

Meeting the Social and Emotional Needs of Students with High Ability

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Characteristics and Possible Behaviors Associated with High Ability

Characteristic	Possibly Problematic Classroom Behavior
Early reading and/or quick mastery of reading	May be impatient with reading instruction, resist doing worksheets, and insist on reading own material which may be years above grade level.
Learns new things quickly and easily	May exhibit boredom and frustration when others do not catch on as quickly, not being allowed to move on or do something else. May be frustrated with group work when others are not as capable.
Has extensive vocabulary, background knowledge in a particular area, or memory of detail	May dominate discussions and refuse to listen to others' contributions. May argue in a sophisticated way.
Grasps math concepts quickly; solves problems involving critical thinking; is intuitive; enjoys logic and puzzles	May resist doing repetitive computation drill needed by others. May correctly or incorrectly jump to an answer without careful attention to detail. May make careless errors, have trouble with legibility of writing, refuse to do homework, and incorrectly assume all will be as easy as the first examples. May work problems in unconventional ways.
Interested in some things in depth. Grasps Big Picture, concepts, and forms connections.	May work hard in a new area of interest or just one subject, allowing other areas to suffer. May be impatient with others who do not see how things are connected and with material not at the right level of complexity.
Has a more intense energy level, activity level, or ability to concentrate; talks fast	May seek active inquiry or be so completely involved with a task that he/she becomes frustrated with having to change tasks. Could seem overactive, stubborn or uncooperative with poor self-regulation.
Extremely sensitive and/or introverted	May cry easily, prefer to work alone, may not readily participate orally, may (incorrectly) appear to be immature in social development. May be upset by student cruelty to others or to teacher becoming upset with the class. May be overly sensitive to others' remarks, but also be able to deliver stinging criticism.

Characteristics and Possible Behaviors Associated with High Ability continued

Characteristic	Possibly Problematic Classroom Behavior
Thinks differently; is creative	May appear different and/or rebellious or may experience social isolation. May be a day dreamer. May ask tangential questions and seem off track. May question authority.
Great sense of humor	May be the class clown or use humor sarcastically.
Curious, observant	May be off task and have difficulty disengaging to change activities.
Perfectionistic	May set unrealistic standards for self and others, be overly concerned with details, be rigid in work routines. May find true-false or multiple choice questions frustrating in their lack of precision; may be argumentative and correct every small error made by others.
Displays interest in complex games, fantasy, non-fiction	May prefer to play with older children or adults. (May also prefer to play with younger children whom he/she can organize into activities.) May become involved in fantasy worlds or science fiction.
Likes to observe before participating	May have difficulty with change and become anxious with new situations. Likes to be in control and know all the rules or details of the assignments. May be uncomfortable with open-ended assignments and ambiguity.
Sensitive to environment	May object to loud noises, bright lights, odors, or have many allergies.
Demonstrates leadership potential	May be considered bossy and unable to accept input or share control of ideas
May have different friends in different activities or venues	May have positive relationships but lack a “best” friend for all areas; may consider him/herself unpopular as a result of not being in one “in” crowd.

Social and Emotional Issues Facing High Ability Students

1. Overexcitabilities: Gifted students may have “intensities” that may manifest themselves in one or more of these areas (Dabrowski’s Theory):

- Intellectual intensity and focus on a particular topic.
- Greater sensitivity to environment (appreciation for music or art, sensitivity to loud noises or bright lights, more allergies, etc.).
- Surplus of physical energy
- Vivid imagination and creativity
- Heightened emotional sensitivity (reaction to criticism, perfectionism, empathy, attachment).

2. Asynchronous development: Physical, cognitive, and emotional development may be at different places within the same child:

- Presents a number of problems for the child with exceptional abilities.
 - Adults, accustomed to advanced verbal reasoning from the child, may fail to understand emotional outbursts more typical of his/her chronological age.
 - The child may find it difficult to communicate with age mate peers who are considerably below her intellectual level, even if they are at the same level emotionally.
- In general, the greater the level of ability, the greater the discrepancies.

