

GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PACKAGE FOR TEACHERS

E X T E N S I O N

# Module 3



Early Childhood  
Primary  
Secondary

Professor Miraca U.M. Gross



Australian Government  
Department of Education,  
Science and Training

THE UNIVERSITY OF  
NEW SOUTH WALES



**GERRIC**

Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre

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# Extension Level

## Introduction

Welcome to the Advanced Training Program of the Australian Government Professional Development Package for Teachers in Gifted and Talented Education.

As with the Core Package which you have completed previously, we want to individualise the Program as much as possible to optimise its relevance and usefulness to you.

Initially you will select from Early childhood, Primary or Secondary school context. For the purpose of this course we are defining early childhood as all pre-school or school years up to and including Year 2.

Additionally there is content differentiated by:

<b>Role</b>	Classroom Teacher 	Executive Staff 	Principal 
<b>Location</b>	Urban 	Rural 	
<b>Mode</b>	Self Study 	Small Group 	Whole Staff 

While using the package, you will be able to select content that is applicable to your context.

**Thank you! You're now ready to proceed.**

You have already completed the six Core Modules which looked at a wide range of issues. Let's briefly review the areas you covered.

### **Module 1: Understanding Giftedness**

We discussed the difference between gifts and strengths and examined Gagné's Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent and the many ways in which a student can be gifted. We explored the impact of personal and environmental characteristics on the translation of gifts (high potential) into talents (high performance). We looked at some of the ways in which gifted children and adolescents may differ from their age-peers in both their cognitive and their socio-affective development.

### **Module 2: The Identification of Gifted Students**

We looked at the principles of effective identification in early childhood, in the primary school years and in adolescence. We discussed how using multiple criteria - a **range** of objective and subjective measures, rather than one test or checklist on its own - can provide a 'safety net' which will catch as many as possible of the gifted or talented students in your school. We looked at teacher and parent nomination and the use of IQ, aptitude and achievement testing, off-level testing and the use of dynamic testing to identify students from disadvantaged and culturally diverse populations. Finally we looked at 'putting it all together' to provide a coherent and cohesive identification matrix.

### **Module 3: Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students**

This module focussed on ways in which intellectually or academically gifted children may differ from age-peers in their emotional maturity, and how the 'forced-choice dilemma' may lead to them 'dumbing down' or moderating their achievements for peer acceptance. We also explored the five forms of 'over-excitability' and noted that students who react more intensely than their classmates to intellectual, emotional or physical stimuli can sometimes be misdiagnosed as having Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

### **Module 4: Understanding Underachievement in Gifted Students**

We explored some of the causes of underachievement among gifted students - reasons why highly able young people may perform significantly below their potential. Low academic self-efficacy, boredom, learning disabilities, low teacher expectations and dysfunctional perfectionism were explored. Betts and Neihart's Profiles of the Gifted and Talented were introduced as a useful framework to identify and understand underachievement. Dynamic Testing was proposed as an effective means of identifying 'invisible underachievers' from culturally diverse and low socio-economic groups.

### **Module 5: Curriculum Differentiation for Gifted Students**

This module introduced some procedures which teachers can use to differentiate the level, pace and complexity of curriculum delivery for gifted learners through modifying content, process, product and learning environment. Pre-testing to assess what students already know allows us to minimise unnecessary revision by compacting the curriculum. Bloom's Taxonomy and the Williams model of curriculum development provide useful structures through which teachers can develop an enriched and challenging curriculum for gifted students, while the Kaplan model provides an excellent scaffold for developing theme-based independent study or research projects.

## **Module 6: Developing Programs and Provisions for Gifted Students**

This module explored some of the mythologies which have grown up around ability grouping and acceleration and introduced some of the research-based findings that support the use of these procedures for gifted and talented learners. Several forms of grouping and acceleration were described and practical hints were provided to maximise their effectiveness. The international guidelines on acceleration were introduced to enable teachers and parents to evaluate both a student's readiness for acceleration and which forms of acceleration might be most suitable.

**The Extension Level of the Professional Development Package builds on, and expands from, the Core Package.**



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E X T E N S I O N

# Module 3



Early Childhood



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# Module 3

## Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development

Welcome to Extension Module 3: Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development.

In this Module you'll explore the ways in which gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship differ from those of most of their age-peers and how these differences can affect their social interactions.

We'll look at current Australian research on how optimism and different forms of motivation can affect student achievement and we'll explore the effects of different types of perfectionism.

Families can contribute enormously to student achievement but, unfortunately, some family issues can also contribute to underachievement. We'll look at the complexities of both these situations and explore ways in which the school can support and assist parents of gifted underachievers, to empower these students to achieve.

**Professor Miraca U.M. Gross**



## **Extension Module 3: Early Childhood**

### **Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development**

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1. Why do many gifted students seek out older students as friends?
2. How can perfectionism both help and hinder talent development?
3. How does competition affect gifted students' motivation?
4. How does blaming teachers for students' school difficulties disempower students?

1. Children tend to gravitate to other children who are at similar levels of intellectual and emotional development. For intellectually gifted children, this tends to translate to age-peers of similar abilities or children two or more years older. An additional factor is that as students move from early childhood into adulthood, they pass through a series of stages in which their conceptions and expectations of friendship become more and more sophisticated and complex. Gifted children tend to have expectations of friendship which their age-peers have not yet developed, and this causes them to gravitate towards older students whose conceptions of friendship are more akin to theirs.

2. Perfectionism can be a positive force when it is linked to a realistic acceptance that perfect performance is seldom achievable and when it is achieved it is as a result of years of striving and improving one's performance. It can be a negative influence when students are allowed or encouraged to set standards for themselves which they cannot realistically attain or when teachers or parents focus primarily on what has not been achieved rather than what has been done successfully.

3. Some gifted students thrive on competition. It stimulates and motivates them. Others dislike it intensely. Motivational orientation, which we looked at in Core Module 3, seems to play an important part. In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than those who are focussed on **being** the best. Research suggests that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the smartest, cleverest or the most successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do.

4. Research studies have found that parents who continually attribute their children's success or failure to excellent teaching or poor teaching may instil in their children a belief that they themselves can do little to contribute towards their own success.

If you were not correct in your answers to these four questions you should benefit from at least some of the information that follows in this Module.

If your answers to all four questions were correct you may not need to complete this Module though we advise that you still skim-read it to check whether it offers you anything new.

Specialisation Module 3 offers further information for you to consider on issues in the social and emotional development of gifted and talented students.

## Outcomes

At the completion of this Extension Module you will be able to:

- understand why many gifted students seek out older students as friends.
- facilitate the development of positive social relationships in students who have difficulty finding friends.
- devise strategies to assist gifted students to develop some of the positive attitudes and habits associated with perfectionism and reduce unfacilitative or negative perfectionistic tendencies.
- understand how dynamics in the home-school relationship can assist or hinder gifted students' progress.

# Part 1

## Gifted students and the search for friendship

*‘When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often “a friend”. The children’s experience of school is completely coloured by the presence or absence of relationships with peers.’  
(Silverman, 1993, p. 72).*

The need for friendship is a driving force in people’s lives. Most of us choose friends on the basis of similarities - we look for people who have roughly the same interests, opinions, attitudes, sense of humour and expectations of friendship as we do. However, research has found that particularly in the early and middle years of primary school, the friendship expectations of intellectually gifted students differ significantly from those of their age-peers of average ability, while the conceptions of friendship held by very highly gifted students bear little resemblance to those held by the considerable majority of children with whom they are likely to be grouped for purposes of instruction - and, ironically, for purposes of socialisation!

### Influences on children’s friendship choices

Research identifies five main influences on children’s friendship choices:

- Children form friendships not primarily on the basis of chronological age, but on the basis of similarities in developmental stages. Intellectual and emotional maturity have a considerable influence on how children view friendships and on who they choose as friends. Teachers who work with intellectually disabled students often notice that these students seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability, or children two or more years younger than themselves. For much the same reason, intellectually gifted children tend to seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability or children two or more years older than themselves.



This search for ‘like-minded’ friends appears to begin in very early childhood. In a classic early study, researchers spent several days observing a mixed-ability group of three-year-olds at nursery school, measuring the number of times different children chose each other as spontaneous play companions and the length of time the pairs or small groups spent together. When they calculated the correlation between the mental age and spontaneous group participation, they found that those children who played together **most often** showed a remarkable similarity in developmental age while this similarity was even stronger for those who played together **longest** (Hubbard, 1929).

We talked in Core Module 1 about the long attention span shown by many intellectually gifted children. In play, it seems that this attention span is even longer when the play-partners are both bright.

Over the next few days watch the play patterns in the students in your class or group.

- Do regular play-partnerships appear?
- How often and for how long do these students play together?
- What do you notice about their attention span?
- Are there any differences between the play-partnerships in the classroom and in the playground?
- Do some children seem to seek out older children in the playground, where these children are more available?



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We talked in Core Module 1 about the long attention span shown by many intellectually gifted children. In play, it seems that this attention span is even longer when the play-partners are both bright.

Over the next few days watch the playground play patterns in the students in your school.

- Do regular play-partnerships appear?
- How often and for how long do these students play together?
- What do you notice about their attention span?
- Do some children seem to seek out older children?  
Ask these children's teachers about their social relationships within the class.
- Do they make friends easily or do they seem to be loners?

- Children's capacity to make social comparisons, which we discussed in Core Module 3, influences their ability to recognise similarities and differences between themselves and other children. The move to viewing other children as potential friends - people with whom one can develop reciprocal relationships - depends on the capacity to view the potential friend as an individual with his or her own characteristics, ideas and interests. In general, children don't start to make these social comparisons until approximately age 7, but gifted children acquire this ability rather earlier. They may start to notice, at surprisingly early ages, both the individuality of other children and the differences between their own interests, attitudes, likes and dislikes and those of their classmates.
- Children's play is an important element in building friendships. However the play interests of gifted children often differ from those of their age-peers. They are less interested in **physical** competition (races, ball games, etc) and tend to prefer games or activities where **ideas** and **strategies** are matched against each other. This can place the gifted student in yet another form of 'forced-choice dilemma'; play can become an uneasy

compromise between their own interests and abilities and their desire to be accepted into a social group (Silverman, 1993). Children and adolescents who are less willing or less able to make such a compromise often become 'loners', preferring to invent solitary intellectual games which often centre on fantasy and imagined adventure.

Children's play interests are strongly determined by their stage of cognitive development, and the play preferences of intellectually gifted children tend to resemble those of children some years older (Gross, 1999). Teachers, however, should be aware that they may not observe the **true** play preferences of gifted children if they are not provided with companions who share their play interests.

Solitary play in gifted children, rather than indicating social maladjustment or peer rejection, can simply signal the unavailability of children who share their interests.



*The games that gifted children invent for their own personal enjoyment can appear deceptively simple but may have remarkable degrees of complexity. Hadley, aged 7, had a collection of 120 model cars with which he played on a regular basis. His favourite game was racing as many as 70 of the cars against each other on a dirt track in his garden. However, the structure of the race was complex, and progressed through a process of elimination heats based on the speed and distance each car had travelled. A single race meeting could take up to several hours (Gross, 2004).*

*If Hadley had played this game in the playground, passing teachers might well have remained quite oblivious to the intricate interweaving of the variables of size, mass and friction which, for Hadley, were the whole point of the game. They might simply have seen the activity as a small boy playing with cars.*

*However, Hadley had learned not to play this game at school. It required a long attention span and delayed gratification, as the outcome of even one elimination heat could take up to an hour. It is doubtful whether his classmates would have had the interest or patience.*

- Children's reading interests can also influence friendship choice. Someone who is passionate about reading is unlikely to choose, and keep, as a friend someone who thinks books are boring. In addition, the reading interest of gifted students tend to be those of students some years older.

Many gifted students in primary school seek out books which portray intellectual, emotional or moral striving on the part of the protagonist, eg, 'chronicles' which follow a character's growth to moral maturity or 'quests' which portray a conflict between good and evil.

Many highly gifted children who display the sensual and imaginal 'overexcitabilities' discussed in Core Module 3 are attracted to certain literature because of the poetic beauty of the language. For example, at age 11, Christopher Otway, in Gross's longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+, developed a special interest in the Old Testament, particularly the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Psalms while Adam, of the same study, became enthralled with Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* because of the lyricism of the language (Gross, 2004).

Children with such unusual and advanced reading interests can experience extreme difficulty in finding age-peers with whom they can discuss their joy in reading. Indeed, some conceal their unusual interests for fear of derision. When the teacher of 7-year-old Anastasia asked her, in class, what she was reading at home, the child answered; 'A book about bunnies'. It was *Watership Down!*

- Researchers studying friendship in children and adults point out the contrast between **popularity** and **friendship**. Popularity is characterised by the deliberate acquisition of a wide circle of playmates or 'cohort members'; a certain degree of dependency on peer approval; and conformity to peer conventions, behaviours, rules and routines. Gifted students seem to leave behind, rather earlier than their age-peers, the social behaviours which characterise a desire for popularity and seem to seek, rather earlier than age-peers, relationships with a smaller circle of playmates who seem to display more of the functions of friendship - companionship, stimulation, intimacy and affirmation (Gottman & Parker, 1986).

A key issue in friendship is the **quality**, rather than the **quantity** of one's friends. Close friendships centre on an exchange of feelings, insights and confidences. Friendship offers support, closeness, warmth, trust, enjoyment and kindness; indeed, true friendship seeks the good of the other. The relative social and emotional maturity of intellectually gifted children allows them to appreciate, at earlier ages than usual, the difference between friendship and popularity. Popularity is a competitive distortion of friendship in which importance is placed on the **quantity**, rather than the quality, of 'followers' (or dates, or invitations, or votes) one can attract, and which seeks self-affirmation rather than the affirmation of the friendship bond.

Mary Ann Swiatek (1995) in a study of highly gifted 7th-10th grade students, found that many of her subjects who were actively acknowledging and using their high abilities 'discount(ed) the importance of popularity as it is traditionally understood in schools' (p.156) as they believed that many gifted students who had achieved popularity had done so by compromising their values so that others would like them.

The five issues discussed above - developmental age, the early onset of norm-referencing, their different play interests and reading interests, and their tendency to seek friendship rather than popularity - serve as powerful, interacting influences on the friendship choices exercised by gifted children. Gifted children and adolescents have different expectations of friendship from those held by the majority of their age-peers; they seem to view the nature of friendship, and the obligations of friendship, in a different light.

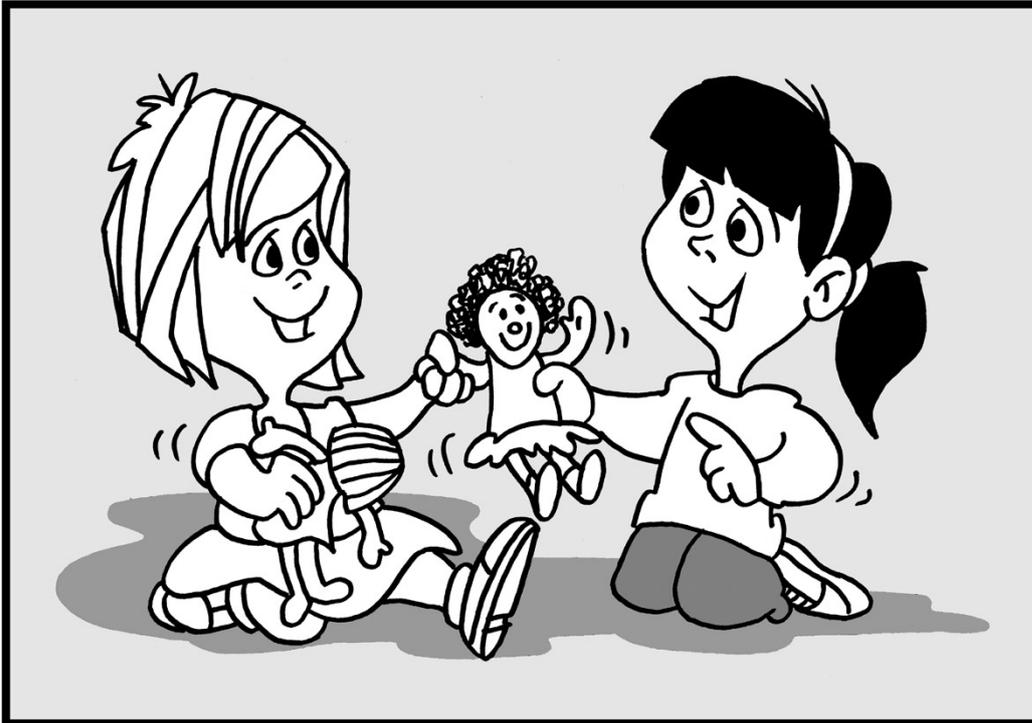


Jarred, aged 6, was attending a GERRIC vacation program for gifted students. He had thoroughly enjoyed the math/science workshop in which he participated. The children, working in pairs, had created load-bearing bridges and Jarred had worked with Daniel whom he had met for the first time. At the close of the program Jarred dissolved in a traumatic, tearful display of intense emotion which lasted for 20 minutes. His mother was unable to console him, but, as she explained to the course leader, this was not a unique situation. He was devastated by the fact that at the end of the session Daniel had left with his mother, and had taken their model with him. It was a superbly structured bridge and the two boys had worked long and hard, cooperating, negotiating and revising their ideas. Jarred had never before experienced such a harmonious relationship with another child. He thought Daniel and he had become friends.

Initially, Helen, the course leader, thought that Jarred's distress was because Daniel had the model and he did not, but she swiftly became aware that the issues went much deeper. Between sobs, Jarred asserted that he did not want the model back, because that would mean that Daniel would be upset. From his point of view, an injustice had been done to his sense of fairness **and friendship**. He felt that Daniel and he should have discussed the situation about who would take the model home - **as friends would**; in fact he would have been happy to have his new 'good friend' keep the model. The model was infinitely less important than what had seemed to be the beginning of friendship.

A study conducted with 700 Australian children in the early childhood to early secondary years found that children's conceptions of friendship form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age (Gross, 2002). The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

**Stage 1: 'Play Partner':** In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on 'play-partnership'. A friend is seen simply as another child who readily plays with you and allows you to use or borrow her playthings. In general this stage characterises the early childhood years.

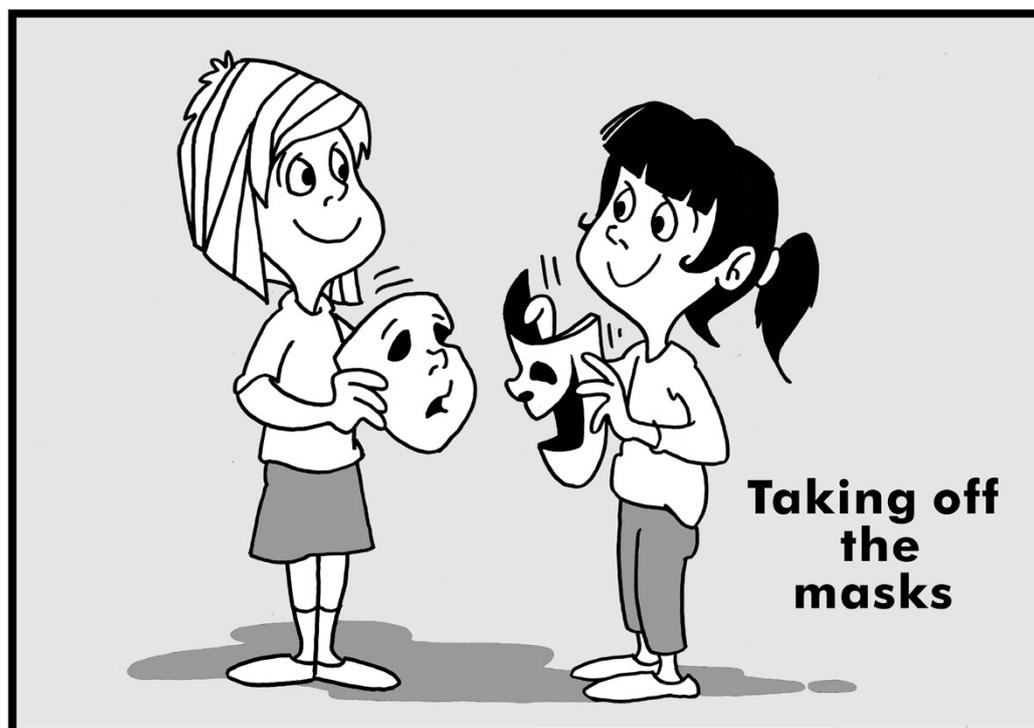


**Stage 2: 'People to chat to':** The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between 'friends' are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged. This stage is most noticeable about age 7-9.

**Stage 3: 'Help and encouragement':** At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; children do not yet see themselves as having the obligation to provide help or support in return. Of course, there is overlap between the stages - some children enter a stage rather earlier than their age-peers and others enter much later - but in general this stage characterises 9-11 year olds.

**Stage 4: 'Intimacy/empathy':** The child now realises that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flow both ways and, indeed, the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding. In general children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12.

**Stage 5: 'The sure shelter':** The title comes from a passage in one of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. 'A faithful friend is a sure shelter: whoever finds one has found a rare treasure' (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. A 12-year-old boy in Miraca Gross's longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+ (Gross, 2004) defined a friend as: 'A place you go to when you need to take off the masks. You can take off your camouflage with a friend and still feel safe.'



Many children - and indeed some adults - do not develop this conception of friendship.

Gross's (2004) study compared the friendship conceptions of three groups of students - children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children and exceptionally-profoundly gifted children. (You may want to refer briefly to the section on levels of giftedness in Extension Module 1.) **The study demonstrated strongly that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age as by mental age.** A strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. While the age ranges noted above characterise students of average intellectual ability, gifted children pass through the stages earlier - in some cases, some years earlier.

Gifted children begin to look for friends with whom they can develop close and trusting relationships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability are looking for play partners.

As stated earlier, many previous studies have suggested that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children of above average ability. This new study suggests that they may not only be seeking the intellectual compatibility of mental age peers; they may also be actively looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

Interestingly, the differences in friendship conception between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the early childhood years and the early years of primary, than in the years of early adolescence. **In Years 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children had the conceptions of friendship which characterise average ability children three or more years older.** It may be at this age that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship.

Very highly gifted children may be even more at risk. **The study found that children of IQ 160+ tend to begin the search for ‘the sure shelter’ - friendships of complete trust, honesty and fidelity - four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage.** Indeed, exceptionally and profoundly gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12. No wonder these children encounter difficulties with socialisation! There is little common ground between a 6-year-old who is seeking the ‘sure shelter’ and an age-peer who is looking for a ‘play partner’.

Substantial **gender differences** appeared in this Australian study. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls were, on average, two years further along the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. This suggests that gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability, as they will appear so dramatically different from the majority of boys of their age. This may explain why, particularly in the early years of school, gifted boys sometimes prefer the company of girls.



