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Social Adjustment and Peer Pressures for Gifted Children

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This article by Sylvia Rimm addresses the social issues that gifted young people face on a regular basis. It gives situational examples and offers suggestions to parents on how to deal with issues that may arise. Peer pressures are discussed as well as strategies for parents on helping their children to chose the "right" peer group.

Parents of gifted children often wonder and worry about the peer relationships of their children. They may hear stories of gifted children going awry because of peer pressure or about gifted children who feel isolated. This article will address three issues: 1) What research says about gifted children and peer relationships; 2) How much involvement parents should have in influencing their children's peer relationships; and 3) What parents can do when gifted children are in the "wrong" peer group. These issues may be quite different for elementary grade children than for older children.

The Elementary Grade Years
Studies of gifted, elementary-aged children actually found that they tend to be liked by their peers, and in one study were actually found to be more popular than their peers (Udvari & Rubin, 1996; Austin & Draper, 1981; Schneider, 1987; Schneider, Clegg, Byrne, Ledingham, & Crombie, 1989). Children and adults alike are influenced by their peers, but children who are still in the process of developing a value system are more vulnerable to negative influences (Rimm, 2000). Parents should take a proactive position in discussions about friendships during early childhood to lay the foundation for children making good decisions about friends later. You can help your children select good friends by teaching them early about what being a good friend means. For example, for a young child you could talk about kindness, love of learning, honesty, sharing, and having fun together. For gifted children, it's especially important for them to choose peers who enjoy learning so they feel confident in their own motivation to learn. Here are two examples of opportunities to teach children about peer relationships:

> Sam enjoys time with his friend Nick, but after play dates Sam seems to be a different child. Sam's language changes to ugly vocabulary that he's never heard at home. He pushes limits and is disrespectful to his parents. Sam has also shared tales of Nick's troublesome behavior in school.

> First grader Hannah wanted her ears pierced. Her parents considered her far too young for earrings, but weren't sure how to handle Hannah's strong persuasion based on wanting to fit in with her friends who all had pierced ears and wore earrings.

In Sam's case, parents shouldn't feel hesitant about setting limits for their children if they find them selecting misbehaving or negative friends. If they observe that friends are a bad influence on their children, it's best to require children to discontinue play with them temporarily. It's also important to explain to children that people change, and when their friends' behaviors improve, they may play together again. For example, Sam may have to say to Nick, "My mom [or dad] says I can't play with kids who use bad language."

In Hannah's case, parents have no reason to prohibit Hannah's play with her "earring wearing" friends. They can decide to tell Hannah that earrings are inappropriate for her at this age and that she will need to wait until middle or high school. It isn't a question of a "right" time for earrings, but a parent's decision about her own values and teaching children early that there will be times ahead when they will be different than their friends based on their own family values. A discussion of differences and independence will help prepare them for the more intense, peer pressured years ahead in middle and high school.

The Middle and High School Years
The middle and high school years can be quite lonely for some gifted teens. Gifted adolescents often express conflict over their giftedness. They value being intelligent, yet almost always realize that giftedness exacts a social price. Here are some of the comments from gifted middle school students with whom I met for focus groups about peer pressure:

> I want so much to get A's for my parents and for myself, but also I want to be accepted by the "in" group at our school. The "in" group considers students who get all A's to be nerds.

> I used to be considered smart in my old school, but my friends never seemed to mind. After I got into the gifted magnet school and told my friends in my neighborhood, they started pushing me around and calling me "nerd." They tease me and say I'm weak because I'm smart.

> In our class, we have two people in fifth grade that go to seventh grade math. Kids are jealous and try to beat them up and hurt them, just because they're nerdy.

Over 3,500 Minnesota secondary students responded to a newspaper column question that asked if they would rather be the best looking, most athletic, or smartest student in their class. Respondents were supposed to write an essay to support their answers (Schroeder-Davis, 1999). Although more students favored "most intelligent" (53.8 percent), followed by "most athletic" (37.3 percent) and "best looking" (only 8.9 percent), content analysis of these student essays showed that the students were aware of an anti-intellectual stigma expressed by peers. Twenty-two percent directly alluded to that stigma, and almost none attributed any immediate social benefits to being smartest (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2001).

A survey conducted by Brown and Steinberg (1990) of 8,000 high school students in California and Wisconsin found that fewer than 10 percent of the high achievers were willing to be identified as part of the "brain" crowd, and students often withdrew from debate, computer clubs, and honors classes to avoid being labeled a "geek," "dweeb," or "nerd" (Davis & Rimm, 2003). The percentage was even lower for females than for males.

