Working with gifted and talented children and their families and with gifted adults is a neglected area of practice for psychologists. Two widespread myths among educators, pediatricians, and psychologists, are that gifted children and adults are quite rare, and that bright minds have few issues and seldom need special help. In fact, gifted children and adults are defined as those in the upper three to ten percent of the population in any of several intellectual domains (NAGC, 2010). Clinical and educational practice usually focuses on disadvantaged persons and obvious psychopathology. Many are unaware that talented and gifted children are at risk for underachievement, peer relationship issues, power struggles, perfectionism, existential depression, and other problems, and that bright adults often have job difficulties, problems with peers, spouses or children, and existential depression that stem from giftedness. In addition, few psychologists understand that special issues can arise when a child or adult is twice-exceptional - that is, gifted as well as having a diagnosable condition such as a learning disability, vision difficulties, auditory issues, ADHD, etc. As a result, many gifted children and adults are being overlooked, misdiagnosed, and receiving treatment that may be inappropriate (SENG Misdiagnosis Initiative, 2014).

The association of high ability with emotional or social difficulties has been, in some ways, counter-intuitive. A primary and generally accepted key facet of the construct of "intelligence" is that intelligence includes problem-solving abilities in various areas, including related areas such as foresight, planning, reasoning ability, capacity to see cause-effect relations, attention to details, memory for relevant data, and a wide array of knowledge upon which the individual might draw (Sattler, 2008). To the extent that a person possesses more of these cognitive qualities, it might seem that such an individual would then have fewer - not more - social and emotional problems. Using this logic, such individuals should be able to anticipate, avoid, and/or solve more interpersonal problems than others and should have more self-understanding.

Such assumptions and implications regarding the impact of intelligence on emotional and interpersonal functioning are not always valid. Authors periodically have written of individuals who were highly able cognitively, but who demonstrated significant emotional or interpersonal deficits (e.g., Piirto, 2004). Other authors (e.g., Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Kerr, 2014), however, have suggested that intelligence does seem related to interpersonal adaptiveness.

Historically, controversy has existed about the extent to which intellectually gifted children and adults are prone to social and emotional problems. Looking back to the early 1900s, the prevailing notion within Western cultures was that intellectually gifted children were constitutionally more prone to insanity or to becoming social misfits, and that early cognitive development was likely to result in early atrophy, as was expressed in the then-popular saying of "Early ripe; early rot." The classic Terman longitudinal studies of gifted children disproved this general notion and found that the identified gifted children were, as a group, no more likely to experience social or emotional difficulties than were children in general (Terman, 1925; Terman & Oden, 1947). In fact, these children seemed to have fewer problems, although retrospective consideration suggested that Terman's sample was probably biased in ways that favored environmentally advantaged, teacher-favored children, many of whom received advice and guidance as they grew (Kerr, 1991; Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchak, 2005).

Voices subsequent to Terman sometimes differed. Hollingworth (1926, 1942; Klein, 2002) agreed with Terman's findings with regard to most gifted children, but noted that children of unusually high intelligence seemed more prone to certain types of problems. Using the then-new IQ tests, Hollingworth concluded that there was an optimum intelligence range of about 120-145, in which range children generally had fewer social and emotional problems. However, children above that range, in her opinion, were more at risk for various personal and interpersonal difficulties.

In the 1940s and 1950s, little professional emphasis was placed on social or emotional problems of gifted children, although a few authors (e.g., Strang, 1951; Witty, 1940) wrote about the psychology of gifted students. In the 1960s and 1970s,
...few psychologists understand that special issues can arise when a child or adult is twice-exceptional - that is, gifted as well as having a diagnosable condition such as a learning disability, vision difficulties, auditory issues, ADHD, etc. As a result, many gifted children and adults are being overlooked, misdiagnosed, and receiving treatment that may be inappropriate (SENG Misdiagnosis Initiative, 2014).

a very few programs were available to counsel and guide gifted students, usually such programs were affiliated with universities (Kerr, 1991), but few published studies concerned social-emotional needs.

In the 1980s, a surge of interest occurred in this topic stimulated by Guiding the Gifted Child (Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982), an APA award-winning book about social and emotional issues of gifted children, and by a new program called Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted (www.sengifted.org). SENG continues as a nationwide non-profit organization that focuses on social and emotional issues of bright children and adults. Subsequently, the National Association for Gifted Children created a Counseling and Guidance Division. Limited research was available at that time, and information came primarily from the experiences of numerous therapists, educators, parents, and counselors.

