



Highly gifted children and peer relationships

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This article by Deirdre Lovecky reviews the research on highly gifted children and peer relationships. The author highlights possible issues with peers for highly gifted children. She also discusses strategies for developing successful peer relationships.

Research on social adjustment and development of highly gifted children suggests that the more highly gifted the child, the more likely there will be less than optimal social and emotional adjustment (Butks, Jensen & Terman, 1930; Gallagher, 1958; Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1931; Janos & Robinson, 1985). Gross (1993) found that the majority of these children (over IQ 160) tended to internalize problems. On the outside they looked more socially mature, but on the inside they experienced more loneliness, isolation and peer difficulties than moderately gifted children. The children themselves identified problems with social acceptance and feeling valued for their opinions, difficulties with social skills and dealing with being picked on by age peers. Hollingworth (1931) identified the ages of four to nine as the most problematic for highly gifted children due to differences in levels of social development of these children as opposed to age peers.

Research on children's friendships shows that when asked to pick qualities that determine what makes a best friend, average children, ages four to seven, associated friendship with sharing materials or activities, or offering assistance, defense against others and other friendly behavior. Older children, above age ten or so, chose sharing interests, private thoughts and feelings, having a mutual sense of respect and affection. As children grow older they increasingly understand friendship in terms of reciprocity and mutuality. Friendships become interdependent (people need each other), last over time, and imply an understanding of thoughts, feelings and personalities of the individuals (Selman, 1981).

Highly gifted children may be at a higher level of development in the understanding of reciprocity in relationships, and are then out of sync with age peers in expectations about friendships; however, they may not yet have developed to the level of mental age peers, especially in the early years. As they get older, differences in social development tend to decrease because the basis for friendship becomes more mutual for all children, only the depth and degree of commitment continue to develop.

An example of a highly gifted child out of sync in social development is Jade, age six, and her friend Joan, age nine (Gross, 1993). Sometimes Joan would not want to play with Jade who would feel that Joan didn't like her anymore. Jade's mother attributed Joan's response to Jade as resulting from peer pressure not to play with a younger child, and indeed this might be so; however, Jade's response also suggests that she is acting at a level of social development where the child still feels one must always be accepted as a play partner (inclusion) to be a friend. If one is not allowed to play, then one is not a friend, and the gifted child would feel this as not being liked anymore. The older child would see the situation as one in which friendship is more constant, not dependent on always playing with one; indeed, the older child would expect to have more, different kinds of friends and not always play with all of them. While friendship would still be disrupted by conflict, it wouldn't be disrupted by exclusion from an activity.

Social asynchrony may be characterized as the result of general asynchronous development, that is, the intellectual, social, emotional, physical and chronological ages of the child are quite different (Columbus Group, 1991). The child may not fit with either age peers or mental age peers and his or her understanding of the basis of relationships will be quite different from both groups. Yet, putting the child with social age peers for all activities is not the answer either because then he or she will not fit in terms of intellectual understanding or level of interest. In fact, one of the problems for highly gifted children playing with older children is that just being older is no guarantee that the relationship will work. Older children may not match in level of understanding or depth and breadth of interests. For example, Ian, age six, with an IQ over 200, loves dinosaurs and has extensive knowledge of them and paleontology in general. Many peers of all ages also like dinosaurs, but it is rare for Ian to find someone with whom to discuss his interests because age peers know too little and older children still know too little and are uninterested in the theories which Ian is investigating. In fact, they think he is rather a show off because he keeps correcting them. Ian finds he must keep his interest for knowledgeable adults. Ian never quite feels he has a true friend because no one really shares his interests. This becomes especially important when we consider that research on the development of children's friendships suggests that friends perceive themselves as similar to each other in like activities and then believe they share common patterns of behavior (Fine, 1981). This means both that the friend likes the same activities, and likes the behavior of the speaker, and this sharing is mutually reinforcing. If there is no such friend, a highly gifted child will feel isolated and not accepted.

Another group of highly gifted children exhibits peer difficulties because of unusually large discrepancies between social and cognitive development. In fact, they may be less mature than age peers in some respects, yet far ahead intellectually. In addition, many exhibit inappropriate behaviors that elicit ridicule and rejection from peers. The literature suggests significant problems with social interactions for some children. For example, Dahlberg (1992), Kennedy (1995, and May 1994) all described case histories of highly gifted boys far ahead of age peers intellectually but who had little positive social connection with any peers.