None of the high-achieving African-Americans surveyed in the Brown and Steinberg study were willing to be considered part of the "brain" crowd. This social pressure was confirmed by Ford (1994-95). In her study of gifted African-American girls, peer pressure had a powerfully negative effect on their achievement in school.

Over half of the girls in her study indicated they were teased by their peers for their high achievement, and one third were accused of "acting white." These negative experiences caused feelings of alienation and rejection, as well as withdrawal and underachievement for these girls. Marva Collins, African-American and founder of the Urban Preparatory School in Chicago, remembers her struggles.

> I grew up as an African-American during the worst period of racism in Alabama. If I was called a racist name and I told my dad and my grandfather, they would just look at me without surprise and say "And...?" People would say to me as a child, "Don't you know? Black kids can't do those things." It never dawned on me that because I was a black kid, I was inferior to anyone. I never believed the word "can't." Everything I've done in my life I've been told I couldn't do, so when someone tells me what I can't do, I know I'm on the right track. "I can" has become my mantra. Kids picked on me a lot. They'd say, "You think you're more than us." My parents had to pick me up from high school every day because kids would want to fight me, scratching and pulling my hair. (Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman, 2001)

Luftig and Nichols (1989) also found evidence that gifted boys hid or masked their giftedness by being funny. In contrast to average adolescents and gifted girls, Luftig and Nichols (1990) found gifted boys ranked as most popular, non-gifted boys and non-gifted girls as second most popular, and finally, gifted girls as least popular of the four groups. Fifteen percent of the successful women in the See Jane Win study considered social isolation to be their most negative experience in childhood. A study of over 1,000 successful women (Rimm, Rimm-Kaufman, & Rimm, 1999) found the theme of a social price to pay common among many who were excellent students. Some women commented that they intentionally did poorly on tests or didn't hand in assignments. However, their backing away from achievement to preserve their social selves was typically temporary, and they, their parents, or a teacher recognized the dysfunction of their brief underachievement.

For example, Martha Aarons, a flutist in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra, recalled coming home from middle school and crying daily because kids called her "hairy legs" and "brain." It was not an easy time for an all-A student who loved classical music. It was traumatic for her, and it took her years to recover from that sadness. Attendance at summer music camps dissipated the pressure and reassured her there were others like her. She made plenty of friends through her music (Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman, 2001).

Gifted adolescents often express feelings of difference (Swiatek & Dorr, 1998; Rimm et al., 1999; Rimm & Rimm-Kaufman, 2001). Manor-Bullock, Look, and Dixon (1995) suggested these feelings result from the "gifted" label, although gifted women interviewed for the See Jane Win research expressed feelings of difference frequently, whether or not they were in gifted programming. Coleman and Cross (1988) suggested that even when children don't feel different, they sometimes assume that others perceive them as different, and thus, they believe that perception will interfere with their social interactions. The Coleman and Cross study points out that the stigma of giftedness doesn't have to be proven as real if it is assumed by the students to be real. Their beliefs about the stigma will have an effect on their social relationships anyway.

Extreme Giftedness
Many studies that have compared social adjustment of moderately gifted students to students with extremely high IQs have concluded that popularity is a much greater problem for students with unusually high intelligence (Austin & Draper, 1981; Feldman, 1986; Gallagher, 1958; Hollingworth, 1942), and that extremely gifted children have much greater social problems, probably related to how far from the norm their thinking experiences are.

Gross (1993) found that for students with IQs of 160+, eighty percent of them reported that they experienced intense social isolation in a regular classroom and were continuously monitoring their social behavior to conform to the expectations of their peer group. That, in combination with their frequently unchallenging curriculum, caused them ongoing emotional stress.

How Families Can Be Supportive
While positive relationships with parents typically are not harmful to peer relationships (Montemayer, 1984), reliance on peers for advice and acceptance can be negatively associated with closeness to parents (Kandel & Lesser, 1972). Continuous bickering with parents seems to propel adolescents to more dependence on and acceptance of peer norms, with rejection of parent norms (Hill, 1980). Maintaining a positive family environment helps gifted children deal with the anti-gifted peer pressure they may feel during adolescence.

It's also important for parents to value and support their children's talent during this precarious period in their development and not to add to the pressures the child is already feeling. Parents need to be especially careful not to stress popularity and social success. Instead, parents may have to counter peer messages of popularity by pointing out that the emphasis on popularity, as a competitive form of friendship, ends at high school graduation (Rimm, 1988). They will need to support their conscientious students and point out the rewards ahead, including good scholarships and excellent colleges, and explain that once college begins the stress on popularity will fall away and be viewed as immature.