In the last few decades, new issues, perspectives, and substantial research have emerged, and particular attention has been given to reconceptualizing the concepts of “intelligence” and “giftedness,” as well as the methods used to identify such children (Worrell, Subotnik, & Olszewski-Kubilius, 2013). The National Association for Gifted Children has noted that “individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains” and that “The development of ability or talent is a lifelong process.” (NAGC, 2010). Prior to that time, educational and psychological practice almost exclusively identified gifted children in terms of intellectual ability and/or specific academic aptitude, despite the conceptual breadth of legislative or textbook definitions. In particular, “giftedness” was often treated as though it were synonymous with intelligence test scores and/or academic achievement test scores or educational achievements (Webb & Kleine, 1993).

As a result, most of the research and observations concerning the social and emotional needs of gifted children is based on gifted children who were considered gifted in those traditional ways. That is, the existing knowledge about possible social and emotional difficulties is derived from children who showed unusual aptitude and performance in academic areas—i.e., children who were already functioning pretty
well in school. Highly able students who were unwilling or unable to show their abilities academically (e.g., underachievers or those who also had a learning disability or emotional problems) were not studied, nor were children with high aptitude in other areas such as music or art.

It is important to recognize that the literature concerning social-emotional needs of gifted children and adults can be grouped into two basic categories. One group of authors views gifted and talented persons as being prone to problems and in need of special interventions to prevent or overcome their unique difficulties (e.g., Altman, 1983; Delisle, 2005; Hayes & Sloat, 1989a; Lovecky, 2003; Silverman, 1991). The other group of authors views gifted children as generally being able to fare quite well on their own, and gifted children with problems needing special interventions are seen as a relative minority (e.g., Janos & Robinson, 1985; Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002; Robinson, Shore & Enerson, 2006).

These divergent views are not as contradictory as they first appear. Those authors who find that gifted children are doing relatively well on their own usually have focused on students from academic programs specifically designed for gifted children. Such children, by the very nature of the selection process, are typically functioning well in school, which then generally implies also that they would not be experiencing major social or emotional problems. Such selection procedures are likely to limit the representativeness of the sample of the gifted children being studied and would exclude gifted children who are academically underachieving because of social or emotional problems and who are not being served educationally in special programs for gifted children. An underestimate of social and emotional issues is likely. By contrast, those authors who find frequent problems among gifted children often rely on data gathered in clinical settings and from individual case studies where the population is self-selecting. As a result, there is likely a sample bias that would prompt an over-estimate of the incidence of social and emotional difficulties. Both views have at least partial validity. Gifted children who are able to function sufficiently in school settings such that they can be identified as such are likely also to be functioning generally well in other areas of life, and thus do not appear to be at major risk for developing social and emotional problems, particularly if these children are also being served by some school program which is attempting to meet their needs. On the other hand, high potential gifted children who have not been identified and are not in school programs appear to be more at risk for certain social and emotional difficulties.

...high potential gifted children who have not been identified and are not in school programs appear to be more at risk for certain social and emotional difficulties.

higher frequencies in gifted adolescents and adults of existential depressions (Webb, 2014), alcohol consumption (Kanazawa & Hellberg, 2010), eating disorders (Kerr & Kurpius, 2004), interpersonal problems (Jacobsen, 2000; Stryznewski, 1999), and marital issues (Kerr, 2014; Kerr & Cohn, 2001).

It should also be recognized, though, that there are exceptions to both groups. Some unidentified and unserved gifted children and adults function quite well personally and socially; conversely, some gifted children and adults in excellent school or work settings experience notable problems. The following discussion describes key dimensions that appear to be factors in these exceptions, some of the more common reasons why gifted children and adults are unable to function and need psychological guidance, and ways in which psychologists and other mental health professionals can provide help.

Exogenous versus Endogenous Problems

A clear distinction must be made to consider contextual aspects as separate from internal personal characteristics of gifted persons so that social and emotional difficulties of gifted children and adults can be divided into two categories—exogenous and endogenous. Exogenous problems are those that arise, or are caused, primarily because of the interaction of the child or adult with the environmental setting (e.g., family or the cultural milieu). Endogenous problems are those that arise primarily from within the individual essentially regardless of environment; that is, endogenous problems stem from the very characteristics of the gifted child or adult. The endogenous-exogenous distinction has seldom been used explicitly with regard to the emotional functioning of gifted individuals, though it appears to have considerable merit in conceptualizing the social and emotional needs of gifted children.

