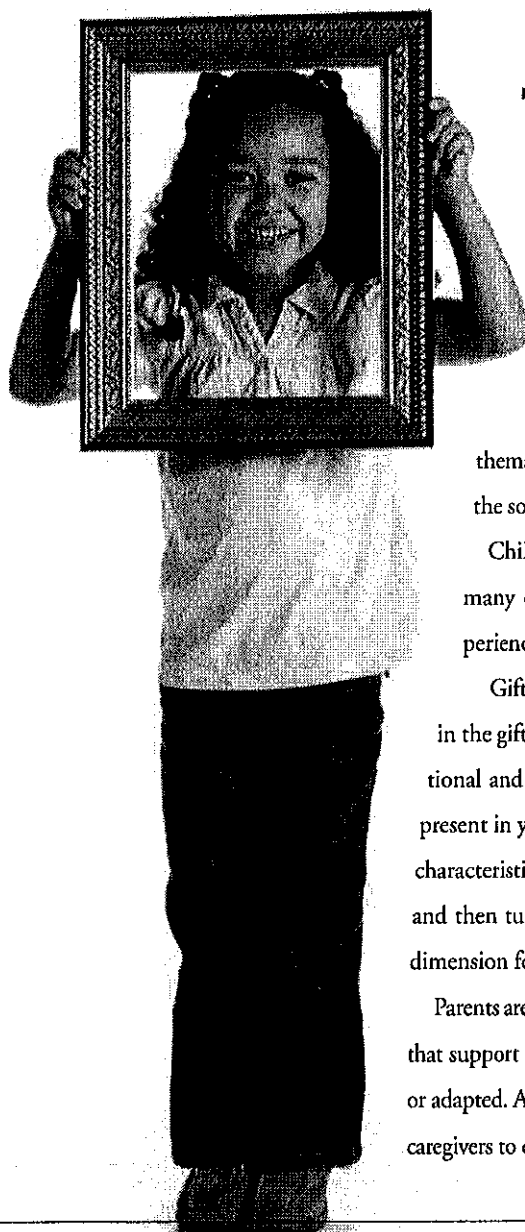


# Social-Emotional Characteristics of Young Gifted Children

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There are a variety of definitions related to giftedness. Recognizing that the definitions vary by affiliation, school, and state, this article focuses specifically on a definition related to the whole person. Annemarie Roeper (1982) defined giftedness as “a greater awareness, a greater sensitivity, and a greater ability to understand and to transform perceptions into intellectual and emotional experiences” (p. 21).

Gifted children have a variety of identifying characteristics. These characteristics are present across cognitive and affective domains and manifest themselves differently among individuals. The focus of the following characteristics is the social-emotional aspect of young gifted children, ages 3–8 (see Table 1).

Children, particularly young children, demonstrate characteristics of giftedness in many different ways. These characteristics manifest themselves based on gender, experiences, cultural identity, personal passions and interests, and family or community.

Gifted children develop asynchronously. Morelock (2000) stated that “asynchrony in the gifted population means a lack of synchronicity in the rates of their cognitive, emotional and physical development” (as cited in Silverman, 2000, p. 4). This asynchrony is present in young gifted children and can pose challenges when addressing social-emotional characteristics. A child may have an in-depth conversation about dinosaurs with an adult and then turn around and hit a classmate for not sharing a toy. Asynchrony adds another dimension for building a repertoire of strategies in working with young gifted children.

Parents are ideally suited to address their child’s exhibited characteristics and develop strategies that support him or her. As children grow, their needs change and strategies must be modified or adapted. As experts in their own children’s giftedness, parents need to work with teachers and caregivers to determine what techniques work best at various stages of development.

**Table 1 Social-Emotional Characteristics**

| Characteristics                             | Possible Manifestations of Characteristic   |
|---|---|
| High degree of sensitivity and empathy      | Knows what everyone else is doing and feeling; understands the depth of issues  |
| Perfectionism                               | May not finish projects because it doesn't look as good as the child envisions; does not have the skills to complete a "perfect" model like the example; may shut down; becomes frustrated; feels unsuccessful  |
| Excellent/keen sense of humor               | Ability to pick up on adult humor at an early age; understands the use of puns; plays with language   |
| Feeling of being different                  | Playmates may be older peers; struggles to find chronological peers; recognition that he or she doesn't "fit in"  |
| Intensity                                   | May be focused on learning everything there is to learn about a topic; may come across as being serious   |
| Heightened sensory awareness                | May be sensitive to touch, sounds, sights, and smells, which may result in only wearing clothes with no tags and needing a quiet environment; has sensory overload when a vast arrays of colors or items are used; feels ill when walking by a department store perfume counter or a food court at the mall |
| Idealism                                    | Wants everyone to get along; no problem is too big and there is a solution; everything can be worked out  |
| Sense of justice                            | Thinks each person should be treated equally  |
| Advanced levels of moral judgment           | Focuses on family or community even though peers may still be focused on self   |
| High expectations of self and others        | Expects everyone to live up to the behavior guidelines  |
| Early development of inner locus of control | Participates in activities for him- or herself, not others; external rewards don't matter   |
| Awareness of society and global community   | Understands his or her place in a larger community and world  |

*Note.* Adapted from Clark (2008), Johnsen (2011), Smolny and von Fremd (2004), and VanTassel-Baska (2003).

There are a few strategies that are universally applied when addressing social-emotional characteristics of gifted children. Cross (2005) provided the following strategies:

- teaching the child to anticipate and understand how he or she reacts to events and situations;
- providing techniques and strategies to either change the reaction or deal with his or her reaction;
- guiding the child in dealing with the difficulties and as he or she develops strategies; and
- communicating with teachers and other caregivers to understand the child and the goals for the child.