Another characteristic of gifted students is that they tend to prefer the company of a few close friends rather than large, looser groups. This is also a characteristic of children who are introverts rather than extroverts. Gifted children who are introverts - and as discussed in Linda Silverman's valuable book, *Counselling the gifted and talented*, there seems to be a growing body of literature which connects the two (Silverman, 1993) - may have a double ‘need’ for a few closer relationships rather than many more ‘surface’ relationships.



Gifted children in rural and remote areas may be in a particularly sensitive situation. There may be few students of their own age level with whom they have enough in common, in terms of intellectual and emotional development, abilities and interests, for close friendships to develop spontaneously.

Grade advancement can be one means through which gifted students can be allowed readier access to students whose levels of intellectual and emotional maturity are closer to theirs. In one- or two-teacher primary schools, younger gifted children should be given regular access to older students. The teacher could explain to some of the older students that the younger child is lonely for companionship because her interests are more like those of older children and that they could help by befriending her.

As discussed earlier, girls tend to develop, in terms of their friendship expectations, earlier than boys, and gifted boys may sometimes gravitate towards girls for companionship. This may put them at risk for mockery or even ostracism from other boys. **Primary teachers should be sensitive towards this and try to create a class or school climate in which cross gender friendships are accepted.**

A number of gifted children's associations, and universities, run weekend or school vacation enrichment programs and these can be a wonderful opportunity for rural children to meet a wider range of students who share their interests. Some universities will offer sponsorships to students from rural and isolated regions to attend these courses. Alternatively, some service clubs may be willing to fund travel and accommodation costs.

## How do motivation and optimism influence achievement?

As discussed in the Core level of this Module, research has traditionally suggested that intellectually gifted students tend to be characterised by high levels of intrinsic motivation - the urge to learn for the sheer love of learning - rather than extrinsic motivation - working hard to achieve a good grade or to be praised by the teacher. This leaning towards task-involvement seems to be intensified when the student is able to experience 'flow' - engagement with a task which is just above the student's current level of mastery - in his or her Zone of Proximal Development. We will discuss the influence of 'flow' on children's task engagement in Extension Module 4.

Researchers have debated whether intrinsic motivation is a stable personality trait or whether it can be induced through the provision of challenging material and an intellectually stimulating environment. The trend over the last few years is to regard intrinsic motivation as 'situational'; students' motivational levels will depend on where they are, who they are with and what they are doing at the time. It is important to note, also, that academic challenge may not always produce a motivated response. If a gifted student has 'cruised by' for years, gaining high grades for work that she has mastered with little effort, the provision of work at which she has to **strive** to succeed may result in stress and anxiety.

More recent research has explored the effects of 'strain on coping resources'. This is usually thought of as the results of an **overload** of work or responsibilities; however, it may also be the results of prolonged tedium - **underload**! Either way the individual reacts negatively and one result can be a depression of intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can work in harmony. Recent Australian research highlights the positive association of optimism with both intrinsic motivation **and** extrinsic motivation (Hoekman, McCormick & Barnett, 2005). When a student feels optimistic about her learning situation - that things are going well, that she is having a good day, that she is achieving, that she is feeling energetic, or that she is positively engaged with the work she has been given - this may have a positive impact on both forms of motivation. By contrast, prolonged overload or underload may negatively affect optimism and, by association, result in decreased motivation.

Gifted students who are presented, too often and for too long, with a preponderance of material that they have already mastered, and which, furthermore, they mastered without truly having to engage intellectually with the work, are unlikely to feel good about learning. By contrast, the 'flow' experiences associated with the intrinsic pleasure of learning and talent development are often characterised by 'the combination of intrinsic enjoyment and intense concentration within a clear, long-term extrinsic reward structure' (Hoekman et al, 2005, p. 108). Hoekman and her colleagues suggest that teachers should aim to provide students with meaningful and challenging opportunities for academic and personal growth in the context of strong social support networks.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum presented in a socially optimal context which includes interaction with ability peers would seem to be a valuable catalyst in the development of optimism and healthy levels of motivation.

## Perfectionism: The two edged sword

Over the last few years Australians have developed very ambivalent attitudes towards perfectionism. We like to see it in people who are responsible for our safety - doctors and nurses for example - or who provide essential services (few things induce greater fury than a taxi-driver or bus driver who gets lost), or who provide sporting or popular entertainment (the soccer player who kicks an own goal is not easily forgiven). We almost insist on it in classical musicians and dancers, and in Olympic athletes. In a sense, they are there to be perfect. But we often don't appreciate others expecting it of us, and it has become politically incorrect to encourage it in children.

Nowadays many psychologists and educators view perfectionism as psychologically unhealthy. It is often viewed as leading to underachievement, frustration and low self-esteem. And indeed it **can** lead to such problems if it is poorly managed or allowed to become the dominant force in a student's achievement motivation. However, it can also be a source of great satisfaction and it can be a powerful force in personal and professional growth.

Patricia Schuler (2002), a counsellor and educational consultant in New York, has succinctly summarised the major findings about perfectionism in gifted students:

- As a group, gifted students tend to be perfectionistic.
- They are rather more perfectionistic than students of average ability.
- Their perfectionism can be a powerful force for high achievement.

Schuler emphasises, however, that perfectionism can be either healthy or neurotic. Healthy perfectionists are 'those who derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits' (2003, p. 72). Neurotic perfectionists, on the other hand, 'are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things well enough to warrant that feeling' (2003, p. 72). Other researchers categorise this dichotomy as **enabling** perfectionism which empowers one towards success and **disabling** perfectionism which stunts one's capacity to achieve at the level of which one is truly capable.

However, to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'Some are born perfectionistic, some achieve perfectionism and some have perfectionism thrust upon them'.

In some gifted students, perfectionism seems to be a powerful innate drive. It is a longing to produce, physically, ideas that exist in the mind but which have not yet taken concrete form. In the Early Childhood strand of Core Module 1 we described Alexa who a few days after her 5th birthday tore up her first five attempts to write a thank you letter to her much loved grandma. Alexa wanted her writing to be as neat and clearly aligned as the print in the birthday card her grandma had given her - and her 5-year-old printing just wouldn't come out that way!



Dabrowski, whose research on 'over-excitabilities' was discussed in the Core level of this Module, believed that perfectionism was largely innate and that it was a strongly positive quality in personality - 'the striving for self-perfectionism that propels the individual towards higher level development' (Silverman, 1993, p. 57).

Other scholars believe that even when it is not innate, perfectionism in its **enabling** sense, as an empowering drive for self-improvement, can be achieved through dedication and effort. The student thoughtfully analyses her strengths and weaknesses and works to optimise the former and lessen the negative effects of the latter.

In other cases **disabling** perfectionism may unintentionally be 'taught' to gifted students by parents who are themselves perfectionistic or who push or hurry the child. David Elkind, author of *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon* (Elkind, 1981), spoke out strongly against parents who 'hothouse' children - although interestingly he later spoke out equally strongly against teachers who used his book to argue against accelerating gifted students academically (Elkind, 1988). Elkind was adamant that accelerating is not 'hurrying'; he emphasised that it is a professional response to gifted students' naturally accelerated pace of learning.

Disabling perfectionism may also be accidentally taught by teachers who teach or model performance goals the need to **be** the best - rather than learning goals - the drive to do one's **personal** best. (We looked at those contrasting goals in Core Module 3.) A class climate which over-emphasises a view of competition as 'one wins, the others lose' can lead to anxiety and a fear of failure.

Some perfectionists feel the need to control their environment by directing their high expectations of themselves onto others. Parents may demand unrelentingly high standards of their children. Other adults may demand unrealistically high standards of achievement of colleagues or employees.

Young children like Alexa whose 5-year-old fingers couldn't produce the 'perfect' script she visualised for her thank you letter may need very sympathetic and sensitive handling. Pre-school teachers who notice early 'negative perfectionist' tendencies can alert parents to ways of handling this. The following behaviours and suggested responses were generated by James Alvino and his colleagues from the journal *Gifted Child Today*.

### Signs of perfectionism in young children

- High levels of anxiety
- Relentless self-criticism
- A tendency to magnify and generalise imperfections: 'I'm no good at anything.'
- Excessive criticism of others
- Fear of trying new things (fear of failure)
- Inability to share responsibility for fear that things won't come out perfectly: 'I'd rather do it myself.'
- Feelings of inferiority or inadequacy
- Tendency to depression or feeling flat after completion of a task when the 'high' of success has worn off (Alvino, 1989, p. 130).

### Advice on curing (or avoiding) perfectionism

- Give your child **unconditional** love. Try to separate your child's behaviour (whether it warrants criticism or praise) from his or her sense of self. Use 'That was a naughty thing to do' rather than 'You are naughty.'
- Forge strong emotional bonds with your child. Respect your child's feelings - negative or positive - and communicate openly about feelings.
- As your young child approaches school age, or as soon as he or she is capable of understanding issues rather than just facts, talk about perfection as an unattainable ideal. No one is perfect - the goal is to do the best one can.
- Provide safe opportunities for your child to 'fail' from time to time. A gradual but continuing commitment to trying new experiences - a new food, a new friend, a new place to visit or a new skill - can help 'innoculate' your child against fear of failure.
- Encourage your child to be a 'persistent explorer'. Help them see that trial and error is a legitimate means of discovering new things, that a mistake can be as illuminating a learning experience as immediate success.
- In situations that require problem solving, help your child see that there are alternative ways of doing things; that it is not always 'one right way and the rest wrong ways'.
- Be a good role model. Let your child see **you** fail and bounce back. Be able to laugh at yourself and at the foibles we all experience. Show that you accept your own limitations and concentrate on your strengths (Alvino, 1989, pp. 135-136).



Mrs Connor and Mrs Hale teach Year 1 classes at the same school. Cathy, in Mrs Connor's class, is highly gifted and has always been a bit of a loner - not from choice but rather because her emotional maturity and interests are so very different from those of her classmates. Recently Mrs Hale and Mrs Connor have been bringing their classes together for some subjects and Cathy has formed a close friendship with Shona, a gifted student in Mrs Hale's class. The two girls spend every recess and lunchtime together and spend hours together after school and at weekends. Cathy is happier than her family or her teachers have ever seen her. 'I can talk to Shona about things that **matter**', she told her mum.

A difficulty arises, however, when Shona's mum tells Mrs Hale that she is concerned that Shona is now spending all her time with Cathy and has lost interest in her other friends. She would rather see Shona make a wider circle of friends. However, at the same time, Cathy's mum, who is delighted with the change in her daughter, approaches the school Principal and asks for Cathy to be moved into Mrs Hale's class so that the new friendship can be facilitated! Mrs Connor is a bit 'miffed' at this; she doesn't want to lose her 'star' student!

Consider this situation through the lens of what you now know about how gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to differ from those of age-peers. How might you advise Shona's and Cathy's mums? What might you say to Mrs Connor?



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A difficulty arises, however, when Shona's mum tells Mrs Hale that she is concerned that Shona is now spending all her time with Cathy and has lost interest in her other friends. She would rather see Shona make a wider circle of friends. However, at the same time, Cathy's mum, who is delighted with the change in her daughter, approaches you and asks for Cathy to be moved into Shona's class so that the new friendship can be facilitated! Mrs Connor is a bit 'miffed' at this; she doesn't want to lose her 'star' student!

Consider this situation through the lens of what you now know about how gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to differ from those of age-peers. How might you advise Shona's and Cathy's mums? How could you respond to Cathy's mum's request for the class change? What might you say to Mrs Connor?



It might be useful to talk to both mums about the hierarchy of children's friendship conceptions and the tendency of gifted students to have developed expectations of friendship which are more like those of older children. Cathy's comment that she can talk to Shona about 'things that matter' suggests that, young though she is, she is well past the 'play partner' or even 'someone to chat to' stages of friendship. Shona's mum needs to understand that it is **okay** if her daughter prefers to link with one special friend right now rather than 'play the field'. Parents sometimes worry that the child seems to be putting all his or her friendship 'eggs' in the one basket. However, because the quality of gifted children's friendships is different, they have an earlier need for the exchange of confidences and the discovery of mutual bonds. This is more easily achieved in pairs than in larger groups.

Perhaps the Principal could talk to both mothers about Cathy's mum's proposal that Cathy move to Shona's class. (At least she's willing that it should be her daughter who will make the shift!)

Mrs Connor needs support to understand that Cathy's mum's request is in no way a slur on her own professional competence. The suggestion comes from a natural desire to see her daughter's new found happiness continue. She must have been very worried about her daughter's loneliness.



It might be useful to talk to both Mrs Connor and Mrs Hale about the hierarchy of children's friendship conceptions and the tendency of gifted students to have developed expectations of friendship which are more like those of older children. Cathy's comment that she can talk to Shona about 'things that matter' suggests that, young though she is, she is well past the 'play partner' or even 'someone to chat to' stages of friendship.

You could also talk to each of the two mums about their specific concerns. Shona's mum needs to understand that it is **okay** if her daughter prefers to link with one special friend right now rather than 'play the field'. Parents sometimes worry that the child seems to be putting all his or her friendship 'eggs' in the one basket. However, because the quality of gifted children's friendships is different, they have an earlier need for the exchange of confidences and the discovery of mutual bonds. This is more easily achieved in pairs than in larger groups.

Cathy's mum seems to be really invested in facilitating her daughter's special friendship with Shona. Moving class isn't something a parent suggests lightly. Perhaps you could talk to both parents about the proposal. If there is room for an additional student in Mrs Hale's class, and Mrs Hale is willing to take Cathy, this might be a happy solution, as Cathy doesn't seem to have any friends in her own class. If it is not going to be practical this year, perhaps the girls could be placed in the same class next year.

Mrs Connor needs support to understand that Cathy's mum's request is in no way a slur on her own professional competence. The suggestion comes from a natural desire to see her daughter's new found happiness continue. She must have been very worried about her daughter's loneliness.

# Part 2

## What characterises families of gifted and talented students?

### Family demographics

Studies of the families, and family situations, of academically gifted students conducted over the last 60 years are surprisingly consistent in their findings. However, please remember that while the facts reported below are **tendencies** - and in some cases strong tendencies - they are not **absolutes**! There are exceptions to every one of these findings!

- Gifted children tend to be only children or oldest children. (The incidence varies across studies from 59% to 67%.)
- They tend to come from small families.
- Their parents tend to have delayed starting their families, so the average age of parents at the birth of the first child tends to be substantially older than the average for their community or country.
- Parents tend to be highly educated and to value education highly.
- The incidence of divorce among parents of gifted children tends to be substantially lower than in the regular community.

These findings have been synthesised from reviews of the research literature conducted over several years by many researchers (see, for example, Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gross, 2004). We should be aware, however, that these findings arise from studies of children and adolescents who have been identified as gifted! Some arise from studies of gifted underachievers; others, however, arise from studies of students who are successful achievers at school - students whom Gagné would define as **talented**. Parents of small families would probably have more time to spend on their children than parents of large families. Only children and oldest children have longer periods in their early years of being the main focus of parental attention. Parents who work for several years before starting their families may well be more financially secure. Parents who themselves have higher degrees are more likely to teach their children the value of higher education. All these issues, which Gagné would view as facilitative environmental catalysts, affect talent development.

More important than demographics, however, are the **expectations** that parents of gifted students have for their children and how the family assists these children to develop their gifts into talents.

## Parenting by positive expectations

Davis and Rimm (2004) emphasise that if high achievement, positive attitudes and constructive behaviour are expected and reinforced by parents, children will internalise and practise these values. However, it is important that the messages given to children by their parents are **clear** and **consistent**.

Studies of young people who grew up to be highly successful in their careers (eg Bloom, 1985; Walberg, Williams & Zeiser, 2003; Gross, 2004) have found that the messages transmitted by their parents had a lot in common. Their parents:

- placed strong emphasis on trying to do one's best, working hard and spending one's time constructively.
- emphasised the importance of study, learning and school.
- taught respect for individuality and tolerance for the points of view of others.
- recognised that a positive and achievement-oriented atmosphere also had to include the need for reasonable amounts of fun and recreation - a balance of work and play.
- provided a balance of support and challenge.
- **provided predictable and consistent expectations for conduct.**

It is important that parents of intellectually gifted children continue to accept their obligations to guide, protect and monitor their children. No matter how highly gifted a child may be, he or she is still a child and does not have the maturity and experience to make ultimate decisions on his or her conduct. It is the parents who do have the maturity and experience to set appropriate limits on the child's behaviour.

The following quotation comes from the 1970s when we were less gender-inclusive in our pronouns than we are now - but the meaning still stands clear and is as relevant as it ever was.

'Discipline your gifted child when he needs disciplining. Correct him when he needs correction. Give direction when he needs direction. He should not be granted special privileges nor should unacceptable behaviour be tolerated because of his intellectual gifts.' (Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977)

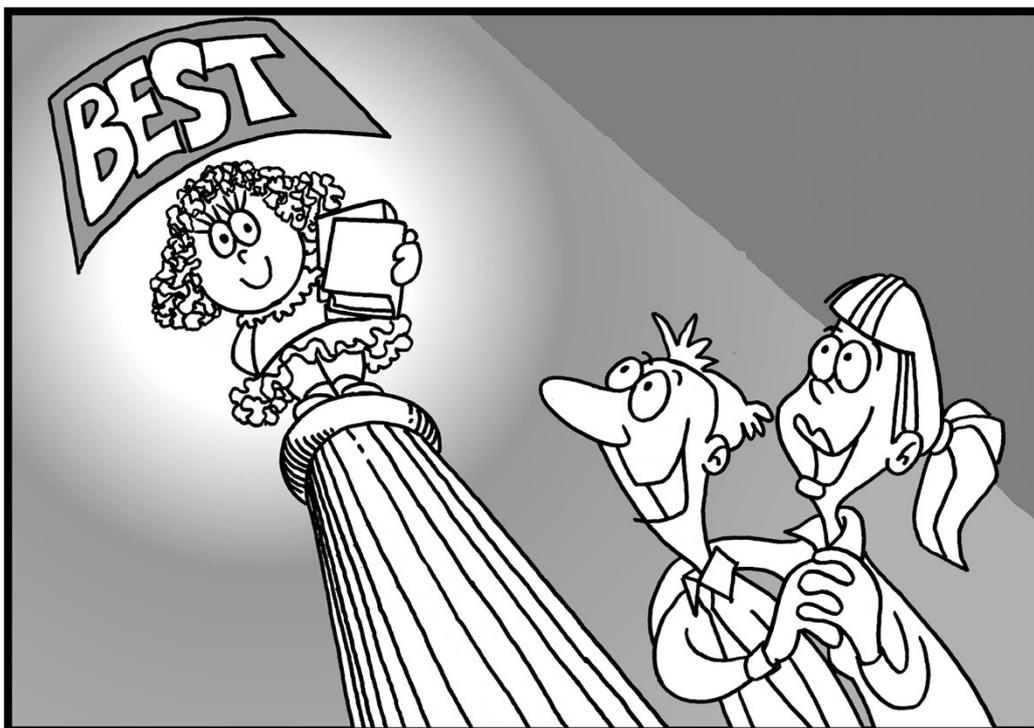
## Handling competition

Today's society is competitive. We compete for jobs, social status, success and even partners. For students talented in sports, athletics or music, competition is built into the talent development process. Does pressure help or disadvantage gifted students under competition situations? Of course, it is in part an issue of personality but what do researchers generally find?

In Core Module 3 we compared **task involvement** (focussing on learning goals) and **ego-involvement** (focussing on performance goals). In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than ego-involved students who tend to focus on **being** the best. Self-esteem is higher in task-involved students

than in their ego-involved age-peers (Gross, 1997) and, as will be discussed later, these students are less likely to experience a decrease in self-esteem when they enrol in ability grouped programs.

Davis and Rimm (2004) point out that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the **smartest**, the **prettiest**, the **cleverest** or the **most** successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do. An additional risk is that such normatively expressed praise may create unrealistic expectations in the children that they are expected to maintain this superior status indefinitely.



Of course, some individuals thrive on competition. For some gifted young people competition provides a powerful encouragement to perform to the very best of their ability. For some it also promotes resilience - the capacity to get up and try again, even better and more successfully, when one has not at first succeeded. Karnes and Riley (2005) suggest that entering competitions can enhance gifted students' critical thinking skills, presentation and performance skills, and self-confidence - as long as competitions are properly monitored and parents emphasise to children that the essence of competitions is that there are losers as well as winners. Rimm and Olenchak (1991) found that Future Problem Solving proved helpful in reversing underachievement in some gifted students who had initially been reluctant to compete for fear of failing.

The following suggestions for reducing stress related to competition come from a range of research studies.

- Involvement in a range of competitive activities may help children learn to cope with competition in a more relaxed way. Regular experience of competition may help reduce anxiety.
- Encourage the child to focus on the quality of her participation in the event rather than the place or mark she scored. (Parents need to model this too, or the point will be lost!)
- Allow children to talk openly about their fears and anxieties about competition. Avoid giving the child the idea that expressing negative feelings is taboo. Parents can encourage the child by saying ‘What’s the worst thing that could happen in the competition? How likely is it for that to happen?’
- Use humour to counteract stress. Parents can gently mock themselves for their own anxieties - making it clear to the child that this is what they are doing.
- Encourage the highly competitive achiever to engage in a balance of activities which are non-competitive.



*Ellen, aged 7, entered a short story writing competition set by her primary school. She worked hard on her story, thoughtfully choosing descriptive phrases and thinking about how her characters would speak and behave. Ellen’s teacher told her mother, privately, that she had never seen a child of Ellen’s age take so much care and display so much concentration.*

*Ellen didn’t win her section of the competition, nor did she come second or third. She was bitterly disappointed - as were her teacher and her mother. However, the judges did award her a ‘Highly Commended’ and one of the judges wrote on her study ‘Shows promise’. Ellen’s mum explained the meaning of ‘commended’ and her teacher, Ms Davis, explained that ‘shows promise’ meant that she had talent and would improve with practice. “Shows promise” is about what you will be in the future,’ she explained to Ellen. ‘It means you’re going to get better and better if you continue to work on your writing as you’ve been doing.’*

*By encouraging Ellen to change her performance-oriented view of the competition into a task-oriented perception, Ellen’s mother and teacher helped her see that winning or losing was only one aspect of competition; an equally important aspect was learning to improve.*

## Forming positive school-family partnerships

As this Module is being written, the Australian media have been focussing, with concern, on the behaviour of parents who seem to view the school-family relationship as one of conflict, rather than of cooperation. These individuals generally form a small minority in a school's parent body but their influence is still disturbing, particularly as there is a substantial amount of research that suggests that parents who regularly enter into conflict with the school, and who discuss regularly, with their children, their dissatisfaction with their child's school or teachers, tend to have children who develop as academic underachievers.

(The following section is adapted, with acknowledgement, from Gross, M.U.M. (2003). Does criticising your child's teacher disempower your child? *Understanding Our Gifted*, 15 (4), 22-23.)

James and Shelagh Gallagher (1994), in a study of families of gifted students who were underachieving in school, found something disturbing. The view of education which the parents were presenting to their bright but underperforming children was that the child's success in school was primarily the responsibility of the teacher, rather than of the child himself. If the student was underperforming, it was the fault of the teacher. If the student had succeeded in previous years, it had had been through good teaching rather than through the child's efforts or ability. By denying the student's involvement in her success or failure, these parents were disempowering the student. They were encouraging their children to see themselves as passive recipients of instruction.