Parents can also encourage the development of positive interests that will ultimately lead them to positive peer groups and social confidence. The See Jane Win research showed that gifted girls who felt negative peer pressure often coped with that pressure with involvement in interests and activities. Scouts, music, horseback riding, religious groups, and sports provided arenas to develop self-confidence and friendship. Even during the teen years, kids need to continue to be involved in family activities. If teens are lonely, parents may wish to invite a friend to join the family activities. On the other hand, if teens are too social, families can preserve family time for family bonding only, and insist that friends don't join the family for these special occasions.

Probably the best way to support gifted and talented students, particularly adolescents, is to help assemble a gifted cohort group. It will encourage high achievement and reinforce the full use of students' talents. Youth symphony orchestras, high-level Saturdays, summer programs, special classes, debate teams, intellectual and creative teams, and gifted peer-discussion groups help young people to value their talent and build constructive self-concepts and identities.

Perhaps most important, schools need to provide counselors and school psychologists who are trained to understand the peer pressures and isolations that gifted children feel so that social isolation doesn't lead to anger toward themselves or others. If knowledgeable adults are not available to support these gifted students in their schools, they are indeed at risk of using their gifted cognitive abilities and sensitivities to harm themselves and society instead of making the contributions of which they are capable.

If Your Teens Are In Negative Peer Groups
Peers who smoke, drink alcohol, use drugs, and oppose school and parents will put pressure on your children to do the same. Peers who are excellent students, involved in extracurricular activities, and busy building skills and interests are likely to have a positive effect on your children. Sometimes parents and teachers may be fooled by teens' school behavior. That is, occasionally, even apparently positive kids lead a very different and unhealthy social life outside of school unbeknownst to their families.

If your child is already in a negative peer group, here are some suggested potential solutions for separating them from their negative friends. Unfortunately, all of these are more effective with children in middle school than in high school, and none are guaranteed to be a solution. All are worth considering (Rimm et al., 1999):

Solution #1: Substituting a Positive Relationship
The most positive technique for removing an adolescent from a negative peer group is getting her involved in a positive peer experience, such as a fun enrichment program, a religious club or scout group, a special interest group, a sport, drama, art, music, a creative writing activity, a summer program or camp, or a youth travel experience.

Solution #2: Prohibiting a Friendship
Also somewhat effective in middle school and possibly in early high school, but not likely beyond that, is a clear message to your child that you wish he not befriend particular individuals or groups of kids. You'll need to justify the prohibition by explaining that you find their behavior unacceptable, and you'll only permit them to be friends outside of school if you see positive changes in the other teens. If you and your child's other parent agree on that philosophy, your child is more likely to accept it. As parents, if you don't agree, don't waste your time prohibiting the friendship. Your child will ignore the message he doesn't like if he receives an equally powerful message that he prefers from his other parent. If either of you believe that your child should have the right to choose any friends he wishes, he will, regardless of one parent insisting he not be allowed to.

Solution #3: Entering Contests
Encourage your child to enter a contest or activity in which she has a chance of winning or earning an important part. Don't hesitate to talk to a coach or teacher privately about your efforts to reverse your child's negativism. Winning kids are often excluded from peer groups that are negative about school. Winning a speech, art, or music contest offers peer status to students and causes them to appear more interesting to positive students. Sometimes a victory is sufficient to separate a teen from a negative peer group.

Solution #4: An Exciting Family Trip
A family trip may distract your wayward child from negativity. Time away from peers in an entirely new environment can channel your child's independence. One-to-one trips may be important in temporarily reducing tension and enhancing family closeness. One parent and one teen on a trip may be better than the whole family because the teen is more likely to relax without sibling rivalry issues.

Solution #5: Volunteer Activities
Participating with family, religious, or community groups in efforts to help others who are in need builds confidence in teens. When they're feeling good about their contributions, they're less likely to join in with negative teens.

Solution #6: Changing Schools
This is a last consideration. This works most effectively in the beginning of a negative peer group relationship before your child is overly engaged with a group. It also works best if the negative group does not live in the surrounding neighborhood and if your child and her friends don't drive yet. It has been extremely powerful for some students who have been clients at Family Achievement Clinic, but it should be used sparingly. New schools also have negative peer groups that may attract your child.

If you introduce any of these potential separators to your children, don't expect them to like them. Your teens may fight you if they are pressured to participate. They shouldn't even be suggested as choices, or they surely will not select them. You can, however, permit or even encourage them to make choices among activities. For example, they may choose the summer creative writing or music program that seems most interesting. These are the choices they can make effectively. These choices will encourage their independence and may lessen their resistance.

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Permission Statement