

NAVIGATING IN A SOCIAL WORLD: STRATEGIES FOR MOTIVATING GIFTED CHILDREN

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Motivating gifted children to interact appropriately within their social world can be very gratifying. Yet, the reality is that it can often feel overwhelming for parents and educators. Understanding, appreciating, and coping with a gifted child's special traits can at times be confusing, puzzling, and mentally exhausting.

Parents and educators are keenly aware that motivating children is an essential part of any day. When it comes to gifted children, however, we question how to go about doing it in an effective manner. When we try, we often wonder if we have done it the right way. Appreciating that there is not a single *right way* is a good place to begin because gifted children present with their own set of unique needs. Further, parents and educators are the greatest advocates for finding which balance of motivational strategies works best, and in which situations. Gifted children thrive when allowed to initially practice developing skills within a smaller model, such as a family, enabling them to build skills within a sample social model. Transferring these new skills beyond the home increases opportunities and results in a greater number of successful social interactions. Social opportunities are out there to be seized, especially when you apply a little imagination and creativity.

How do you build the social world of gifted children so that it nicely balances their need to be alone, doing what they love best, while at the same time helping them find social peers who enjoy common interests? How do you motivate gifted children to socially interact with peers outside the scholastic arena when the world routinely groups children by age - regardless of whether they share common interests or abilities? Finally, how do you do all of this with sensitivity, creativity, and effectiveness?

These complex questions can more easily be answered by first dealing with the following simpler questions: What is a social peer? Have the behaviors of your gifted child been considered? Why are the unique needs of gifted children often misunderstood? Why are creative solutions important?

What is a social peer?

Social motivation is about celebrating differences, not about conforming to what others expect. It is about assisting children in finding their niche, motivating them to share with others, and helping them to recognize those subtle cues to use as an opening to a social opportunity. What a social peer looks like for a gifted child is indistinct and therefore one must look deeper into what a peer truly is. A "peer", as defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, is "one that is of equal standing with another". This definition further goes on to explain the word "equal" as "one belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, grade, or status". A second definition given for *peer* is offered using the word "companion", which is defined as "one that is closely

connected with something similar". For the gifted child, therefore, a social peer would be a companion who has similar connections or interests to themselves, but without specific parameters of age or grade.

Gifted children tend to thrive best when they interact with a variety of social groups. Even better is when each group fulfills a different social need or purpose (Webb, 1994). If you ask gifted children what they long for most, a frequent answer will be "a friend" (Silverman, 1993). Why then is it so difficult for many gifted children to be motivated to make friends? As many gifted children find it emotionally difficult to make and keep friends, compensating strategies to motivate them should be devised and implemented. Dr. Miraca Gross tackles this issue in her article, "*Play Partner*" or "*Sure Shelter*" (2001). Gross outlines five developmental influences in children that affect friendship choices. Understanding which influences are involved in making friends is important in motivating gifted children to build appropriate peer relationships.

The first developmental influence Gross looks at is *Mental age*. Gross explains that all children experience the stages of cognitive development in the same order. The gifted children, however, progress faster, reaching those final cognitive stages much earlier than their age peers. Research supports the idea that mental age affects the pace at which children will progress through these five stages.

The next developmental influence that Gross talks about is the *Onset of social comparisons*. Children move from a world that they think only exists for them to one where they want to compare their triumphs, ideas, and fascinations with other children. This shift in perspective is more closely related to the mental age of the child than to the chronological age. Therefore, Gross points out, a gifted child around the age of four or five may reach this stage of social comparisons about three years before an average-ability child who would typically reach it around the age of seven or eight. According to Fine (as cited in Gross, 2001), being able to reach a stage in development where the sharing of ideas between friends can take place depends on the capacity to see a friend as a person who could possess similar character, thoughts, and interests.

A third developmental influence regarding friendship is the *Similarity of play preferences*. Children usually play with other children who share a common interest and are generally found within a similar stage of cognitive development. Yet, when you compare the play interests of an average-ability child with those of a gifted child, a certain discrepancy appears. The average-ability child gravitates towards games with rules that are clearly understood. In addition, these children prefer to follow the rules. In contrast, the gifted child tends to be motivated to play games that offer an opportunity to challenge its own rules - games where new ideas can be tried.