Relatively few characteristics of gifted children and adults inherently make them
more likely to experience social and emotional problems. Instead, difficulties most often arise as exogenous problems from the interaction of these characteristics with the cultural settings, attitudes, and value-milieu within which they may find themselves. Nevertheless, there are some characteristics of gifted children and adults that do seem to increase the probability of social and emotional difficulties essentially regardless of the influence by the cultural milieu. These are:

- Drive to use one's abilities
- Drive to understand, to search for consistency
- Ability to see possibilities and alternatives
- Emotional intensity (focus; intrinsic motivation; persistence)
- Concern with social and moral issues (idealism; sensitivity)
- Different rates or levels of physical and emotional development

Ironically, the characteristics of gifted individuals that are their greatest strengths are also likely to be their Achilles' heel. Here are some common strengths, along with associated difficulties that are likely to result (Clark, 2012; Seagoe, 1974; Webb, 1993).

- Acquires information quickly vs. impatient with slowness of others
- Inquisitive attitude vs. asks embarrassing questions; strong willed
- Seeks systems and strives for order vs. seen as bossy or domineering
- Creative and inventive vs. may disrupt plans of others
- Intense concentration vs. resists interruption; seen as stubborn
- High energy vs. frustration with inactivity
- Diverse interests vs. seen as scattered
- Strong sense of humor vs. humor may disrupt classroom or work
- Keen observer vs. sees inconsistencies and may become disillusioned

Even these characteristics are seldom inherently problematic by themselves. More often it is combinations of these characteristics and interactions with situational factors that lead to problematic behavior patterns. Some common patterns from such interactions are as follows.

### Intensity and Sensitivity (Overexcitabilities)

Kasimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychologist and psychiatrist, developed a theory that has vastly improved our understanding of bright children and adults, particularly his concept of overexcitabilities, which refers to a person's heightened response to stimuli (the exact translation of Dabrowski's term from the Polish is superstimulatability). Understanding the overexcitabilities allows us to comprehend how bright people—particularly the more highly gifted—often experience life much more ideally, intensely, and sensitively than others. (Mendaglio, 2008; Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997).

Dabrowski recognized that certain individuals seem instinctively drawn to certain kinds of stimulation. He also noted that their excitability tends to be in one or more of five different areas: intellectual, imaginative, emotional, sensual, and psychomotor. Some people show their excitable passion and intensity in all areas, others in fewer areas, perhaps only one or two.

Dabrowski and others after him have observed that very bright children and adults are particularly prone to experience these overexcitabilities, and as a result, their passion and intensity lead them to be so reactive that their feelings and experiences far exceed what one would typically expect (Daniels & Meckstroth, 2009).

These individuals are frequently accused by those around them of being excessive persons with “too much” of one trait or another and often hear negative comments such as, “You are just too sensitive,” or, “You're over-thinking this!” or, “You are too much of an idealist!” Being extremely intense or sensitive can bring with it a sharp awareness of being different or of being disappointed in the lack of idealism in the world, and sometimes their overexcitabilities are misdiagnosed as psychological disorders (Webb et al., 2005). On the other hand, these heightened experiences also can be positive ones that can provide a richness of experience and allow a person to experience life in ways that others cannot even imagine. As such, the overexcitabilities are both a major source of strength and also often a cause of substantial stress, personal frustration, and criticism. Bright people often feel that they are different from mainstream society simply by virtue of their high intellect, but those with overexcitabilities find that it is even harder to feel “normal!” Other people are likely to see these intense, sensitive idealists as quirky - and they often are. Their intensity can prompt others to become irritated and to criticize them. Or their intensity may cause them difficulty in controlling their behaviors so that they overreact to situations in ways that alienate others. Some of these individuals are so excessive that others find them exhausting to be around and avoid them. Their “over the top” behaviors, their intense focus on their activities and goals, and the accompanying self-absorption can be hard for others to live with. As one woman described her spouse, “It seems for him that anything worth doing is worth doing to excess!”

Table 1 shows how the overexcitabilities can work in both positive and negative ways for the people who exhibit them.