3. Perfectionism: high ability students may:

- Place unrealistically high standards for performance on themselves. May result in anxiety, frustration, or self-blame for less-than-perfect performance.
- Feel as though others (parents or teachers) have unrealistically high expectations. This may result in fear of failure, avoidance of challenges, depression, and connection of self-worth to performance.
- Develop unrealistically high standards for the performance of others.

4. Self-esteem/Identity issues: High ability students may experience difficulty constructing their identities, which may lead to lowered self-esteems. Difficulty with identity development may result from any of the following:

- Lack of understanding of higher abilities and their implications
- Feeling different from one’s same-age peers
- Behaviors inconsistent with gender role expectations (e.g., sensitivity in gifted boys, assertiveness in gifted girls)
- Being identified as learning disabled as well as having high abilities
- Differences resulting from cultural, linguistic, or SES differences

Special Considerations

There is a range among those students with high ability and many domains in which the high ability might occur. Just because the school has identified students for advanced instruction based on their high cognitive ability, it is an incorrect assumption they will be similar in their needs and characteristics and that their development will be similarly advanced among the multiple aspects of their personal selves. Some among those of high ability will have extraordinary levels of ability and development in one or more domains (highly gifted). The higher the ability, the greater the difference from the average, and the more likely it is that the student will not “fit” with other students of the same age. This illustrates the need for the school to be sensitive to the needs of the individual and to put students with high ability together, so they might find another person to connect with and develop positive social skills. Teachers and counselors can also encourage attendance at special programs or camps geared to students of high ability. For example, The Indiana Academy for Math, Science and the Humanities is a public residential school for students in grades 11 and 12; it is a haven for students with advanced abilities. In addition, students with high ability may be found among those with learning disabilities, ADD, ADHD, emotional disorders, visual or hearing impairments, etc. It is important that the educational planning for the twice exceptional include the development of their strengths in addition to the attention that is paid to their disabilities.

Additional Affective Issues and their Interaction with Giftedness

This list was adapted from a list on topics for affective education found in Cohen, L. & Frydenberg, E. (1996). *Coping for capable kids: Strategies for parents, teachers, and students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press. www.prufrock.com

Other topics to be included that, although not specific to gifted individuals, are still important to overall affective development and may interact with giftedness in the following ways:

- **Introversion:** gifted individuals are more likely to be introverted than the general population (50% of gifted population compared to 25% of general population).
- **Peer pressure:** high ability children may struggle more with peer pressure; they are already feeling different from their peers as a result of their ability differences, yet still want to fit in socially.
- **Competitiveness:** high ability children are frequently accustomed to doing well and may need guidance in developing healthy attitudes toward competition with others.
- **Social skills:** because of advanced vocabulary, increased intensity, and/or different interests, high ability children may experience difficulty interacting socially with the same-age peers.
- **Dealing with stress:** high ability students may feel stress from perceived expectations and demands from others.
- **Responsibility:** high ability children may be given more responsibilities by teachers and parents and therefore need guidance in learning how to manage these responsibilities to self and others.
- **Acceptance:** high ability children need guidance in developing appreciation for others with different abilities.
- **Family dynamics:** high ability may influence family dynamics with regard to expectations and parental pressure.
- **Study habits:** high ability students often lack good study skills, as they frequently can earn solid grades without effort. In later grades, when faced with challenging coursework for the first time, high ability students lacking study skills may avoid the challenge, fail, or experience undue stress and self doubt from lack of preparation.
- **Leadership skills:** as high ability individuals often seek out, or are called upon to assume leadership positions, they need guidance in developing these skills.
- **Career exploration:** as a result of their multipotentiality, high ability children need early opportunities for career exploration.