This disparity is a key obstacle to friend-making in the world of gifted children because their interests, as noted above, are often significantly different from the interests of average-ability children of the same age. Despite this obstacle, the need for gifted children to make friends is greater than the lack of similar play preferences. Both Gross and Silverman (as cited in Gross, 2001) found that this is the time when concessions begin to happen for gifted children between their personal interests and skills and their longing to be socially accepted within a group. Those gifted children who are unable to make these social adjustments will often favor being alone with their intellectual games.

Similarity of reading interests is the fourth developmental influence. Frequently, gifted children take pleasure in reading books portraying clever, sensitive, or ethically driven characters. Such children, with advanced or mature reading interests, can face great challenges in finding playmates of the same age that share their enjoyment in reading. For some, words are seen everywhere and are so intoxicating that reading just cannot be helped. For others, hiding their ability or intense interest in reading is a strategy they employ to fit in socially. However, these children then face the dilemma of not being true to themselves.

Finally, Gross describes her fifth developmental influence as the *Capacity to distinguish between popularity and friendship*. Gifted children realize earlier than their same age-peers that being genuine is more important than being popular. To be popular is to have many friends, not necessarily meaningful friends. As both Gottman and Parker point out (as cited in Gross, 2001), they seem to look for friendships in smaller, select groups that have more significant connections. For gifted children, it is about the quality, not the quantity.

It is important for parents and educators to become familiar with these five developmental influences in addition to the well-established impact of gender and level of giftedness. This is necessary to fully appreciate the depth of difficulty that gifted children encounter when they are faced with being social, which to them is a complex task to be consciously navigated every day. To be social, for many gifted children, is to be motivated enough to embark on one of their most difficult daily challenges. Yet, just like any area of development, there are stages to be passed through. Gross saw the importance of friendship stages, but found that the *5 Stages of Friendship* first outlined by Selman in 1981 (as cited in Gross, 2001) needed additional considerations for the gifted child. Working within Selman's framework, Gross outlined five of her own friendship stages:

- Stage 1: "Play partner" – a friend engages a child in play and borrowing is okay.
- Stage 2: "People to chat to" – sharing of interests in conversation becomes important.
- Stage 3: "Help and encouragement" – a friend is seen as a source of support, but the obligation is not seen as reciprocal.
- Stage 4: "Intimacy/empathy" – friendship is now seen as giving and taking; that it works both ways.

Stage 5: "The sure shelter" – friendship is seen as deep and long lasting with unconditional acceptance. It was found that children with IQs of 160 or higher entered this final stage four to five years earlier than their average ability age peers.

All children progress through these five stages of friendship. Gifted children, however, pass through these friendship stages earlier than their age peers.

As gifted children continue to advance in their intellectual abilities, the imbalance or asynchronous development becomes increasingly obvious and, therefore, the social gap becomes more pronounced. As children develop, they are going to experience this imbalance at one point or another. However, it is the gifted child, especially the highly gifted child, who will experience it to the extreme. Accordingly, the need for strategies to cope with this imbalance becomes even more necessary when motivating them to socialize.

Have the behaviors of your gifted child been considered?

I am sure that you have all experienced, to some degree, a few of your children's unique behaviors that may have begun to interfere with their healthy social interactions. This is a legitimate concern. In 2006, a research article was published entitled "Intellectual ability and cortical development in children and adolescents". When looking at brain development in gifted children (by MRI imaging), the researchers discovered some very interesting results. The children studied were between the ages of 5 and 11 years. Researchers compared the outer layer of the brain of three groups of children: average IQs, above average IQs, and high IQs. Results showed that the cortex layer of the brain demonstrated a very different maturity pattern in children with high IQs compared to children with average and above average IQs. Although the high IQ group took longer to mature, once it reached full maturity it enriched faster and fuller than the other two IQ groups. These findings are significant because it is the pre-frontal cortex that controls organization and impulse control. These findings explain why our children, so skilled in the areas of scholastics and/or the arts, cannot remember seemingly logical things like the fact that reading while walking is not a good idea! Consideration of the behaviors of your gifted child is important. In this example of brain development, it is shown that some behaviors are beyond a gifted child's control. Therefore, incorporating daily strategies by parents and educators empowers the child with the tools to cope.

