



The emotional needs of the gifted child

Annemarie Roeper

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The emotions are the heart and soul of giftedness. The heart and soul of the human being is my passion. I have been preoccupied with it throughout my life.

When we look into the eyes of children and adults we see their souls. We receive their message with our own souls. It is my belief that giftedness exists in the heart and soul. It is in the area of emotions where the gifted differ most from others. This is particularly evident in the most highly gifted. The emotions of the gifted grow out of their greater cognitive awareness which then translates into feelings. They understand early on that it hurts when you get injured and learn to avoid it by being extra careful. That means they develop fears earlier and stronger; sometimes, to an exaggerated degree. For example, I've known several very gifted children who were terrified of germs and would visualize them flowing through their bodies, destroying their health. To just tell them how unlikely this is may not satisfy them. They need us to acknowledge their fear. During the Gulf War, many gifted children were frightened of bomb attacks. The rational explanation by parents left them feeling misunderstood. Intellectually, they knew an attack on us was not likely to happen, but they needed to have their anxieties understood. Their concerns extended beyond personal fears. That adults could be so destructive undermined their feelings of safety. Even four year olds identified with the Iraqi children. I could see the desperation in their eyes and their need to do something, such as writing a letter to the President.

Because of their greater awareness, gifted children understand the consequences of their behavior and develop feelings of guilt sooner and stronger than others. Being aware often drives them to remedy a situation by taking action, and yet, realizing their own helplessness. Problems between parents are a frequent case in point. Their solution may seem bizarre, such as misbehaving or drawing attention to themselves rather than to the conflict. If they can't influence the situation they develop a feeling of guilt because they often feel responsible. They are also perfectionists and feel they are not supposed to act on their emotions. An eleven year old boy in our school one day burst crying into my office. When I finally could quiet him down, so I could ask him what had happened, he said that he had hit another child. He was totally overcome by guilt. The perfectionist may not be jealous, for instance. They may turn those feelings against themselves. All of the senses of gifted children are heightened. They are over excitable. These emotions are most likely expressed in the safety of home. Families become witnesses to the expression of greatest joy and happiness as well as desperation in the gifted child. In a household of gifted people the electricity is palpable. Everything is more so. While the ability for cognitive learning is in the brain, the motivation for learning, for inner growth, for self actualization is emotional and is in the heart. Gifted children are often driven to learn. The drive is emotional; the ability to learn is cognitive.

It is known that some people with great intellectual ability do not want to learn for a variety of reasons. We cannot force them to as much as we might try. We often hear about motivation. Motivation is emotional not cognitive. Every time a child says, "I want," it is an expression of emotion. Gifted children overflow with emotion, passion, enthusiasm. At times, they exhaust others with their emotionality. I have seen big boys cry when they see beauty or when they are very disappointed. Their sense of justice is deeply emotional. Children frequently get very emotional about the homeless, the atom bomb, or war. Injustice in the classroom is unbearable for them; injustice at home even more so. One child could never forgive the teacher who tore up his best friend's picture. I once saw a child give up winning a chess game on purpose, because he noticed that it would be intolerable for the other child.

Giftedness to me is a great deal of heart and soul. Yet, most of the work, research, and approaches to reaching the gifted child is on a cognitive basis. We try to understand the gifted with our brain, with reason. The whole approach to education, beginning with parents, has moved to a cognitive basis. By excluding the emotions, we miss the essence of giftedness. If we want to be supportive of the gifted, we must support the Self. Self actualization means emotional growth. This must not be construed to mean that they don't need the educational opportunities for growth. They need them desperately, but not necessary in the way we want them to learn. They are driven emotionally to make sense of the world or to express themselves in it. For this reason, gifted children love science and math and information in their chosen area of interest. Their goal is to master the world by understanding. Mastery for them means safety. That is why cognitive growth is a must for the gifted. They want to incorporate the world by understanding it, by exploring it. They are passionate learners for emotional reasons. But their desire is not always directed towards skilled or academic learning but towards concept learning of their own choosing. Therefore, our expectations contradict the inner need of the gifted. They often feel too tightly structured and controlled. There are those who have trouble spelling. That may be all the school knows about them. But their inner stories and fantasies could paint the world in brilliant colors and express more excitement and knowledge than you could ever find in the teacher controlled classroom. Most of this



richness is hidden behind our linear approach to education. It would be so exhilarating if all that inner creativity and emotionality that exists in our children could burst into the world and become visible. Instead, we concentrate on taming it and bend the child to our linear world. And the Self fights back.

