

## Managing the Rainbow! *Self Identity in Gifted Children*

A healthy self- concept, or "self", is essential for positive emotional, cognitive and social development. It depends upon healthy identity formation, which arises from understanding and accepting oneself. All parts of the child need to be incorporated to assist in complete identity formation. We shouldn't omit informing the child about their giftedness any more than we should hide their ethnicity, culture, or other inherent parts of their being. So it is important, if not imperative, to have conversations about giftedness with gifted children. *Not doing* so could negatively affect the child in some area, *while doing so* will most often assist in their development.

*Awareness and understanding are powerful, liberating experiences. Awareness is also a vital part of growth. It involves recognizing and accepting oneself, and developing understanding and acceptance of others.*

Our children may struggle with social and emotional issues and deduce that something is wrong with them. Literature on identity formation indicates that children are able to detect differences between themselves and others, even as a toddler. This puts our sensitive children at risk for negative self-concept as well as social exclusion if they are not given proper information.



Children synthesize information from people and events and incorporate it into the "self". If not provided proper information, they are forced to "fill in the blanks" with input from other sources (e.g., the playmate who has called her names, the teacher who scolds the child for responding too often, or even be the parent who implements extreme measures to force a child to "behave like other kids") and can incorporate these negative descriptions of themselves. Helping children understand more about their characteristics will assist them to accept themselves as unique and marvelous beings. It will explain their feelings of difference and allow them to attach meaning to their thoughts and feelings.

If gifted children become aware that the differences they experience are common to others, it allows them to not only feel better about themselves but also to accept themselves as a whole.

Here are 4 main ways to assist the development of gifted identity in children:

Validation - awareness of and acknowledgement of giftedness (this needs to be done continually and not just once)

Affirmation - continual reinforcement & acceptance of who they are

Affiliation - provide them with access to alliance/association with "similar others" (both inside and outside the school system)

Affinity - nourish their individuality and support them in the things they are passionate about

There are many varying definitions for "giftedness". Commonly, gifted children are defined by *who they are* but more importantly it is about *what they need*. In other words, we often talk about giftedness only from the perspective of looking at the child from the **outside in** - when we should be focusing on what is happening from the **inside out**. We can get caught up focusing on external labels (you are smart, talented) and neglect to ask what is going on inside (what are you experiencing, how are you feeling?).



Everyone needs a sense of belonging. In the development of self, group identity is as important as personal identity. It gives the child a sense of connectedness, similar to those groupings that involve nationality, language, religion, or family. Understanding and interacting with those similar to oneself allows for better integration into social networks and a society as a whole.

Talking to children should entail more than just the dichotomy of gifted versus non-gifted concepts. *Rather than relating scores or numbers to children, it is beneficial to discuss the pattern of strengths and abilities.* Noting the strengths as well as areas of weakness or challenge is important. Descriptions of characteristics, learning profiles and cognitive style can be informative for gifted children and assist their academic and intellectual growth.

***Do not expect one conversation at the point of early identification to be sufficient.***

Adults serve as mirrors in which the self of the gifted child can be revealed. This means that growth and integration of the child's true self occurs in the space of the relationship between child and adult (Niehart 1998). Remember that words matter! "Killer Statements" are comments parents and educators sometimes use (often out of frustration or a misplaced idea that it will motivate gifted kids). These statements should be avoided at all costs:

- You did a great job but.....
- For someone so smart, you sure are acting.....
- This should be easy for a "smart kid like you".....
- As long as you do your best, honey.....
- Why can't you just be like everyone else (or be normal)....
- Why can't you stop being....
- How can you be so bright and have such little common sense....

Finally, parents need to have a solid understanding about the impact their own giftedness has on their own life before they can assist their children (*put on your own oxygen mask before assisting others!*). When parents minimize their own giftedness or fail to acknowledge their own differences, what children hear is, "It's not OK to know about this," or, "There's something bad about this." The implications for loss of the true self are obvious. To learn more about adult giftedness, I recommend Paula Prober's blog and new book "***Your Rainforest Mind***" and also Mary-Elaine Jacobsen's book "***The Gifted Adult***".

## **GATE 101 – Social Emotional Issues - List of Resources**

- Berg, Jesse (2015) **Visual Leap. A Step-by-Step Guide to Visual Learning for Teachers and Students.** Lamprey & Lee.
- Daniels, Susan and Michael M. Piechowski (2009) **Living With Intensity. Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability and Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults.** Great Potential Press.
- Gardner, Howard (2011) **Frames of Mind. The Theory of Multiple Intelligences.** Basic Books.
- Jacobsen, Mary-Elaine (1999) **The Gifted Adult. A Revolutionary Guide for Liberating Everyday Genius.** Ballantine Books.
- Light, Carolyn M. (2009) **All of Me. A Discussion about Discussing Giftedness With the Gifted.** *Gifted Education Communicator*. Summer 2009, Volume 40, Number 2, p. 19 (available as a PDF by request)
- Lind, Sharon (2001) **Overexcitability and the Gifted.** *The SENG Newsletter* 1(1): 3-6. (available as a PDF by request)
- Neihart, Maureen (1998) **Preserving the True Self of the Gifted Child** *Roeper Review*, 20:3, 187-191 (available as a PDF by request)
- Prober, Paula (2016) **Your Rainforest Mind: A Guide to the Well-Being of Gifted Adults and Youth.**
- Selznick, Richard (2009) **The Shut-Down Learner. Helping Your Academically Discouraged Child.** Sentient Publications.
- Silverman, Linda Kreger (2002) **Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner.** DeLeon Publishing.
- Webb, James T., Janet L. Gore, Edward R. Amend and Arlene R. DeVries (2007) **A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children.** Great Potential Press.
- Webb, James T., Edward R. Amend, Nadia E. Webb, Jean Goerss, Paul Beljan, and F. Richard Olenchack (2005) **Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults.** Great Potential Press.
- Paula Prober Blog – Your Rainforest Mind:  
<https://rainforestmind.wordpress.com/>