Research on popularity in average children suggests unpopular children exhibit behaviors that make them stand out and lead to rejection. Putallaz & Gottman (1981) included such behaviors as asking questions that were irrelevant to the group topic, talking about themselves and their problems, feelings, opinions and interests when others were doing something else, introducing new topics abruptly, disagreeing when first joining a group, and not understanding how to disagree positively (that is, naming the general rule being violated and offering an alternative suggestion). Instead, unpopular children tended to call the group's attention to themselves, tried to control group activity, and to distract the group. Other children saw them as bossy, opinionated, controlling, and self-centered.

In this author's experience highly gifted children with severe peer difficulties tended to behave like the unpopular children in Putallaz and Gottman's (1981) studies. They had little idea of how to approach others to initiate an activity, or to join in an activity in progress. They also lacked the idea of reciprocity in relationships

when peers were already starting to manage relationships more mutually. Many exhibited inappropriate social skills for their age such as substituting monologues for conversations, interrupting peers, insistence of their own agenda versus going along with a group goal or sharing ideas with another, asking irrelevant and fact-oriented questions, and wanting everyone else to observe the exact rules they have decided are the right ones. They also often needed to win, and had little idea of sharing time, attention or materials. Many seemed to feel entitled to getting their own way or they wouldn't play at all. Other immature behaviors for their age caused many problems such as poor reactions to mild stress like crying, running away, or telling teachers on peers. Children who showed little empathy or ability to care about another had difficulty connecting with peers, as did those who tended to immerse themselves in fantasy play instead of attending to peers. After about age nine, intense immersion into fantasy play was regarded as immature by many age peers. All of these problem behaviors occurred in a variety of highly gifted children including those in regular classes, pull-out programs, and special classes for the gifted. They tended to be more problematic for highly gifted children with attentional deficits, but were not restricted to this group, nor were these behaviors restricted to interactions with age peers.

Highly gifted children who are most successful in dealing with peers are those who are able to go along with group goals, be flexible and able to assume multiple social roles (listener, active questioner about another's interest, noticing affect state and activity level of peers, finding commonalities with which to connect to the others). Many gifted girls do these things very well.

In attempting to assess reasons for peer relationship problems in highly gifted children, it is necessary to determine if the child's behaviors are appropriate in general. Does the child relate well to adults because adults allow him or her to be in charge of the interaction, putting up with behaviors that peers would not such as determining the topic or carrying on a monologue? Can the child relate to any peer group well? Is the child able to initiate activities with peers at all, or does he or she show little interest in peers? Does the child show significant behavioral problems that include acting out, withdrawn or obnoxious behaviors? Depending on the answers to these questions, different strategies need to be implemented.

The highly gifted child having peer difficulties because he or she is advanced over age peers in expectations for reciprocity and mutuality, in moral development and in specific needs for close intimate friends, needs contact with older gifted peers at similar levels of social development no matter what his or her age. Even in preschool years many highly gifted children are ready for best friends and yearn for that closeness and intimacy. These children cannot be happy in a typical preschool class where friendships change daily based on activity needs.

On the other hand, highly gifted children with more age level social development may stand out with older peers in accelerated programs. Behavior that may seem inappropriate may be quite appropriate for age. Thus, a child radically accelerated like William Sidis (Wallace, 1986) playing with his hat in class was immature by the standard of Harvard students, but was more like others of his age (11 years).

Many highly gifted children with peer problems connect only with adults with whom they feel safe, unfortunately as they grow older, behaviors that are tolerable in early years become hindrances in the formation of more mature friendships with adults as well. A 6-year-old who thinks conversation is asking questions and testing adult knowledge is not acting inappropriately for his or her age, but a 9-year-old is. Thus, adults who mentor highly gifted children, especially in situations where gifted peers are few, need to be aware of the nuances of relationships they share with the child. The mentoring relationship is not about intellectual interests alone but about relationships; otherwise the mentoring relationship exists at a preschool level of complexity - we are friends because I need you for this activity.

In situations where the highly gifted child exhibits significant behavioral problems with gifted peers, adult intervention including psychotherapy is necessary. The goal is not to make the highly gifted child conform to peer expectations, but to help the child develop adequate social skills to support cognitive and emotional needs. Without appropriate intervention, social difficulties are likely to be life-long. Finally, in highly gifted children who have trouble with age peers, intervention will need to focus on finding peers who fit the highly gifted child's level of social expectation and need as well as level of interests.

A boy like Ian, with a wish for a friend to share his interest in dinosaurs, and be friends through thick and thin forever, will need to meet gifted peers with an agenda and sophistication like his own.

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