Why are the unique needs of gifted children often misunderstood?

Parents and educators are frequently busy troubleshooting the overt learning and behavioral issues of their gifted children. In so doing, they sometimes underestimate the importance of understanding the unique and underlying needs of their gifted children. It may seem that we do not have to worry about the smart and quiet children but, unfortunately, many gifted children become poorly socialized teenagers with few social skills. Suddenly, it seems, the unique needs of those smart and quiet children have surfaced

and must now be addressed. Thus, parents and educators should be tweaking the personal learning environments of their gifted children as early as possible. They can do this by encouraging and motivating their gifted children to practice social skills. Usually, the more creative the tweak, the more motivational it will be.

Another reason why the unique needs of gifted children are often misunderstood is that we do not recognize and accept the fact that they perceive the world differently than their average-ability age peers. To overcome this, we should focus on the differences in their intensity, need for exhaustive interpretation, and ability or approach to processing information. Designing an environment that nurtures and supports their unique, ever emerging needs, will require a little thought and a lot of creativity. Teaching gifted children how to emotionally cope in the world outside (which is becoming less and less understanding of their developmental path) will pay significant dividends for not only the gifted children, but their parents and educators as well.

For many gifted children, encountering new social situations and successfully navigating through them is a learned process. This is because they feel overwhelmed by the intricacies of these situations. Recognizing this unique need and then breaking down the social situations into smaller, more manageable steps will enable parents and educators to redirect the intense focus of their gifted children. As this intense focus often interferes with learning new skills, a valuable strategy is to reduce the challenge into something more tolerable in size than approaching the task or activity in its entirety. Dealing with the unique needs of gifted children while they are young is much easier and, ultimately, more effective, than trying to achieve the changes when they are older. Breaking down emotional barriers, such as the intensities and anxieties intertwined with perfectionism, is a great motivational tactic towards improving the social skills of gifted children.

A frequent and often misunderstood behavior for gifted children is “perfectionism”. Perfectionism, as described by Jim Delisle (2002), is a state of mind where failure is never considered a viable option. This state of mind may indicate a deep need for constant approval, which could interfere with the ability to achieve an objective. Delisle goes on to explain that perfectionism is “...not about doing your best or striving for high goals” (p. 64). Rather, it “... can take a heavy toll on your self-esteem, relationships, creativity, health, and capacity to enjoy life” (p. 64). Every child deserves the opportunity to enjoy life, but life is not perfect. For some gifted children, the ability to enjoy life, being able to appreciate in the light-heartedness of play, comes from being taught how to creatively work around some of life’s obstacles, stretching their logical/linear tendencies of thinking. Otherwise, there is risk of thoughts and behaviors becoming ingrained and rigid.

Another often-misunderstood need of gifted children is routine. Some gifted children are encouraged to establish and follow routines, while others are taught to hide them. Helping gifted children learn how to understand their emotions and embrace their over-sensitivities, while learning how to maintain that expected social decorum, is a slow yet

achievable process. What skills can be taught to reduce the emotional anxiety that often arises when natural and inevitable disruptions to routine occur? Gifted children often derive comfort from the predictability of their daily patterns. This trait, though, does not bode well within the context of social groups. Parents and educators, therefore, could help gifted children reduce their excessive reliance on routines by teaching the “4 Rs” strategy: reinforce, remind, repeat, and reiterate.

Reinforce the fact that things change; do this frequently. Integrate, as often as possible, reasons why an event might get canceled. Discuss with your gifted child how disruption to routine might make them feel. Then apply the strategy by engaging the child in a problem solving game about the potential disruption; the more creative the better. Together, develop a plan as to how the change will be appropriately handled.

Remind your child frequently about change at every and any opportunity that presents itself. As you know, gifted children are often highly emotional. Helping them not only to acknowledge their disappointment, but finding appropriate ways to express their emotions is an important part to their maturing process. Having a backup plan to help offset disappointment can also motivate your child to have something to look forward to, and assist with the transition from disappointment to cheerfulness.

Repeat the skills that you are teaching through encouragement and practice. Just like a memory is strengthened with repetition, skills are improved by repeating them. Practice helps to ingrain the process into a child’s mind. Strengthening *habits of mind* may even help children stretch beyond linear thinking. Finding those alternate creative paths will help the gifted child remember coping skills.