### Asynchronous Development

Motor skills, particularly fine-motor, often lag behind a gifted child's cognitive conceptual abilities, particularly in pre-school children (Gilman, 2008; Webb & Kleine, 1993). When the lag is substantial, and when it is combined with their intensity, the result is often emotional outbursts like temper tantrums: That is, the child may see in his “mind's eye” what he wants to do or construct or draw; however, his motor skills do not allow him to achieve his goal. The more intensely he tries, the more frustration he experiences, often resulting...
Table 1: Positives and Negatives of Overexcitabilities (Webb, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overexcitability</th>
<th>Positive manifestations of sensitivities</th>
<th>Negative manifestations of sensitivities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>Thirst for knowledge; discovery; questioning; love of ideas/theories; constant searching for truth; detailed visual recall; detailed planning; keen observation; thinking about thinking; introspection</td>
<td>Sometimes very critical; argumentative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imaginational</td>
<td>Vivid imagination; frequent use of image and metaphor; richness of association; frequent and vivid dreaming; imaginary friends; inventions; gives inanimate objects personalities; preference for the unusual and unique; creation of private worlds; love of poetry, music, and drama</td>
<td>Mixes truth and fiction; preference for imaginary over real friends; need for novelty and variety; low tolerance for boredom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Great depth and intensity of emotional life expressed in a wide range of feelings, from great happiness to profound sadness or despair; strong emotional attachments; compassion; sense of responsibility; constant self-examination; responds at an advanced level to spiritual experiences</td>
<td>Timidity; shyness; difficulty adjusting to new environments; depressive moods; feelings of guilt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensual</td>
<td>Enhanced refinement of the senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch; delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, nature</td>
<td>Easily distracted by sounds or the feel of clothing seams or tags; wants to be the center of attention; may be inclined to overindulging behaviors like overeating or shopping sprees; intense dislike of certain textures, visual images, smells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychomotor</td>
<td>Constantly moving; fast talking; intense drive; augmented capacity for being active and energetic</td>
<td>Restless; compulsive talking/chattering; nervous habits, such as tics, nail-biting, and hair pulling</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

in an emotional outburst which may be labeled by others as immaturity.

Another internal dysynchrony is the lag of judgment or emotional maturity behind intellect (Roedell, 1980; Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). Significant stress in the lives of gifted youngsters occurs when they attempt to deal with emotions or social or interpersonal concepts that are simply beyond their capacity (Hayes & Sloat, 1989; Kerr, 1991). Many aspects of life cannot be "reasoned out" and can be understood only through the accumulation of experience (Webb & Kleine, 1993). Advanced reasoning abilities do not necessarily help in weighing emotions. This lag of judgment is often mislabeled as an emotional disorder when really it is a developmental process where the judgment usually catches up to the intellect as the child grows older.

Internal dysynchrony can likewise occur between the emotions and intellect of gifted youngsters or adults, or within areas of emotions. Since gifted persons tend to have more intense overexcitabilities, they are more driven toward self-knowledge and disillusionment, and hopefully later toward self-actualization. However, the progress toward self-knowledge and self-actualization often involves times of intense emotional growth, turmoil, and "positive disintegration" or "positive maladjustment" where acute self-examination and change are undertaken, and which constitute a necessary step in personal growth and development (Mendaglio, 2008).

These endogenous aspects, however, do also have exogenous consequences. The
stronger one’s overexcitabilities, the less welcome they are among peers and teachers (Daniels & Piechowski, 2008), as well as among coworkers or even spouses and friends (Fiedler, 2008). Further, overexcitabilities in some areas (e.g., sensual) may not be welcomed.

Perfectionism and Avoidance of Risk-Taking

The ability to see how one might perform, combined with emotional intensity, leads many gifted children and adults to have unduly high expectations of themselves and others. The fervor of involvement in their activities combined with their unrealistic goals consumes great amounts of personal time and energy, often unproductively, and in some cases, the perfectionism, anxiety, and excessive rumination and intellectualization can resemble Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Various authors (e.g., Clark, 2012; Hollingworth, 1926; Webb et al., 2007) have noted perfectionism is frequently found among high ability children, with estimates that between 15-20% of highly able children may be significantly handicapped by perfectionism at some point during their academic careers. Eating disorders is likewise associated with perfectionism (Peck & Lightsey, 2008) and with high intellectual ability (Lopez, Stahl, & Tchanturia, 2010).

In the same way that gifted children and adults can see the possibilities, they also can see the potential problems in undertaking those activities. Though the prevalence has not been estimated, authors generally agree that some of these children are unwilling to take such risks, and that the avoidance of risk-taking is often expressed in under-achievement (Siegle & McCoach, 2005), but may also be seen in obsessive indecision where the child perseverates in considering alternatives and outcomes to such a degree that taking action is hindered. The avoidance of risk-taking is also likely when gifted youngsters initially encounter non-success, such as when going from high school to college, and find this experience to be devastating (Blackburn & Erickson, 1986).

Excessive Self-Criticism

Being able to see possibilities and alternatives also can imply that bright individuals not only may see idealistic images of what they might be, but simultaneously berate themselves because they can see how they are falling short of such an ideal (Strang, 1951; Webb, 2013; Webb et al., 2007). The intensity, combined with the idealism, magnifies the amount of self-evaluation, often leading to excessive and inappropriate self-criticism. This pattern often is the foundation for depression arising from anger and disappointment at oneself because of high self-expectancies (Webb, 2013; Webb et al., 2007).