We must be aware there is a dichotomy between the needs of the gifted and the goals of education. Let me give you a glance into the hidden world of giftedness. There is a treasure of imagination and creativity which we hide when we define giftedness as cognitive only. We used to see this inner treasure in nursery schools when no academic demands were made. The stories these children invented, the games they played, depicted everyday life as well as their deep intuitive understanding of the world.

Guardian Angel is that true?

by: Fiammy Dizon 8/4/98

My Guardian Angel is dropping hearts of love from a little cloud up above.

Is it true that you saw someone whose name is God?

Who could make miracles so fine
and could change water into wine.

Oh! Angel is that true?

Wait, I hear an answer from you.

You said it is really true.

Oh! God help this mixed up world to be a better place.

I love you!

Few schools fill the "heart and soul" needs of the gifted. There are, for instance, gifted boys with enormous technical ability and interest. These are the ones who express their dreams with their hands. Years ago, we had a student in our school who wanted to build cars. We arranged for him to spend half of his time in a vocational school where the nine year old studied building cars along with high school seniors. When I met him again recently, he thanked me for making this unusual arrangement. He felt it paved the way for his future. He felt supported and acknowledged. Clearly he was a boy with specific gifts. Virtually no school in the United States today would create this kind of opportunity for him.

Before we made this arrangement for him, he was in trouble a great deal of the time because his needs were unfulfilled. His soul's yearning was thwarted. I've often observed how obstacles to their needs may create aggression in these children.

Gifted children often feel there is no place for them. They feel they are aliens or Martians. They don't feel that they belong here. Their inner agenda, their joy of learning, penetrates to me so strongly, and yet, their voices are so seldom heard. In fact, test results close the doors to many gifted children, namely those who have difficulties with spelling, handwriting, or math computation. This, then, results in depression, because there is no outlet for their creativity. This is a picture that has often been presented to me by these children. Yet, the moment they see the understanding in their teachers and parents, it is as if a light bulb goes on, and the world is a beautiful place again.

Recently, I saw a child who all of the sudden, at the age of eight, blossomed with an enormous musical talent. The school did not support this. Other children, who used to be his friends, began to tease him. He became depressed, because he needed an outlet for his passion. In this case the family was not stumped by the reaction of the school. The parents took him out and arranged for a complex personal educational plan. They developed a combination of home schooling, junior college, and youth orchestra. The result was he is now a truly happy child and seems to be on his way towards an outstanding musical career. Without a doubt, he would have been in trouble and the world would have missed out on the joy he can offer us. A few other examples of children who enjoy the support of their parents. A pair of twins, both with an IQ of 160, develop in totally different directions because their parents and school listened to the soul of each one of them. One lives in this world, using his creative talent in terms of music, acting, reading books, and creating an exciting life for himself within the framework of this society. The other one has been allowed to live in his own inner world, looking for answers for unanswerable questions, such as, What is infinity? How can we reach infinity? Does the universe expand? Is there a God? This child is driven by such intense emotional needs that the words just tumble out of him, sometimes leading to stammering. Another child asks, "What would it be like to be dead?" He would see himself in a bubble, watching his own dead body being grieved for by his friends. This child invented his own galaxy. He also had an unbendable sense of honesty. He got in trouble with his teacher who decided that a good educational method was to have each child write something positive about another child. He couldn't make himself to say this lie when he had nothing positive to say. By the same token, he could not do his boring homework. He didn't believe he should be doing it. It was emotionally impossible for him to cooperate with the demands of the school. This was seen as oppositional behavior.



