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# 1

## **The Heart of the Gifted Child: Emotional Development**

Having recognized for years that gifted children have special academic needs, parents, teachers, and psychologists are now turning to the emotional characteristics of these children. A persisting myth has been that gifted children have no trouble with emotional and social development, or if they do have problems, they also have the necessary inner resources to deal with them. Sensitive adults who work with gifted children realize that this is not true and are focusing attention on how being gifted complicates the usual problems of growing up.

Gifted children face the same difficulties as all children, but being gifted adds an extra dimension. To understand their emotional needs, it is necessary to recognize the extras in the developmental tasks they face. Four areas in which giftedness affects the emotional development of a child are establishing an identity, needing time alone, getting along with others, and learning how to use one's own ability.

All children must establish their own identity; the gifted child must recognize and accept an identity that is different from the norm, which may not be popular or acceptable to peers or family.

*Now beginning junior high, Matthew has already learned that some of his ideas seem strange to his classmates and even to his parents and teachers. Entering a new school, he is determined not to mention thoughts that others might not understand; he tries, in fact, to*

*stifle them in himself. At an age when he should be establishing his sense of identity, he is attempting to deny a part of it to himself as well as to others.*

All children must learn to be alone at times; however, gifted children may actually require time alone, and may need more of it than most people need or can understand. They may have to learn to cope with mixed feelings about their own need for time alone, aware that they also need time with other people, and uncertain how to balance these needs with the expectations of others.

*Sara loves to read, to play the piano, and to sew — all solitary activities. After a day crowded with people at school, she enjoys coming home to these quiet pursuits. Her parents are worried, however, because she seldom invites friends to come home with her. Although Sara is happy with her friends at school and content with her activities at home, she senses her parents' concern and wonders whether there is something wrong with her.*

All children must learn how to get along with others; gifted children must find a few good friends, and learn to value and respect others, even though they themselves may be rejected. Gifted people are unusually intense, and this characteristic is difficult for other children to understand. Gifted people also have heightened sensitivity to the comments and actions of others, so that being misunderstood or rejected is a more painful experience for them than for most. For gifted children the issues of friendship, so important to their healthy development, are much more complex than they are for most children.

*Brian talks with enthusiasm to high school students and adults, but he can find no other grade school children who share his interest in biology. His sixth grade classmates are puzzled by the intensity that marks his oral science reports, and he mistakes their lack of understanding for rejection. In response, he is building a protective wall around himself, neither giving nor expecting friendship from people his own age. If he can be helped to respect his classmates' social or athletic skills as well as his own knowledge of biology — and if he can find*