

CHAPTER I

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GIFTEDNESS

Your 10-year-old child is easy to raise—most days. The rest of the time she is a handful. A big handful. A bit of an enigma, she possesses qualities of being both highly intelligent and completely ignorant when it comes to the mundane. She can be funny and make everyone laugh while also being serious to the point of critical. Her empathy runs high, as she cries at commercials about global warming. Yet she criticizes her friends who don't hold her worldview and often insists to you that her way is always the better way.

Her grades in school are good. But, her teachers complain that she often is sloppy in her work, makes careless errors on the simplest of math problems, and misspells basic words. She often chooses the road less traveled in all aspects of her life, wondering why others don't see that it is—at least to her—the easier way. Often a joy to be around, your child's moods can swing from one extreme to the other. The unbalanced nature of these mood swings causes you to question her emotional stability—and your own.

If you had to summarize her in one word, you would call her intense.

Parenting your child often leaves you frustrated as you vacillate between feeling lucky to have such a great kid and cursed for having to deal with her emotions.

Is she crazy? Are you?

Neither is true. You've just stumbled into the emotional world of gifted children and the drama of parenting and teaching them.

Assumptions are common with gifted children. People often assume that raising a highly curious, bright child is an easy task—something parents should be happy about all of the time. These same people feel that bright children do not fall prey to many of the problems that other children encounter, including poor academic achievement, bullying, or risky behaviors.

Although it is true that there are many rewards to being the parent of a gifted child, believing that a gifted child will be easy to raise only negates the very real challenges inherent in parenting this population. Furthermore, the emotional roller coaster that can accompany giftedness makes parenting a true challenge.

Gifted children face school challenges, difficulties with peers, and problems with overall emotional development, similar to their nongifted counterparts. However, the nature of giftedness makes these issues significantly more intense. Parents of gifted children often are conflicted in their feelings regarding their children—ranging from delight and marvel related to children's creativity and intellectual prowess, to frustration regarding children's poor stress response, to powerlessness when parents feel inept in their own understanding of how to help this unique breed of children. Educators, too, often feel a sense of powerlessness as they try to help their gifted students maintain emotional balance and control in the classroom and with their friends.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND SCHOOL

One of the biggest assumptions made about gifted children involves academic achievement. People assume that these children require little to no discipline or encouragement with regard to learning in the school setting, believing giftedness is the same as being a high-achiev-

ing student (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). Furthermore, it is assumed that gifted children will always find an intrinsic way to learn—there is no need for specialized academic programs or teacher education in the field of giftedness. Unfortunately, these assumptions do not reflect an accurate understanding of the nature of giftedness.

Many gifted children do perform well in school, equating school performance with something as fundamental as breathing. They require little to no assistance from teachers or parents.

However, a growing number of these students share a different reality when it comes to traditional learning. They are frustrated by the mundane and repetitive processes found in many classrooms. Driven by boredom, they fall out of sync with school and withdraw from the learning environment. Unlike their high-achieving counterparts, they are not intrinsically motivated by good grades, having already decided that school has nothing of particular value to offer them.

If this pattern is allowed to continue, these gifted children soon will find themselves unable to get by on pure intellect. Having missed important information in class due to the lack of engagement in learning, they struggle—typically for the very first time. By this point, teachers may not see their gifted qualities at all, and often will believe that someone must have “made a mistake” about the gifted label. If they are recognized as being intelligent, teachers will assume that these underachieving gifted children are just being *lazy*. Seldom is the problem recognized as a mismatch between how gifted children learn and what the school so regularly asks them to do: repetitive and routine tasks.

The reality is, at least 5% of gifted children fail or drop out of school (Renzulli & Park, 2000). This is a statistic that should make educators and parents feel uncomfortable. Maybe even outraged. Closer attention needs to be paid to the unique needs of gifted students if we are going to improve student outcomes for this population. Educational strategies including acceleration, differentiation, and grouping are things that

need to be explored in order to help meet the needs of gifted children and improve their emotional and behavior outcomes.