Reiterate the previous three strategies – reinforce, remind, and repeat. Practice them in a variety of social situations and environments. This will facilitate generalization. It will also empower them to stay in control and to develop a formula for coping with change, both in and outside of the classroom. Self-motivation, for gifted children, is an important step towards social success, and the 4 Rs approach will help get them there sooner.

Why are creative solutions important?

Being able to solve problems takes creativity. Gifted children who are perfectionistic need to be taught that there is usually more than one way to reach a goal, that they are free to explore an alternative course, and that they are not restricted by a singular path that has worked for them in the past. One can consider this to be a form of *stretching* – stretching the brain to think in more than one direction to achieve a goal.

The idea of stretching a gifted child’s way of thinking is supported by research conducted by Dr. Carol Dweck. In her book *Mindset* (2006), she writes about her decades of research on achievement and success. Dweck discusses two types of mindsets: The “Fixed Mindset” and the “Growth Mindset”. She describes the *fixed mindset* as being a state of mind that

impedes your ability to evolve developmentally. A mindset that can diminish accomplishments causing one to second-guess oneself, in turn, leading to weaker learning strategies down the road. The *growth mindset*, on the other hand, was found to be key to advancement opportunities. Significant accomplishments require a growth mindset where you have "... a clear focus, all-out effort, and a bottomless trunk full of strategies" (p. 67).

Generally, Dweck goes on to discuss, you are not just of one mindset. People will have different mindsets in different areas of their lives. She uses artistic ability as an example. You may be primarily of a growth mindset, but in the area of artistic talent, your mind is fixed on your inability to paint a picture. Her research found that "...whatever mindset people have in a particular area will guide them in that area" (p. 47).

Often, children with perfectionism issues get stuck on one design. Once they have mastered a template or blueprint, they are not self-motivated to want to reproduce it any other way; they are comfortable in their fixed mindset! As reliable as this tried and true design may be, continuing to do it just the one way does not encourage or foster the development of creativity. It also does not promote social growth. It is through the process of trial and error that your children discover new and awesome designs and, therefore, develop their *growth* mindset. This process of trial and error can be very scary and upsetting for perfectionistic children. However, by gently encouraging change in a safe and understanding environment, first at home and then out in other social venues, you can motivate your gifted children to gain the confidence to try change on their own. Just as Dweck talks about in her book, it is ... "The passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even when it's not going well, is the hallmark of the growth mindset. This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives" (p. 7).

Dweck (2006) also found that you are born with ability, but it is the intense devotion to learning and enjoyment of challenge that enables you to grow. People who possess a growth mindset flourish when they reach beyond their comfort zones. This inner drive keeps their curiosity strong. Unfortunately, if you fall into the trap of the fixed mindset, they can lose it all. Redirecting the fixed mindset towards that growth mindset shows children that there are alternate paths to reaching a goal. "As soon as children become able to evaluate themselves, some of them become afraid of challenges. They become afraid of not being smart" Dweck (2006 p. 16). With gifted children, in particular the highly gifted, this ability to evaluate themselves can come quite early, which makes it all the more important to keep them stretching while they learn how to motivate themselves and use strategies on their own.

Social opportunities and arenas

As children spend so much time with their classmates and teachers, they have many opportunities to develop social skills and emotional restraint. The scholastic setting however complicates this opportunity. The social, emotional, and scholastic needs are not only intertwined, but are equally important to the complete development of any child.

The scholastic arena is the easiest to understand and is certainly more measurable. Yet, parents and school administrators continue to struggle with decisions about which combination of scholastic factors will work best for gifted children. Consideration is given to enrichment, subject acceleration, full grade acceleration, and homeschooling. Further, the social implications for each must be weighed. It seems that only in the scholastic venue is it still the norm for peers to be of the same age rather than having groupings based on scholastic talents. The idea of grouping based on ability is definitely more mainstream when you look at sports, music, and various other arts.

There is a relationship between the social and emotional obstacles encountered by gifted children. Social opportunities open up as children become more proficient with appropriate emotional interactions. Emotional growth occurs best within a social context. It is good to remember that children generally have a variety of social peers, for example, intellectual, athletic, creative, or simply playdate peers. These time-and-place friends may require common and/or specialized social skills and emotional similarities.