Multipotentiality

Most gifted children, as they approach adolescence, become aware that they have advanced capabilities in several areas. Many of them enjoy this multipotentiality and are involved in diverse activities, sometimes to an almost frantic degree, and may intensely try to cram 30 hours of living into a 24-hour day. While their hypomanic activity is seldom a problem for the child or adult, such level of activity may create problems for family or coworkers. For the individual, however, problems do arise when decisions must be made about college major or career (Kerr, 1985). By choosing one career path, other alternatives are essentially negated, and the result can be decisional anxiety. Kerr (1991, 1997) concluded that multipotentiality was the most frequent cause of gifted students’ difficulties in career development.

Existential Depression

The intense and sensitive idealism, metacognition, and multiple career concerns of gifted children and adults are not widely shared by peers or by society at large and therefore increase the likelihood of existential depression. Societal pressures are more often toward conformity and mediocrity rather than excellence and creativity. Society’s focus on trivial behaviors and meaningless rituals prompts idealistic gifted individuals - especially highly gifted - to spend substantial amounts of personal time and energy searching for life’s meaning and authentic relationships. Career options, self-satisfaction, consistency of beliefs and behaviors, persistence, and real value to humanity are important concerns. The recognition of limits on the development of one’s potential (i.e., one cannot be all that one could be simply because there is not enough time nor space) is combined with realization of the transience of one’s efforts. The result often is that the person feels angry at fate, questions the meaning and worth of life’s existence, and experiences notable existential depression (Webb, 2013). This is particularly likely if one’s cognitive developmental stage is still “dualistic,” seeing the world in terms of absolutes of right and wrong or good and evil (Kerr, 1991), prompting the person to search for absolutes about life.

2e Gifted

Twice-exceptionality can be considered an endogenous problem for gifted persons, particularly the more highly gifted. If a person has a vision, hearing, speech, or other physical disorder, the emphasis by professionals is most often on the disorder, with little emphasis given to enhancing their intellectual abilities. The gifted components are most often overlooked even though they have significant implications for the person’s educational and vocational success and self-concept.

As overall level of intelligence increases, the span of abilities in different areas frequently increases such that there is asynchrony in an individual’s level of ability that is reflected in specific ability areas in subtest scores on achievement or cognitive tests, as well as in classroom or occupational activities (Gilman, 2008; Webb et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2007). These 2e persons frequently underestimate their abilities because they evaluate their competence based more on what they are unable to do - the area(s) that lag behind - rather than on their substantial abilities; as a result, they often underachieve and are prone to depression (Webb et al., 2007; Whitmore & Maker, 1985).
Peer relation problems for gifted children may begin even in preschool. Young gifted children (particularly highly gifted ones) repeatedly and intensely attempt to organize people and things, and in their search for consistency, emphasize "rules" that they attempt to apply to others.

Some gifted persons will have a specific learning disability; others will have physical or medical problems. The person's intellect may be quite high, but because of motor difficulties, such as cerebral palsy, the potential cannot be expressed in ordinary or medical problems. The person's in

Some commonly occurring exogenous problem areas and patterns are as follows.

Educational Conformity vs. Individualism

The gifted child is, by definition, unusual as compared with the typical developmental template in cognitive abilities as well as in intensity and sensitivity, and requires different educational experiences (Gilman, 2008; Webb et al., 2007). Since educational settings have task expectancies based on age-norms, children are grouped by age for educational instruction. Additionally, teachers and administrators focus on helping children achieve basic minimal levels of competence, and little, if any, emphasis is placed on helping gifted develop advanced skills (Gilman, 2008; Webb et al., 2007). Thus, the cognitively gifted child is unlikely to fit the curriculum, depending on the rigidity of the age-groupings and on the presence or absence of flexibility in the instruction regarding individual differences among learners (Gilman, 2008). The child, then, has a dilemma: "If I maximize my individual abilities and learn at the most appropriate pace for me, then I am likely to be seen as non-conformist and different. If I conform to the expectancies for the average child, then I am bored, dishonest with myself, and handicapping my future development." Underachievement often results, in addition to careless, incomplete, disorganized, poor quality, and procrastinated work because the school environment has not taught the challenging process required for achievement (Rimm, 2008).

Parents are often fearful that they will be seen as "pushy parents." They do not know what is reasonable to expect of their child or of the school, and they need guidance and support from psychologists to advocate for their child (Gilman, 2008; Webb et al., 2007). Probably the largest body of literature on gifted children concerns their educational needs, and what adaptations could or should be made to the "regular" curriculum in order to accommodate the gifted child's needs (e.g., Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004; Davis, 2006). Except for self-contained programs or schools, school adaptations represent compromises - that gifted children should develop their abilities, but they should also fit in with others - as a part of societal ambivalence about gifted children.