Negative Outcomes of Social and Emotional Issues

When high ability individuals' social and emotional needs are not addressed, they may experience negative outcomes including one or more of the following:

- Underachievement: performance that is not consistent with one's ability. Interventions will vary, depending on the root of the underachievement.
- Development of a "false self:" hiding abilities, adopting a false persona that is more consistent with the values and interests of peers than one's true values and interests.
- Depression: Failure to accept oneself, to fit in with peers, and to form a cohesive identity in addition to a heightened sensitivity to global problems may lead to depression among those with high ability.

The Importance of an Accepting School Culture for the High Ability Child

Social context is important for both academic and social-emotional development. Does the school value advanced academics? If schools and society are anti-intellectual, valuing other things and ridiculing high achievement, the high ability learner will experience conflict and a negative influence on development. Assess the school culture; are high ability students:

- made to feel "odd" by calling negative attention to their questions, vocabulary and interests?
- made to do all of the grade-level assignments as well as work for their advanced classes?
- kept from advancing in their area(s) of strength until they can demonstrate advanced capability in all subject areas?
- repeatedly told to wait for others to finish before being allowed to advance?
- asked to help others instead of being provided instruction at their level?
- ridiculed for being "nerds," "geeks" or other socially negative terms?
- allowed to take classes at higher grade levels?
- allowed and encouraged to participate in academic competitions?
- respected for academic achievement and taking advanced courses?
- provided an opportunity to take classes together where advanced performance is normal?
- provided access to academic teams or extracurricular activities that can provide social support?

The School Counselor's Role

Listed below are ways in which school counselors can contribute to the affective education of high ability students:

- Understand how high ability kids may be “different” while remembering they are still children with developmental tasks.
- Support programming options that allow gifted students to be placed together for instruction. Being with others of advanced academic ability helps meet students’ affective needs.
- Listen carefully to the high ability child tell you who s/he is and what s/he views as goals and issues.
- Be alert to the social dynamics of the child’s environment; be especially sensitive to issues faced by the non-dominant culture or twice-exceptional high ability child.
- Become an advocate for school policies and programs that offer more advanced options and allow greater flexibility in programs, services, and placements to meet the academic needs of these children.
- Collaborate with high ability personnel to provide professional development for teachers and parents about the social and emotional needs of children with high ability.
- Develop and implement a counseling and guidance plan with specific attention to issues and concerns of high ability children in accordance with the Indiana Standards for High Ability Education.
- Be alert to ways of improving the “Culture of Acceptance of Advanced Performance.”
- Lead discussions for these learners on how it feels to be labeled as having high ability in your school, how to get along with others, how to deal with some of the intensities that come with being high ability, how to achieve goals, and appropriate expectations of self and others.
- Encourage the use of literature and film to support positive affective development in students through the use of guided reading, guided viewing, and discussion groups. Recommend readings for parents and teachers of these students as well.
- Encourage extracurricular activities, hobbies, and physical outlets to relieve stress, make friends, and learn valuable lessons.
- Provide college and career guidance appropriate to advanced opportunities for high ability students.
- Arrange for mentors for high ability students in areas of interest or ability by persons from outside the school environment.
- Support acceleration options for individual students when appropriate.
- Work with the families and teachers to assist with adjustment and achievement when class placements, curriculum or scheduling patterns are different from those of most students.

Parent Education and Support

The school counselor and the High Ability Coordinator or teacher of high ability students can plan and conduct a series of parent education opportunities that will help parents understand and support these children. The purposes of such meetings could be:

- To provide parent information regarding programs or services available for high ability and/or gifted learners in the district or region. Examples: district high ability services for elementary, middle, and high schools; Midwest Talent Search; academic contests; summer programs; Advanced Placement; International Baccalaureate; etc.
- To provide information about gifted children, their needs and characteristics. This can be done by local personnel or by inviting a special speaker knowledgeable in such topics from a university, the Indiana Association for the Gifted (www.iag-online.org), or through the Indiana Department of Education.
- To create a guided discussion forum for parents to enhance their parenting skills and discuss social, emotional, and academic needs of high ability children. An example of these guided discussions is the format of the SENG group (Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted). www.sengifted.org Another example would be through book discussion groups.