ANDREW

Andrew is a 12-year-old sixth grader. Having been identified as gifted in second grade, Andrew enjoyed his early childhood school experiences. In third grade, he earned average grades in all classes and indicated that learning was fun. At home, he typically amused himself by taking things apart—his electronic toys, his mother's old PDA, and a broken computer. He needed to understand why things worked the way they did. His early grade school teachers reported that he was a creative and talented student. His parents could not have been more proud.

As time went on and Andrew entered fifth grade, things began to change. The curriculum, no longer new and exciting, had settled into a mixture of routine and rote activities, punctuated with occasional opportunities for enrichment (which, in Andrew's mind, always meant more work). Andrew began to show disinterest in school, avoiding homework and no longer speaking about his day with excitement. His parents became concerned and went to the teacher for help. She suggested a "token economy" to assist with homework completion, rewarding him based on work completion. This helped for a short while, only to have the problem persist.

Andrew continued to withdraw from school, finding little to stimulate his mind. At home he no longer took apart the computer. Now he designed video games, filling any available time with trying to stump his friends with his new games.

Although he completed little to no work in school, Andrew's test scores continued to be high. The teacher reassured his parents that this was just a phase, promising that he would grow out of it eventually.

However, this was not the case. By sixth grade, things had taken a serious turn for the worse. Andrew, no longer in the habit of completing schoolwork, discovered that his intellect alone was not enough to maintain passing grades. He completed no homework, failed most of

his tests, and rarely demonstrated interest in school. He still designed video games at home and won various online contests.

His parents were at a loss as to what to do. Turning to the school, they were again told that it was a homework issue; if he would only do more homework, he would be fine. His standardized scores from statewide assessments continued to demonstrate high potential, so the school felt the problem was nothing more than a matter of laziness and poor parental structure.

Although Andrew is fictional, drawn from a combination of many real cases, his story is one that exemplifies the typical challenges some gifted children and parents face in the school system. We will revisit Andrew throughout the book, as we learn more about the complex challenges facing gifted students with regard to school.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

Another commonly held myth is that gifted children get along fine in the social aspects of their lives, having little problems with bullies or friendships in general. Sometimes the opposite is assumed—that all gifted children are “geeks” or “nerds” by nature. Such stereotypes minimize the nature of the problems faced by these children as they try to build friendships (Webb et al., 2007).

Many gifted children struggle greatly in the social areas of their lives, related in part to the intensity of their behaviors, as well as the unique aspects of their personalities, both of which will be covered in more detail in subsequent chapters. In general, gifted students have a tendency to appear arrogant and unconnected to their peers, often finding interest in things other than the typical interests of their peers. Social relationships often are negatively impacted by their tendency to lose interest with the day-to-day triviality that typifies most relationships during childhood. Instead, these children would prefer to focus on larger world problems, or things that are abstract and complex—most of which is not appealing to typical nongifted peers. The result

is a combination of frustration and avoidance, neither of which move toward strong interpersonal relationships.

Peer relationships naturally change over the course of childhood, especially as children enter their middle school years. For gifted children, the process of change can be even more difficult, as the move toward fitting in with their typical peers takes on a life of its own. Unable to compete socially due to the uniqueness of their personalities, these children often will hide their giftedness, trying hard to fit in to a social structure that eludes them. They may try out for a sport that the “cool” kids like, or fail classes to fit in with a particular peer group. Sometimes these kids will avoid accolades given by the adults on campus by missing outside events that reward academic achievement or getting “sick” just before awards ceremonies.