Although these parents were concerned about their son or daughter's underachievement and genuinely wanted to help the child improve, they were going about it the wrong way. They were failing to model, for the child, an **intrinsic** motivation to achieve in academic work - a task-oriented desire to learn for the sheer satisfaction of learning. Another problem was that the parents seldom modelled a healthy respect for school or for the education system. Indeed, a substantial number of the parents were openly critical, in front of their children, of their children's teachers and the school's policies.

If parents model a belief that the education their children receive is trivial, or boring or of little value, their children will develop the same attitude. If parents tell a child that the year he spends with a particular teacher is a waste of time, the child will believe this and moderate his efforts accordingly. Parents need to model a love of learning and a respect for the ongoing process of education even in those years where they may feel their gifted child is 'marking time'.

In their study, Gallagher and Gallagher found that the parents of gifted underachievers rarely spoke about their work or shared their career interests with their families. When they **did** speak about their jobs, most took a very negative perspective even when they had invested many years in preparation for high level careers. Sadly, in doing this they were modelling, for their children, a view that the years of study which had led to their employment had been a waste of time.

A striking contrast is provided by the parents in a well known study, conducted by Benjamin Bloom (yes, the creator of Bloom's taxonomy!) who followed the careers of 120 young adults who had achieved world-class success as concert pianists, swimmers, tennis players, mathematicians, sculptors and research neurologists. One of the main findings of this study was that the families in which these young people grew up actively modelled a valuing of the talent field in which their children excelled. While the parents themselves might not themselves have been professional musicians, scientists or sportspersons, they expressed a keen interest in sport, music or science.

‘As a consequence, young children were exposed regularly to activities connected with their subsequent talent fields; they were supported and rewarded for behaviors related to the fields; and they learned in informal ways about knowledge and skills of the activity in which they would eventually excel. The talent area provided activities and amusement for children and their parents - and an interest for them to share’ (Sosniak, 2003, p. 250).

As well as a valuing of their children’s own talent area, the parents of Bloom’s subjects placed, in their own lives, a strong emphasis on striving for excellence, persisting in the face of difficulty or hardship and seeking to achieve one’s potential.

‘It was not enough to stay busy. Emphasis was placed on doing the best one is capable of. Once goals were attained, there was pride in achievement, the reward for a job well done’ (Sloane, 1985, p. 440).

In contrast to the parents in the Gallagher and Gallagher study, the emphasis for Bloom’s parents was on the development of an intrinsic motivation to achieve. Their children were encouraged to see themselves not as ‘empty vessels’ to be filled with knowledge or skill, but as active partners, with their teachers or coaches, in the process of talent development.

There are remarkable similarities between the home environments of Bloom’s subjects and the young people of IQ 160+ in Miraca Gross’s longitudinal study (Gross, 2004). In both the American and the Australian studies, the majority of the families modelled a love of learning and a solid respect for education - and they continued to model this even in the years when their children’s schools were not providing an optimal - or even, in some cases, an adequate - education for their children. Their respect for the educative process - the acquisition of knowledge and skills - never faltered. Even in their own leisure time, the parents chose hobbies which involved learning and practice - eg, reading history, playing musical instruments, china painting, tapestry, short story writing, sports participation at highly competitive levels, gourmet cooking and astronomy. These parents brought to their own undertakings the pursuit of excellence, the striving for success, the concern for detail and precision and the pleasure in talent development that they sought to inculcate in their children.

A striking characteristic of the parents and grandparents of the young people in Gross’s study is their propensity to become involved in service clubs and charity organisations. These people give their spare time and talents freely to help others. Because of the talent for organisation and administration which many of them possess, they tend to occupy leadership positions in these clubs or organisations and spend much of their free time in voluntary and unpaid service. Many of them are involved in organisations which support children with intellectual or physical disabilities. **This stands in striking contrast to the stereotyped perception of parents of the gifted as over-ambitious and selfish individuals whose only concern is to promote the interests of their own children!**

Gross (2004) describes how many of the young people in her study (the majority are now in their middle to late twenties) have followed in their parents' footsteps, becoming involved in the same or other charity organisations, volunteering many hours of their spare time in voluntary service. She believes that this is due, at least in part, to the sense of empowerment which comes with knowing that one can take responsibility for one's own intellectual growth. If we teach our children that they can make a difference to their own lives, they are more likely to believe that they can make a difference to the lives of others.

It is essential that we teach gifted students, like all students, to respect and value education. This includes making them aware that while the skills of their teachers may vary, one thing that stands constant is their **own** capacity to access and explore the world of knowledge. Intellectually gifted children do often pick up, rather more quickly than their classmates, weaknesses in teachers' knowledge or understanding. The sensitive parent will assist the child to work through and round this difficulty, rather than promoting a sense of disempowerment by implying that the teacher is the fount of all knowledge and that this year the well is running dry!

## **Big fish in little ponds? Self-esteem, self-concept and ability grouping**

*'The self-esteem movement ... has helped lead to the abolition of tracking, lest those on lower tracks suffer damaged self-esteem; to the abandonment of IQ testing, lest those who score low feel low self-esteem; to massive grade inflation, lest those who score D's feel bad; to teaching aimed at the very bottom of the class, to spare the feelings of the kids slow to learn ... Each tactic is used to protect the feelings of self-esteem of the kids who would otherwise be outshone. This gain is deemed to outweigh any benefits lost to the kids who would shine. (Seligman, 1995, p. 28)*

Seligman's concerns, though rather emotively expressed, seem to be justified. Camilla Benbow and Julian Stanley (1996) discuss, at length, the disturbing process of grade inflation in American schools and universities, while many Australian teachers oppose the process of assessing students' work with numerical or letter grades on the grounds that this may damage the self-esteem of the less able students. Calls for the abolition of ability grouped programs for gifted students often rest on the dual claim that (a) ability grouping provides no academic advantage for gifted students and (b) it may 'damage' these students' self-esteem.

Research on the academic advantages when academically gifted students are ability grouped is strongly positive - particularly when ability grouping is full time and particularly for gifted students from minority and disadvantaged groups (Page & Keith, 1996). As we outlined in Core Module 6: Developing Programs and Provisions for Gifted Students, and will discuss in greater depth in Extension Module 6, gifted students who enter ability-grouped settings tend to perform substantially better on later measures of school achievement (measures of 'value added') than do equally bright students in mixed-ability classes. Full time ability grouped programs (eg,

special classes and special schools) produce substantial positive gains. Part-time grouping (eg, pull-out programs) produce gains that are more moderate but still positive.

So, what about self-esteem? This is not quite as clear cut. Some studies have found no difference or little difference in the self-concept or self-esteem of academically gifted students and students of average ability while others have found differences favouring gifted students.

One reason for the ambiguity in the results of some studies is that the authors don't explain clearly what they mean by 'self-esteem'. Some even confuse self-esteem and self-concept. As we explained in Core Module 3, self-concept has been defined as the collection of ideas that one has about oneself (Neihart, 1999). So, self-concept is what one believes about oneself. Self-esteem is the affective element of self-concept; how the student feels about what she believes. Both self-concept and self-esteem are influenced by the feedback one receives from other people. Teachers who withhold merited praise from gifted students for fear of making them conceited, while openly praising other students, can have a negative effect on the gifted students' academic self-concept and consequently their academic self-esteem.

Self-concept is multi-faceted. **Academic** self-concept reflects one's view of oneself as a learner; indeed one's self-concept in maths may be quite different from one's self-concept in English. **Social** self-concept reflects how we view our acceptability within social relationships. Then there is an element of self-concept which relates to **home and family** relationships. A further element relates to one's **physical** self-concept. Taking a global view of all this and saying that someone has a 'positive' or 'negative' self-concept is a little simplistic.

As we pointed out in Core Module 3, research has shown that students with relatively low academic self-concepts can achieve outstanding success in school while students with high academic self-concepts can perform quite poorly. Equally, students with high social self-concepts can engage in socially destructive behaviour. Self-concept reflects one's view of one's self; it doesn't necessarily reflect reality!

Nonetheless, ability grouping has been criticised by some writers for its presumed effect on the self-concept and self-esteem of gifted students.

In the early 1980s Professor Herbert Marsh developed a theory which he called the 'Big Fish in the Little Pond Effect' (BFLPE) (Marsh & Parker, 1984). This proposes that able students in 'low ability' schools ('big fish in little ponds') will have higher academic self-concepts than equally able students in 'high ability' schools ('big fish' who are comparing themselves with other 'big fish'). Marsh attributes this self-esteem drop to the change in academic ranking which occurs when a gifted student who has scored at or near the top of his mixed-ability class moves to a new learning environment where all the students are bright and he could end up ranked in the middle of the class or even in the lower half. Marsh questions the value of grouping gifted students together if their self-concept is going to be diminished by the realisation, for the first time, that they are no longer the 'best' in the class and that there are students even more able than themselves. He did acknowledge, however, in the title of his paper, the academic advantages of ability grouping; the paper is titled: 'Determinants of self-concept: Is it better to be a relatively large fish in a small pond **even if you don't learn to swim as well?**' (our emphasis).

What **does** happen to the self-concept of students who are ability grouped? Some studies have found no effect of grouping on either self-esteem or self-concept. Some have found a rise in self-esteem. Others have found that the academic self-esteem of gifted students takes a slight dip on entry to ability grouped programs - although long-term studies suggest that this is usually temporary.

One large scale Australian study of 1500 New South Wales students moving from primary to secondary school (Gross, 1997) did indeed find that students at New South Wales selective high schools (SHS) experienced a dip in academic self-esteem over the first few months of high school. At first glance, this could seem to validate the BFLPE theory, as these students were, in general, moving from mixed-ability classes to an ability grouped setting.

Interestingly, however, the comparison group of students entering comprehensive (mixed-ability) high schools (CHS) experienced a similar dip - and these students were moving from mixed-ability primary schools to mixed-ability secondary schools. For these students, the self-esteem dip can't readily be attributed to the BFLPE as it is unlikely that they experienced a significant change in ranking.

A more likely cause of the dip in academic self-esteem in both the SHS and CHS students is that they had just moved from being the oldest, most senior and most educationally experienced students in a (relatively) small primary school to being the youngest, newest and least experienced students in a much larger secondary school. This sudden shift from being top of the age-grade pecking order in primary school to being at the bottom in secondary could certainly account for a dip in academic self-esteem! Perhaps a Big Fish Little Pond Effect **was** functioning for these two groups of students - but related to the academic pecking order in their former and current schools, rather than to the type of school or class they were entering.

An interesting finding of Gross's study was that, even with the dip in academic self-esteem in both school types, the academic self-esteem of students entering selective high schools for gifted students remained higher than that of their age-peers entering comprehensive high schools and their social self-esteem was likewise higher (Gross, 1997). In both types of school, students whose motivational orientation was task-involved (learning for the love of learning) experienced less of a dip in academic self-esteem than students who were ego-involved (motivated by a need to out-perform their classmates).



### Increasing self-expectation

The dip in academic self-esteem noted in some gifted students on entry to special programs may have yet another, and different, cause.

The great psychologist William James proposed that self-esteem is a ratio of our **performance** in some field that we value compared against our **expectations** of how we will perform in that field (James, 1910). Gifted students who have succeeded, or indeed excelled, at schoolwork without ever having to put in real effort may not realise how much better they could perform if they really tried. When they move into an ability grouped program with work that is faster-paced, pitched at higher levels, and more abstract or complex, they are often amazed at the quality of the work they can accomplish. Paradoxically, this can result in a temporary decrease in academic self-esteem as these students' elation at how well they are performing is tempered with a sense of embarrassment and guilt as they realise the extent of their previous **underachievement**.



Smaller schools in rural areas have less opportunity to offer programs of ability grouping to their gifted students. As discussed in Core and Extension Module 6, some forms of acceleration, such as grade skipping or subject acceleration, can allow gifted students access to a more developmentally appropriate curriculum - and classmates who can work at their level.

For some gifted students, acceleration may result in a temporary dip in academic self-concept when they begin to compare themselves with students a year older. They will probably perform very well indeed - particularly if the school has been careful to follow the Guidelines on Acceleration presented as an Appendix to Core Module 6 - but their performance may not be as far beyond that of their new classmates as it was beyond that of their age-mates, and this may cause them moments of self-doubt.

If the school decides not to accelerate the gifted student, but to present her with faster-paced, more challenging work in the regular classroom, it may be wise for the teacher to have a friendly talk with the student beforehand, preparing her for the experience of being challenged academically in a way she probably has not experienced before. The student may feel embarrassed, at first, to be seen visibly pondering over work rather than breezing through it with ease as he did earlier.

In a small school, providing a gifted student with a curriculum which is very visibly differentiated may cause comments and questions from other parents. You may want to advise the gifted students' parents on how to handle this. A wry, good humoured acknowledgement from the gifted student's mum or dad that, 'Yes, he's having to work quite a bit harder now!' can often set the tone for positive community acceptance.

### Can self-esteem be too high?

Gifted students who have 'cruised by' for years in the mixed-ability classroom, rarely or never experiencing work at which they have had to **strive** to succeed, can sometimes develop an unrealistically inflated academic self-concept. Occasionally these students can become arrogant or conceited. These are the kids who give giftedness a bad name! Teachers who assume that gifted students appear only rarely in the population - 1 in 100 or fewer - may overgeneralise from these over-assertive young people and assume that all gifted students are like this.

Placement in an ability grouped class where there are many students as bright as they are and some who are even brighter, and where the work is set at a level and pace commensurate with their ability, can have positive outcomes for these gifted students, both academically and socially. Discovering that they are not the most mathematically gifted student in the school, that there are skills they have not yet developed, and that they may fail at a task two or three times before succeeding at it - and learning that these are experiences common to the vast majority of the people they will encounter in life - can bring these students' self-perceptions closer to

reality. Everyone has to learn that temporary failure - sometimes repeated - is a necessary step on the way to success. It is better for students, even the most gifted, to learn this in a supportive, encouraging school environment, and grouping gifted students together makes it much easier for teachers to present them with work that will require effort, persistence and commitment. Linda Silverman (1993) points out that conceit is moderated, more often than fostered, by placement in a special program.

## The importance of home support

However, it is important that parents of gifted students who are considering entering ability grouped programs should understand that in all likelihood, their child's class ranking **will** change in the new setting. Miraca Gross's interviews with parents of gifted students whose academic self-esteem experienced a substantial decrease in the first few months of selective high school (fewer than 5% of the sample) found that many of the parents were concerned that their son or daughter was no longer achieving at or near the top of the class and believed that this was due to lack of effort. A typical comment was, 'Now that he's got into the selective school he thinks he doesn't have to work any longer' or 'If she worked as hard as she did in primary school she'd be right up there at the top again.' These parents had difficulty in understanding that it was the environment that had changed rather than their children's efforts to succeed.

By contrast, the **children** of these parents believed that they were working as hard, or even harder, than they had worked in primary school and they were distressed by their parents' unwillingness to believe this. Both their academic self-esteem and their home-family self-esteem suffered as a result.

Schools should be open and frank with parents of students moving into an ability grouped program that it is unlikely that their children will hold the same class ranking as they did in their previous class. It is likely that every student in a gifted class will have scored at or close to the top in their previous, mixed-ability class. Not everyone can be top - nor is it necessarily important that they should be.



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your class who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking?



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your faculty or school who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking? How might you prepare their parents for this change?
- How could you use some of the material in this Extension Module to work constructively with parents who regularly but unwarrantedly blame teachers for difficulties experienced by their children?



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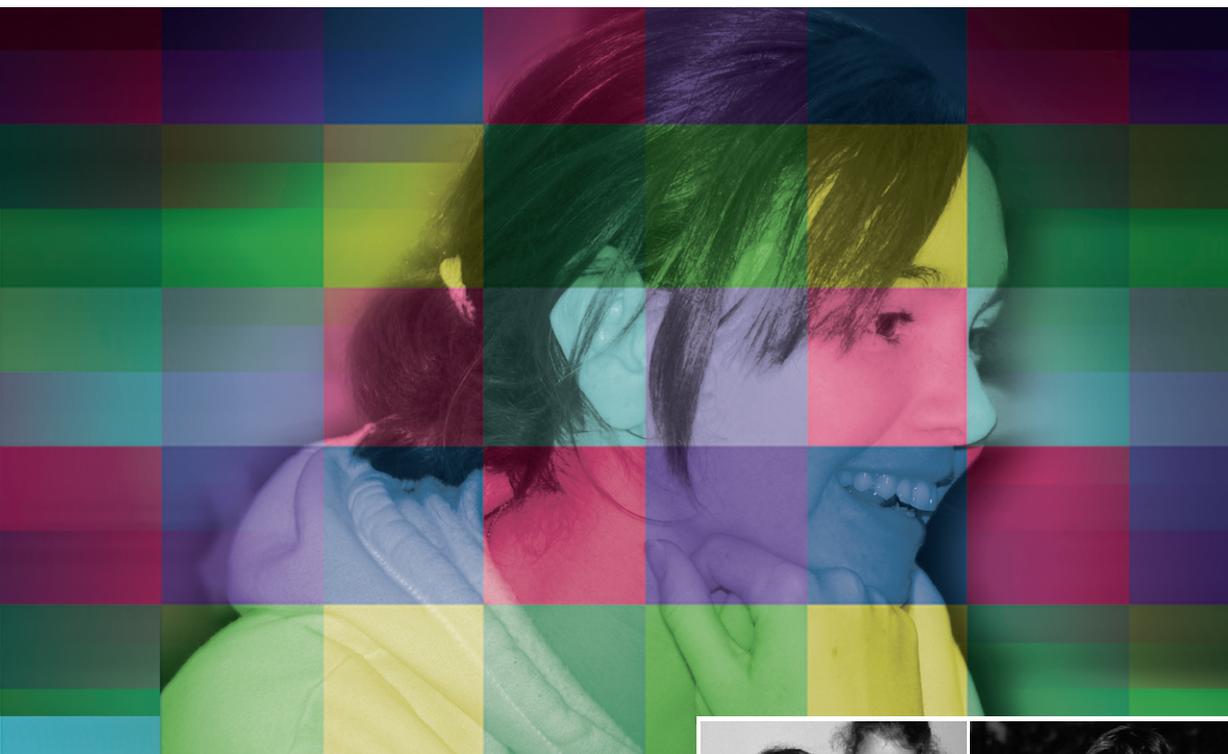




GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PACKAGE FOR TEACHERS

E X T E N S I O N

# Module 3



Primary



Professor Miraca U.M. Gross



# Module 3

## Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development

Welcome to Extension Module 3: Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development.

In this Module you'll explore the ways in which gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship differ from those of most of their age-peers and how these differences can affect their social interactions.

We'll look at current Australian research on how optimism and different forms of motivation can affect student achievement and we'll explore the effects of different types of perfectionism.

Families can contribute enormously to student achievement but, unfortunately, some family issues can also contribute to underachievement. We'll look at the complexities of both these situations and explore ways in which the school can support and assist parents of gifted underachievers, to empower these students to achieve.

**Professor Miraca U.M. Gross**



## **Extension Module 3: Primary**

### **Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development**

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1. Why do many gifted students seek out older students as friends?
2. How can perfectionism both help and hinder talent development?
3. How does competition affect gifted students' motivation?
4. How does blaming teachers for students' school difficulties disempower students?

1. Children tend to gravitate to other children who are at similar levels of intellectual and emotional development. For intellectually gifted children, this tends to translate to age-peers of similar abilities or children two or more years older. An additional factor is that as students move from early childhood into adulthood, they pass through a series of stages in which their conceptions and expectations of friendship become more and more sophisticated and complex. Gifted children tend to have expectations of friendship which their age-peers have not yet developed, and this causes them to gravitate towards older students whose conceptions of friendship are more akin to theirs.

2. Perfectionism can be a positive force when it is linked to a realistic acceptance that perfect performance is seldom achievable and when it is achieved it is as a result of years of striving and improving one's performance. It can be a negative influence when students are allowed or encouraged to set standards for themselves which they cannot realistically attain or when teachers or parents focus primarily on what has not been achieved rather than what has been done successfully.

3. Some gifted students thrive on competition. It stimulates and motivates them. Others dislike it intensely. Motivational orientation, which we looked at in Core Module 3, seems to play an important part. In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than those who are focussed on **being** the best. Research suggests that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the smartest, cleverest or the most successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do.

4. Research studies have found that parents who continually attribute their children's success or failure to excellent teaching or poor teaching may instil in their children a belief that they themselves can do little to contribute towards their own success.

If you were not correct in your answers to these four questions you should benefit from at least some of the information that follows in this Module.

If your answers to all four questions were correct you may not need to complete this Module though we advise that you still skim-read it to check whether it offers you anything new.

Specialisation Module 3 offers further information for you to consider on issues in the social and emotional development of gifted and talented students.

## Outcomes

At the completion of this Extension Module you will be able to:

- understand why many gifted students seek out older students as friends.
- facilitate the development of positive social relationships in students who have difficulty finding friends.
- devise strategies to assist gifted students to develop some of the positive attitudes and habits associated with perfectionism and reduce unfacilitative or negative perfectionistic tendencies.
- understand how dynamics in the home-school relationship can assist or hinder gifted students' progress.

# Part 1

## Gifted students and the search for friendship

*‘When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often “a friend”. The children’s experience of school is completely coloured by the presence or absence of relationships with peers.’  
(Silverman, 1993, p. 72).*

The need for friendship is a driving force in people’s lives. Most of us choose friends on the basis of similarities - we look for people who have roughly the same interests, opinions, attitudes, sense of humour and expectations of friendship as we do. However, research has found that particularly in the early and middle years of primary school, the friendship expectations of intellectually gifted students differ significantly from those of their age-peers of average ability, while the conceptions of friendship held by very highly gifted students bear little resemblance to those held by the considerable majority of children with whom they are likely to be grouped for purposes of instruction - and, ironically, for purposes of socialisation!

### Influences on children’s friendship choices

Research identifies five main influences on children’s friendship choices:

- Children form friendships not primarily on the basis of chronological age, but on the basis of similarities in developmental stages. Intellectual and emotional maturity have a considerable influence on how children view friendships and on who they choose as friends. Teachers who work with intellectually disabled students often notice that these students seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability, or children two or more years younger than themselves. For much the same reason, intellectually gifted children tend to seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability or children two or more years older than themselves.
- Children’s capacity to make social comparisons, which we discussed in Core Module 3, influences their ability to recognise similarities and differences between themselves and other children. The move to viewing other children as potential friends - people with whom one can develop reciprocal relationships - depends on the capacity to view the potential friend as an individual with his or her own characteristics, ideas and interests. In general, children don’t start to make these social comparisons until approximately age 7, but gifted children acquire this ability rather earlier. They may start to notice, at surprisingly early ages, both the individuality of other children and the differences between their own interests, attitudes, likes and dislikes and those of their classmates.