Note: It is important for the counselor to be involved as a professional skilled in group facilitation. It is unproductive for meetings to become gripe sessions about district programs or personnel or to be focused on one particular situation or child. It is wise to clearly state that this is not the purpose of the group, nor will it be tolerated.

College and Career Guidance for High Ability Students










High ability learners are often multi-talented, and this can cause more difficulty in making career decisions. Special care should be taken to ensure students the opportunity to explore career possibilities and to assist them in aligning these possibilities with interests and abilities. Assistance is often needed to recognize where interests and abilities might be used in college planning and career decision-making. Such assistance many include:

- Mentoring opportunities
- Career shadowing opportunities
- Pre-college opportunities, such as dual enrollment in college courses or academic summer programs/ camps in the college setting
- Knowledge of college selection and application process
- Knowledge of financial assistance opportunities
- Information on talent search programs and opportunities for gifted students, such as
 - Midwest Talent Search through the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University (<http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/>)
 - The Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics, and Humanities is a two-year residential public high school for high ability students located on the campus of Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Three hundred juniors and seniors from across the state attend the Academy every year and work toward the Indiana Academic Honors Diploma. This is a public school, meaning that qualifying students do not pay tuition.(<http://www.bsu.edu/academy/>)
Indiana high ability students need to be given information regarding the Indiana Academy.

Tips for Parents of High Ability Students

- ⇒ Allow increasing control in areas s/he is able to make decisions. This fosters independence and self confidence.
- ⇒ Allow choice when possible.
- ⇒ Listen without offering criticism or solutions. Just listen.
- ⇒ Provide opportunities for community service or action; this allows a sense of contribution.
- ⇒ Promote social contact that is positive. Allow friends according to interests.
- ⇒ Praise for personal values you are trying to promote: hard work, kindness, responsibility. Criticize privately.
- ⇒ Promote the value of challenging work and appreciation of school and learning.
- ⇒ Teach good time management and organizational skills.
- ⇒ Be alert to conflicts experienced between high achievement and belonging to a particular group.
- ⇒ Encourage positive relationships with other adults, e.g. teachers, coaches, Scout leaders, other relatives, mentors.
- ⇒ Model acceptance of mistakes.
- ⇒ Pick battles carefully. Think about what is important in the long run.
- ⇒ Model healthy habits of good eating, exercise, down time, and relaxing pursuits.
- ⇒ Stand together with the child's other parent in promoting the importance of school, work, effort, responsibility, and kindness; regardless of marital issues, divorce, etc.

Avoid:

-  Unrealistic expectations.
-  Praise for being the best, for being perfect, for being brilliant.
-  Control or criticism over eating or weight.
-  Criticizing teachers and school in front of the child; seek solutions.
-  Praising for attractiveness, appeal to opposite gender, etc.
-  Stereotyping by gender.
-  Criticism in front of others; comparison with other children.
-  "Fixing" them. They are not wrong, just different.
-  Rescuing from consequences or shielding from difficulties.

Tips for Counselors and Teachers of High Ability Students

- ⇒ Offer challenge and choice; different levels are appropriate for different kids at different times and in different areas.
- ⇒ Allow high ability kids to be and work together.
- ⇒ Foster a culture of achievement; encourage all to work hard.
- ⇒ Use guided readings to discuss the emotions and dilemmas of characters or historical figures. Point out persistence in the face of failure, need for good communication, moral dilemmas, etc.
- ⇒ Foster a culture of appreciation and acceptance of individual difference. Be alert for teasing and bullying; offer strategies for dealing with intolerance.
- ⇒ Praise hard work and organization, not just right answers.
- ⇒ When kids are working together, encourage the process of collaboration, not just the end result. High ability kids sometimes get so hung up on making the product perfect, they take over control, missing the importance of the process.
- ⇒ Encourage trying new things without penalty. Branching out from “tried and true” may be difficult for those focused on perfection. Allow mistakes.
- ⇒ Be careful with assignments. When a high ability student is unclear about expectations, s/he may work for several hours on an assignment you may have meant to take 30 minutes.
- ⇒ Teach study skills and organization to high ability kids. Just because they are smart does NOT mean they know how to manage time, material, or assignments.
- ⇒ Conduct discussions on social skills, good listening, consideration, respect for all.
- ⇒ Promote journaling, creative writing, drama, and music as ways to discuss feelings.