For some gifted students the opposite may be true. Faced with the knowledge that they can never fit in with the popular crowd, and not necessarily wanting to, they take on the personae of *super nerd*, a label that allows them to be above and beyond odd. For this group, being unusual is the prime objective, often leading to significant bullying from other groups of children. When this happens, educators often are at a loss as to how to help. Instead of recognizing the problem as something related to the way in which gifted children interact with the world and teaching tolerance, they struggle with trying to either teach the gifted child to change or telling the parent the acts of bullying are just normal kid behavior. We’ve seen all too often the long-term impact of bullying on any child, let alone a population of children that process the world intensely by nature.

Whether a gifted child is trying to bend herself into a pretzel to fit in or aiming to emulate the label of “nerd,” these children suffer in their relationships, often struggling to find their own safe haven among their peers. The lack of friendships can lead to sincere pain for both the child

and the parent. Both parties are left trying to grapple with the problem, not really understanding why such social connections are so hard.

MEREDITH

Meredith is an 8-year-old gifted girl in third grade. She thinks of herself as outgoing and smart with many friends. However, when she invites friends over for play dates, very few come. She finds herself ostracized on the playground at times—especially when she becomes overwrought during a tetherball game or when she doesn't get her way at recess. Things come to a head one day when she comes home crying, saying that “all” of her friends are refusing to play with her. Concerned, her parents go to the school looking for help. They watch their daughter interact with her friends and quickly begin to understand a part of the problem, as they witness their daughter bossing everyone. They watch in horror as the child tells everyone how wrong they are, refuses to let anyone choose a game, and argues about various rules. When the other children try to tell her that she is not being nice, she immediately gets angry and accuses them of just being jealous of her.

Her parents are shocked. Their own daughter is acting like a brat. Frustrated, they go home and talk with her that night. She cries, stating that she wasn't doing anything wrong. She goes on to say that she doesn't mean to sound bossy and that she just wants friends. The parents' frustration continues long after the conversation ends, as they feel powerless to change the situation. They don't know how to help the other children see the wonderful qualities that Meredith typically demonstrates at home.

Meredith's story—far from unique—paints the picture of what can happen as gifted students begin to enter the social arena of school, as well as the pain that can occur when children are unable to find success in that setting.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR EMOTIONS

Existing myths regarding gifted children not only reflect school performance or peer interactions, but also emotional development. One of the more commonly held beliefs is that gifted children are more prone to anxiety and/or depression than other children. Furthermore, some people in the general population believe that there is little to do regarding the anxiety and depression, other than treat it through therapy and/or medication. The truth about gifted children is actually quite different. Recent research indicates that gifted children often are more resilient than their nongifted counterparts (Mueller, 2009). Furthermore, the depression and anxiety-like behaviors that seem to go hand in hand with many gifted children may not be a *disorder* as much as a natural aspect of the gifted child's personality. These children are more emotionally intense than their nongifted counterparts, resulting in a host of behaviors that simulate anxiety and depression, among other things (Sword, 2006b). The cause of the behavior, however, is substantively different—something often ignored by both the educational and mental health fields.

Gifted children do struggle with their emotional development overall, despite good long-term prognoses. Problems regarding the stability of mood, existential depression, and performance-based anxiety are typical with this population, but for different reasons than similar traits in other children. Gifted children behave in this way as a direct outpouring of the intensity that defines this population, as opposed to a dysfunctional aspect of personality that needs to be fixed. Although the latter responds well to treatment designed to “fix” the problem, the former does not, as it is a normal aspect of many gifted children's development. These children require interventions that stem from a thorough understanding of the emotional nature of giftedness and an understanding of the typical intensity inherent in gifted individuals.

Such interventions need to focus on coping strategies as opposed to changing traits that are inherently part of who they are.

EMILY

Emily, a 16-year-old gifted student, is a high achiever. She also considers herself a fraud. Faced with a definition of being bright and high achieving given by the adults in her life, Emily assumes that she should not have to work as hard as she does to maintain her grades. She watches her high-achieving friends and feels that “they” must be gifted, because “they” do not appear to be working nearly as hard as she is. She has to study diligently, stay up late, and work very hard to uphold the 4.3 GPA she insists on maintaining.