The struggle between conformity and expressing one's abilities continues into adulthood in work, family, and peer settings (Jacobsen; 2000; Kerr & Cohn, 2001; Stryznewski, 1999; Webb, 2013). Gifted girls, minority group children, certain religious group members, or unusually creative children seem particularly likely to experience pressures toward conformity in peer relations (Kerr, 1997; Piirto, 2004), and career decisions are often influenced by the role expectancies of those in the environment. Continually attempting to reconcile the conflict between fitting in and being an individual can be quite stressful.

For gifted individuals, meeting the expectancies of others versus individualism exists throughout the lifespan, and it is displayed in many arenas—school, home, with peers, and in society at large—and raises issues of belongingness and personal life meaning (Webb, 2013). Gifted individuals, particularly the more creative ones, are often non-conformist and challenge traditions, rituals, roles, or expectancies, prompting discomfort in those around. Others see the nonconformist as unpredictable and as challenging the status quo. The more different in creativity or intellect the child is, the more likely that child is to be seen as non-conformist, and thus more likely to experience criticism or rejection by others.
Peer Relations

Peer relation issues are almost universal for gifted individuals, and these exogenous problems often perplex gifted children and adults because they seldom view themselves as being different from others. Since they grow up seeing the world through their own eyes, that is normal for them. One child, for example, was so surprised to discover that other third graders did not know how to play chess, nor did they like to study fractals. Psychologists who work with gifted individuals commonly report clients who say things like, “Others tell me I ask too many questions; I think too much; I am too serious; I have a strange sense of humor; I am impatient with others; I am too idealistic,” and “I don’t understand why I don’t seem to fit in.”

Peer relation problems for gifted children may begin even in preschool. Young gifted children (particularly highly gifted ones) repeatedly and intensely attempt to organize people and things, and in their search for consistency, emphasize “rules” that they attempt to apply to others. They invent games and try to organize their playmates. Almost regardless of the setting, tensions are likely to arise between the gifted children and their age peers, and because of their advanced levels of ability, gifted children often gravitate toward older children or adults in their search for intellectual peers (Webb et al., 2007).

Peer issues continue into adolescence and adulthood, and are relevant to socializing, relations with coworkers, dating, marriage, and family. A relevant and helpful concept for bright adults is that of an intellectual “zone of tolerance.” That is, in order to have a long-lasting and meaningful relationship with another person (whether in friendship or a romantic relationship), that person should be within about plus or minus 20 IQ points of one’s ability level (Jensen, 2004, personal communication). Outside of that zone, there will be significant differences in thinking speed and depth or span of interests, which likely will lead to impatience, dissatisfaction, frustration, and tension on the part of each participant. Others have found that people who marry each other or become friends are usually within about 12 IQ points of each other (Ruf, 2012). When one is highly or profoundly gifted, the difficulty of finding someone similar increases.

Depression

Depression is often anger at oneself or anger at a situation over which one has little or no control, and the two are often related (Webb, 2013).

Anger at oneself is generally endogenous; the gifted individual is able to perceive personal strengths, but also personal shortcomings. Anger at oneself may also have an exogenous component. Some families, for example, have a tradition of continually evaluating and criticizing performance - one’s own and others. In such an environment, any natural propensity by the child to self-evaluate will likely be inflated. The possibility of clinical or sub-clinical depression increases in such situations, as well as academic underachievement.

Exogenous depression may also arise from helpless anger at situations over which one feels no control and a poor sense of personal control over one’s own life (Rimm, 1991; Webb, 2013). When the environment (e.g., home, school, friends) is not supportive of one’s needs and one feels trapped, the frequent result is depression. Educational misplacement of gifted children or inappropriate job settings for gifted adults are examples of situations which do not meet their needs, but over which they have little or no control.

Power Struggles

Most parents, particularly those with high aspirations, have firm ideas about the level of achievement and competence that they want their child to attain. Intense parental aspirations, when combined with the intensity of the gifted child, can lead to major power struggles, with the resulting passive-aggressive behavior by the child (Webb et al., 2007). Fathers in particular tend to perceive giftedness in terms of achievement and appear to be more likely to become involved in power struggles concerning achievement (Silverman, 1988).

