

Identity Conflicts in Gifted Adolescents

Readings

Multicultural Gifted Education, by Donna Y. Ford and J. John Harris III, Teachers College Press, 1999

"Portraits of Resilience: The Urban Life Experience of Gifted Latino Young Men," by Thomas P. Hebert, *Roeper Review*, December 1996

Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, by Mary Pipher, Ballantine, 1995

Identity formation, a major event in adolescence, is the process by which individuals define themselves. It involves exploring the questions "Who am I becoming?" and "What will I do with my life?" Like gender, race, ethnicity, and class, giftedness is an aspect of identity. For gifted adolescents, it defines, in part, who they are and who they are becoming.

As the need to belong increases during adolescence, gifted teens may struggle to establish a cohesive sense of self. The world rarely tolerates or appreciates extreme differences, and it frequently gives unsound feedback to individuals with exceptional talent. Some gifted adolescents experience conflicts when they encounter contradictory expectations about what they should value and what goals they should pursue. They may struggle to determine what it means to be intelligent and female, to express pride in their culture and achieve at high levels, or to be masculine and creative.

Many gifted teens are forced to resolve mixed messages. For instance, many adolescent gifted girls are sensitive to such messages as "Be smart, but not too smart"; "Compete, but be nice"; and "Earn good grades, but be popular." Gifted teens from African American or other minority groups may be influenced by messages like "Achieve, but don't act white"; "Succeed, but cooperate"; and "Get the best education you can, but don't abandon your community." Some gifted boys may struggle to resolve such messages as "Be sensitive, but be strong"; "Care deeply, but don't get too emotional"; and "Express yourself, but act like a man." Gifted adolescents may be led to perceive high

achievement or ability as a betrayal of their cultural, social, or racial affiliations. They may feel pressure to reject their talents and differences in order to maintain a sense of belonging and identity in their social group. Some gifted adolescents cope by underachieving, withdrawing, or resisting challenges.

Maintaining high achievement therefore requires a strong sense of self. How can parents help gifted adolescents establish a healthy identity that includes valuing their exceptional abilities? The first step is to recognize and acknowledge societal and cultural messages that cause conflicts, discomfort, or confusion in gifted adolescents. Acknowledgment helps reduce the dissonance, externalize the problem, and normalize the conflict. Parents can help adolescents see that such messages are a societal phenomenon and affect many people from different groups. For many teens, it is useful to hear from young adults who are successfully sorting out mixed messages in their own lives. It can also be beneficial to provide gifted adolescents with direct instruction in the social skills necessary for achievement across social contexts. Communication skills for and attitudes about addressing issues of power, authority, control, self-control, and conflict resolution are particularly relevant.

—Maureen Neihart, Psy.D.

Maureen Neihart, a clinical psychologist in private practice, has worked with gifted children and their families for more than 20 years.

Owl Faces,
by Turtle Heart
Artville

Expert's Forum

Harnessing Gifted Girls' Emotional Strengths

Gifted girls encounter unique challenges, particularly during adolescence. With our help, they can learn to transform adversity into opportunity. The keys are information and communication. Here are six springboards for conversation and personal growth that concern gifted adolescent girls.

Dealing with Envy

In friendships, girls tend to be supportive of their peers when they suffer failure or

disappointment. If a girl breaks up with her boyfriend, has a fight with her parents, or does poorly on an exam, she can count on her friends to help out with kind and encouraging words. However, girls are less skilled at cheering on peers. If a girl exhibits outstanding performance in a sporting event, on an important exam, or at a dance audition, her friends may become envious of her. Recognizing this tendency and learning appropriate strategies to reverse it can help girls find the vocabulary and emotional strength to

cheer on friends and to accept their own successes graciously.

Dealing with Criticism

Women are understandably sensitive to patronizing and otherwise disrespectful responses to their ideas and actions. Unfortunately, defensiveness can become a knee-jerk reaction to criticism. For a gifted girl to benefit from helpful feedback from peers, teachers, parents, and mentors, she needs to differentiate criticism of her ideas or actions (a sign of respect,

although sometimes hard to hear) from criticism of herself (which is never meant to be helpful). Educators and parents can offer girls examples of constructive and destructive criticism, addressing both subtle and blatant situations, to help them tell the two apart.