In addition to school, Emily plays the piano, swims competitively, and participates in journalism and political clubs. In an effort to complete her required courses and get a head start on college, Emily takes additional classes at the local college campus. She also tutors younger children to help supplement the funds required for her college education.

Emily is under a lot of stress. She deals with the stress in somewhat explosive ways, often melting down into a heap in her room. During these times, Emily will throw things and yell at anyone who asks her anything. This includes siblings and her parents, especially her parents. After her tirades, Emily will feel extreme remorse, causing her to sob and cry, sometimes for hours on end. When Emily looks back on her behavior, she believes that something is wrong with her—that she is somehow damaged or crazy.

Emily’s parents are extremely frustrated with her. Her mood swings have raised havoc in the household, causing major disruptions in everyday routines. They feel there is something seriously wrong with her. Unsure of how to proceed, they discuss the problems with her school and their medical doctor; both of whom suggest counseling. The counselor, taking in the information provided by the parents, becomes concerned with anxiety, depression, and mood problems. A treatment plan involving significant amounts of medication, as well as therapy, is

developed. Although Emily is happy to get help, she can't help believing that getting help means she really *is* crazy—very crazy, in her opinion.

Emily's story is not as simple as it may sound. The behavior certainly could point to mental health issues. However, the behavior taken out of the context of Emily's intellect does not paint a complete picture. The intensity of her emotions is extreme, and it does mimic a mood disorder. However, differentiating between a mood disorder and the normal intensity of behavior associated with giftedness and stress requires thoroughly understanding the giftedness in order to develop an appropriate treatment plan—something that is not always considered.

Overall, the many assumptions regarding the true nature of giftedness serve only to misrepresent the joys and problems of being gifted. True challenges in academic, social, and emotional arenas are overlooked and misunderstood, resulting in the negation of the difficulties really faced by teachers, parents, and children. The next few chapters will further explore the truth behind the characteristics of giftedness, and the impact of these characteristics on overall functioning.

NOTES TO THE TEACHER

The vast majority of assumptions and myths surrounding giftedness revolve around education. The Fall 2009 edition of *Gifted Child Quarterly* (GCQ) identified 19 popular myths related to giftedness (see Treffinger, 2009). These myths aren't new. In fact, a 1982 edition of the same publication originally identified many of these concerns in an editorial by Don Treffinger. And yet, despite advocacy, research, and the support of organizations like the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), the mythology continues. Worse, perpetuation of these myths and assumptions serves only to distort the true needs of gifted children and maintain the status quo in education.

Some of the assumptions unique to education include the belief that specific teaching strategies geared toward this population are not

necessary because gifted children learn in all settings. Others include the belief that all children have the capacity for giftedness; therefore, as long as a teacher is challenging all students, no specific understanding of giftedness is necessary. Both of these myths negate the very real and unique aspects of giftedness related to personality and emotional attributes. Furthermore, they oversimplify the realities facing many teachers of gifted students who underachieve, placing blame on the student and parents instead of recognizing the need for collaboration between all parties in order to improve student outcomes.

One of the most common education-related assumptions is that acceleration is socially damaging to gifted children. Although grade skipping can have a negative impact on some gifted children, the research indicates that this is not true for all students (Kulik, 2004). It is important to be well grounded in an understanding of giftedness and the unique needs of the individual student when making educational placement decisions. This is particularly true in both cases of acceleration and in dealing with gifted students who are dually exceptional (these students also are sometimes called twice-exceptional students).

The last myth I want to specifically mention is the commonly held belief among educators that a student identified as having exceptional needs (e.g., learning disabilities) cannot be gifted. This myth negates the very real cases of gifted and learning-disabled students and allows schools to continue to ignore the needs of giftedness when providing for the disability (Webb et al., 2005). I will focus more on the specific social and emotional struggles of dually exceptional children in Chapter 5.