

## Gifted kids at risk: Who's listening?

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Driving home from last week's Hollingworth Conference on the Highly Gifted, I heard a radio interview with Thomas Moore, author of *Care of the Soul*. He spoke of the loss of empathy in our lives. His words echoed those spoken only hours earlier by Dr. Thom Buescher, an expert on gifted adolescents. We were discussing the tragedy in Littleton, Colorado. I mentioned that I was about to write an article about gifted kids at risk. "What factors do you think were involved in this horrible incident?" I asked.

"The lack of intimacy and rejection," he replied.

Now, I sit here surrounded by newspaper and magazine clippings all offering opinions about the "whys" of Littleton and other locations where bright kids have murdered or committed suicide. Suggestions on how to avoid similar incidents: gun control, metal detectors, peer mediation, conflict resolution, changing media messages, controlling video games and access to the Internet, parent involvement, religion, and more counselors in our schools...they are all here. Yet no one discusses an important component in understanding what is happening to *some* bright kids – their being "gifted" and at risk for emotional difficulties.

E-mails and discussions with colleagues around the country confirm what Thomas Moore and Thom Buescher so eloquently stated. Loss of empathy, lack of intimacy, and rejection are daily experiences for *some* gifted children and adolescents. As "Geek Profiling" sweeps the country, we must speak out to dispel the myths that surround what it means to be "gifted and talented." We must make a concerted effort to educate our society so that awareness, acceptance, and action will result. It is time to ask others listen to us. It is time to say clearly: **bright kids are not better, yet they are different; and because they are, they face different issues.**

Consider these two prevailing and paradoxical myths about gifted children and adolescents.

Myth 1: They do not have problems; somehow they can handle difficulties on their own.

Myth 2: Some of their characteristics are perceived as pathological.

To dispel such misconceptions, we must better understand the gifted: their intellectual and personality characteristics, the manifestations of high ability, and the specific problems and issues they face.

Silverman (1993) presents lists of the interrelated intellectual and personality characteristics of giftedness that may be found across all talent domains:

### Intellectual Characteristics

Exceptional reasoning ability  
 Intellectual curiosity  
 Rapid learning rate  
 Facility with abstraction  
 Complex thought processes  
 Vivid imagination  
 Early moral concern  
 Passion for learning

### Personality Characteristics

Insightfulness  
 Need to understand  
 Need for mental stimulation  
 Perfectionism  
 Need for precision/logic  
 Excellent sense of humor  
 Sensitivity/empathy  
 Intensity

Giftedness impacts a child's psychological growth and well-being through the relationship among these characteristics, the type of giftedness manifested, the degree of giftedness (above average to profound), and how well the needs of the child are being met. A child or adolescent may demonstrate general high ability or it may be in a certain domain such as mathematics, verbal, spatial, interpersonal, music, or kinesthetic. In addition to these characteristics and areas of high abilities, it is important to know what attitudes, values, personality temperament, and life experiences a gifted student brings to school. The culture and values of the school and community will also impact whether a gifted child or adolescent feels invited to participate as a positive contributing member.

Research consistently shows that many gifted children and adolescents have the capacity for intensified thinking and feeling, as well as vivid imaginations. Whether they are gifted athletes, artists, musicians, intellectuals, or are highly creative, they may have higher levels of emotional development due to greater awareness and intensity of feeling. "Being different" in ability and



personality characteristics may lead to higher expectations, jealousy, and resentment by adults and peers. Specific problems that may result can be external or internal:

- Difficulty with social relationships
- Refusal to do routine, repetitive assignments
- Inappropriate criticism of others
- Lack of awareness of impact on others
- Lack of sufficient challenge in schoolwork
- Depression (often manifested in boredom)
- High levels of anxiety
- Difficulty accepting criticism
- Hiding talents to fit with peers
- Nonconformity and resistance to authority
- Excessive competitiveness
- Isolation from peers
- Low frustration tolerance
- Poor study habits
- Difficulty in selecting among a diversity of interests (Silverman, 1987)

For some gifted adolescents, acceptance by their peer group is the major source of stress in their lives. Repeatedly they hear the message "It's okay to be smart, but it's better if you are something else we can accept as well."

So what happens when a gifted adolescent is "just smart" and is trying to survive in a perceived anti-intellectual environment? Options may include: conformity (working hard to be "average" or "normal"), withdrawal (isolation or alienation), depression (blaming themselves), aggressiveness (blaming others), or continued nonconformity. Higham and Buescher (1987, p. 29) call this the "cultivated weirdness act" whereby a gifted adolescent makes individual statements which say, "Okay, I'm different — just let me show you HOW DIFFERENT I can be."