- Children’s play is an important element in building friendships. However the play interests of gifted children often differ from those of their age-peers. They are less interested in **physical** competition (races, ball games, etc) and tend to prefer games or activities where **ideas** and **strategies** are matched against each other. This can place the gifted student in yet another form of ‘forced-choice dilemma’; play can become an uneasy compromise between their own interests and abilities and their desire to be accepted into a social group (Silverman, 1993). Children and adolescents who are less willing or less able to make such a compromise often become ‘loners’, preferring to invent solitary intellectual games which often centre on fantasy and imagined adventure.

Children’s play interests are strongly determined by their stage of cognitive development, and the play preferences of intellectually gifted children tend to resemble those of children some years older (Gross, 1999). Teachers, however, should be aware that they may not observe the **true** play preferences of gifted children if they are not provided with companions who share their play interests.

Solitary play in gifted children, rather than indicating social maladjustment or peer rejection, can simply signal the unavailability of children who share their interests.

- Children’s reading interests can also influence friendship choice. Someone who is passionate about reading is unlikely to choose, and keep, as a friend someone who thinks books are boring. In addition, the reading interest of gifted students tend to be those of students some years older.

Many gifted students in primary school seek out books which portray intellectual, emotional or moral striving on the part of the protagonist, eg, ‘chronicles’ which follow a character’s growth to moral maturity or ‘quests’ which portray a conflict between good and evil.



*David, in Year 6, has become something of an ‘authority’ on the Harry Potter books. He has made a study of similarities between the Harry Potter series, the Star Wars series and the legends of King Arthur and the search for the Holy Grail. Because Star Wars is ‘cool’ the other kids tolerate his passion. He has not told them that he is also tracing similarities between Harry Potter and Virgil’s **Aeneas** because that would be less cool!*

Many highly gifted children who display the sensual and imaginal 'overexcitabilities' discussed in Core Module 3 are attracted to certain literature because of the poetic beauty of the language. For example, at age 11, Christopher Otway, in Gross's longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+, developed a special interest in the Old Testament, particularly the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Psalms while Adam, of the same study, became enthralled with Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* because of the lyricism of the language (Gross, 2004).

Children with such unusual and advanced reading interests can experience extreme difficulty in finding age-peers with whom they can discuss their joy in reading. Indeed, some conceal their unusual interests for fear of derision. When the teacher of 7-year-old Anastasia asked her, in class, what she was reading at home, the child answered; 'A book about bunnies'. It was *Watership Down!*

- Researchers studying friendship in children and adults point out the contrast between **popularity** and **friendship**. Popularity is characterised by the deliberate acquisition of a wide circle of playmates or 'cohort members'; a certain degree of dependency on peer approval; and conformity to peer conventions, behaviours, rules and routines. Gifted students seem to leave behind, rather earlier than their age-peers, the social behaviours which characterise a desire for popularity and seem to seek, rather earlier than age-peers, relationships with a smaller circle of playmates who seem to display more of the functions of friendship - companionship, stimulation, intimacy and affirmation (Gottman & Parker, 1986).

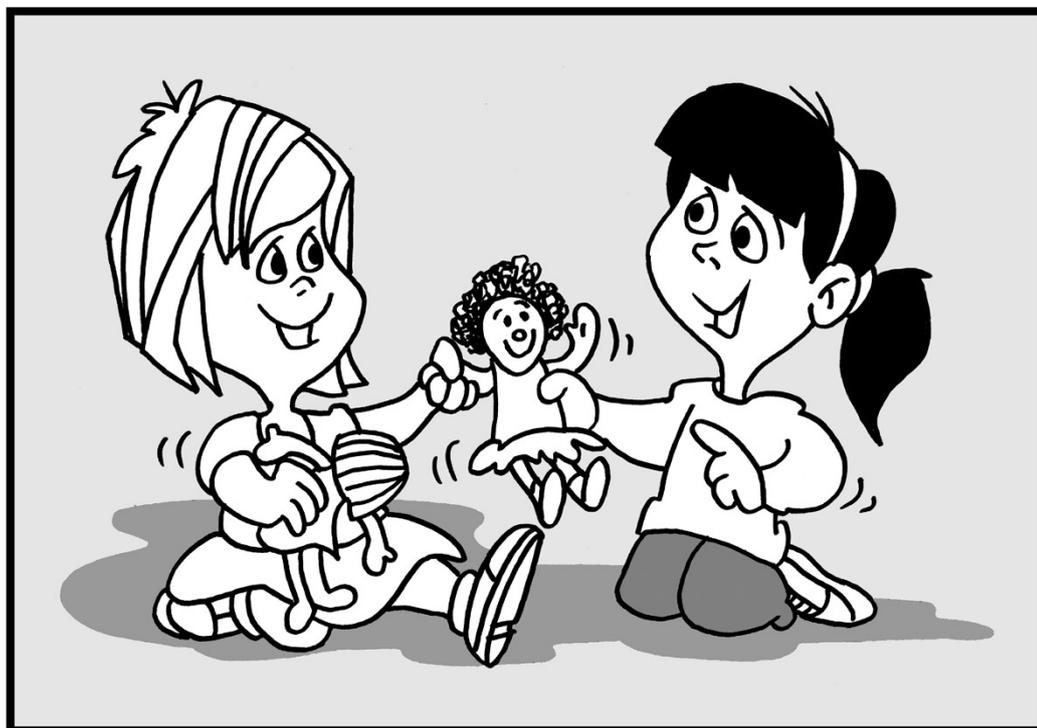
A key issue in friendship is the **quality**, rather than the **quantity** of one's friends. Close friendships centre on an exchange of feelings, insights and confidences. Friendship offers support, closeness, warmth, trust, enjoyment and kindness; indeed, true friendship seeks the good of the other. The relative social and emotional maturity of intellectually gifted children allows them to appreciate, at earlier ages than usual, the difference between friendship and popularity. Popularity is a competitive distortion of friendship in which importance is placed on the **quantity**, rather than the quality, of 'followers' (or dates, or invitations, or votes) one can attract, and which seeks self-affirmation rather than the affirmation of the friendship bond.

Mary Ann Swiatek (1995) in a study of highly gifted 7th-10th grade students, found that many of her subjects who were actively acknowledging and using their high abilities 'discount(ed) the importance of popularity as it is traditionally understood in schools' (p.156) as they believed that many gifted students who had achieved popularity had done so by compromising their values so that others would like them.

The five issues discussed above - developmental age, the early onset of norm-referencing, their different play interests and reading interests, and their tendency to seek friendship rather than popularity - serve as powerful, interacting influences on the friendship choices exercised by gifted children. Gifted children and adolescents have different expectations of friendship from those held by the majority of their age-peers; they seem to view the nature of friendship, and the obligations of friendship, in a different light.

A study conducted with 700 Australian children in the early childhood to early secondary years found that children's conceptions of friendship form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age (Gross, 2002). The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

**Stage 1: 'Play Partner':** In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on 'play-partnership'. A friend is seen simply as another child who readily plays with you and allows you to use or borrow her playthings. In general this stage characterises the early childhood years.

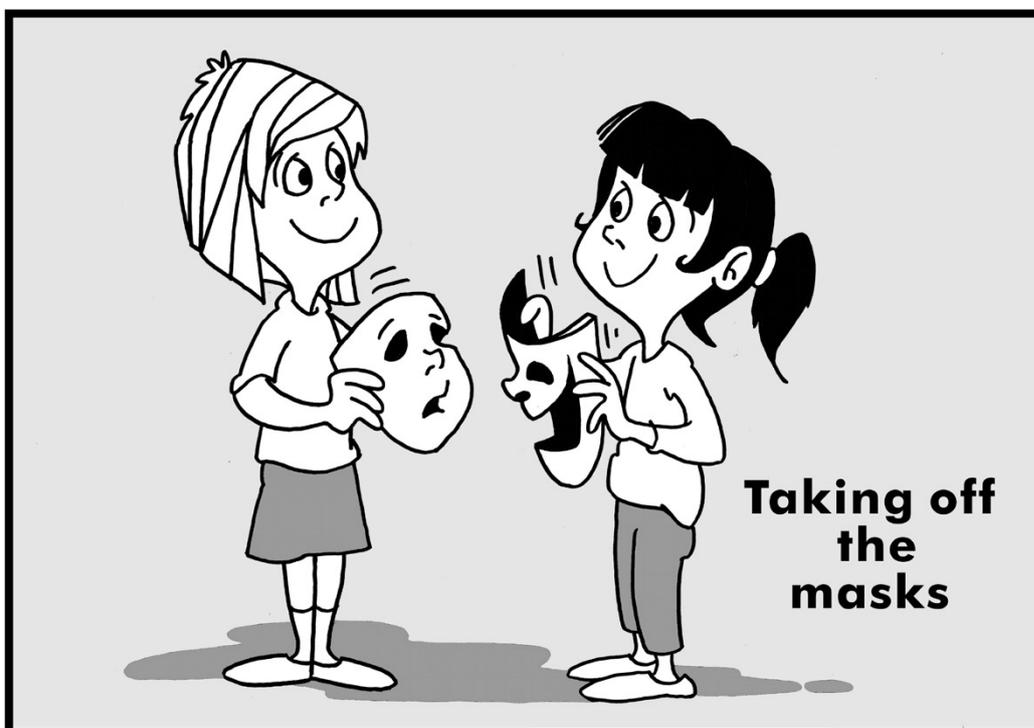


**Stage 2: 'People to chat to':** The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between 'friends' are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged. This stage is most noticeable about age 7-9.

**Stage 3: 'Help and encouragement':** At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; children do not yet see themselves as having the obligation to provide help or support in return. Of course, there is overlap between the stages - some children enter a stage rather earlier than their age-peers and others enter much later - but in general this stage characterises 9-11 year olds.

**Stage 4: 'Intimacy/empathy':** The child now realises that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flow both ways and, indeed, the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding. In general children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12.

**Stage 5: 'The sure shelter':** The title comes from a passage in one of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. 'A faithful friend is a sure shelter: whoever finds one has found a rare treasure' (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. A 12-year-old boy in Miraca Gross's longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+ (Gross, 2004) defined a friend as: 'A place you go to when you need to take off the masks. You can take off your camouflage with a friend and still feel safe.'



Many children - and indeed some adults - do not develop this conception of friendship.

Gross's (2004) study compared the friendship conceptions of three groups of students - children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children and exceptionally-profoundly gifted children. (You may want to refer briefly to the section on levels of giftedness in Extension Module 1.) **The study demonstrated strongly that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age as by mental age.** A strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. While the age ranges noted above characterise students of average intellectual ability, gifted children pass through the stages earlier - in some cases, some years earlier.

Gifted children begin to look for friends with whom they can develop close and trusting relationships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability are looking for play partners.

As stated earlier, many previous studies have suggested that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children of above average ability. This new study suggests that they may not only be seeking the intellectual compatibility of mental age peers; they may also be actively looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

Interestingly, the differences in friendship conception between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the early childhood years and the early years of primary, than in the years of early adolescence. **In Years 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children had the conceptions of friendship which characterise average ability children three or more years older.** It may be at this age that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship.

Very highly gifted children may be even more at risk. **The study found that children of IQ 160+ tend to begin the search for ‘the sure shelter’ - friendships of complete trust, honesty and fidelity - four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage.** Indeed, exceptionally and profoundly gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12. No wonder these children encounter difficulties with socialisation! There is little common ground between a 6-year-old who is seeking the ‘sure shelter’ and an age-peer who is looking for a ‘play partner’.

Substantial **gender differences** appeared in this Australian study. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls were, on average, two years further along the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. This suggests that gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability, as they will appear so dramatically different from the majority of boys of their age. This may explain why, particularly in the early years of school, gifted boys sometimes prefer the company of girls.



Another characteristic of gifted students is that they tend to prefer the company of a few close friends rather than large, looser groups. This is also a characteristic of children who are introverts rather than extroverts. Gifted children who are introverts - and as discussed in Linda Silverman's valuable book, *Counselling the gifted and talented*, there seems to be a growing body of literature which connects the two (Silverman, 1993) - may have a double ‘need’ for a few closer relationships rather than many more ‘surface’ relationships.



Gifted children in rural and remote areas may be in a particularly sensitive situation. There may be few students of their own age level with whom they have enough in common, in terms of intellectual and emotional development, abilities and interests, for close friendships to develop spontaneously.

Grade advancement can be one means through which gifted students can be allowed readier access to students whose levels of intellectual and emotional maturity are closer to theirs. In one- or two-teacher primary schools, younger gifted children should be given regular access to older students. The teacher could explain to some of the older students that the younger child is lonely for companionship because her interests are more like those of older children and that they could help by befriending her.

As discussed earlier, girls tend to develop, in terms of their friendship expectations, earlier than boys, and gifted boys may sometimes gravitate towards girls for companionship. This may put them at risk for mockery or even ostracism from other boys. **Primary teachers should be sensitive towards this and try to create a class or school climate in which cross gender friendships are accepted.**

A number of gifted children's associations, and universities, run weekend or school vacation enrichment programs and these can be a wonderful opportunity for rural children to meet a wider range of students who share their interests. Some universities will offer sponsorships to students from rural and isolated regions to attend these courses. Alternatively, some service clubs may be willing to fund travel and accommodation costs.

## How do motivation and optimism influence achievement?

As discussed in the Core level of this Module, research has traditionally suggested that intellectually gifted students tend to be characterised by high levels of intrinsic motivation - the urge to learn for the sheer love of learning - rather than extrinsic motivation - working hard to achieve a good grade or to be praised by the teacher. This leaning towards task-involvement seems to be intensified when the student is able to experience 'flow' - engagement with a task which is just above the student's current level of mastery - in his or her Zone of Proximal Development. We will discuss the influence of 'flow' on children's task engagement in Extension Module 4.

Researchers have debated whether intrinsic motivation is a stable personality trait or whether it can be induced through the provision of challenging material and an intellectually stimulating environment. The trend over the last few years is to regard intrinsic motivation as 'situational'; students' motivational levels will depend on where they are, who they are with and what they are doing at the time. It is important to note, also, that academic challenge may not always produce a motivated response. If a gifted student has 'cruised by' for years, gaining high grades for work that she has mastered with little effort, the provision of work at which she has to **strive** to succeed may result in stress and anxiety.

More recent research has explored the effects of 'strain on coping resources'. This is usually thought of as the results of an **overload** of work or responsibilities; however, it may also be the results of prolonged tedium - **underload**! Either way the individual reacts negatively and one result can be a depression of intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can work in harmony. Recent Australian research highlights the positive association of optimism with both intrinsic motivation **and** extrinsic motivation (Hoekman, McCormick & Barnett, 2005). When a student feels optimistic about her learning situation - that things are going well, that she is having a good day, that she is achieving, that she is feeling energetic, or that she is positively engaged with the work she has been given - this may have a positive impact on both forms of motivation. By contrast, prolonged overload or underload may negatively affect optimism and, by association, result in decreased motivation.

Gifted students who are presented, too often and for too long, with a preponderance of material that they have already mastered, and which, furthermore, they mastered without truly having to engage intellectually with the work, are unlikely to feel good about learning. By contrast, the 'flow' experiences associated with the intrinsic pleasure of learning and talent development are often characterised by 'the combination of intrinsic enjoyment and intense concentration within a clear, long-term extrinsic reward structure' (Hoekman et al, 2005, p. 108). Hoekman and her colleagues suggest that teachers should aim to provide students with meaningful and challenging opportunities for academic and personal growth in the context of strong social support networks.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum presented in a socially optimal context which includes interaction with ability peers would seem to be a valuable catalyst in the development of optimism and healthy levels of motivation.

## Perfectionism: The two edged sword

Over the last few years Australians have developed very ambivalent attitudes towards perfectionism. We like to see it in people who are responsible for our safety - doctors and nurses for example - or who provide essential services (few things induce greater fury than a taxi-driver or bus driver who gets lost), or who provide sporting or popular entertainment (the soccer player who kicks an own goal is not easily forgiven). We almost insist on it in classical musicians and dancers, and in Olympic athletes. In a sense, they are there to be perfect. But we often don't appreciate others expecting it of us, and it has become politically incorrect to encourage it in children.

Nowadays many psychologists and educators view perfectionism as psychologically unhealthy. It is often viewed as leading to underachievement, frustration and low self-esteem. And indeed it **can** lead to such problems if it is poorly managed or allowed to become the dominant force in a student's achievement motivation. However, it can also be a source of great satisfaction and it can be a powerful force in personal and professional growth.

Patricia Schuler (2002), a counsellor and educational consultant in New York, has succinctly summarised the major findings about perfectionism in gifted students:

- As a group, gifted students tend to be perfectionistic.
- They are rather more perfectionistic than students of average ability.
- Their perfectionism can be a powerful force for high achievement.

Schuler emphasises, however, that perfectionism can be either healthy or neurotic. Healthy perfectionists are 'those who derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits' (2003, p. 72). Neurotic perfectionists, on the other hand, 'are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things well enough to warrant that feeling' (2003, p. 72). Other researchers categorise this dichotomy as **enabling** perfectionism which empowers one towards success and **disabling** perfectionism which stunts one's capacity to achieve at the level of which one is truly capable.

However, to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'Some are born perfectionistic, some achieve perfectionism and some have perfectionism thrust upon them'.

In some gifted students, perfectionism seems to be a powerful innate drive. It is a longing to produce, physically, ideas that exist in the mind but which have not yet taken concrete form. In the Early Childhood strand of Core Module 1 we described Alexa who a few days after her 5th birthday tore up her first five attempts to write a thank you letter to her much loved grandma. Alexa wanted her writing to be as neat and clearly aligned as the print in the birthday card her grandma had given her - and her 5-year-old printing just wouldn't come out that way!



Dabrowski, whose research on 'over-excitabilities' was discussed in the Core level of this Module, believed that perfectionism was largely innate and that it was a strongly positive quality in personality - 'the striving for self-perfectionism that propels the individual towards higher level development' (Silverman, 1993, p. 57).

Other scholars believe that even when it is not innate, perfectionism in its **enabling** sense, as an empowering drive for self-improvement, can be achieved through dedication and effort. The student thoughtfully analyses her strengths and weaknesses and works to optimise the former and lessen the negative effects of the latter.

In other cases **disabling** perfectionism may unintentionally be 'taught' to gifted students by parents who are themselves perfectionistic or who push or hurry the child. David Elkind, author of *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon* (Elkind, 1981), spoke out strongly against parents who 'hothouse' children - although interestingly he later spoke out equally strongly against teachers who used his book to argue against accelerating gifted students academically (Elkind, 1988). Elkind was adamant that accelerating is not 'hurrying'; he emphasised that it is a professional response to gifted students' naturally accelerated pace of learning.

Disabling perfectionism may also be accidentally taught by teachers who teach or model performance goals the need to **be** the best - rather than learning goals - the drive to do one's **personal** best. (We looked at those contrasting goals in Core Module 3.) A class climate which over-emphasises a view of competition as 'one wins, the others lose' can lead to anxiety and a fear of failure.

Some perfectionists feel the need to control their environment by directing their high expectations of themselves onto others. Parents may demand unrelentingly high standards of their children. Other adults may demand unrealistically high standards of achievement of colleagues or employees.

Teachers and school administrators who notice ‘negative perfectionist’ tendencies in primary school students can alert parents to ways of handling this. Michael Pyryt, in an article in *Parenting for High Potential*, a magazine produced by the American National Association for Gifted Children, alerted parents to indications of possible negative perfectionism in gifted primary students and possible responses. Michael is Director of the Centre for Research on Gifted Education at the University of Calgary, in Canada.

- Does your child pay more attention to mistakes than to correct answers?
- Does your child set unrealistic expectations for his or her work?
- Is your child dissatisfied with a Grade of A instead of A+?
- Does your child focus on unmet goals instead of enjoying current accomplishments?
- Does your child get extremely upset when everything in life doesn’t work perfectly? (Pyryt, 2004, p. 10)

### Hints for parents

- **Don’t take it personally.** Tell your children not to take grades or teacher evaluations personally. Some children tend to view the evaluations they receive on assignments as indications of personal worth. Some children try to avoid this threat to their self-concept by procrastinating in handing in assignments. Unfortunately some parents reinforce this association of achievement with self-worth by criticising children for their mistakes rather than acknowledging their successes. ‘You got 25 out of 30 on the maths test? What did you do wrong with the other 5?’
- **Know when to stop.** Children who have excellent research skills and who are also perfectionistic may not know when to stop collecting information for a school project. This can be made even more complex with the expansion of the World Wide Web. ‘Gifted students need to know that whatever topic they pick for a project, they will find more possible references available than they can possibly manage to acquire and read in the time allotted’ (Pyryt, 2004, p. 12). Parents can help children develop skills in deciding which of the many sources of information available are likely to be useful for them.
- **Match the time commitment to the value of assignments.** Teachers of upper primary children sometimes give weighted marks to different elements of a project or assignment. Perfectionists sometimes have hard time grasping this concept and may spend as much time on questions worth 10% of the total mark as they do on elements worth 50%, because they want to complete each section to the highest level of perfection possible.
- **Set goals and focus on improvement.** ‘The attainment of excellence typically occurs as a result of small incremental improvements rather than quantum leaps.’ (Pyryt, 2004, p. 13). Assist children to set realisable goals and work towards them. Help them identify the steps needed to accomplish these goals, develop an action plan to work through these steps and monitor progress as they go.
- **Study the lives of eminent people.** Most ‘great’ men and women didn’t achieve greatness effortlessly or immediately. Reading biographies of eminent people will assist gifted children to realise four ‘great truths’ about great achievers.

1. The path to success is seldom simple or linear. Setbacks are common and barriers such as rejection of oneself or one's efforts, illness or economic misfortunes can hold back even the most dedicated achiever.
2. Great effort is usually required to achieve great success. Even the most intellectually gifted scientist or the most committed researcher rarely gets by on inspiration alone.
3. Revision and refinement are part of any inventive or creative process. Very few books are publishable in their first draft. Very few inventions work perfectly first time.
4. Failure can be constructive. If you learn from your mistakes, you're unlikely to make **exactly** the same mistake again. That's part of learning, and progress. (Pryyt, 2004.)



Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan teach Year 5 classes at the same primary school. Briony, in Ms Crawford’s class, is highly gifted and has always been something of a social isolate - not from choice but rather because her emotional maturity and interests are so very different from those of her classmates. She is a rather sad and lonely child.

However, this year things have changed. Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan have been bringing their classes together for some subjects and Briony has formed a close friendship with Tricia, a gifted student in Mrs Brennan’s class who had also been something of a loner. The two girls spend every recess and lunchtime together and spend hours together after school and at weekends. Briony is happier than her family or her teachers have ever seen her. ‘There’s nothing I can’t talk to Trish about,’ she told her mum. ‘She seems to just know how I feel about things - and she feels the same.’

Early in Term 2, Briony and Tricia asked their teachers if the four of them could meet to discuss an idea the two girls had developed. In this meeting, the girls asked whether they could be placed in the same class for the remainder of the year. Each of the girls was willing to move to the other’s class. They explained that they liked and admired both Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan and they would be happy for the teachers to make the decision regarding who would move - but they were happier than they had ever been at school, since they became friends, and they very much wanted to be in the same class.

Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan told the girls they would think about it - and the next day they approached Mrs Campbell, the Principal. Mrs Campbell’s first reaction was that a better move would be for Ms Crawford to encourage Briony to widen her circle of friends.

Consider this situation through the lens of what you now know about how gifted students’ different conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to differ from those of age-peers. How might you respond to Mrs Campbell? What further information would you need before you could make a decision about the class change?



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Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan told the girls they would think about it - and the next day they approached you. Your first reaction was that a better move would be for Ms Crawford to encourage Briony to widen her circle of friends. On reflection, however, you could see that the idea had its points - but you are aware that there are other, organisational issues, to be taken into consideration.

Consider this situation through the lens of what you now know about how gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to differ from those of age-peers. How might you respond to the two girls - and to their teachers? What further information would you need before you could make a decision about the class change?



It might be useful for Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan to talk to the Principal about the hierarchy of children's friendship conceptions and the tendency of gifted students to have developed expectations of friendship which are more like those of older children. Briony's comment about the quality of her relationship with Trish - the depth of understanding, and that there is nothing they can't talk about - suggests that the girls are well past the 'someone to chat to' stage of friendship. They may already be functioning at Level 4 in the friendship hierarchy which sees a deepening of students' emotional sharing and bonding. In general, children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12 but intellectually gifted students, particularly girls, are often functioning at this level by the middle years of primary school.

Teachers and parents of gifted students need to understand that it is quite normal and acceptable if they prefer to link with one special friend at this stage rather than 'play the field'. Perhaps the Principal is worried that Briony and Tricia seem to be putting all their friendship 'eggs' in the one basket. However, because the quality of gifted children's friendships is different, they have an earlier need for the exchange of confidences and the discovery of mutual bonds. This is more easily achieved in pairs than in larger groups.

The Principal needs to talk to Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan about the practicalities of the proposed move. (This is discussed in the section for Principals and executive staff.) However, the girls have clearly thought carefully about their proposal and have shown a certain maturity and flexibility in their readiness to let the teachers decide whose class they should be in. It's good to see that Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan are willing to take the suggestion forward to the Principal.



You are familiar with the hierarchy of children's friendship conceptions and the tendency of gifted students to have developed expectations of friendship which are more like those of older children. Briony's comment about the quality of her relationship with Trish - the depth of understanding, and that there is nothing they can't talk about - suggests that the girls are well past the 'someone to chat to' stage of friendship. They may already be functioning at Level 4 in the friendship hierarchy which sees an deepening of students' emotional sharing and bonding. In general, children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12 but intellectually gifted students, particularly girls, are often functioning at this level by the middle years of primary school.

It is quite normal and acceptable for gifted students to prefer to link with one special friend at this stage rather than 'play the field'. Educators (and parents!) sometimes worry that students like Briony and Tricia seem to be putting all their friendship 'eggs' in the one basket. However, because the quality of gifted children's friendships is different, they have an earlier need for the exchange of confidences and the discovery of mutual bonds. This is more easily achieved in pairs than in larger groups.

How would the girls' parents feel about the move? Is there a place in one of the classes for the other girl to move to? Would it set a precedent within the school? Is it likely to lead to similar requests from other families? These are all issues you will want to consider from the administrative viewpoint. However, the girls have clearly thought carefully about their proposal and have shown a certain maturity and flexibility in their readiness to let the teachers decide whose class they should be in. Ms Crawford and Mrs Brennan have also clearly thought seriously about it. It's good to see that they have been willing to bring the girls' suggestion forward to you. The 'risk' of setting precedents has to be balanced against the emotional security of children in your school, and these girls have clearly been lonely in previous grades.

If it is not going to be practical to honour their request this year, could they be placed in the same class from the start of next year?

# Part 2

## What characterises families of gifted and talented students?

### Family demographics

Studies of the families, and family situations, of academically gifted students conducted over the last 60 years are surprisingly consistent in their findings. However, please remember that while the facts reported below are **tendencies** - and in some cases strong tendencies - they are not **absolutes**! There are exceptions to every one of these findings!

- Gifted children tend to be only children or oldest children. (The incidence varies across studies from 59% to 67%.)
- They tend to come from small families.
- Their parents tend to have delayed starting their families, so the average age of parents at the birth of the first child tends to be substantially older than the average for their community or country.
- Parents tend to be highly educated and to value education highly.
- The incidence of divorce among parents of gifted children tends to be substantially lower than in the regular community.

These findings have been synthesised from reviews of the research literature conducted over several years by many researchers (see, for example, Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gross, 2004). We should be aware, however, that these findings arise from studies of children and adolescents who have been identified as gifted! Some arise from studies of gifted underachievers; others, however, arise from studies of students who are successful achievers at school - students whom Gagné would define as **talented**. Parents of small families would probably have more time to spend on their children than parents of large families. Only children and oldest children have longer periods in their early years of being the main focus of parental attention. Parents who work for several years before starting their families may well be more financially secure. Parents who themselves have higher degrees are more likely to teach their children the value of higher education. All these issues, which Gagné would view as facilitative environmental catalysts, affect talent development.

More important than demographics, however, are the **expectations** that parents of gifted students have for their children and how the family assists these children to develop their gifts into talents.

## Parenting by positive expectations

Davis and Rimm (2004) emphasise that if high achievement, positive attitudes and constructive behaviour are expected and reinforced by parents, children will internalise and practise these values. However, it is important that the messages given to children by their parents are **clear** and **consistent**.

Studies of young people who grew up to be highly successful in their careers (eg Bloom, 1985; Walberg, Williams & Zeiser, 2003; Gross, 2004) have found that the messages transmitted by their parents had a lot in common. Their parents:

- placed strong emphasis on trying to do one's best, working hard and spending one's time constructively.
- emphasised the importance of study, learning and school.
- taught respect for individuality and tolerance for the points of view of others.
- recognised that a positive and achievement-oriented atmosphere also had to include the need for reasonable amounts of fun and recreation - a balance of work and play.
- provided a balance of support and challenge.
- **provided predictable and consistent expectations for conduct.**

It is important that parents of intellectually gifted children continue to accept their obligations to guide, protect and monitor their children. No matter how highly gifted a child may be, he or she is still a child and does not have the maturity and experience to make ultimate decisions on his or her conduct. It is the parents who do have the maturity and experience to set appropriate limits on the child's behaviour.

The following quotation comes from the 1970s when we were less gender-inclusive in our pronouns than we are now - but the meaning still stands clear and is as relevant as it ever was.

'Discipline your gifted child when he needs disciplining. Correct him when he needs correction. Give direction when he needs direction. He should not be granted special privileges nor should unacceptable behaviour be tolerated because of his intellectual gifts.' (Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977)

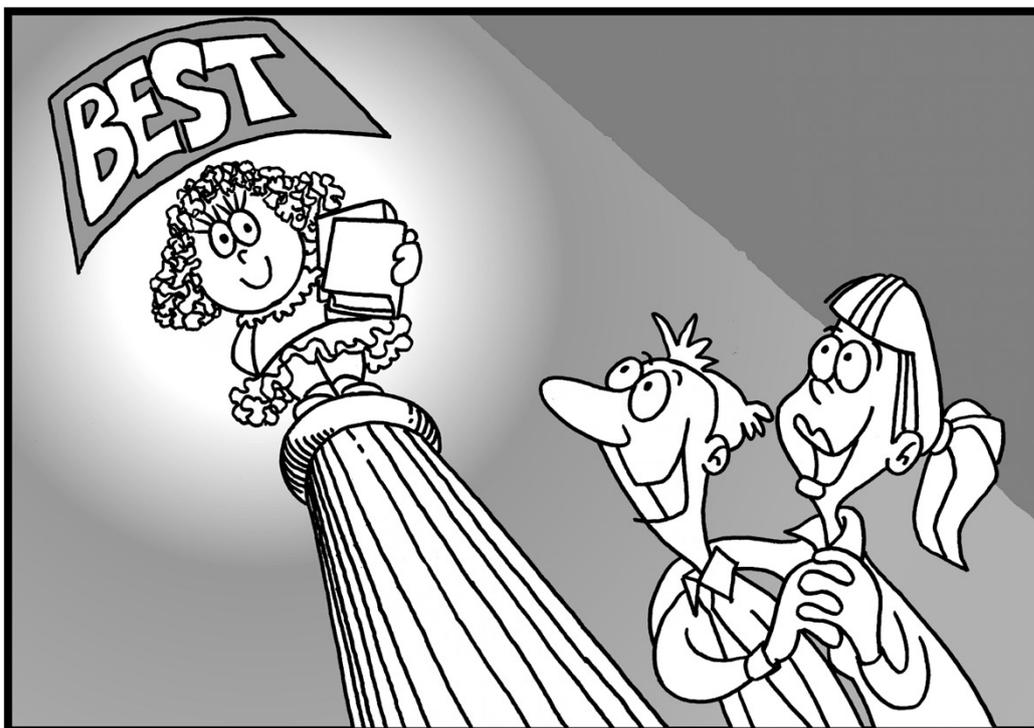
## Handling competition

Today's society is competitive. We compete for jobs, social status, success and even partners. For students talented in sports, athletics or music, competition is built into the talent development process. Does pressure help or disadvantage gifted students under competition situations? Of course, it is in part an issue of personality but what do researchers generally find?

In Core Module 3 we compared **task involvement** (focussing on learning goals) and **ego-involvement** (focussing on performance goals). In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than ego-involved students who tend to focus on **being** the best. Self-esteem is higher in task-involved students

than in their ego-involved age-peers (Gross, 1997) and, as will be discussed later, these students are less likely to experience a decrease in self-esteem when they enrol in ability grouped programs.

Davis and Rimm (2004) point out that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the **smartest**, the **prettiest**, the **cleverest** or the **most** successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do. An additional risk is that such normatively expressed praise may create unrealistic expectations in the children that they are expected to maintain this superior status indefinitely.



Of course, some individuals thrive on competition. For some gifted young people competition provides a powerful encouragement to perform to the very best of their ability. For some it also promotes resilience - the capacity to get up and try again, even better and more successfully, when one has not at first succeeded. Karnes and Riley (2005) suggest that entering competitions can enhance gifted students' critical thinking skills, presentation and performance skills, and self-confidence - as long as competitions are properly monitored and parents emphasise to children that the essence of competitions is that there are losers as well as winners. Rimm and Olenchak (1991) found that Future Problem Solving proved helpful in reversing underachievement in some gifted students who had initially been reluctant to compete for fear of failing.

The following suggestions for reducing stress related to competition come from a range of research studies.

- Involvement in a range of competitive activities may help children learn to cope with competition in a more relaxed way. Regular experience of competition may help reduce anxiety.
- Encourage the child to focus on the quality of her participation in the event rather than the place or mark she scored. (Parents need to model this too, or the point will be lost!)
- Allow children to talk openly about their fears and anxieties about competition. Avoid giving the child the idea that expressing negative feelings is taboo. Parents can encourage the child by saying ‘What’s the worst thing that could happen in the competition? How likely is it for that to happen?’
- Use humour to counteract stress. Parents can gently mock themselves for their own anxieties - making it clear to the child that this is what they are doing.
- Encourage the highly competitive achiever to engage in a balance of activities which are non-competitive.



*Laurie, aged 10, learns Scottish highland dancing and is displaying a growing talent. She won a prize in her dancing school’s annual contest and with the enthusiastic support of her parents and her dancing teacher, she entered a competition at the local show which attracts dancers from all around the state. She was confident that she would bring home at least one medal.*

*Laurie didn’t win any of her sections of the competition, nor did she come second or third. She was bitterly disappointed and burst into tears during the award ceremony. However, the judges did award her a ‘Highly Commended’ for the Highland Fling and, seeing her distress, one of the judges made a point of talking to her and showing her his written notes which included the comment ‘Shows promise’. Laurie’s mum explained the meaning of ‘commended’ and her teacher, Mrs Hamilton, explained that ‘shows promise’ meant that she had talent and would improve with practice. “Shows promise” is about what you will be in the future,’ she explained to Laurie. ‘It means you’re going to get better and better if you continue to work on your dancing as you’ve been doing.’*

*By encouraging Laurie to change her performance-oriented view of the competition into a task-oriented perception, Laurie’s mother and teacher helped her see that winning or losing was only one aspect of competition; an equally important aspect was learning to improve.*

## Forming positive school-family partnerships

As this Module is being written, the Australian media have been focussing, with concern, on the behaviour of parents who seem to view the school-family relationship as one of conflict, rather than of cooperation. These individuals generally form a small minority in a school's parent body but their influence is still disturbing, particularly as there is a substantial amount of research that suggests that parents who regularly enter into conflict with the school, and who discuss regularly, with their children, their dissatisfaction with their child's school or teachers, tend to have children who develop as academic underachievers.

(The following section is adapted, with acknowledgement, from Gross, M.U.M. (2003). Does criticising your child's teacher disempower your child? *Understanding Our Gifted*, 15 (4), 22-23.)

James and Shelagh Gallagher (1994), in a study of families of gifted students who were underachieving in school, found something disturbing. The view of education which the parents were presenting to their bright but underperforming children was that the child's success in school was primarily the responsibility of the teacher, rather than of the child himself. If the student was underperforming, it was the fault of the teacher. If the student had succeeded in previous years, it had had been through good teaching rather than through the child's efforts or ability. By denying the student's involvement in her success or failure, these parents were disempowering the student. They were encouraging their children to see themselves as passive recipients of instruction.

Although these parents were concerned about their son or daughter's underachievement and genuinely wanted to help the child improve, they were going about it the wrong way. They were failing to model, for the child, an **intrinsic** motivation to achieve in academic work - a task-oriented desire to learn for the sheer satisfaction of learning. Another problem was that the parents seldom modelled a healthy respect for school or for the education system. Indeed, a substantial number of the parents were openly critical, in front of their children, of their children's teachers and the school's policies.

If parents model a belief that the education their children receive is trivial, or boring or of little value, their children will develop the same attitude. If parents tell a child that the year he spends with a particular teacher is a waste of time, the child will believe this and moderate his efforts accordingly. Parents need to model a love of learning and a respect for the ongoing process of education even in those years where they may feel their gifted child is 'marking time'.

In their study, Gallagher and Gallagher found that the parents of gifted underachievers rarely spoke about their work or shared their career interests with their families. When they **did** speak about their jobs, most took a very negative perspective even when they had invested many years in preparation for high level careers. Sadly, in doing this they were modelling, for their children, a view that the years of study which had led to their employment had been a waste of time.

A striking contrast is provided by the parents in a well known study, conducted by Benjamin Bloom (yes, the creator of Bloom's taxonomy!) who followed the careers of 120 young adults who had achieved world-class success as concert pianists, swimmers, tennis players, mathematicians, sculptors and research neurologists. One of the main findings of this study was that the families in which these young people grew up actively modelled a valuing of the talent field in which their children excelled. While the parents themselves might not themselves have been professional musicians, scientists or sportspersons, they expressed a keen interest in sport, music or science.

‘As a consequence, young children were exposed regularly to activities connected with their subsequent talent fields; they were supported and rewarded for behaviors related to the fields; and they learned in informal ways about knowledge and skills of the activity in which they would eventually excel. The talent area provided activities and amusement for children and their parents - and an interest for them to share’ (Sosniak, 2003, p. 250).

As well as a valuing of their children’s own talent area, the parents of Bloom’s subjects placed, in their own lives, a strong emphasis on striving for excellence, persisting in the face of difficulty or hardship and seeking to achieve one’s potential.

‘It was not enough to stay busy. Emphasis was placed on doing the best one is capable of. Once goals were attained, there was pride in achievement, the reward for a job well done’ (Sloane, 1985, p. 440).

In contrast to the parents in the Gallagher and Gallagher study, the emphasis for Bloom’s parents was on the development of an intrinsic motivation to achieve. Their children were encouraged to see themselves not as ‘empty vessels’ to be filled with knowledge or skill, but as active partners, with their teachers or coaches, in the process of talent development.

There are remarkable similarities between the home environments of Bloom’s subjects and the young people of IQ 160+ in Miraca Gross’s longitudinal study (Gross, 2004). In both the American and the Australian studies, the majority of the families modelled a love of learning and a solid respect for education - and they continued to model this even in the years when their children’s schools were not providing an optimal - or even, in some cases, an adequate - education for their children. Their respect for the educative process - the acquisition of knowledge and skills - never faltered. Even in their own leisure time, the parents chose hobbies which involved learning and practice - eg, reading history, playing musical instruments, china painting, tapestry, short story writing, sports participation at highly competitive levels, gourmet cooking and astronomy. These parents brought to their own undertakings the pursuit of excellence, the striving for success, the concern for detail and precision and the pleasure in talent development that they sought to inculcate in their children.

A striking characteristic of the parents and grandparents of the young people in Gross’s study is their propensity to become involved in service clubs and charity organisations. These people give their spare time and talents freely to help others. Because of the talent for organisation and administration which many of them possess, they tend to occupy leadership positions in these clubs or organisations and spend much of their free time in voluntary and unpaid service. Many of them are involved in organisations which support children with intellectual or physical disabilities. **This stands in striking contrast to the stereotyped perception of parents of the gifted as over-ambitious and selfish individuals whose only concern is to promote the interests of their own children!**

Gross (2004) describes how many of the young people in her study (the majority are now in their middle to late twenties) have followed in their parents' footsteps, becoming involved in the same or other charity organisations, volunteering many hours of their spare time in voluntary service. She believes that this is due, at least in part, to the sense of empowerment which comes with knowing that one can take responsibility for one's own intellectual growth. If we teach our children that they can make a difference to their own lives, they are more likely to believe that they can make a difference to the lives of others.

It is essential that we teach gifted students, like all students, to respect and value education. This includes making them aware that while the skills of their teachers may vary, one thing that stands constant is their **own** capacity to access and explore the world of knowledge. Intellectually gifted children do often pick up, rather more quickly than their classmates, weaknesses in teachers' knowledge or understanding. The sensitive parent will assist the child to work through and round this difficulty, rather than promoting a sense of disempowerment by implying that the teacher is the fount of all knowledge and that this year the well is running dry!

## **Big fish in little ponds? Self-esteem, self-concept and ability grouping**

*'The self-esteem movement ... has helped lead to the abolition of tracking, lest those on lower tracks suffer damaged self-esteem; to the abandonment of IQ testing, lest those who score low feel low self-esteem; to massive grade inflation, lest those who score D's feel bad; to teaching aimed at the very bottom of the class, to spare the feelings of the kids slow to learn ... Each tactic is used to protect the feelings of self-esteem of the kids who would otherwise be outshone. This gain is deemed to outweigh any benefits lost to the kids who would shine. (Seligman, 1995, p. 28)*

Seligman's concerns, though rather emotively expressed, seem to be justified. Camilla Benbow and Julian Stanley (1996) discuss, at length, the disturbing process of grade inflation in American schools and universities, while many Australian teachers oppose the process of assessing students' work with numerical or letter grades on the grounds that this may damage the self-esteem of the less able students. Calls for the abolition of ability grouped programs for gifted students often rest on the dual claim that (a) ability grouping provides no academic advantage for gifted students and (b) it may 'damage' these students' self-esteem.

Research on the academic advantages when academically gifted students are ability grouped is strongly positive - particularly when ability grouping is full time and particularly for gifted students from minority and disadvantaged groups (Page & Keith, 1996). As we outlined in Core Module 6: Developing Programs and Provisions for Gifted Students, and will discuss in greater depth in Extension Module 6, gifted students who enter ability-grouped settings tend to perform substantially better on later measures of school achievement (measures of 'value added') than do equally bright students in mixed-ability classes. Full time ability grouped programs (eg,

special classes and special schools) produce substantial positive gains. Part-time grouping (eg, pull-out programs) produce gains that are more moderate but still positive.

So, what about self-esteem? This is not quite as clear cut. Some studies have found no difference or little difference in the self-concept or self-esteem of academically gifted students and students of average ability while others have found differences favouring gifted students.

One reason for the ambiguity in the results of some studies is that the authors don't explain clearly what they mean by 'self-esteem'. Some even confuse self-esteem and self-concept. As we explained in Core Module 3, self-concept has been defined as the collection of ideas that one has about oneself (Neihart, 1999). So, self-concept is what one believes about oneself. Self-esteem is the affective element of self-concept; how the student feels about what she believes. Both self-concept and self-esteem are influenced by the feedback one receives from other people. Teachers who withhold merited praise from gifted students for fear of making them conceited, while openly praising other students, can have a negative effect on the gifted students' academic self-concept and consequently their academic self-esteem.

Self-concept is multi-faceted. **Academic** self-concept reflects one's view of oneself as a learner; indeed one's self-concept in maths may be quite different from one's self-concept in English. **Social** self-concept reflects how we view our acceptability within social relationships. Then there is an element of self-concept which relates to **home and family** relationships. A further element relates to one's **physical** self-concept. Taking a global view of all this and saying that someone has a 'positive' or 'negative' self-concept is a little simplistic.

As we pointed out in Core Module 3, research has shown that students with relatively low academic self-concepts can achieve outstanding success in school while students with high academic self-concepts can perform quite poorly. Equally, students with high social self-concepts can engage in socially destructive behaviour. Self-concept reflects one's view of one's self; it doesn't necessarily reflect reality!

Nonetheless, ability grouping has been criticised by some writers for its presumed effect on the self-concept and self-esteem of gifted students.

In the early 1980s Professor Herbert Marsh developed a theory which he called the 'Big Fish in the Little Pond Effect' (BFLPE) (Marsh & Parker, 1984). This proposes that able students in 'low ability' schools ('big fish in little ponds') will have higher academic self-concepts than equally able students in 'high ability' schools ('big fish' who are comparing themselves with other 'big fish'). Marsh attributes this self-esteem drop to the change in academic ranking which occurs when a gifted student who has scored at or near the top of his mixed-ability class moves to a new learning environment where all the students are bright and he could end up ranked in the middle of the class or even in the lower half. Marsh questions the value of grouping gifted students together if their self-concept is going to be diminished by the realisation, for the first time, that they are no longer the 'best' in the class and that there are students even more able than themselves. He did acknowledge, however, in the title of his paper, the academic advantages of ability grouping; the paper is titled: 'Determinants of self-concept: Is it better to be a relatively large fish in a small pond **even if you don't learn to swim as well?**' (our emphasis).

What **does** happen to the self-concept of students who are ability grouped? Some studies have found no effect of grouping on either self-esteem or self-concept. Some have found a rise in self-esteem. Others have found that the academic self-esteem of gifted students takes a slight dip on entry to ability grouped programs - although long-term studies suggest that this is usually temporary.

One large scale Australian study of 1500 New South Wales students moving from primary to secondary school (Gross, 1997) did indeed find that students at New South Wales selective high schools (SHS) experienced a dip in academic self-esteem over the first few months of high school. At first glance, this could seem to validate the BFLPE theory, as these students were, in general, moving from mixed-ability classes to an ability grouped setting.

Interestingly, however, the comparison group of students entering comprehensive (mixed-ability) high schools (CHS) experienced a similar dip - and these students were moving from mixed-ability primary schools to mixed-ability secondary schools. For these students, the self-esteem dip can't readily be attributed to the BFLPE as it is unlikely that they experienced a significant change in ranking.

