

Social and Emotional Development Of Children Identified as Gifted

Recognize and respect the relationship between social and emotional needs and academic needs.

One affects the other. For example, whether a gifted student is challenged or able to work at a pace that is stimulating can affect his or her emotional well-being. Our school psychology clinic in Teachers College at Ball State University has documented that the most common reason gifted students are referred for psychological assessments is rooted in their becoming a behavior problem in school after having previously been a strong student. The root of the behavioral change is the manifest frustration with not being challenged in school. For many students, this connection goes unnoticed until it is far too late to help them.

Be cautious about forcing your desires on students based on your perception of their strength areas.

Talent manifests over time and with opportunity. Determining for a child what his or her "gift" or "talent" is without allowing for flexibility or encouraging additional self-exploration may cause a number of problems from adolescence on. A positive outcome of nurturing a talent is the development of a lifelong a vocational interest or hobby.

Teach pro-social skill development.

Teaching gifted students a handful of social skills can reduce the number of negative experiences they may encounter while in school. The phrasing of questions and comments and the ability to take another person's perspective are skills that are helpful in teaching gifted students to navigate the difficult social waters in schools.

Teach them to enjoy nonacademic activities.

As appropriate, try to teach gifted students to recognize that nonacademic pursuits are also important in one's life. They become stress relievers and additional areas where gifted students can grow. Modeling works well in teaching this lesson.

Teach gifted students ways to manage stress.

As they move through the grades, many will experience growing amounts of stress. Ironically, much of this will be self-imposed or a consequence of only their gift being recognized by those around them without concern for their needs as individuals. Because many gifted students develop coping strategies, educating them about how to effectively manage stress may prove relatively easy.

To accomplish many of the suggestions previously noted, adults should model the behavior they wish gifted students to exhibit.

Like all children, gifted students learn from the behavior of adults. Whether it is effective coping strategies, nonthreatening communication techniques, or how to relax, teachers, counselors, and parents often become the models that children follow. If you want your messages to be influential, let the students see you behaving accordingly.

Understand that much of how gifted students appear and behave is biologically affected.

Do not try to change the basic nature of the student. Shyness, for example, like some physical characteristics, has roots in biology. Like the relationship between body type and weight, shyness and a student's willingness and ability to actively participate in class are related. Respect the nature of the individual gifted child.

Embrace diversity, do not merely tolerate it.

To tolerate suggests a position of authority or position of judgment that allows someone to decide what human differences are meaningful and, therefore, acceptable and what differences are intolerable. This special privileged position tends to disadvantage gifted students because giftedness rarely makes people's lists of meaningful differences. As a teacher, parent, or counselor, you are in a position to have a significant impact on the minds of gifted children. If a school truly embraces diversity, then gifted students will be accepted. In many schools, giftedness is still experienced as being aberrant. In a study a few years ago, I found that gifted students are just as prone to believe stereotypical ideas about other gifted students as the general population. This phenomenon can be explained by the fact that gifted students cannot escape their environment.

Expose gifted students to knowledgeable counseling-avoid professionals who are not knowledgeable about gifted students.

A proactive counseling program can be invaluable to gifted students. Learning about oneself and how to effectively relate to others in school can positively affect the psychological development of gifted students. Conversely, messages learned from untrained counselors and psychologists who rely on intuition when providing services can actually exacerbate problems in the social and emotional realm.

Know that many gifted students will have created coping strategies while in the earliest grades in school.

I have found that, by first grade, some gifted children have begun to engage in behavior patterns that reveal their discomfort with the gifted student label. Some of these strategies reflect their tacit knowledge about the social milieu of their classroom. Knowing that these patterns exist can enable teachers, counselors, and parents to understand the worries and behaviors surrounding gifted students' school experience.

Provide opportunities for down time.

All children need time to relax away from school concerns. Arranging down time for some students will come easy, but for others it will be quite difficult. Providing gifted student's opportunities to explore or read for pleasure can reduce stress and may have the positive effect of increasing vocational pursuits when they get older.