older who are of above average ability – children who resemble them somewhat in mental age and emotional maturity. Unfortunately, teachers often misunderstand this and assume that the child who does not easily form friendships with age-peers is "emotionally immature". Ironically, the difficulties stem from emotional maturity rather than immaturity.

- Gifted children may become aware at an early age that they are "different" from their age-peers and they often worry about this. Parents may consider discussing the chronological age/mental age/ emotional age discrepancy with their children and reassuring them that individual differences are a part of life.
- Talk to the child's teacher about the gravitation towards mental age peers. She has probably seen this in children who are developmentally delayed; explain to her that it is also a characteristic of children who are developmentally advanced.

A study which I conducted with 700 children aged 5-12 found that children's conceptions of friendship form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age (Gross, 2002). The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

Stage 1: "Play Partner": In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on "play-partnership". A friend is seen as someone who engages the child in play and permits the child to use or borrow her playthings.

Stage 2: "People to chat to": The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between "friends" are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged.

Stage 3: "Help and encouragement": At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; the child does not yet see himself as having the obligation to provide help or support in return.

Stage 4: "Intimacy/empathy": The child now realises that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flows both ways and, indeed, the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding.

Stage 5: "The sure shelter": The title comes from a passage in one of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. "A faithful friend is a sure shelter: whoever finds one has found a rare treasure" (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. A 12-year-old boy in my longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+ (Gross, 2003) told me: "A friend is a place you go to when you need to take off the masks. You can take off your camouflage with a friend and still feel safe."

In my friendship study I was able to compare the friendship conceptions of children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children and children of IQ 160+. The study demonstrated strongly that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age as by mental age. A strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. Gifted children were beginning to look for friends with whom they could develop close and trusting relationships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability were looking for play partners.

However, the differences between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the primary school years, and in the early years of elementary school, than in the later years. In grades 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children have the conceptions of friendship which characterise average ability children three or more years older.

As stated earlier, many previous studies have suggested that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children of above average ability. This new study suggests that they may not only be seeking the intellectual compatibility of mental age peers; they may also be looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

Leta Hollingworth (1936) believed that the social isolation experienced by many highly gifted children was most acute between the ages of 4 and 9. My own findings strongly support this. Children of IQ 160+ tend to begin the search for "the sure shelter" - friendships of complete trust, honesty and fidelity - four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage. Indeed, in my study exceptionally and profoundly gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12. No wonder these children encounter difficulties with socialization. There is little common ground between a 6-year-old who is seeking the "sure shelter" and an age-peer who is looking for a "play partner".

- It can be useful for parents to discuss the hierarchy of friendship conceptions with their gifted children. Because gifted children begin to make social comparisons earlier than their age-peers, they can become acutely aware that they seem to be looking for different things in friendship than are their age-peers. A frank but sensitive discussion of this can help ameliorate the feelings of "strangeness".

Substantial gender differences appeared in my study. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls were, on average, significantly further along the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. This suggests that exceptionally gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability, as they will appear so dramatically different from the majority of boys of their age. This may explain why, in the early years of school, highly gifted boys sometimes prefer the company of girls.

Such are the differences in the friendship conceptions held by average and gifted students in the earlier years of primary school that it is at this level that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship.

Another characteristic of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children is that they seem to prefer the company of a few close friends rather than large, looser groups. This is also a characteristic of children who are introverts rather than extroverts. Highly gifted children who are introverts (and there seems to be a growing body of literature which connects the two – read Silverman, 1993, for example) may have a double "need" for a few closer relationships rather than many more "surface" relationships.

- It's *okay* if your gifted child prefers to link with one "special" friend rather than "play the field". Parents sometimes worry that the child seems to be putting all his or her friendship "eggs" in the one basket – but we must remember that because the quality of gifted children's friendships is different, they have an earlier need for the exchange of confidences and the discovery of mutual bonds. This is more easily achieved in pairs than in larger groups. It's actually quite common for gifted children to prefer a close in-depth relationship with one friend rather than a range of lighter, more "surface" relationships with a range of acquaintances. It's natural that you are worried that your son or daughter is spending so much time with only one other child, but think of it this way: in finding good friends children are learning two things: firstly that *they* are acceptable to other children and, secondly, that they themselves can *be* a good friend. These are great lessons for all kids to learn but they are especially essential for children who may have, earlier, been rather socially isolated. It's lovely to see children who have previously been "loners" beginning to loosen up and move out towards other children. It's the self-confidence that they have gained from this first "good friendship" that is making them see themselves as someone who can search out to others without the fear of being rejected.