Avoid:



- Pitting one against the other. If all do well, all may get A's.
- Stereotyping by gender.
- Focusing on high ability. This creates certain expectations and values the person not for him/herself but only for the intellect.
- Holding a particular student up as the example. This may set the student up for awkward or difficult social interactions. Focus on meeting the criteria, hard work, and responsibility.
- Lack of acceptance of the student's own feelings. If s/he is unhappy with something, allow her/him to express reasons and solutions.

Tips for High Ability Students

- ⇒ When you have a concern, share it with a trusted friend, relative, or other adult. Thinking out loud helps define the issue; others may offer support and ideas.
- ⇒ Focus on problem solving. Find out all you can, consider different views, consider whether the issue needs to be reframed, develop a strategy.
- ⇒ Work hard. Sometimes more effort is spent on worrying about assignments, grades, or other concerns than is spent on actual work related to the concerns.
- ⇒ Develop social skills. Be genuinely interested in others and what they are doing; be kind to everyone; invite someone else to share an activity both will enjoy.
- ⇒ Keep a journal or write songs or poetry. Regular writing about your thoughts and feelings helps you to clarify and allows you to see the progress you are making in growth and maturity.
- ⇒ Engage in regular physical activity. Burning of energy in sports or physical exercise releases tension and promotes good health and positive self concept.
- ⇒ Do something for others. Engage in some sort of community service or regular assistance to someone less fortunate; it puts your own problems in perspective and boosts your self esteem.
- ⇒ Engage in relaxing activities for enjoyment. Read, sing, play an instrument, watch movies, cook, build things, follow a team, listen to music, go to a play, etc.

Avoid:



- Worry without developing a positive plan for a solution.
- Wishful thinking without developing goals and plans.
- Neglect of work or problems.
- Withdrawing from others.
- Excessive self blame and self criticism.
- Expecting yourself and/or others to be perfect.

Useful Websites for the Affective Development of High Ability Students

- www.iag-online.org The Indiana Association for the Gifted.
- www.nagc.org National Association of Gifted Children.
- www.hoagiesgifted.org This resource has articles, information on distance learning/ summer/ Saturday programs, reading lists, products, contests, scholarships, links for kids and teens, and much more. It is an award-winning site.
- <http://www.davidson-institute.org> The Davidson Institute for Talent Development provides resources for supporting the needs of highly gifted individuals.
- http://www.sengifted.org/articles_social/index.shtml Full text articles on parenting gifted children and the social and emotional needs of gifted children are available on-line.
- www.prufrock.com for a blog, articles, books and other materials for parents and kids.
- www.freespirit.com for the Gifted Kids Survival Guides and other publications relating to gifted kids.

College Planning Websites

- <http://www.bsu.edu/academy/> The Indiana Academy for Science, Mathematics and Humanities, a public residential high school open to Indiana high school students of high ability.
- <http://www.learnmoreindiana.org/> Learn More Resource Center, Indiana's Pre-K to College Connection, helps Indiana residents learn about college in Indiana, preparing for college, getting to college, student financial aid, Indiana career information and other essential information for lifelong success.
- <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/> Programs and articles about college planning for gifted students.
- ACT www.act.org
- The College Board www.collegeboard.com
- Petersons www.petersons.com
- The Sallie Mae Foundation www.salliemae.com