Enmeshment or Confluence

Some parents of gifted children become emotionally enmeshed with their children; they narcissistically attempt to live out their own aspirations and wished-for achievements through their highly able child, and become overly involved in the child’s life (Miller, 1996). Instead of a power struggle, the child accedes to the parental over-involvement. This pattern can lead to the gifted child having a poorly differentiated sense of self-identity as distinct from that of the parent.

Mistaking the Abilities for the Child

This problem often is embedded within the enmeshment or the power struggle. The child’s unusual abilities may be what is emphasized by the parents, particularly fathers (Silverman, 1991), and the child’s feelings or sense of person are denigrated. Such over-emphasis on achievement prompts the child toward perfectionism.
...few psychologists receive training about the characteristics or special needs of gifted children, and, in fact, are often taught in graduate school that "gifted children will make it on their own."

and superficial relations with other people, for the child comes to internalize the emphasis on the importance of accomplishments rather than on the inherent worth as a person (Grobman, 2006). To be sure, many highly achieving persons feel good about themselves, and are neither perfectionistic, nor superficial. Such persons seem to have come from families that emphasized and modeled achievement, but balanced it with concerns for personal worth (Bloom, 1985; Robinson, Shore, & Enerson, 2006; Goertzel et al., 2004).

Sibling Relations

When one child in the family is labeled as gifted, and most often that is the first-born child (Cornell, 1984), the other children in the family may view themselves as non-gifted. Gifted children often hold high status in the family; parents often feel closer to and prouder of the child who is labeled gifted, sometimes generating adjustment problems in siblings who are considered non-gifted (Cornell, 1983, 1984, 1989; Grenier, 1985; Silverman, 1991). Despite the "either-or" thinking (i.e., gifted vs. non-gifted), the siblings are likely to be close in intelligence (Silverman, 2009). Thus, it is important to evaluate siblings to see if they, too, should be considered as gifted. Otherwise, there is substantial likelihood of underachievement by the unlabeled, but equally bright, siblings (Webb et al., 2007).

Sibling rivalry seems more likely if the second-born child is labeled as gifted but the first-born is not. Whereas first-born children identified as gifted generally enjoyed a close sibling relationship, second-born children labeled as gifted experienced more problems in sibling relationships (Tuttle, 1990). However, as the difference in sibling IQs increases, competition among the siblings decreases, and the sibling relations are more harmonious (Baller & Koch, 1984).

Parental Understanding

Family problems occur most often because parents of gifted children (a) lack information about gifted children, (b) lack support for appropriate parenting, or (c) are attempting to cope with their own unresolved problems (which may have to do with their own experiences with being gifted).

Despite conventional beliefs that "every parent has a gifted child," parents - particularly fathers—often overlook or underplay signs of precocious intellectual development in their children (Silverman, 1991; Webb et al., 2007), though they may recognize their child as different from other children. Most parents apply guidelines and norms derived from children of average abilities or that emphasize minimally expected developmental criteria (Webb & Kleine, 1993). Parental puzzlement and frustration often result.

Sometimes parents’ own unresolved issues with giftedness contribute to family problems. Commonalities of heredity and environment usually (though not always) result in gifted children having gifted parents (Silverman, 1991). However, most parents are unaware of how bright they are or how it affects their lives. The intensity, impatience, and high expectations that characterize these parents, if not mediated by self understanding, can create an environment of misery for those within the family.

Approaches to Preventing or Ameliorating Problems

Gifted individuals are not immune to social and emotional problems simply because of their unusual abilities. Although many gifted children and adults do function quite well, others do not, and may actually be more likely to experience significant difficulties related to their giftedness at some point in their lives, particularly if they are educationally misplaced and/or if they and their families lack appropriate information (Neihart et al., 2002; Webb et al., 2005; Webb et al., 2007). Ironically, their advanced ability to adapt or adjust may itself result in some problems, such as underachievement or excessive conformity (Kerr, 1997) as they strive to fit in.

As noted previously, most counselors, psychologists, and primary health care professionals have little, if any, training in assessing or treating gifted individuals with emotional or interpersonal difficulties. Extremely few psychologists receive training about the characteristics or special needs of gifted children, and, in fact, are often taught in graduate school that “gifted children will make it on their own” and that they are not a group likely to have special problems (Webb et al., 2005). Similarly, psychologists are unaware of how frequently gifted children reach development milestones much earlier (Ruf, 2009), which has implications for peer relations as well as for school issues and educational planning. In fact, some studies have indicated that these professionals have distinctly negative feelings toward gifted children (Shore, Cornell, Robinson, & Ward, 1991). Further, most professionals have been trained in a pathology model, rather than an enhancement of human potential model, and tend to focus only on clear dysfunctions compared with the norm, rather than seeing that failure to reach potential might likewise be a dysfunction. As a result, “very few mental health professionals know how to adapt their counseling strategies to better meet the needs of individuals with high abilities, and untrained counselors may pathologize normal characteristics of gifted individuals, such as adaptive perfectionism and overexcitabilities” (Moon, 2002, p. 218).
Services under a Different Label