By using a variety of strategies to meet the social and emotional needs of the child, there is better chance of him or her developing appropriate coping skills.

### **Children You May Know**

#### **High Degree of Sensitivity**

Brian, age 7, has always been a sensitive child. He demonstrates genuine care for his peers and adults

and is considered a friend by all his classmates. He has a well-developed sense of right and wrong. When Brian does something "wrong," he immediately internalizes his "failure." Any sign of a raised voice or disappointment from an adult leads him to find a corner of the room, cover his face, cry, and shut himself off from others. This is difficult for the adults who want to discuss the situation with him or ask for reasons behind the inappropriate behavior. Sometimes he becomes so upset that he refuses to listen, cooperate, or engage, resulting in the appearance of sullen refusal to deal with the consequences of his actions.

Brian displays a variety of characteristics but most prominently a high degree of sensitivity and empathy, high expectations of self and others, an inner locus of control, and perfectionism related to behavior and idealism. At-home strategies include talking to Brian with a soft voice, providing time to allow him to calm down, and having him identify what he did "wrong." Brian needs the adults in his life to have a great deal of patience, an identified space for him to go to so that he can spend the time he needs to calm himself down, and an awareness

that he needs some time alone (Clark, 2008; Cross, 2005; Silverman, 2000; Smutny, 2001; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). Discussion can happen after he has calmed down, focusing on his behavior and future choices (Fonseca, 2011).

Brian's teachers need to understand how sensitivity translates to certain behaviors. Providing teachers with this information helps them to recognize that the behavior is the internalized consequences of the unacceptable behavior rather than adult defiance.

At school, Brian's teachers must be patient and build a trusting relationship with him. When an incident does happen, a quiet, private place to talk is best. Brian needs reinforcement that it was his behavior that was unacceptable and that the teacher still likes him. Brian thrives on trusting relationships, and it is important that these develop with the adults in his life (Cross, 2005; Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Fonseca, 2011).

### **Awareness of Society and the Global Community**

Samantha, age 8, cannot be in the room when a news story is on the television or radio. She becomes consumed with the problems presented in the stories and tries to develop solutions to complex, sometimes inexplicable issues. Her immediate response is a deeply felt empathy that quickly becomes paralyzing. The level of sadness is difficult for her to deal with, and she struggles to continue with her daily routines. Samantha becomes withdrawn and frightened, feeling powerless in an "out-of-control" world.

Samantha displays an awareness of society and global community, advanced levels of moral judgment, high degree of sensitivity and empathy, idealism, sense of justice, and intensity. At home, if possible, avoid media outlets and discussions about current events while she is around. However, it is important for Samantha to develop an understanding that "bad" things happen in the world that she has no control over (Clark, 2008; Cross, 2005; Fonseca, 2011). Events and information need to be discussed in consumable amounts or through books with a focus on positive,

age-appropriate ways that she can help (Halsted, 2009). Community service projects will provide strategies or solutions for helping her feel that she can contribute to a cause. Projects need to be age appropriate and may include making cards for victims and thank-you cards for the first responders; gathering supplies for a disaster drive; making blankets, hats, or scarves; or raising money for an organization (Kaye, 2010).

In school, teachers need to be aware of her deep response to issues. In the classroom when issues arise, she can be given the opportunity to remove herself from the discussion. Using journals can provide Samantha with an outlet for discussing issues or concerns as well as provide the teacher insights into her thinking (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Class service-learning projects provide her with the ability to contribute to an organization and a way to focus on making a difference. Communication with teachers and other adults in her life will be beneficial in her development of additional personal strategies (Cross, 2005; Fonseca, 2011; Smutny, 2001).

### **Heightened Sensory Awareness**

Genell, age 4, is extremely sensitive to her environment. She is aware of every color, sound, and scent within the classroom. She was in the gym at school one day when the fire alarm went off for a routine drill. She was so affected by the sensory overload that she refused to return to the gym at the conclusion of the drill. For several months after the incident, Genell became physically ill upon entering the gym.

Genell has a heightened sensory awareness, intensity, and an inner locus of control. At home, Genell does best in an environment without a variety of stimuli and needs some quiet time in an environment that works for her (Fonseca, 2011; Silverman, 2000; Smutny, 2001). Discussion of loud noises and the purposes of the sounds will help Genell with the recognition of the importance of the sounds. Talk with Genell and find out what was happening at the time the alarm went off: Is there something specific

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that would have helped her? What is she thinking when she walks back into the gym? Creating and recognizing the specifics of the incident will help develop strategies for dealing with future events (Clark, 2008; Cross, 2005).

At school, teachers need to understand that this was a traumatizing event. In the future when there is a scheduled drill, have someone remove her from the building prior to the alarm going off or warn her that it is coming, and keep the communication with her parents open. Patience is critical in working with Genell (Cross, 2005). Providing encouragement while she is given time to acclimate herself to the gym will be needed (Silverman, 2000; Smutny, 2001; VanTassel-Baska, 2003). Before participating fully in the class she may need to stand in the doorway or enter the gym for increasing amounts of time. This process may take a couple of days to months and the adults need to be patient with her and recognize that she experienced a traumatic event and needs guidance and support in addressing this situation (Cross, 2005; Silverman, 2000).

### Summary

Parents of gifted children act as guides, supports, inspirations, and advocates for them. Manifestations of giftedness in young children are often puzzling: their responses seem amplified, their interests all-consuming, and their needs insatiable. At other times, they may be delightfully engaged and brimming with enthusiasm. Without a guide or manual for such situations, parents sometimes feel as if they are on an uncharted course. With the ideas and strategies discussed in this article, parents, caregivers, and teachers can help children steer their social and emotional issues successfully. ☼

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