



Kansas Effective Practices

Instructional Toolkit

Gifted 101 and Beyond

Social/Emotional Issues

Unique Social/Emotional Issues of Gifted Students

All students face emotional and developmental issues at all phases and ages. Gifted students also experience additional challenges—and experience them intensely. The following summaries are adapted from the work of Earle (2003) regarding these unique issues, presented in alphabetical order, not in order of importance or frequency.

Acceleration: Gifted students often deal with difficult decisions about accelerated (single subject or full grade) classes. Acceleration may clearly be the best educational option, but social and emotional aspects must be considered. Should the student skip a grade or be accelerated in just the strength area, if at all? How will he or she handle the additional expectations and stress, including being in class with older students?

Asynchronous Development: Students develop at different paces in different areas. Gifted students often function at one age level intellectually, another socially, and yet another emotionally. People who treat them like the little adults that they sound like may be critical when they act in “childish” (actually age-appropriate) ways.

Chameleon Effect: Students who feel it is not “cool” to be smart may hide their abilities to blend in (and become friends with) others their own age. Girls may not work up to their academic potential so they do not “show up” the boys. Parents, teachers and other educators may need to encourage gifted students to keep showing their bright sides and building on their strengths.

Communication: Students of their own age often do not understand the abstract thoughts or advanced vocabularies of gifted students. They may be interested in concepts that their peers do not understand.

Disorganized/Lacking Study Skills: Because of divergent thinking and excellent memory skills, gifted students may not learn to organize or prioritize their work, or even study. If schoolwork is below their ability level, these skills may not be necessary. But when they do encounter challenging work, they may not have the necessary organization or study skills that they need.

Misunderstood: Gifted students may be misunderstood by their teachers and by their age-mates. Teachers may misinterpret their gifted students as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) or think that students who are highly sensitive, fearful or intense are emotionally disturbed. Gifted students do not just feel misunderstood. They often are misunderstood.

Multipotentialed: Being good at many things sounds like a wonderful problem to have, but gifted students may feel overwhelmed or confused by having too many interests and abilities. Because they have strengths in so many areas, choosing a career path may be difficult.

Overexcitabilities: Gifted students experience life with greater intensity than others because of the ways their brains process information. According to Tolan (1999), Dabrowski identified the following overexcitabilities, which appear more frequently in gifted people: emotional, intellectual, sensual, psychomotor, and imaginal. These overexcitabilities may lead to gifted students being more vulnerable, more absorbed, and/or more sensitive than their peers.

Ownership of Their Gifts: The gifted student, the school and the family must think about who “owns the gift.” What do gifted students owe society, their community, their schools, their families and themselves? Where do they fit in the universal scheme of things?

Perfectionism: Many gifted students strive for excellence, which can be a problem if it becomes an obsession with trying to be perfect. Social relations and creativity may be impaired by the quest for perfection. Such gifted students may develop physical (headaches, stomach aches, even depression) or emotional symptoms (avoiding anything that cannot be done perfectly or not turning in their schoolwork because it is just not “good enough”).

Selective Learning/Underachievement: Gifted students may select not to perform academically to their potential. Others may have social or emotional problems that get in the way of achieving. Determining the type and cause of their underperformance is essential. Changes may need to be made at school, home, or both, before the gifted student becomes actively engaged in school and therefore productive.

Self-Concept: If they compare themselves to age-mates, gifted students may have over inflated self-concepts. But if they compare themselves to those who excel in given fields, they may develop low self-concepts and think they can never be “that good.”

Social Isolation: Feeling “different” may range from not sharing similar interests to having interests beyond those of their age-mates, which makes it difficult to find true friends. Feelings of isolation can increase when attention is given to them because of their giftedness.

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