

SECOND EDITION

the **Social** and
Emotional
Development
of **Gifted Children**

What Do We Know?

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SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS AND NEEDS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

INTRODUCTION

There are many reasons that the social and emotional development of gifted children differs from that of children with average ability. Research over the past 10–15 years has changed the nature of the discussion on some of these needs. The field has moved away from dichotomous and linear perspectives to understandings that acknowledge the dynamic interplay of forces in development. Today, we believe that both ability and environment must be considered because social and emotional characteristics shape and are shaped by interactions with others. Also, development must be understood within a cultural context because many concepts (e.g., self, identity, achievement) are socially constructed. It is this interaction that makes growing up gifted a qualitatively different experience.

For example, in her chapter, Speirs Neumeister highlights how research on perfectionism, a common characteristic of gifted children, has moved from studies based on typologies to studies based on dimensions of positive strivings and evaluative concerns. Similarly, Freeman and Garces-Bacsal report on changing patterns of gender differences in gifted children, and Cross discusses how some characteristics of gifted children can present challenges for social relationships. As you read this section, watch for these and other examples of this shift in our understanding of the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted children. How do they confirm or modify your own ideas about gifted children's development?



THEORIES OF SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT IN GIFTED CHILDREN

KRISTOFOR WILEY

INTRODUCTION

When Lewis Terman used the newly developed Stanford-Binet intelligence scale to identify children with “genius” over a century ago, he took the opportunity to measure more than just cognitive ability in those children. Among the many characteristics he explored in *Genetic Studies of Genius* (Terman, 1926) were several regarding emotional maturity and affect. Terman came to the conclusion that his high-IQ subjects were, in general, socially and emotionally well-adjusted.

In the years following Terman’s 1926 publication, Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926, 1942), then an instructor at Columbia University, drew on the work of Terman and others to study a handful of students with Stanford-Binet IQs above 180. Her conclusions, while largely in agreement with Terman, added a discussion of “special perplexities” on the part of the highly intelligent. Her concerns for these students included the social difficulties often provoked by a mismatch between

physical and cognitive development (asynchrony), disadvantages in demonstrating leadership among older mental peers, and lack of close friendship among age peers.

These two scholars framed a discussion of affective characteristics by highlighting both the strengths and potential complications of high intelligence. Due to differences in their settings and the students with whom they worked, Terman and Hollingworth sometimes emphasized different aspects of the experience of these students, but neither could have anticipated the opposed viewpoints they would be summoned to represent. It is not difficult now to find claims that the gifted are somehow a population apart in their emotional state, either universally protected by their capabilities or uniquely vulnerable for the same reason. Neither, of course, is predictably the case. Rather, the students we identify as gifted are a vast array, as different from one another as they are from their nonidentified peers. The act of predicting social or emotional difference on the basis of gifted identification, whether it be unique vulnerability or boundless resilience, is neither supported by research nor logically consistent.

That said, advanced cognitive or academic abilities typically reflected by gifted identification can create unique challenges when it comes to peers and the environment. For some gifted students, school is an exercise in patience as material already learned is once again presented. For others, it represents a world in which constant effort is required to fit in. Asynchrony is a defining element of giftedness, and in some students, it provokes a qualitatively different social experience. Our mandate as professionals is to command the idea of asynchrony, not to predict social or emotional differences in gifted individuals, but to aid our understanding when those differences present themselves.

THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING

The unique cognitive characteristics of the gifted, those by which they are identified, must be part of our discussion. They are not, however, enough to provide understanding. A host of variables (including

asynchrony) impact social and emotional well-being. Understanding the relationships between these variables requires a theoretical framework. Theory links individual traits and outcomes in an attempt to escape mere correlation. A clear example of this comes in recent discussions of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities. Researchers have demonstrated a correlation between overexcitability scores and giftedness, but it is only when we engage Dabrowski's larger Theory of Positive Disintegration (e.g., Piechowski, 2014) that we are able to explore whether this relationship is meaningful.

The purpose of this chapter is not to catalog research on individual social or emotional traits associated with gifted individuals; such summaries will be found in subsequent chapters. Rather, it is to offer a survey of theoretical frameworks through which those traits can be more effectively understood and addressed. The following section highlights several theories of social or emotional development that have found use in recent years among gifted educators, as well as recent research drawing on those frameworks. It is not a comprehensive list, but it represents a cross-section of popular acceptance, recent development, and depth of application. The greater intent is to demonstrate how placing traits of giftedness in a theoretical context can help us formulate better service.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Research in gifted education typically draws upon one or more theoretical frameworks to explore a specific area of interest. Many theories from developmental psychology have been put to use over the years in the study of the social and emotional development of gifted children. The following theories can be applied to the unique development of gifted children, helping to explain outcomes and behaviors once we consider them in the context of giftedness.