A more likely cause of the dip in academic self-esteem in both the SHS and CHS students is that they had just moved from being the oldest, most senior and most educationally experienced students in a (relatively) small primary school to being the youngest, newest and least experienced students in a much larger secondary school. This sudden shift from being top of the age-grade pecking order in primary school to being at the bottom in secondary could certainly account for a dip in academic self-esteem! Perhaps a Big Fish Little Pond Effect **was** functioning for these two groups of students - but related to the academic pecking order in their former and current schools, rather than to the type of school or class they were entering.

An interesting finding of Gross's study was that, even with the dip in academic self-esteem in both school types, the academic self-esteem of students entering selective high schools for gifted students remained higher than that of their age-peers entering comprehensive high schools and their social self-esteem was likewise higher (Gross, 1997). In both types of school, students whose motivational orientation was task-involved (learning for the love of learning) experienced less of a dip in academic self-esteem than students who were ego-involved (motivated by a need to out-perform their classmates).



## Increasing self-expectation

The dip in academic self-esteem noted in some gifted students on entry to special programs may have yet another, and different, cause.

The great psychologist William James proposed that self-esteem is a ratio of our **performance** in some field that we value compared against our **expectations** of how we will perform in that field (James, 1910). Gifted students who have succeeded, or indeed excelled, at schoolwork without ever having to put in real effort may not realise how much better they could perform if they really tried. When they move into an ability grouped program with work that is faster-paced, pitched at higher levels, and more abstract or complex, they are often amazed at the quality of the work they can accomplish. Paradoxically, this can result in a temporary decrease in academic self-esteem as these students' elation at how well they are performing is tempered with a sense of embarrassment and guilt as they realise the extent of their previous **underachievement**.



Smaller schools in rural areas have less opportunity to offer programs of ability grouping to their gifted students. As discussed in Core and Extension Module 6, some forms of acceleration, such as grade skipping or subject acceleration, can allow gifted students access to a more developmentally appropriate curriculum - and classmates who can work at their level.

For some gifted students, acceleration may result in a temporary dip in academic self-concept when they begin to compare themselves with students a year older. They will probably perform very well indeed - particularly if the school has been careful to follow the Guidelines on Acceleration presented as an Appendix to Core Module 6 - but their performance may not be as far beyond that of their new classmates as it was beyond that of their age-mates, and this may cause them moments of self-doubt.

If the school decides not to accelerate the gifted student, but to present her with faster-paced, more challenging work in the regular classroom, it may be wise for the teacher to have a friendly talk with the student beforehand, preparing her for the experience of being challenged academically in a way she probably has not experienced before. The student may feel embarrassed, at first, to be seen visibly pondering over work rather than breezing through it with ease as he did earlier.

In a small school, providing a gifted student with a curriculum which is very visibly differentiated may cause comments and questions from other parents. You may want to advise the gifted students' parents on how to handle this. A wry, good humoured acknowledgement from the gifted student's mum or dad that, 'Yes, he's having to work quite a bit harder now!' can often set the tone for positive community acceptance.

### Can self-esteem be too high?

Gifted students who have 'cruised by' for years in the mixed-ability classroom, rarely or never experiencing work at which they have had to **strive** to succeed, can sometimes develop an unrealistically inflated academic self-concept. Occasionally these students can become arrogant or conceited. These are the kids who give giftedness a bad name! Teachers who assume that gifted students appear only rarely in the population - 1 in 100 or fewer - may overgeneralise from these over-assertive young people and assume that all gifted students are like this.

Placement in an ability grouped class where there are many students as bright as they are and some who are even brighter, and where the work is set at a level and pace commensurate with their ability, can have positive outcomes for these gifted students, both academically and socially. Discovering that they are not the most mathematically gifted student in the school, that there are skills they have not yet developed, and that they may fail at a task two or three times before succeeding at it - and learning that these are experiences common to the vast majority of the people they will encounter in life - can bring these students' self-perceptions closer to

reality. Everyone has to learn that temporary failure - sometimes repeated - is a necessary step on the way to success. It is better for students, even the most gifted, to learn this in a supportive, encouraging school environment, and grouping gifted students together makes it much easier for teachers to present them with work that will require effort, persistence and commitment. Linda Silverman (1993) points out that conceit is moderated, more often than fostered, by placement in a special program.

## The importance of home support

However, it is important that parents of gifted students who are considering entering ability grouped programs should understand that in all likelihood, their child's class ranking **will** change in the new setting. Miraca Gross's interviews with parents of gifted students whose academic self-esteem experienced a substantial decrease in the first few months of selective high school (fewer than 5% of the sample) found that many of the parents were concerned that their son or daughter was no longer achieving at or near the top of the class and believed that this was due to lack of effort. A typical comment was, 'Now that he's got into the selective school he thinks he doesn't have to work any longer' or 'If she worked as hard as she did in primary school she'd be right up there at the top again.' These parents had difficulty in understanding that it was the environment that had changed rather than their children's efforts to succeed.

By contrast, the **children** of these parents believed that they were working as hard, or even harder, than they had worked in primary school and they were distressed by their parents' unwillingness to believe this. Both their academic self-esteem and their home-family self-esteem suffered as a result.

Schools should be open and frank with parents of students moving into an ability grouped program that it is unlikely that their children will hold the same class ranking as they did in their previous class. It is likely that every student in a gifted class will have scored at or close to the top in their previous, mixed-ability class. Not everyone can be top - nor is it necessarily important that they should be.



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your class who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking?



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your faculty or school who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking? How might you prepare their parents for this change?
- How could you use some of the material in this Extension Module to work constructively with parents who regularly but unwarrantedly blame teachers for difficulties experienced by their children?



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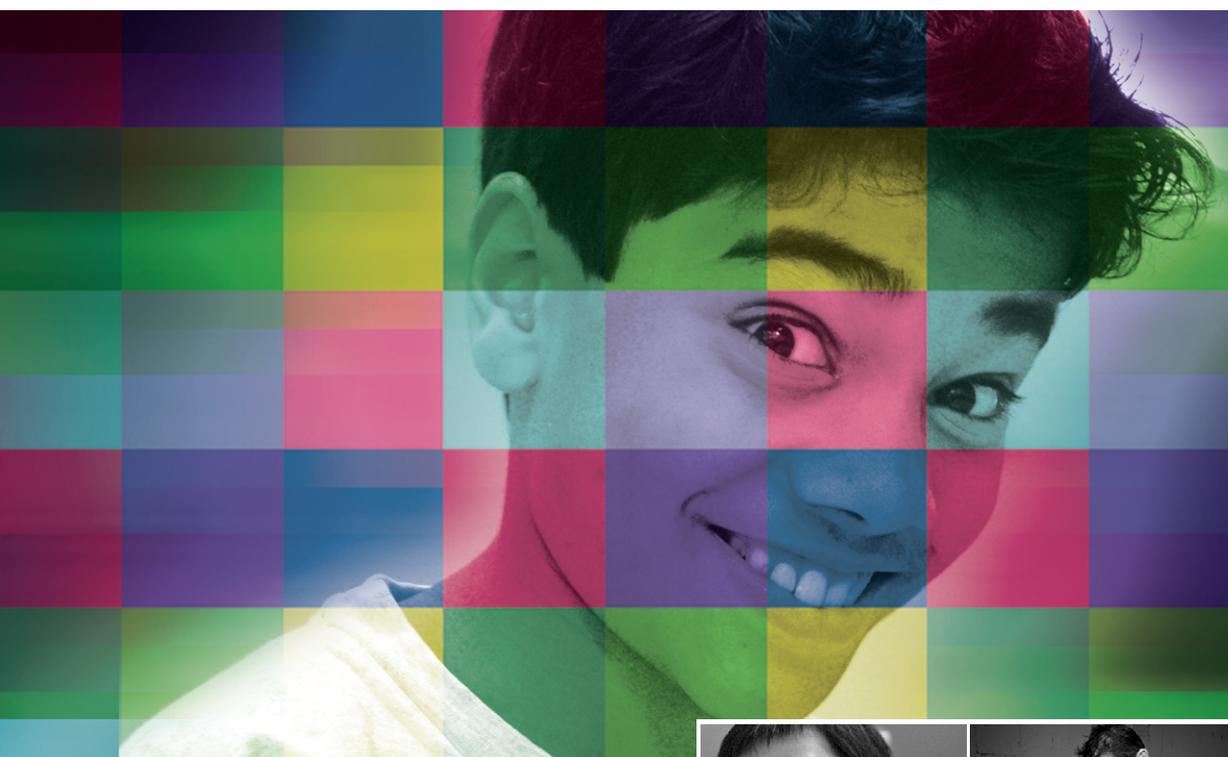




GIFTED AND TALENTED EDUCATION  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PACKAGE FOR TEACHERS

E X T E N S I O N

# Module 3



Secondary



Professor Miraca U.M. Gross



# Module 3

## Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development

Welcome to Extension Module 3: Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development.

In this Module you'll explore the ways in which gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship differ from those of most of their age-peers and how these differences can affect their social interactions.

We'll look at current Australian research on how optimism and different forms of motivation can affect student achievement and we'll explore the effects of different types of perfectionism.

Families can contribute enormously to student achievement but, unfortunately, some family issues can also contribute to underachievement. We'll look at the complexities of both these situations and explore ways in which the school can support and assist parents of gifted underachievers, to empower these students to achieve.

**Professor Miraca U.M. Gross**



## **Extension Module 3: Secondary**

### **Further Issues in Social-Emotional Development**

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1. Why do many gifted students seek out older students as friends?
2. How can perfectionism both help and hinder talent development?
3. How does competition affect gifted students' motivation?
4. How does blaming teachers for students' school difficulties disempower students?

1. Children tend to gravitate to other children who are at similar levels of intellectual and emotional development. For intellectually gifted children, this tends to translate to age-peers of similar abilities or children two or more years older. An additional factor is that as students move from early childhood into adulthood, they pass through a series of stages in which their conceptions and expectations of friendship become more and more sophisticated and complex. Gifted children tend to have expectations of friendship which their age-peers have not yet developed, and this causes them to gravitate towards older students whose conceptions of friendship are more akin to theirs.

2. Perfectionism can be a positive force when it is linked to a realistic acceptance that perfect performance is seldom achievable and when it is achieved it is as a result of years of striving and improving one's performance. It can be a negative influence when students are allowed or encouraged to set standards for themselves which they cannot realistically attain or when teachers or parents focus primarily on what has not been achieved rather than what has been done successfully.

3. Some gifted students thrive on competition. It stimulates and motivates them. Others dislike it intensely. Motivational orientation, which we looked at in Core Module 3, seems to play an important part. In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than those who are focussed on **being** the best. Research suggests that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the smartest, cleverest or the most successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do.

4. Research studies have found that parents who continually attribute their children's success or failure to excellent teaching or poor teaching may instil in their children a belief that they themselves can do little to contribute towards their own success.

If you were not correct in your answers to these four questions you should benefit from at least some of the information that follows in this Module.

If your answers to all four questions were correct you may not need to complete this Module though we advise that you still skim-read it to check whether it offers you anything new.

Specialisation Module 3 offers further information for you to consider on issues in the social and emotional development of gifted and talented students.

## Outcomes

At the completion of this Extension Module you will be able to:

- understand why many gifted students seek out older students as friends.
- facilitate the development of positive social relationships in students who have difficulty finding friends.
- devise strategies to assist gifted students to develop some of the positive attitudes and habits associated with perfectionism and reduce unfacilitative or negative perfectionistic tendencies.
- understand how dynamics in the home-school relationship can assist or hinder gifted students' progress.

# Part 1

## Gifted students and the search for friendship

*‘When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often “a friend”. The children’s experience of school is completely coloured by the presence or absence of relationships with peers.’  
(Silverman, 1993, p. 72).*

The need for friendship is a driving force in people’s lives. Most of us choose friends on the basis of similarities - we look for people who have roughly the same interests, opinions, attitudes, sense of humour and expectations of friendship as we do. However, research has found that particularly in the early and middle years of primary school, the friendship expectations of intellectually gifted students differ significantly from those of their age-peers of average ability, while the conceptions of friendship held by very highly gifted students bear little resemblance to those held by the considerable majority of children with whom they are likely to be grouped for purposes of instruction - and, ironically, for purposes of socialisation!

### Influences on children’s friendship choices

Research identifies five main influences on children’s friendship choices:

- Children form friendships not primarily on the basis of chronological age, but on the basis of similarities in developmental stages. Intellectual and emotional maturity have a considerable influence on how children view friendships and on who they choose as friends. Teachers who work with intellectually disabled students often notice that these students seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability, or children two or more years younger than themselves. For much the same reason, intellectually gifted children tend to seek out, as friends, either age-peers of similar ability or children two or more years older than themselves.
- Children’s capacity to make social comparisons, which we discussed in Core Module 3, influences their ability to recognise similarities and differences between themselves and other children. The move to viewing other children as potential friends - people with whom one can develop reciprocal relationships - depends on the capacity to view the potential friend as an individual with his or her own characteristics, ideas and interests. In general, children don’t start to make these social comparisons until approximately age 7, but gifted children acquire this ability rather earlier. They may start to notice, at surprisingly early ages, both the individuality of other children and the differences between their own interests, attitudes, likes and dislikes and those of their classmates.

- Children’s play is an important element in building friendships. However the play interests of gifted children often differ from those of their age-peers. They are less interested in **physical** competition (races, ball games, etc) and tend to prefer games or activities where **ideas** and **strategies** are matched against each other. This can place the gifted student in yet another form of ‘forced-choice dilemma’; play can become an uneasy compromise between their own interests and abilities and their desire to be accepted into a social group (Silverman, 1993). Children and adolescents who are less willing or less able to make such a compromise often become ‘loners’, preferring to invent solitary intellectual games which often centre on fantasy and imagined adventure.

Children’s play interests are strongly determined by their stage of cognitive development, and the play preferences of intellectually gifted children tend to resemble those of children some years older (Gross, 1999). Teachers, however, should be aware that they may not observe the **true** play preferences of gifted children if they are not provided with companions who share their play interests.

Solitary play in gifted children, rather than indicating social maladjustment or peer rejection, can simply signal the unavailability of children who share their interests.

- Children’s reading interests can also influence friendship choice. Someone who is passionate about reading is unlikely to choose, and keep, as a friend someone who thinks books are boring. In addition, the reading interest of gifted students tend to be those of students some years older.

Many gifted students in primary school seek out books which portray intellectual, emotional or moral striving on the part of the protagonist, eg, ‘chronicles’ which follow a character’s growth to moral maturity or ‘quests’ which portray a conflict between good and evil.

Many highly gifted children who display the sensual and imaginal ‘overexcitabilities’ discussed in Core Module 3 are attracted to certain literature because of the poetic beauty of the language. For example, at age 11, Christopher Otway, in Gross’s longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+, developed a special interest in the Old Testament, particularly the books of Ecclesiastes, Proverbs and Psalms while Adam, of the same study, became enthralled with Charles Kingsley’s *The Water Babies* because of the lyricism of the language (Gross, 2004).

Children with such unusual and advanced reading interests can experience extreme difficulty in finding age-peers with whom they can discuss their joy in reading. Indeed, some conceal their unusual interests for fear of derision. When the teacher of 7-year-old Anastasia asked her, in class, what she was reading at home, the child answered; ‘A book about bunnies’. It was *Watership Down*!

- Researchers studying friendship in children and adults point out the contrast between **popularity** and **friendship**. Popularity is characterised by the deliberate acquisition of a wide circle of playmates or ‘cohort members’; a certain degree of dependency on peer approval; and conformity to peer conventions, behaviours, rules and routines. Gifted students seem to leave behind, rather earlier than their age-peers, the social behaviours which characterise a desire for popularity and seem to seek, rather earlier than age-peers, relationships with a smaller circle of playmates who seem to display more of the functions of friendship - companionship, stimulation, intimacy and affirmation (Gottman & Parker, 1986).

A key issue in friendship is the **quality**, rather than the **quantity** of one’s friends. Close friendships centre on an exchange of feelings, insights and confidences. Friendship offers support, closeness, warmth, trust, enjoyment and kindness; indeed, true friendship seeks the good of the other. The relative social and emotional maturity of intellectually gifted children allows them to appreciate, at earlier ages than usual, the difference between friendship and popularity. Popularity is a competitive distortion of friendship in which importance is placed on the **quantity**, rather than the quality, of ‘followers’ (or dates, or invitations, or votes) one can attract, and which seeks self-affirmation rather than the affirmation of the friendship bond.

Mary Ann Swiatek (1995) in a study of highly gifted 7th-10th grade students, found that many of her subjects who were actively acknowledging and using their high abilities ‘discount(ed) the importance of popularity as it is traditionally understood in schools’ (p.156) as they believed that many gifted students who had achieved popularity had done so by compromising their values so that others would like them.



*Penny, in Year 9, is a ‘loner’ but not from choice. She has had only one good friend since entering high school and earlier this year the friend and her family moved interstate. Penny is very bright academically but very quiet and shy and she lacks confidence. Her interests are books and psychology (but not ‘pop psychology’, she recently told her teacher) and there seems to be no one else in her Year with whom she has much in common.*

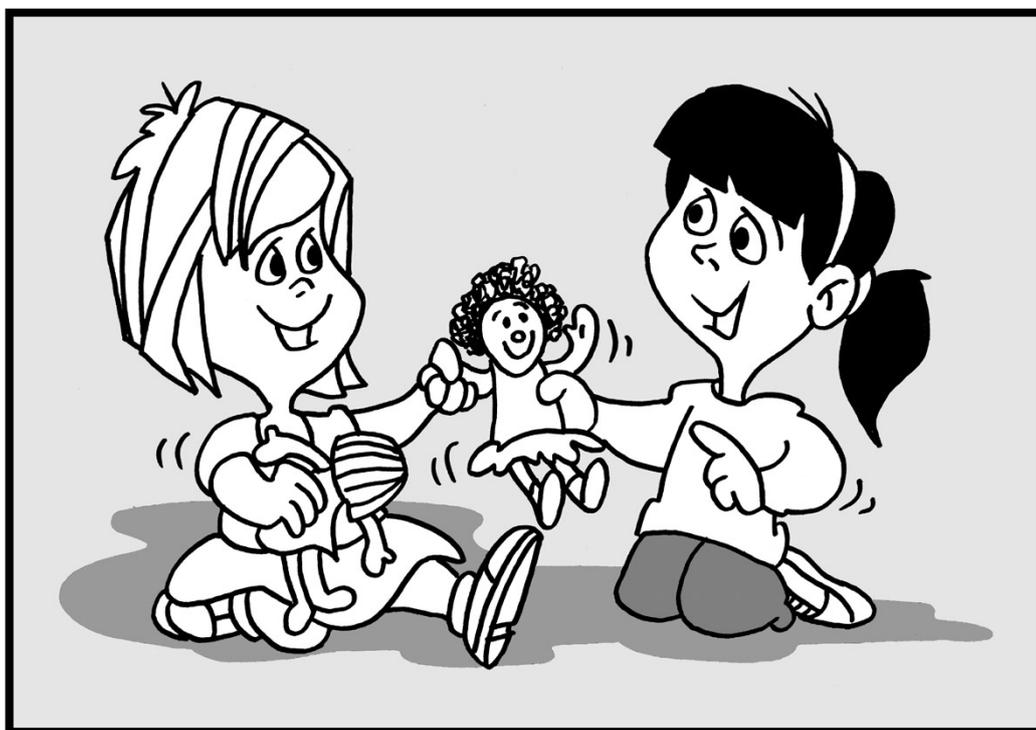
*Her sister, Sara, who is six years older, has been encouraging her to spread her wings a bit more. She offered to buy Penny a few new outfits to give her a ‘cooler’ image. She took her to a rock concert and encouraged her to start listening to modern music. ‘You’ve got to make a bit more effort’ she told Penny. ‘If you get out a bit more and meet people and talk about things that will interest **them** they’d accept you a bit more.’*

*‘I know,’ said Penny, ‘but it wouldn’t be **me** they’d be accepting.’*

The five issues discussed above - developmental age, the early onset of norm-referencing, their different play interests and reading interests, and their tendency to seek friendship rather than popularity - serve as powerful, interacting influences on the friendship choices exercised by gifted children. Gifted children and adolescents have different expectations of friendship from those held by the majority of their age-peers; they seem to view the nature of friendship, and the obligations of friendship, in a different light.

A study conducted with 700 Australian children in the early childhood to early secondary years found that children's conceptions of friendship form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age (Gross, 2002). The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

**Stage 1: 'Play Partner':** In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on 'play-partnership'. A friend is seen simply as another child who readily plays with you and allows you to use or borrow her playthings. In general this stage characterises the early childhood years.

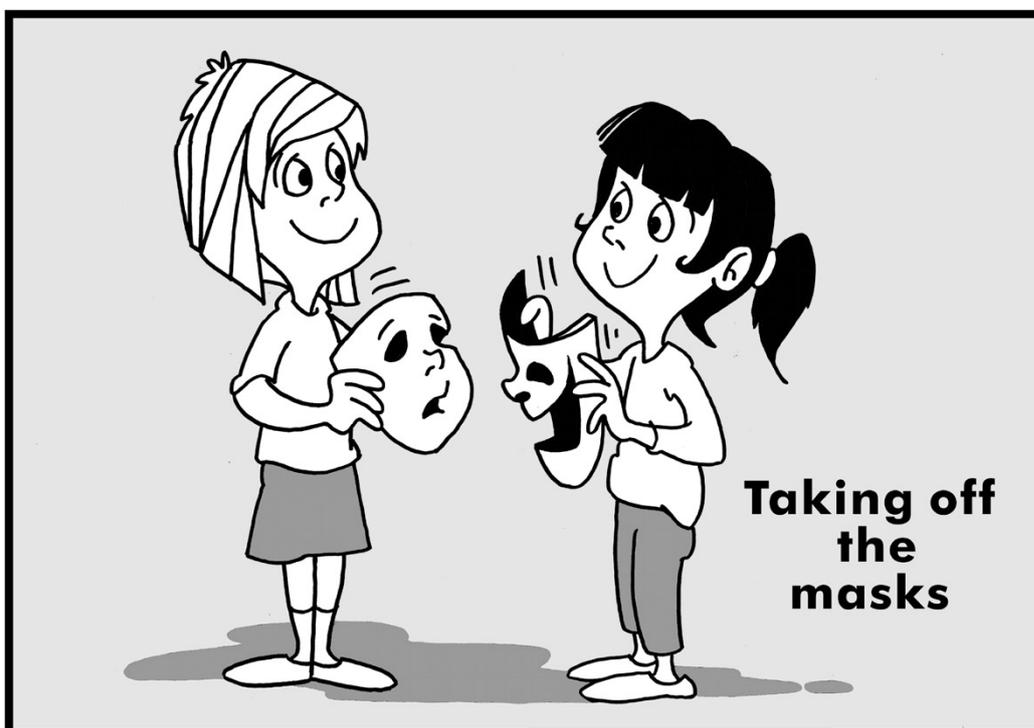


**Stage 2: 'People to chat to':** The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between 'friends' are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged. This stage is most noticeable about age 7-9.