Handling Well-Intentioned but Unsuitable Classroom Values

According to education experts, girls tend to learn better in groups than individually. However, gifted girls may not enjoy cooperative learning as much as their classmates, who expect less of the outcome. Should gifted girls contribute to assignments in which they take little pride, or should they assume the burden of raising the bar for the team? Rather than resisting, gifted girls should be shown that they can use group learning to master or refine communication, problem-solving, mediation, and listening skills.

Another piece of misguided wisdom is that girls prefer cooperation to competition. But all evidence gleaned from the worlds of music and sports, for instance, indicate that girls can be fierce competitors in their areas of strength and should relish those opportunities.

Managing Relationships with Mentors

Mentoring implies an unusual degree of intimacy between teacher and student. This kind of relationship has unique potential for stimulating growth in skills, content knowledge, professional experience, and psychosocial development. Yet intimacy in any unbalanced power relationship can be scary, and girls need to understand the nature of such relationships to avoid losing their identity, assertiveness, or power of choice in them. Knowing the elements of a healthy mentoring relationship can allow girls to focus on its joys and privileges.

Coping with Home Responsibilities and Expectations

Gifted girls tend to have more chores to do at home than their brothers; they also tend to pursue solitary interests. Between their domestic responsibilities and the activities they like to do on their own, they run the risk of social isolation. But if they have weighed this risk for themselves (viewing it, perhaps, as a

chance to enjoy their own company), then, as long as they do their fair share at home, parents should not interfere.

Juggling Talent Development and Social Life

Most young girls long for friendships, romance, and appreciation for who they are and what they do. Ideally, a gifted girl finds a peer group that shares her values and interests. Girls should be tracked into ability groups once they are out of elementary school so the siren song of social life does not draw them away from the development of their talents. If their abilities are in the performing arts or sports, then band, orchestra, and athletic teams will provide the friendships and support that encourage excellence and fun. Girls who are academically gifted need to experience camaraderie in a special school, a special class, or a summer program.

Discussing these topics can strengthen the natural resilience of the gifted girls in our care and make adolescence more pleasurable for them. They can then use these skills to take on young adulthood with gusto.

DGL: *How can parents help their gifted child find a mentor? Where should they look?*

Subotnik: Mentors are not easy to find, and they are used inefficiently when they simply serve as role models to elicit interest in an area of study or performance. Mentors have the most positive effect when they pair up with a young person who already has a deep interest in a subject or discipline and seeks additional information and skill. When a gifted girl has exhausted her resources at school and at home, she should seek out experts who might serve in such a capacity via colleges and universities, museums, contests, contacts gained through special academic programs, the Internet, and so on.

At a later stage, gifted young women need to be recruited by mentors or highly regarded coaches and teachers, rather than the other way around. Experts are always seeking protégées whom they can socialize into their areas of interest. Even the most eminent individuals hope to maintain their intellectual or performance

"lineage" and to keep themselves supplied with fresh perspectives. The best way for gifted young women to get such mentors is to make their work known to them.

DGL: *You mention that a social life is important but that it can also draw girls away from developing their talents. How can parents know when their children's social lives are taking precedence over their academic life?*

Subotnik: Girls who exhibit a serious passion for sports, music, poetry, or something else are less likely to get sidetracked. Many gifted girls, however, will not fall in love with an idea or discipline until they are young adults. Their parents need to reinforce their values with regard to schoolwork and other responsibilities. Schoolwork comes first. Extracurricular commitments agreed to by the gifted girl and her family are second. Family commitments, including attendance at key family gatherings and performance of reasonable chores, are a close third. Social life comes fourth. If this rule is enforced from elementary school on, then a gifted girl's changing priorities will be self-evident.

—Rena F. Subotnik, Ph.D.

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Resources

Center for Gifted Education Policy
www.apa.org/ed/cgep.html

Remarkable Women: Perspectives on Female Talent Development, edited by Karen D. Arnold, Kathleen D. Noble, and Rena F. Subotnik, Hampton, 1996

Smart Girls: A New Psychology of Girls, Women, and Giftedness, by Barbara A. Kerr, Great Potential (formerly Gifted Psychology Press), 1997

Work Left Undone: Choices and Compromises of Talented Females, by Sally M. Reis, Creative Learning, 1998

Marble Female Mask
Campania (near
Pompeii?)
Roman sculpture
First century A.D.
DCC1969.10