Sometimes needs and problems of gifted children and adults are served by mental health professionals, but the situations and problems are misdiagnosed or labeled in a fashion that is only partially accurate (Webb et al., 2005). For example, the professional may recognize and treat existential depression, but overlook the gifted components involved. Seeing numerous possibilities in situations may be classified as obsessive behavior. The intensity and daydreaming of a bored gifted child might be labeled as an attention deficit disorder. Interpersonal withdrawal could be due to educational misplacement or the lack of peers by a gifted youngster. The clownish classroom behavior of a gifted child who is educationally misplaced might be incorrectly diagnosed as an undersocialized conduct disorder behavior pattern.

Assessment Approaches

Sometimes formal psychological assessments are needed for a differential diagnosis or because the parents or school want a second opinion. It is important that professionals doing such assessments are knowledgeable about gifted children. For example, on projective personality tests, gifted children often give responses that might appear pathological, but are simply a reflection of their vivid imagination combined with their intensity (Webb & Kleine, 1993). Gifted children and adults show a great deal more intra-test scatter than do other children (Gilman, 2008; Webb & Kleine, 1993). That is, there is substantially greater variability across abilities than among children of average or less ability level. Such variability can prompt inappropriate conclusions of learning disability or other disorders. And since so many gifted children reach the ceiling on subscales of standardized tests of cognitive ability, out-of-level testing may be needed.

Treatment Approaches

Treatment interventions generally are quite effective with gifted children and adults. Their conceptual quickness apparently allows them to more quickly grasp and apply therapeutic suggestions. Most professionals, once they become familiar with relevant literature on gifted individuals, are readily able to incorporate that information into their treatment approaches. Relationship and insight-oriented approaches appear particularly useful since they go along with the cognitive strengths of the gifted child. That is not to demean behavioral or strategic approaches; they, too, may be helpful. Rational-emotive therapy approaches can be quite effective in helping gifted persons learn to manage their “self-talk” that underlies their feelings of excessive stress, perfectionism, or depression (Webb, 2013; Webb et al., 2007). Many gifted individuals are searching for some cognitive framework through which they might understand themselves and their lives, but they also have a particular need to feel understood and to have a relationship with the treating professional.

In addition to treating clinical problems, psychologists, pediatricians, and others can do anticipatory guidance with parents of gifted and talented persons, and there are substantial resources that a professional can suggest to the individual or family. Several non-profit groups have information available for free from their websites or sponsor conferences or other educational opportunities. Particularly noteworthy are Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted (www.sengifted.org), Davidson Institute for Talent Development (www.ditd.org), Hoagies Gifted (www.hoagiesgifted.org), and the National Association for Gifted Children (www.nagc.org). Likewise several publishers specialize in books for parents of gifted children and the professionals who work in the field, which can be used for bibliotherapy.

Parents of gifted children and gifted adults are looking for counseling and mental health professionals to whom they can turn for information, advice, support, diagnostic clarifications, and treatment. At present, it is difficult for them to find knowledgeable and helpful professionals. Gifted individuals and their families often need counseling and guidance in three areas—academic planning and career opportunities; personal and social concerns with their families, peers, or teachers; and special outside-of-school enrichment experiences. Although there is seldom third-party reimbursement for psychological services for gifted issues, per se, many families are willing to pay out of pocket. Psychologists can expand their practices to meet this need, which currently is a neglected area of practice, by learning about the characteristics of gifted individuals and the implications for diagnosis and treatment either through readings or through continuing education opportunities through nonprofit groups like SENG, which actively provide such information.

References and CE exam available at E-Psychologist.org

Author

James T. Webb, Ph.D., the founder of the non-profit group SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted Children), served on the Board of Directors for the National Association for Gifted Children and was president of the American Association for Gifted Children. Dr. Webb is lead author of six books and numerous articles about gifted children. In 2011, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award of the Arizona Association for Gifted Children the Community Service Award from the National Association for Gifted Children, and the Upton Sinclair Award by EducationNews.org. Dr. Webb is a past-president of the Ohio Psychological Association and served on the APA Council of Representatives. Formerly Professor and Associate Dean at the Wright State University School of Professional Psychology, Dr. Webb is president of Great Potential Press.
References


Silverman, L. K. (2009). *What we have learned about gifted children: 30th anniversary.*  