**Stage 3: 'Help and encouragement':** At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; children do not yet see themselves as having the obligation to provide help or support in return. Of course, there is overlap between the stages - some children enter a stage rather earlier than their age-peers and others enter much later - but in general this stage characterises 9-11 year olds.

**Stage 4: 'Intimacy/empathy'**: The child now realises that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flow both ways and, indeed, the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding. In general children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12.

**Stage 5: 'The sure shelter'**: The title comes from a passage in one of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. 'A faithful friend is a sure shelter: whoever finds one has found a rare treasure' (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. A 12-year-old boy in Miraca Gross's longitudinal study of children of IQ 160+ (Gross, 2004) defined a friend as: 'A place you go to when you need to take off the masks. You can take off your camouflage with a friend and still feel safe.'



Many children - and indeed some adults - do not develop this conception of friendship.

Gross's (2004) study compared the friendship conceptions of three groups of students - children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children and exceptionally-profoundly gifted children. (You may want to refer briefly to the section on levels of giftedness in Extension Module 1.) **The study demonstrated strongly that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age as by mental age.** A strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. While the age ranges noted above characterise students of average intellectual ability, gifted children pass through the stages earlier - in some cases, some years earlier.

Gifted children begin to look for friends with whom they can develop close and trusting relationships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability are looking for play partners.

As stated earlier, many previous studies have suggested that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children of above average ability. This new study suggests that they may not only be seeking the intellectual compatibility of mental age peers; they may also be actively looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

Interestingly, the differences in friendship conception between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the early childhood years and the early years of primary, than in the years of early adolescence. **In Years 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children had the conceptions of friendship which characterise average ability children three or more years older.** It may be at this age that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship.

Very highly gifted children may be even more at risk. **The study found that children of IQ 160+ tend to begin the search for ‘the sure shelter’ - friendships of complete trust, honesty and fidelity - four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage.** Indeed, exceptionally and profoundly gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12. No wonder these children encounter difficulties with socialisation! There is little common ground between a 6-year-old who is seeking the ‘sure shelter’ and an age-peer who is looking for a ‘play partner’.

Substantial **gender differences** appeared in this Australian study. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls were, on average, two years further along the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. This suggests that gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability, as they will appear so dramatically different from the majority of boys of their age. This may explain why, particularly in the early years of school, gifted boys sometimes prefer the company of girls.



Another characteristic of gifted students is that they tend to prefer the company of a few close friends rather than large, looser groups. This is also a characteristic of children who are introverts rather than extroverts. Gifted children who are introverts - and as discussed in Linda Silverman’s valuable book, *Counselling the gifted and talented*, there seems to be a growing body of literature which connects the two (Silverman, 1993) - may have a double ‘need’ for a few closer relationships rather than many more ‘surface’ relationships.



Gifted children in rural and remote areas may be in a particularly sensitive situation. There may be few students of their own age level with whom they have enough in common, in terms of intellectual and emotional development, abilities and interests, for close friendships to develop spontaneously.

Grade advancement can be one means through which gifted students can be allowed readier access to students whose levels of intellectual and emotional maturity are closer to theirs. In one- or two-teacher primary schools, younger gifted children should be given regular access to older students. The teacher could explain to some of the older students that the younger child is lonely for companionship because her interests are more like those of older children and that they could help by befriending her.

As discussed earlier, girls tend to develop, in terms of their friendship expectations, earlier than boys, and gifted boys may sometimes gravitate towards girls for companionship. This may put them at risk for mockery or even ostracism from other boys. **Primary teachers should be sensitive towards this and try to create a class or school climate in which cross gender friendships are accepted.**

A number of gifted children's associations, and universities, run weekend or school vacation enrichment programs and these can be a wonderful opportunity for rural children to meet a wider range of students who share their interests. Some universities will offer sponsorships to students from rural and isolated regions to attend these courses. Alternatively, some service clubs may be willing to fund travel and accommodation costs.

## How do motivation and optimism influence achievement?

As discussed in the Core level of this Module, research has traditionally suggested that intellectually gifted students tend to be characterised by high levels of intrinsic motivation - the urge to learn for the sheer love of learning - rather than extrinsic motivation - working hard to achieve a good grade or to be praised by the teacher. This leaning towards task-involvement seems to be intensified when the student is able to experience 'flow' - engagement with a task which is just above the student's current level of mastery - in his or her Zone of Proximal Development. We will discuss the influence of 'flow' on children's task engagement in Extension Module 4.

Researchers have debated whether intrinsic motivation is a stable personality trait or whether it can be induced through the provision of challenging material and an intellectually stimulating environment. The trend over the last few years is to regard intrinsic motivation as 'situational'; students' motivational levels will depend on where they are, who they are with and what they are doing at the time. It is important to note, also, that academic challenge may not always produce a motivated response. If a gifted student has 'cruised by' for years, gaining high grades for work that she has mastered with little effort, the provision of work at which she has to **strive** to succeed may result in stress and anxiety.

More recent research has explored the effects of 'strain on coping resources'. This is usually thought of as the results of an **overload** of work or responsibilities; however, it may also be the results of prolonged tedium - **underload**! Either way the individual reacts negatively and one result can be a depression of intrinsic motivation.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can work in harmony. Recent Australian research highlights the positive association of optimism with both intrinsic motivation **and** extrinsic motivation (Hoekman, McCormick & Barnett, 2005). When a student feels optimistic about her learning situation - that things are going well, that she is having a good day, that she is achieving, that she is feeling energetic, or that she is positively engaged with the work she has been given - this may have a positive impact on both forms of motivation. By contrast, prolonged overload or underload may negatively affect optimism and, by association, result in decreased motivation.

Gifted students who are presented, too often and for too long, with a preponderance of material that they have already mastered, and which, furthermore, they mastered without truly having to engage intellectually with the work, are unlikely to feel good about learning. By contrast, the 'flow' experiences associated with the intrinsic pleasure of learning and talent development are often characterised by 'the combination of intrinsic enjoyment and intense concentration within a clear, long-term extrinsic reward structure' (Hoekman et al, 2005, p. 108). Hoekman and her colleagues suggest that teachers should aim to provide students with meaningful and challenging opportunities for academic and personal growth in the context of strong social support networks.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum presented in a socially optimal context which includes interaction with ability peers would seem to be a valuable catalyst in the development of optimism and healthy levels of motivation.

## Perfectionism: The two edged sword

Over the last few years Australians have developed very ambivalent attitudes towards perfectionism. We like to see it in people who are responsible for our safety - doctors and nurses for example - or who provide essential services (few things induce greater fury than a taxi-driver or bus driver who gets lost), or who provide sporting or popular entertainment (the soccer player who kicks an own goal is not easily forgiven). We almost insist on it in classical musicians and dancers, and in Olympic athletes. In a sense, they are there to be perfect. But we often don't appreciate others expecting it of us, and it has become politically incorrect to encourage it in children.

Nowadays many psychologists and educators view perfectionism as psychologically unhealthy. It is often viewed as leading to underachievement, frustration and low self-esteem. And indeed it **can** lead to such problems if it is poorly managed or allowed to become the dominant force in a student's achievement motivation. However, it can also be a source of great satisfaction and it can be a powerful force in personal and professional growth.

Patricia Schuler (2002), a counsellor and educational consultant in New York, has succinctly summarised the major findings about perfectionism in gifted students:

- As a group, gifted students tend to be perfectionistic.
- They are rather more perfectionistic than students of average ability.
- Their perfectionism can be a powerful force for high achievement.

Schuler emphasises, however, that perfectionism can be either healthy or neurotic. Healthy perfectionists are 'those who derive a very real sense of pleasure from the labours of a painstaking effort and who feel free to be less precise as the situation permits' (2003, p. 72). Neurotic perfectionists, on the other hand, 'are unable to feel satisfaction because in their own eyes they never seem to do things well enough to warrant that feeling' (2003, p. 72). Other researchers categorise this dichotomy as **enabling** perfectionism which empowers one towards success and **disabling** perfectionism which stunts one's capacity to achieve at the level of which one is truly capable.

However, to paraphrase Shakespeare, 'Some are born perfectionistic, some achieve perfectionism and some have perfectionism thrust upon them'.

In some gifted students, perfectionism seems to be a powerful innate drive. It is a longing to produce, physically, ideas that exist in the mind but which have not yet taken concrete form. In the Early Childhood strand of Core Module 1 we described Alexa who a few days after her 5th birthday tore up her first five attempts to write a thank you letter to her much loved grandma. Alexa wanted her writing to be as neat and clearly aligned as the print in the birthday card her grandma had given her - and her 5-year-old printing just wouldn't come out that way!



Dabrowski, whose research on 'over-excitabilities' was discussed in the Core level of this Module, believed that perfectionism was largely innate and that it was a strongly positive quality in personality - 'the striving for self-perfectionism that propels the individual towards higher level development' (Silverman, 1993, p. 57).

Other scholars believe that even when it is not innate, perfectionism in its **enabling** sense, as an empowering drive for self-improvement, can be achieved through dedication and effort. The student thoughtfully analyses her strengths and weaknesses and works to optimise the former and lessen the negative effects of the latter.

In other cases **disabling** perfectionism may unintentionally be 'taught' to gifted students by parents who are themselves perfectionistic or who push or hurry the child. David Elkind, author of *The hurried child: Growing up too fast too soon* (Elkind, 1981), spoke out strongly against parents who 'hothouse' children - although interestingly he later spoke out equally strongly against teachers who used his book to argue against accelerating gifted students academically (Elkind, 1988). Elkind was adamant that accelerating is not 'hurrying'; he emphasised that it is a professional response to gifted students' naturally accelerated pace of learning.

Disabling perfectionism may also be accidentally taught by teachers who teach or model performance goals the need to **be** the best - rather than learning goals - the drive to do one's **personal** best. (We looked at those contrasting goals in Core Module 3.) A class climate which over-emphasises a view of competition as 'one wins, the others lose' can lead to anxiety and a fear of failure.

Some perfectionists feel the need to control their environment by directing their high expectations of themselves onto others. Parents may demand unrelentingly high standards of their children. Other adults may demand unrealistically high standards of achievement of colleagues or employees.

Patricia Schuler, whose research on perfectionism was mentioned earlier, has made a special study of perfectionism in gifted adolescents. She compiled several lists of practical suggestions to assist educators and parents to help adolescents understand, and manage, dysfunctional perfectionism (Schuler, 1999). The recommendations below are drawn primarily from lists which Schuler compiled from the work of several researchers who have studied the learning and socio-affective needs of academically gifted young people in middle and high schools.

Schuler's study focussed particularly on gifted adolescents in a rural school environment and may be of particular benefit to gifted Australian adolescents in similar settings.

## Recommendations for teachers

- Educate yourself about the cognitive and affective characteristics of gifted adolescents. Understand how their perfectionism, sensitivity and intensity can be both helpful and harmful to them.
- Learn to recognise how and when perfectionism can become stressful. These can be: persistent procrastination in starting work and/or unwillingness to turn in work; inability to tolerate mistakes (in oneself or others); and impatience with one's own or others' imperfections.
- Talk to your students about the difference between excellence and perfection. Examine your own behaviours to ensure that you are not modelling unfacilitative perfectionism in your students.
- Teach your students the skills of task analysis, time management and goal setting. This can help the perfectionist to understand the value of setting more manageable goals - tackling things in stages rather than 'all at once'. Use contracts to encourage underachieving gifted perfectionists to finish their products.
- Provide opportunities for gifted adolescents to experience temporary failure (followed by success) in an intellectually and emotionally safe environment. Introduce them to new experiences to encourage them to take risks. Focus on open-ended activities and provide more choices in such a way that they don't always choose the things at which they are most successful. This helps those perfectionists who are reluctant to take chances.
- You don't need to grade every assignment. Perfectionists often feel they are 'failing' if they don't get a 'A' or 'A+' grade - even if the subject is not one of their talent areas. 'Free' them from this compulsion by occasionally just marking 'pass/fail' or 'satisfactory/unsatisfactory'. Provide awards that are linked to improvement in a subject rather than to absolute success.
- Focus on perfectionistic gifted adolescents' strengths and successes rather than on the mistakes they make. Be careful about how you phrase criticism because perfectionists can 'add' your comments to the load of self-criticism they already carry.
- Learn to use teaching and programming techniques which research shows are beneficial for gifted learners; eg, curriculum compacting, ability grouping and acceleration, which are discussed in Modules 5 and 6 of this Professional Development Course.
- Share with your students how you have handled failure and successes in your own life.

- Study how the arguments or styles of an expert have changed over time; this can illustrate how an individual's ideas evolve and how changing one's mind is not a sign of weakness.

Michael Pyryt, Director of the Centre for Research on Gifted Education at the University of Calgary, in Canada, suggests teachers should encourage gifted students to study the lives of eminent people. Most 'great' men and women didn't achieve greatness effortlessly or immediately. Reading biographies of eminent people will assist gifted children to realise four 'great truths' about great achievers.

1. The path to success is seldom simple or linear. Setbacks are common and barriers such as rejection of oneself or one's efforts, illness or economic misfortunes can hold back even the most dedicated achiever.
2. Great effort is usually required to achieve great success. Even the most intellectually gifted scientist or the most committed researcher rarely gets by on inspiration alone.
3. Revision and refinement are part of any inventive or creative process. Very few books are publishable in their first draft. Very few inventions work perfectly first time.
4. Failure can be constructive. If you learn from your mistakes, you're unlikely to make **exactly** the same mistake again. That's part of learning, and progress (Pyryt, 2004).

## Recommendations for parents

You may want to share the 'Perfectionism' section of this Module with parents of gifted students who are showing signs of unfacilitative perfectionism. Schuler's suggestions for parents of perfectionists are highly compatible with her suggestions for teacher assistance. When the home and school work together, supporting the perfectionist gifted adolescent, the likelihood of disabling perfectionism being transformed into enabling perfectionism is greatly strengthened.

- Recognise that your gifted adolescent's intellectual and emotional characteristics are intertwined and closely influence each other. Understand that the personality trait of perfectionism is also influenced by factors in the young person's environment and that this will influence whether the perfectionism is manifested in healthy or dysfunctional ways.
- Realise that perfectionism can be a positive motivator or a cause of stress for your gifted adolescent - or sometimes both! Be aware of pressures your gifted adolescent may be experiencing at home and at school. Talk to your adolescent about what perfectionism means to him or her - and to you.
- Is perfectionism a personality trait that you can recognise in yourself as well as in your adolescent? If so, by recognising the positive and negative components of perfectionism you can help your child by modelling appropriate responses. Point out positive but imperfect role models in the media to help them understand that no one can be perfect.
- Learn to set priorities in your own life and help your adolescent to do likewise. Help him or her to accept that making mistakes is a learning experience. Model your own acceptance of **your** mistakes. Teach the concept of 'constructive failure' which shows that future improvement arises from an understanding of what is going wrong at the present time.

- Help your adolescent to set high but realistic standards for himself/herself but not to expect other students to conform to these same standards. Help them to understand that time, effort and not giving up will help them attain the standards they are setting - **if** these standards are indeed realistic.
- Work with your gifted adolescent to improve his or her self-evaluation skills. Encourage them to develop an intrinsic locus of control by praising their efforts rather than their successes. Help them to understand that an individual's **worth** is not dependent on other people's evaluations but rather that each individual is responsible for his or her behaviour and the consequences of that behaviour.
- Avoid comparing your gifted adolescent to siblings or peers. Show your adolescent that s/he has inherent dignity and self-worth which are **unconditional**.
- Support, nurture and encourage your adolescent in activities in areas of interest or passion which bring enjoyment to him or her. Provide a time for creative activities and risk taking with safe opportunities to fail. Focus on the joy of self-discovery. Have fun with your adolescent.
- Teach your adolescent that health is important. Don't let study interfere with eating and sleeping. Overanxious perfectionists may put themselves under pressure to study much more than they need to, or is good for them.
- Seek professional counselling if your gifted adolescent becomes so fearful of failure or rejection that s/he becomes unable to act or make decisions.



You teach in a large high school with several classes at entry level. You are intrigued by Shani, one of the new intake. She is tall, poised, mature, very talented, particularly in maths - and seemingly quite uninterested in the other students in her own Year. It's not that she rejects them or sees herself as superior - she is polite and helpful in class, an excellent group worker and already well liked by her teachers - but at recess and lunch she gravitates towards students two or three years older.

Initially her friendships with the older students were limited to girls who had been at her own primary school two or three years before, but they introduced her to their classmates and she is now completely and warmly accepted by them. She socialises with them after school and at weekends.

Your school participates in a regional gifted and talented program which includes, as a feature, weekend camps for students with special talent in maths. In general, this serves students in middle and senior grades. Entry is by teacher and peer nomination. Several of Shani's older friends were accepted for an upcoming weekend camp and, contrary to precedent, so was Shani who had also applied for the program. Ms Michaels, her maths teacher, had nominated her and she had received several peer nominations from her friends in older grades.

When the other students in her own Year found out that Shani had been accepted for the maths camp there was an uproar. They protested that her acceptance was favouritism and that the school should not make an exception for a junior student simply because she had older friends who were willing to 'pull strings' for her.

Consider this situation through the lens of what you now know about how gifted students' conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to differ from those of age-peers. What may be the reasons behind Shani's gravitation, right from the start of the school year, to students older than herself? Why do the older students accept her so readily? Should the school allow her to go on the maths camp? Should they have accepted the teacher and peer nominations? If not, what can the school do to either formalise the situation so that younger maths-talented students can attend this program, or to formally remove this option so that they cannot?



Your school is a large high school with several classes at entry level. Almost right from the start of the year, teachers were drawing your attention to Shani, one of the new intake. She is tall, poised, mature, very talented, particularly in maths - and seemingly quite uninterested in the other students in her own Year. It's not that she rejects them or sees herself as superior - she is polite and helpful in class, an excellent group worker and already well liked by her teachers - but at recess and lunch she gravitates towards students two or three years older.

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Some of the parent body have taken it up and you have had three complaints from parents of younger students that their children were not nominated for the maths camp because it had not been formally announced that, this year, younger students were eligible.

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Now consider the other issue. Should the school allow Shani to go on the maths camp? Should the maths faculty have accepted the teacher and peer nominations? If not, what can the school do to either formalise the situation so that younger maths-talented students can attend this program, or to formally remove this option so that they cannot?



Let's firstly look at possible causes for Shani's preference for older students. You are familiar with the hierarchy of children's friendship conceptions and the tendency of gifted students to have developed expectations of friendship which are more like those of older children. Shani's friendship with the older students must have started at primary school or the older girls would not have been so ready to accept her as soon as she arrived in high school. It is possible that while she was still in middle primary, she was functioning at Level 4 in the hierarchy of friendship conceptions which sees a deepening of students' emotional sharing and bonding. In general children enter this stage at about age 11 or 12 but intellectually gifted students, particularly girls, are often functioning at this level by the middle years of primary school. Possibly no other girl in her Year level was ready for, or seeking, this level of friendship - but the older students were and it was with them that she bonded.

The upper years of primary school can be very lonely for gifted students whose friendship conceptions are already so far ahead of those of their classmates. Often there is, quite simply, no one at their school who is looking for the same things in friendship as they are. Like Shani, the people with whom they made friends earlier have moved on to secondary.

Shani's friends must have been missing her, too, and that accounts for the warmth of the welcome she received.

The issues with the maths camp are not as simple as may appear. Was the camp openly advertised as specifically for older students or was this just a convention that no one had challenged before? If the age restriction is not a formal requirement then Shani may well be entitled to attend the camp as she received the requisite teacher and peer nomination. If there are questions regarding whether Shani's maths achievement is up to the level required by the camp, that can be easily established by assessment. It's a pity the school had not added an objective criterion - a maths aptitude or achievement test or an off-level test of maths - to the two subjective criteria it was using. That would have obviated the cries of favouritism!



Shani's strong preference for older students must have become obvious in the first few weeks of school. Did anyone on the executive staff phone the primary school she had just come from, and ask about her pattern of friendships in the primary years?

If this had happened, you would have found that Betty, Sara, Cath and Lara, the girls Shani is closest to, all came to you from the same primary school two years before. Shani is just consolidating good friendships which already existed.

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You may also want to consider that allowing a younger maths-talented student to attend the camp is simply one of the many forms of acceleration that your school could use to respond to subject-specific talent. If Shani's maths ability is at the level required for the camp, if she is socially and emotionally mature enough to attend (and there seems little doubt about that!), if she has met the entry criteria (which she has!), if she wants to attend and if her parents are happy about it, it would seem to be a little discriminatory to refuse her admission.

# Part 2

## What characterises families of gifted and talented students?

### Family demographics

Studies of the families, and family situations, of academically gifted students conducted over the last 60 years are surprisingly consistent in their findings. However, please remember that while the facts reported below are **tendencies** - and in some cases strong tendencies - they are not **absolutes**! There are exceptions to every one of these findings!

- Gifted children tend to be only children or oldest children. (The incidence varies across studies from 59% to 67%.)
- They tend to come from small families.
- Their parents tend to have delayed starting their families, so the average age of parents at the birth of the first child tends to be substantially older than the average for their community or country.
- Parents tend to be highly educated and to value education highly.
- The incidence of divorce among parents of gifted children tends to be substantially lower than in the regular community.

These findings have been synthesised from reviews of the research literature conducted over several years by many researchers (see, for example, Davis & Rimm, 2004; Gross, 2004). We should be aware, however, that these findings arise from studies of children and adolescents who have been identified as gifted! Some arise from studies of gifted underachievers; others, however, arise from studies of students who are successful achievers at school - students whom Gagné would define as **talented**. Parents of small families would probably have more time to spend on their children than parents of large families. Only children and oldest children have longer periods in their early years of being the main focus of parental attention. Parents who work for several years before starting their families may well be more financially secure. Parents who themselves have higher degrees are more likely to teach their children the value of higher education. All these issues, which Gagné would view as facilitative environmental catalysts, affect talent development.

More important than demographics, however, are the **expectations** that parents of gifted students have for their children and how the family assists these children to develop their gifts into talents.

## Parenting by positive expectations

Davis and Rimm (2004) emphasise that if high achievement, positive attitudes and constructive behaviour are expected and reinforced by parents, children will internalise and practise these values. However, it is important that the messages given to children by their parents are **clear** and **consistent**.

Studies of young people who grew up to be highly successful in their careers (eg Bloom, 1985; Walberg, Williams & Zeiser, 2003; Gross, 2004) have found that the messages transmitted by their parents had a lot in common. Their parents:

- placed strong emphasis on trying to do one's best, working hard and spending one's time constructively.
- emphasised the importance of study, learning and school.
- taught respect for individuality and tolerance for the points of view of others.
- recognised that a positive and achievement-oriented atmosphere also had to include the need for reasonable amounts of fun and recreation - a balance of work and play.
- provided a balance of support and challenge.
- **provided predictable and consistent expectations for conduct.**

It is important that parents of intellectually gifted children continue to accept their obligations to guide, protect and monitor their children. No matter how highly gifted a child may be, he or she is still a child and does not have the maturity and experience to make ultimate decisions on his or her conduct. It is the parents who do have the maturity and experience to set appropriate limits on the child's behaviour.