Another example, a four year old girl was passionately interested in learning all about animals — she knew all their Latin names. She knew which ones were extinct and why. She knew the importance of the skeleton, etc. She had a beautiful command of language. Her emotions and love for animals could not tolerate the thought that they ate each other. She invented a whole world of animals who were so constructed that they did not need to eat each other. She was filled with sadness about the violence in nature. Her family acknowledged this reaction in her and did not reject it as childish. They looked carefully for a school which would understand this child's needs rather than to try and change her point of view.

A very shy ten year old couldn't stand it when his teacher treated another child unfairly. He stood up in the classroom to defend him, even though he is usually too shy to speak up much. This demonstrates the strength of his emotions.

A thirteen year old girl loves horses more than people. They are her best friends. She says "They are honest and don't cheat. They don't manipulate you."

An eleven year old boy has periods of anti-social behavior. All sorts of suggestions have been made as to how to cope with this. It was seen as ADD by teachers. His parents realized that it always happened when he felt threatened or not in control.

For instance, on the playground, there are too many people and too much space. Something about that made him feel unprotected. At another time, he tried to control his parents, didn't want to leave them out of his sight, behaved in a very antagonistic manner. They had learned to look for reasons and realized that it started when the death of a friend was discussed. He then developed anxieties of his parents dying but had not learned to express it in words. Once they figured this out, they could deal with it and talk to him. The behavior abated.

I have many more stories about the unknown inner life of the child. Parents are caught between the outside world and the inner agenda of the child. Many parents remember their own difficulties about fitting in. Gifted children usually have gifted parents. Their anxiety and desire to shield their child from the same experiences they faced influences them to put pressure on the child to fit in. Parents may disregard the child's needs and agenda because they are acting on their own emotional needs. It is my belief that there is a life-force within each child which pushes him or her in the direction where the Self wants to go. The child's first loyalty is to his or her own needs.

School represents society on one side. We must see the needs of the child on the other. We have often ignored these needs or simply not been aware of them. When parents feel the pull from the school's expectations, children often feel left alone, confronted with several giants, namely school and parents, who want to pull them where they don't want to go. The child, however, fiercely defends his or her needs. Those needs are irrepressible. If they feel blocked, they will break through in defensive behavior. It is a force that will break the window if it finds the door closed. It is this dilemma that I see gifted parents and their gifted children face so many times.

I would like to impress parents with the reality of the need of the child and that the first requirement is that there be a bond, a lifeline, between parents and child. In my experience, I have found that the solidity of this relationship is the greatest reason that a child will come through the difficult times to which they are often exposed. No matter how isolated some of the very highly gifted feel, they maintain a healthy Self if they feel that their parents are truly on their side. Many children have told me their parents are their best friends and they could not handle life without them. There are some schools and educational institutions which meet the needs of many of the gifted children. In that case, we can see that the child can grow up unhindered. We must look at the situation as a triangle which contains the child, the teacher, and the parent. They each have their own agenda, even though the education of the child is, of course, the common goal. A decision needs to be reached whether the needs of the child are the driving force, or the demands of society. The needs of the child must be the starting point and from there build the bridges to the outside world. By this, I don't mean a permissive approach, where the child makes all the decisions, but one that is geared to help the child become who she or he is. The gifted child does not know how to reach these goals. She needs adult guidance and protection.

She needs the supportive empathy of both parents and teachers. The parents and children are actually in the center of a vast interlocking network, which begins in the cradle of the child, continues with the family, the school, the country, and the world.

Often we feel powerless within this huge network and expect the child to follow the pressure from the so called real world, even when we know it is not a good fit. Actually, there is no such thing as the real world. We each have the power and the will to do what we need to do. Children who grow up with a strong Self will understand they can create their own niche in the world.

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