Armed now with the tools of what a social peer can look like, along with the unique needs and behaviors of gifted children, the task of successful social motivation begins. For many children, this will most likely require them to reach beyond their comfort zone – beyond the areas in which they excel. Moreover, it is not about making an introvert act like an extrovert. Is it okay for them to spend time alone, immersed in what they love to do? Absolutely! Is it okay for them to do this all the time? No. Finding the optimal balance becomes a significant responsibility. Respecting your gifted child's need for downtime is important, but so too is the development of the social skills needed for interacting with others. As one mother recently expressed to me, even if you disregard the wheel that hardly ever squeaks, you should still oil it occasionally.

A gifted child's social group is made up of a wide variety of children, each playing a unique role in their social world. Finding the right peers can be easier than you think. The "social arena" can be divided into three areas: enrichment opportunities, Internet resources, and mainstream social activities. Structure is the common theme in each of these areas. Structured programs offer the most success because they are tailored to have a beginning, middle, and an end, which helps to ground a gifted child. Open-ended activities, on the other hand, offer a lot of creative thought, but may also cause a lot of anxiety.

Enrichment opportunities for gifted children include locating any local weekend and/or summer programs designed specifically for gifted children. These are great outlets, not only for the scholastic challenge, but also for seizing the social opportunity of finding other children with similar interests. The after school club is another place to consider. If your school does not have something that might be of interest to your child, then create it. A group activity in your own home can offer the opportunity to easily monitor, re-direct, and coach your children with the tools they are learning to use. Creating these types of opportunities at home gives

children additional opportunities to practice their social skills in a familiar environment. There may also be times that the only way to get their toes wet is to find one-to-one opportunities. This could take the form of a mentor, either for themselves or to be one for someone else. Another strategy involves becoming a volunteer. By encouraging gifted children to choose a local cause they are enthusiastic about affords a venue for social interaction with others that share the same passion.

In this age of technology, the Internet becomes an invaluable parental resource for ideas to facilitate motivating gifted children to improve their social skills. Networking online with other parents will help you to increase your inventory of strategies, and to develop social networks for your child. There are local, state, and national parent support groups; consider joining or creating one. Reading blogs on the different aspects of giftedness, will help you gain further insight into the world of gifted children. Find or create online groups for your children to share their interests with others. Make use of local homeschooling sites for gifted children. You will learn that these homeschooling families are very open to meeting new peers for their own children. They also offer valuable resources for ideas and other related Internet sites.

Another, less intimidating idea is having a pen-pal or a cyber peer. This is a great step towards being social. Not being face-to-face offers an opportunity to think about what to say without the pressure of having a timely response. Your child might find a friend who lives in a neighboring state or overseas whose language is one that your child is studying.

Mainstream social opportunities are an arena often overlooked. Although there is still going to be asynchrony between mental age and chronological age, there are many examples of activities where the mind is engaged within the context of a group setting. One such example is martial arts. This discipline challenges both the mind and the body. It is practiced within a group; yet advancement is achieved at one's own, individual rate. Swimming, when taken in the form of group lessons, is another venue that provides just enough opportunity to practice social skills without needing to utter a word. Fine arts, musical arts, and theater classes offer wonderful opportunities for gifted children to express their strengths and imagination while being a part of an ensemble. Board game groups provide opportunities for practicing appropriate social interactions. This could be as simple as putting together a group of local kids in your area or introduced as an after school program. Board game groups, especially those that advance in strategy, can begin as a recreational activity and then progress as needed. Your local park district might also offer a wide variety of classes or workshops to students of different ages. If your child is chronologically on the lower end of the suggested age range, park district activities can provide the opportunity to interact with children who have similar interests and are closer intellectual peers. If something is of interest to your child beyond their offered age range, contact the instructor to see if they might consider an accommodation.

Gifted children deserve to have friends who get them. Parents and educators can motivate gifted children by becoming constant, dedicated observers of their children's *actions*, which are the silent indicators of their social and emotional needs. Without such vigilance, those irreplaceable teachable moments might be lost. Accept the fact that there is no quick fix, that you should trust your instincts, and that with patience, persistence, and perseverance, you *will* find appropriate social peers and outlets for your gifted child. When you do, you will experience a wonderful sense of accomplishment.

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