The following quotation comes from the 1970s when we were less gender-inclusive in our pronouns than we are now - but the meaning still stands clear and is as relevant as it ever was.

'Discipline your gifted child when he needs disciplining. Correct him when he needs correction. Give direction when he needs direction. He should not be granted special privileges nor should unacceptable behaviour be tolerated because of his intellectual gifts.' (Ginsberg & Harrison, 1977)

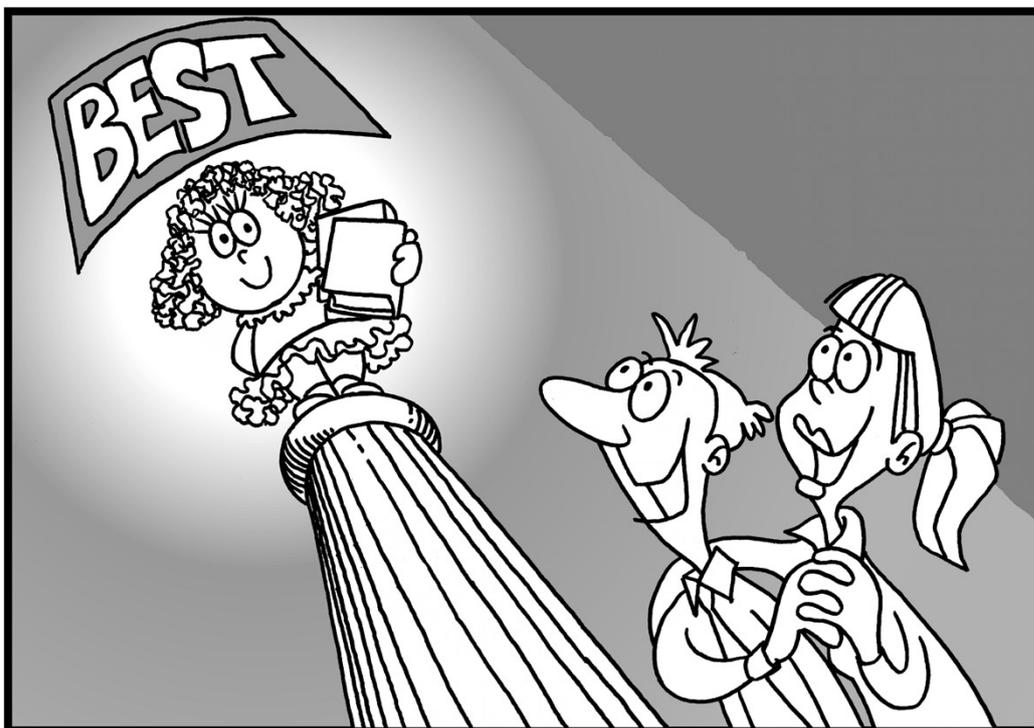
## Handling competition

Today's society is competitive. We compete for jobs, social status, success and even partners. For students talented in sports, athletics or music, competition is built into the talent development process. Does pressure help or disadvantage gifted students under competition situations? Of course, it is in part an issue of personality but what do researchers generally find?

In Core Module 3 we compared **task involvement** (focussing on learning goals) and **ego-involvement** (focussing on performance goals). In general, individuals who are focussed on **doing** their best (task-involved) experience less internal negative pressure than ego-involved students who tend to focus on **being** the best. Self-esteem is higher in task-involved students

than in their ego-involved age-peers (Gross, 1997) and, as will be discussed later, these students are less likely to experience a decrease in self-esteem when they enrol in ability grouped programs.

Davis and Rimm (2004) point out that parents who repeatedly praise their children for being the **smartest**, the **prettiest**, the **cleverest** or the **most** successful may be instilling in their children the idea that their value lies in being superior to their age-peers rather than in being excellent in what they do. An additional risk is that such normatively expressed praise may create unrealistic expectations in the children that they are expected to maintain this superior status indefinitely.



Of course, some individuals thrive on competition. For some gifted young people competition provides a powerful encouragement to perform to the very best of their ability. For some it also promotes resilience - the capacity to get up and try again, even better and more successfully, when one has not at first succeeded. Karnes and Riley (2005) suggest that entering competitions can enhance gifted students' critical thinking skills, presentation and performance skills, and self-confidence - as long as competitions are properly monitored and parents emphasise to children that the essence of competitions is that there are losers as well as winners. Rimm and Olenchak (1991) found that Future Problem Solving proved helpful in reversing underachievement in some gifted students who had initially been reluctant to compete for fear of failing.

The following suggestions for reducing stress related to competition come from a range of research studies.

- Involvement in a range of competitive activities may help children learn to cope with competition in a more relaxed way. Regular experience of competition may help reduce anxiety.
- Encourage the child to focus on the quality of her participation in the event rather than

the place or mark she scored. (Parents need to model this too, or the point will be lost!)

- Allow children to talk openly about their fears and anxieties about competition. Avoid giving the child the idea that expressing negative feelings is taboo. Parents can encourage the child by saying ‘What’s the worst thing that could happen in the competition? How likely is it for that to happen?’
- Use humour to counteract stress. Parents can gently mock themselves for their own anxieties - making it clear to the child that this is what they are doing.
- Encourage the highly competitive achiever to engage in a balance of activities which are non-competitive.



*Ching-Lai, aged 14, has been studying tae kwon do and is displaying a growing talent. He won a prize in a local contest and with the enthusiastic support of his parents and his tae kwon do instructor, he entered a competition in the martial arts section of the local show which in recent years has attracted contestants from all around the state. He was confident that he would bring home at least one medal.*

*Ching-Lai didn't win any of his sections of the competition, nor did he come second or third. He was bitterly disappointed and ashamed of his failure. He felt he had let himself and his instructor down. However, one of the judges made a special point of talking to Ching-Lai afterwards and showing the boy his written notes which included the comment 'Shows great promise and will improve with experience'. Ching-Lai's instructor was delighted that the judge had singled out his pupil for encouragement. "'Shows promise" is not about your performance right now,' he explained to Ching-Lai . 'It is about what you will be in the future. It means you will improve steadily if you continue to work as you have been doing.'*

*By encouraging Ching-Lai to change his performance-oriented view of the competition into a task-oriented perception, his instructor helped him see that winning or losing was only one aspect of competition; an equally important aspect was learning to improve.*

## **Forming positive school-family partnerships**

As this Module is being written, the Australian media have been focussing, with concern, on the behaviour of parents who seem to view the school-family relationship as one of conflict, rather than of cooperation. These individuals generally form a small minority in a school's parent body but their influence is still disturbing, particularly as there is a substantial amount of research that suggests that parents who regularly enter into conflict with the school, and who discuss regularly, with their children, their dissatisfaction with their child's school or teachers, tend to have children who develop as academic underachievers.

(The following section is adapted, with acknowledgement, from Gross, M.U.M. (2003). Does criticising your child's teacher disempower your child? *Understanding Our Gifted*, 15 (4), 22-23.)

James and Shelagh Gallagher (1994), in a study of families of gifted students who were underachieving in school, found something disturbing. The view of education which the parents were presenting to their bright but underperforming children was that the child's success in school was primarily the responsibility of the teacher, rather than of the child himself. If the student was underperforming, it was the fault of the teacher. If the student had succeeded in previous years, it had had been through good teaching rather than through the child's efforts or ability. By denying the student's involvement in her success or failure, these parents were disempowering the student. They were encouraging their children to see themselves as passive recipients of instruction.

Although these parents were concerned about their son or daughter's underachievement and genuinely wanted to help the child improve, they were going about it the wrong way. They were failing to model, for the child, an **intrinsic** motivation to achieve in academic work - a task-oriented desire to learn for the sheer satisfaction of learning. Another problem was that the parents seldom modelled a healthy respect for school or for the education system. Indeed, a substantial number of the parents were openly critical, in front of their children, of their children's teachers and the school's policies.

If parents model a belief that the education their children receive is trivial, or boring or of little value, their children will develop the same attitude. If parents tell a child that the year he spends with a particular teacher is a waste of time, the child will believe this and moderate his efforts accordingly. Parents need to model a love of learning and a respect for the ongoing process of education even in those years where they may feel their gifted child is 'marking time'.

In their study, Gallagher and Gallagher found that the parents of gifted underachievers rarely spoke about their work or shared their career interests with their families. When they **did** speak about their jobs, most took a very negative perspective even when they had invested many years in preparation for high level careers. Sadly, in doing this they were modelling, for their children, a view that the years of study which had led to their employment had been a waste of time.

A striking contrast is provided by the parents in a well known study, conducted by Benjamin Bloom (yes, the creator of Bloom's taxonomy!) who followed the careers of 120 young adults who had achieved world-class success as concert pianists, swimmers, tennis players, mathematicians, sculptors and research neurologists. One of the main findings of this study was that the families in which these young people grew up actively modelled a valuing of the talent field in which their children excelled. While the parents themselves might not themselves have been professional musicians, scientists or sportspersons, they expressed a keen interest in sport, music or science.

'As a consequence, young children were exposed regularly to activities connected with their subsequent talent fields; they were supported and rewarded for behaviors related to the fields; and they learned in informal ways about knowledge and skills of the activity in which they would eventually excel. The talent area provided activities and amusement for children and their parents - and an interest for them to share' (Sosniak, 2003, p. 250).

As well as a valuing of their children's own talent area, the parents of Bloom's subjects placed, in their own lives, a strong emphasis on striving for excellence, persisting in the face of difficulty or hardship and seeking to achieve one's potential.

'It was not enough to stay busy. Emphasis was placed on doing the best one is capable of. Once goals were attained, there was pride in achievement, the reward for a job well done' (Sloane, 1985, p. 440).

In contrast to the parents in the Gallagher and Gallagher study, the emphasis for Bloom's parents was on the development of an intrinsic motivation to achieve. Their children were encouraged to see themselves not as 'empty vessels' to be filled with knowledge or skill, but as active partners, with their teachers or coaches, in the process of talent development.

There are remarkable similarities between the home environments of Bloom's subjects and the young people of IQ 160+ in Miraca Gross's longitudinal study (Gross, 2004). In both the American and the Australian studies, the majority of the families modelled a love of learning and a solid respect for education - and they continued to model this even in the years when their children's schools were not providing an optimal - or even, in some cases, an adequate - education for their children. Their respect for the educative process - the acquisition of knowledge and skills - never faltered. Even in their own leisure time, the parents chose hobbies which involved learning and practice - eg, reading history, playing musical instruments, china painting, tapestry, short story writing, sports participation at highly competitive levels, gourmet cooking and astronomy. These parents brought to their own undertakings the pursuit of excellence, the striving for success, the concern for detail and precision and the pleasure in talent development that they sought to inculcate in their children.

A striking characteristic of the parents and grandparents of the young people in Gross's study is their propensity to become involved in service clubs and charity organisations. These people give their spare time and talents freely to help others. Because of the talent for organisation and administration which many of them possess, they tend to occupy leadership positions in these clubs or organisations and spend much of their free time in voluntary and unpaid service. Many of them are involved in organisations which support children with intellectual or physical disabilities. **This stands in striking contrast to the stereotyped perception of parents of the gifted as over-ambitious and selfish individuals whose only concern is to promote the interests of their own children!**

Gross (2004) describes how many of the young people in her study (the majority are now in their middle to late twenties) have followed in their parents' footsteps, becoming involved in the same or other charity organisations, volunteering many hours of their spare time in voluntary service. She believes that this is due, at least in part, to the sense of empowerment which comes with knowing that one can take responsibility for one's own intellectual growth. If we teach our children that they can make a difference to their own lives, they are more likely to believe that they can make a difference to the lives of others.

It is essential that we teach gifted students, like all students, to respect and value education. This includes making them aware that while the skills of their teachers may vary, one thing that stands constant is their **own** capacity to access and explore the world of knowledge. Intellectually gifted children do often pick up, rather more quickly than their classmates, weaknesses in teachers' knowledge or understanding. The sensitive parent will assist the child to work through and round this difficulty, rather than promoting a sense of disempowerment by implying that the teacher is the fount of all knowledge and that this year the well is running dry!

## **Big fish in little ponds? Self-esteem, self-concept and ability grouping**

*'The self-esteem movement ... has helped lead to the abolition of tracking, lest those on lower tracks suffer damaged self-esteem; to the abandonment of IQ testing, lest those who score low feel low self-esteem; to massive grade inflation, lest those who score D's feel bad; to teaching aimed at the very bottom of the class, to spare the feelings of the kids slow to learn ... Each tactic is used to protect the feelings of self-esteem of the kids who would otherwise be outshone. This gain is deemed to outweigh any benefits lost to the kids who would shine. (Seligman, 1995, p. 28)*

Seligman's concerns, though rather emotively expressed, seem to be justified. Camilla Benbow and Julian Stanley (1996) discuss, at length, the disturbing process of grade inflation in American schools and universities, while many Australian teachers oppose the process of assessing students' work with numerical or letter grades on the grounds that this may damage the self-esteem of the less able students. Calls for the abolition of ability grouped programs for gifted students often rest on the dual claim that (a) ability grouping provides no academic advantage for gifted students and (b) it may 'damage' these students' self-esteem.

Research on the academic advantages when academically gifted students are ability grouped is strongly positive - particularly when ability grouping is full time and particularly for gifted students from minority and disadvantaged groups (Page & Keith, 1996). As we outlined in Core Module 6: Developing Programs and Provisions for Gifted Students, and will discuss in greater depth in Extension Module 6, gifted students who enter ability-grouped settings tend to perform substantially better on later measures of school achievement (measures of 'value added') than do equally bright students in mixed-ability classes. Full time ability grouped programs (eg, special classes and special schools) produce substantial positive gains. Part-time grouping (eg, pull-out programs) produce gains that are more moderate but still positive.

So, what about self-esteem? This is not quite as clear cut. Some studies have found no difference or little difference in the self-concept or self-esteem of academically gifted students and students of average ability while others have found differences favouring gifted students.

One reason for the ambiguity in the results of some studies is that the authors don't explain clearly what they mean by 'self-esteem'. Some even confuse self-esteem and self-concept. As we explained in Core Module 3, self-concept has been defined as the collection of ideas that one has about oneself (Neihart, 1999). So, self-concept is what one believes about oneself. Self-esteem is the affective element of self-concept; how the student feels about what she believes. Both self-concept and self-esteem are influenced by the feedback one receives from other people. Teachers who withhold merited praise from gifted students for fear of making them conceited, while openly praising other students, can have a negative effect on the gifted students' academic self-concept and consequently their academic self-esteem.

Self-concept is multi-faceted. **Academic** self-concept reflects one's view of oneself as a learner; indeed one's self-concept in maths may be quite different from one's self-concept in English. **Social** self-concept reflects how we view our acceptability within social relationships. Then there is an element of self-concept which relates to **home and family** relationships. A further element relates to one's **physical** self-concept. Taking a global view of all this and saying that someone has a 'positive' or 'negative' self-concept is a little simplistic.

As we pointed out in Core Module 3, research has shown that students with relatively low academic self-concepts can achieve outstanding success in school while students with high academic self-concepts can perform quite poorly. Equally, students with high social self-concepts can engage in socially destructive behaviour. Self-concept reflects one's view of one's self; it doesn't necessarily reflect reality!

Nonetheless, ability grouping has been criticised by some writers for its presumed effect on the self-concept and self-esteem of gifted students.

In the early 1980s Professor Herbert Marsh developed a theory which he called the 'Big Fish in the Little Pond Effect' (BFLPE) (Marsh & Parker, 1984). This proposes that able students in 'low ability' schools ('big fish in little ponds') will have higher academic self-concepts than equally able students in 'high ability' schools ('big fish' who are comparing themselves with other 'big fish'). Marsh attributes this self-esteem drop to the change in academic ranking which occurs when a gifted student who has scored at or near the top of his mixed-ability class moves to a new learning environment where all the students are bright and he could end up ranked in the middle of the class or even in the lower half. Marsh questions the value of grouping gifted students together if their self-concept is going to be diminished by the realisation, for the first time, that they are no longer the 'best' in the class and that there are students even more able than themselves. He did acknowledge, however, in the title of his paper, the academic advantages of ability grouping; the paper is titled: 'Determinants of self-concept: Is it better to be a relatively large fish in a small pond **even if you don't learn to swim as well?**' (our emphasis).

What **does** happen to the self-concept of students who are ability grouped? Some studies have found no effect of grouping on either self-esteem or self-concept. Some have found a rise in self-esteem. Others have found that the academic self-esteem of gifted students takes a slight dip on entry to ability grouped programs - although long-term studies suggest that this is usually temporary.

One large scale Australian study of 1500 New South Wales students moving from primary to secondary school (Gross, 1997) did indeed find that students at New South Wales selective high schools (SHS) experienced a dip in academic self-esteem over the first few months of high school. At first glance, this could seem to validate the BFLPE theory, as these students were, in general, moving from mixed-ability classes to an ability grouped setting.

Interestingly, however, the comparison group of students entering comprehensive (mixed-ability) high schools (CHS) experienced a similar dip - and these students were moving from mixed-ability primary schools to mixed-ability secondary schools. For these students, the self-esteem dip can't readily be attributed to the BFLPE as it is unlikely that they experienced a significant change in ranking.

A more likely cause of the dip in academic self-esteem in both the SHS and CHS students is that they had just moved from being the oldest, most senior and most educationally experienced students in a (relatively) small primary school to being the youngest, newest and least experienced students in a much larger secondary school. This sudden shift from being top of the age-grade pecking order in primary school to being at the bottom in secondary could certainly account for a dip in academic self-esteem! Perhaps a Big Fish Little Pond Effect **was** functioning for these two groups of students - but related to the academic pecking order in their former and current schools, rather than to the type of school or class they were entering.

An interesting finding of Gross's study was that, even with the dip in academic self-esteem in both school types, the academic self-esteem of students entering selective high schools for gifted students remained higher than that of their age-peers entering comprehensive high schools and their social self-esteem was likewise higher (Gross, 1997). In both types of school, students whose motivational orientation was task-involved (learning for the love of learning) experienced less of a dip in academic self-esteem than students who were ego-involved (motivated by a need to out-perform their classmates).



## Increasing self-expectation

The dip in academic self-esteem noted in some gifted students on entry to special programs may have yet another, and different, cause.

The great psychologist William James proposed that self-esteem is a ratio of our **performance** in some field that we value compared against our **expectations** of how we will perform in that field (James, 1910). Gifted students who have succeeded, or indeed excelled, at schoolwork without ever having to put in real effort may not realise how much better they could perform if they really tried. When they move into an ability grouped program with work that is faster-paced, pitched at higher levels, and more abstract or complex, they are often amazed at the quality of the work they can accomplish. Paradoxically, this can result in a temporary decrease in academic self-esteem as these students' elation at how well they are performing is tempered with a sense of embarrassment and guilt as they realise the extent of their previous **underachievement**.



Smaller schools in rural areas have less opportunity to offer programs of ability grouping to their gifted students. As discussed in Core and Extension Module 6, some forms of acceleration, such as grade skipping or subject acceleration, can allow gifted students access to a more developmentally appropriate curriculum - and classmates who can work at their level.

For some gifted students, acceleration may result in a temporary dip in academic self-concept when they begin to compare themselves with students a year older. They will probably perform very well indeed - particularly if the school has been careful to follow the Guidelines on Acceleration presented as an Appendix to Core Module 6 - but their performance may not be as far beyond that of their new classmates as it was beyond that of their age-mates, and this may cause them moments of self-doubt.

If the school decides not to accelerate the gifted student, but to present her with faster-paced, more challenging work in the regular classroom, it may be wise for the teacher to have a friendly talk with the student beforehand, preparing her for the experience of being challenged academically in a way she probably has not experienced before. The student may feel embarrassed, at first, to be seen visibly pondering over work rather than breezing through it with ease as he did earlier.

In a small school, providing a gifted student with a curriculum which is very visibly differentiated may cause comments and questions from other parents. You may want to advise the gifted students' parents on how to handle this. A wry, good humoured acknowledgement from the gifted student's mum or dad that, 'Yes, he's having to work quite a bit harder now!' can often set the tone for positive community acceptance.

### Can self-esteem be too high?

Gifted students who have 'cruised by' for years in the mixed-ability classroom, rarely or never experiencing work at which they have had to **strive** to succeed, can sometimes develop an unrealistically inflated academic self-concept. Occasionally these students can become arrogant or conceited. These are the kids who give giftedness a bad name! Teachers who assume that gifted students appear only rarely in the population - 1 in 100 or fewer - may overgeneralise from these over-assertive young people and assume that all gifted students are like this.

Placement in an ability grouped class where there are many students as bright as they are and some who are even brighter, and where the work is set at a level and pace commensurate with their ability, can have positive outcomes for these gifted students, both academically and socially. Discovering that they are not the most mathematically gifted student in the school, that there are skills they have not yet developed, and that they may fail at a task two or three times before succeeding at it - and learning that these are experiences common to the vast majority of the people they will encounter in life - can bring these students' self-perceptions closer to

reality. Everyone has to learn that temporary failure - sometimes repeated - is a necessary step on the way to success. It is better for students, even the most gifted, to learn this in a supportive, encouraging school environment, and grouping gifted students together makes it much easier for teachers to present them with work that will require effort, persistence and commitment. Linda Silverman (1993) points out that conceit is moderated, more often than fostered, by placement in a special program.

## The importance of home support

However, it is important that parents of gifted students who are considering entering ability grouped programs should understand that in all likelihood, their child's class ranking **will** change in the new setting. Miraca Gross's interviews with parents of gifted students whose academic self-esteem experienced a substantial decrease in the first few months of selective high school (fewer than 5% of the sample) found that many of the parents were concerned that their son or daughter was no longer achieving at or near the top of the class and believed that this was due to lack of effort. A typical comment was, 'Now that he's got into the selective school he thinks he doesn't have to work any longer' or 'If she worked as hard as she did in primary school she'd be right up there at the top again.' These parents had difficulty in understanding that it was the environment that had changed rather than their children's efforts to succeed.

By contrast, the **children** of these parents believed that they were working as hard, or even harder, than they had worked in primary school and they were distressed by their parents' unwillingness to believe this. Both their academic self-esteem and their home-family self-esteem suffered as a result.

Schools should be open and frank with parents of students moving into an ability grouped program that it is unlikely that their children will hold the same class ranking as they did in their previous class. It is likely that every student in a gifted class will have scored at or close to the top in their previous, mixed-ability class. Not everyone can be top - nor is it necessarily important that they should be.



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your class who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking?



- Have you learned anything from this Extension Module that might help to explain a student in your faculty or school who has high ability but seems to be persistently dissatisfied with his or her performance?
- What strategies might you use to prepare students who are to be accelerated or ability grouped for a possible change in class ranking? How might you prepare their parents for this change?
- How could you use some of the material in this Extension Module to work constructively with parents who regularly but unwarrantedly blame teachers for difficulties experienced by their children?



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