The hobbies, interests and play preferences of gifted children can also "set them apart" from their age-peers. Children's play interests are strongly determined by their stage of cognitive development and the play preferences of intellectually gifted children tend to resemble those of children some years older. For example, gifted children tend to enjoy games with rules at earlier ages than other children. They often prefer games where ideas and strategies are matched against each other and where new proposals can be trialled, whereas the average child prefers games where such rules as exist are clearly defined and closely adhered to. This can cause conflict when the highly able child, who may see the illogicality or irrelevance of the rules, seeks to overturn them, either to improve the game or simply for the intellectual stimulation of the ensuing argument!

Because of these factors, the play of highly gifted children tends to be an uneasy compromise between their own interests and abilities and their desire to be accepted into a social group. Children who are less willing or less able to make such a compromise often become 'loners', preferring to invent solitary intellectual games which often center on fantasy and imagined adventure.

Teachers need to be aware that they may not observe the true play preferences of gifted children if they are not provided with companions who share their play interests. Solitary play in gifted children, rather than indicating social maladjustment or peer rejection, can simply signal the unavailability of children who share their interests.

- It can be perplexing and indeed infuriating to gifted children that their age-peers don't become excited by the types of games that they find fascinating. It may be necessary to remind them that a few months (or years) ago they didn't find these games fascinating either! People's play interests develop and change at different rates.
- Hobby and interest clubs can be a great way of finding, for your gifted children, other children who share their interests. This can often lead to the development of friendships; after all, friendships begin through having something of interest to talk about. Do you have a local gifted children's association which has weekend activities? That can often help to bring a shy gifted student out of her shell as the children who attend these programs are more likely to have the sort of interests your daughter shares.
- It can sometimes be useful to ask your gifted child to describe her "ideal friend" - and then privately ask his or her teacher whether there is anyone in the class who bears some resemblances. Is there anyone in her class that your child likes better than s/he likes the other children? Could the teacher facilitate the development of a "beginning friendship" by getting the two kids to work together on a class project, a book report or something?
- Some gifted children very much prefer the companionship of children a couple of years older - children who are closer to their level of intellectual and emotional maturity. Could that be the case with your child - and does s/he have access to older children?
- The intellectual and emotional maturity of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children makes them ideal candidates for acceleration. Placing these children with older children who are closer to their mental and emotional age can facilitate the development and maintainance of friendships.
- In some cases this may be the first time the gifted child has ever truly realised both the extent of her ability and the extent of her difference. Parents may find that their EG and PG children may become a little less satisfied

with the more surface level games, conversations and friendships that they have had before. They have now had the opportunity to experience both the "more" that is in them and the "more" that can be in friendships.

- On the other hand, however, some gifted students who **do** have a close friend with whom they have a happy and fulfilling relationship seem to adapt quite happily to the needs and level of the other kids in their class or district. It's a kind of "social generosity". Because the gifted student is getting the intellectual stimulation and loving companionship he or she needs from the close friendship, he subconsciously feels he has "time left over" to drop down for a while to the level of the other children whose needs are different. (If the gifted child *wasn't* having his intellectual needs fulfilled, and was consequently intellectually frustrated, it might be a very different picture! Something else we should think about a little more carefully than we currently do is the importance, in friendship development, of a shared sense of humor. There is quite a lot of research that shows that gifted students tend to have a more mature sense of humor than their age-peers.

Gifted kids tend to be "a stage ahead" in their perceptions of humor. Some humor theorists hold that humor derives from an appreciation of incongruity. In the early years of school, humor derives from *visual* incongruity - a clown is funny, a man walking under a ladder and a paint pot falling on his head is funny. Later - often about age 8-10 - they are more into *verbal* incongruities - dreadful puns, knock-knock jokes, etc. Finally, in adolescence, humor ends up as derived from incongruity of ideas. The Monty Python series is an example of this, as is Seinfeld and the Gary Larrson "Far Side" cartoons. Gifted kids *tend to* (it's not always so) go through these stages earlier and faster. That can lead to problems. If you are 5 and into puns and your classmates have no idea what you are talking about or finding funny, this can lead to loneliness.!

It's not the other kids' fault; they genuinely just can't connect with what the gifted kid is enjoying. It can be particularly problematic when the gifted kid has reached abstract humor (soup usually equates with warmth and mothering but Seinfeld gives us a soup Nazi!) that he may appreciate on many different levels but he may not be able to explain to his age-peers just what it is about the idea he finds so rewarding/amusing/weird etc.

It's difficult to bond in friendship with people we can't laugh with!

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Comments

Parent on 5/28/2014

Both of my boys are gifted, but my older son has only one friend. He tells me that he doesn't talk to the other kids because they aren't someone that he would like to talk to. He also says that the other kids aren't always well behaved. He has always only had one friend and I worry so much! He will be starting middle school, but this time he will be at a gifted center... I hope that this helps him!

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