For some gifted adolescents, seeking special environments, positive or negative, where they can be accepted and excel helps them to deal with the lack of empathy, loss of intimacy and rejection. This may intensify their own lack of tolerance for others, and they may choose overt anti-social and/or suicidal behaviors. Add to that easy access to guns, an everyday stream of acceptable violent messages in the media and video games, inappropriate educational opportunities, lack of parental awareness or supervision, role conflicts, community apathy or stagnation, and possible mental illness, and should we be surprised that horrible, tragic incidents occur?

Repeatedly, we see factors for children and adolescents who are at risk for emotional difficulties stated in the press. Dirkes (1983) provided symptoms of undesirable levels of anxiety in gifted children, including:

- decreased performance
  - expressed desire to be like teen-agers
  - reluctance to work in a team
  - expressions of low self-concept
  - excessive sadness or rebellion
  - reluctance to make choices or suggestions
  - extremes of activity or inactivity
  - a change in noise or quietude
  - repetition of rules and directions to make sure that they can be followed
  - avoidance of new ventures unless certain of the outcome
  - other marked changes in personality
- In addition, we find other danger signals for gifted children and adolescents that indicate they may be seriously depressed or suicidal
- self-imposed isolation from family
  - self-imposed perfection as the ultimate standard, to the point that the only tasks enjoyed are the ones completed perfectly
  - deep concern with personal powerlessness
  - narcissism — total preoccupation with self and with fantasy
  - unusual fascination with violence
  - eating disorders
  - chemical abuse
  - rigidly compulsive behaviors (Schmitz & Galbraith, 1985)

I worry that educators, parents, and counselors may not be able to detect the stress burdening gifted children and adolescents. Some gifted children and adolescents cover up their symptoms of sadness and depression in order to fit in. Still others fear admitting to distress, because they may be perceived as less than perfect and not in control of their lives. I hear too many straight A gifted students, who are a “pleasure to have in class,” speak of their anguish because of peer and adult rejection. The intensity of their pain and anger is hard to imagine.

What actions can we, the lawmakers, parents, educators, and counselors, take to help gifted kids at risk?

- **Become more aware of the characteristics, needs and issues of gifted children.** They need help in “being different.” The lack of empathy and rejection by others, including adults and peers, is commonplace for many of these children. According to Thom Buescher, “Lack of empathy and intimacy lead to poor coping skills, and those provide the momentum for intolerance... the precursor to violent acts.” Too many gifted children and adolescents suffer in silence, or seek negative ways to express their frustration and anger. Teasing and humiliation must be stopped. Empathy and intimacy are needed so that emotional sensitivity doesn’t become emotional disturbance.
- **All of us must advocate for appropriate services to address the lack of challenge and the issues so many gifted children and adolescents face.** Programming and services need to be implemented for specific extraordinary talents. In New York State, gifted children are the only special needs students who do not warrant appropriate educational services! The laws need to be changed-now.
- **Parents, develop an awareness of your gifted child’s characteristics.** Let them know that they are more than their achievement or academic ability. If you sense sadness, rejection, or anger, speak with your child. Find a counselor who has training and experience in working with gifted children and adolescents to help you.
- **Educators, reexamine your own attitudes and beliefs about gifted children and adolescents, especially those who are highly creative and may be comfortable in their nonconformity.** Resist the urge to “Geek Profile.” The messages I have read in the past two weeks from bright kids harassed because they look or think differently are frightening. Offer all staff members training on how to differentiate instruction for gifted students, including acceleration, enrichment, special programs, mentorships, as well as how to meet their social and emotional needs. All school personnel need to understand the differentiating characteristics of gifted individuals, related needs, and possible concomitant problems. Teachers need to open the lines of communication, and LISTEN, really listen to what bright kids are saying — about themselves, their values, their interests.
- **Counselors, get training on the intellectual, social, and emotional issues of gifted children and adolescents.** Become aware of how schools can be the most restrictive and stressful places for bright kids. Help gifted students develop appreciation for the similarities and differences between themselves and others, teach social skills if necessary, and show how to solve problems in creative and positive ways. Every school district should have at least one counselor who specializes in or has specific training about gifted students.

What happened in Littleton, Colorado is horrific. It is not known if mental illness was a factor in the lives of the adolescent boys who created such carnage. We do know, however, that they were bright young men who perceived rejection from the culture within their school, and chose violence as a coping strategy.

As parents, educators, and counselors we can foster intimacy, empathy, and acceptance for gifted children and adolescents. The choices are now ours to make.

Who is listening? Who will act?

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