

Sensitivity

Paul, a four-year-old gifted boy, told his parents he wanted to give away some of his favorite toys so that another boy would have toys for the holidays. No one knew where Paul had gotten the idea, but after he insisted for several days, his parents allowed him to give away the toys. Afterwards, Paul sometimes felt happy thinking of his toys having fun with a new boy. A depth of feeling that results in a sense of identification with others (people, animals, nature, the universe) characterizes the trait of sensitivity. Passion and compassion are two different aspects. Passion refers to the depth of feeling that colors all life experience and brings intensity and complexity to the emotional life of these gifted children. Passionate people form deep attachments and react to the feeling tone of experiences: they think with their feelings (Lovecky, 1990b).

Compassion refers to the sense of caring many gifted children show for others, enabling them to make commitments to social causes from a desire to decrease the pain they see others suffering. Compassionate gifted children suffer too, and are apt to relate intensely to the suffering of the world around them. Both Roeper (1982) and Piechowski (1991) describe this empathy and compassion as emotional giftedness.

The passion side of sensitivity refers to an intense commitment to people and ideas. Convinced of the moral right of an action, the gifted child will not give in to any adult rationalization, explanation or attempt to effect a change of mind. These children may also commit themselves to relationships from an early age. Even if hurt by people, they feel that if only the key to understanding could be found, then they would be friends. The focus for this sort of child is on the potential of people rather than on their faults.

The dedication and commitment of passionate gifted children bring them into conflict with adults, but also bring a sense of alliance with the universe. This sense of passionate commitment is powerful, and far outweighs all the conflict that might occur before the goal is attained.

Many sensitive gifted children are highly empathic. They not only know what others feel, but appear to experience the feelings themselves. This is particularly true of intensely negative feelings. While most children know when a parent is angry, these gifted children feel the anger inside themselves, experiencing it as the other person does. In fact, they may think they are angry themselves, but be unable to find an antecedent event that triggered the feeling. This great empathy may mean that they feel so many feelings that they cannot distinguish whose feelings are whose. To use their great empathy without risking being overwhelmed by strong feelings, they need to learn how to separate their feelings from those of others and to understand that they need to feel "with" rather than "for" the other person.

Experiencing the suffering of another person without any means of separating oneself from the pain may mean that too much pain is experienced. These gifted children may try to ease the suffering of the other person by trying to make them happy. If they cannot do so, they may withdraw instead. Those children who try to cope by making others happy tend to take on too much responsibility for interpersonal interactions. They come to see themselves as responsible for how others feel. Negative affect in another is seen as their own personal failing. Some try to avoid any negative situations by being exceptionally good at all times. Those children who withdraw from feeling too much pain from others may actively avoid people and situations that tend to produce negative feelings. This results in isolation and disconnection from common bonds with others. Learning to separate their feelings from those of other people, and to cope with feeling the suffering of others can lead empathic gifted children to use their understanding of themselves and others to foster relationships.

Interventions

Adults who deal with sensitive gifted children need to be aware of the depth of the children's feelings and to have some understanding of the problem of feeling other people's feelings and suffering. Since these aspects of sensitivity often lead the gifted child to feel responsible for others' feelings, particularly those of parents and siblings, parents must help the child understand that in relationships, all involved have a responsibility for what happens, and are responsible for their own feelings.

In working with children who have not yet learned to separate other people's feelings from their own, adults can help them to cope by learning to build appropriate interpersonal distance. Actual physical distancing techniques may be the needed first step. For example, the child is asked to leave the room and assess what is being felt now, and what was felt prior to start of the problem. Next the child thinks about what the problem really is, and brainstorms some solutions. Finally, the child returns, and the people involved discuss their feelings and the proposed solutions.

Learning the difference between compassion (caring) and empathy (accurate understanding of another's viewpoint) can also help develop interpersonal space as the child struggles to see things from others' perspectives without feeling responsible for their feelings. Sometimes mental imagery helps; for example, building a transparent, magic wall allows one to see and hear others, but keeps out a sense of invasion by other's feelings.

Some compassionate gifted children can be termed "gifted givers." They give altruistically, without expecting a return and without measuring the cost. To them, giving is a natural thing to do when confronted by someone's needs. These gifted children often have a lot to offer others; giving is very rewarding to them.

In dealing with a "gifted giver," adults need to understand the joy and sharing of self involved, because to discourage this kind of giving from the child means to take away a part of the self. However, these children can learn to examine why they give in any particular circumstance, and how to assess when they should and should not give. Some need to learn about the interpersonal consequences of giving too much, others about receiving. These children may need to understand that their giving may incur a sense of obligation in others so that receiving means another person must then return the giving. It is helpful for gifted givers to understand that there are times when they must receive the giving of others because receiving allows others also to experience the joy of giving. Some gifted children give so much that their families take their giving for granted. These children, and their families, may need to learn the essential difference between being selfish and having a self.

- See more at: <http://www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/exploring-social-and-emotional-aspects-of-giftedness-in-children#sthash.v30O98wL.dpuf>

Perceptiveness

Emily was five years old when she noticed the poorest children in her class appeared to get the least from Santa. This seemed unjust to Emily, particularly as she had also noted that parents did not give children Christmas gifts; that was Santa's job. Years later, Emily remembered this disillusionment as an important marker in her developing awareness of fairness and justice. In ninth grade some of her growing sense of injustice was given voice in a poem she wrote for the school paper satirizing the administration of her high school for its bigotry towards minority students. The poem was not printed, and Emily was punished for "disrespect." The irony of the charge was not lost on Emily.

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An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to see quickly to the core of an issue characterize the trait of perceptiveness. Adults with this trait can understand the underlying meaning of personal metaphors, exercise insight and intuition, and see beyond the superficiality of a situation. Truth, justice, and fairness are often issues for these gifted adults. In childhood, perceptiveness manifests itself as intuition, insight, and a need for truth (Lovecky, 1990b).

Perceptive gifted children have a clear sense of honesty and dishonesty. Thus, the differing aspects of themselves that people can show at different times, and are readily accepted at face value by others, are puzzling. The tendency of many people to be nice to someone in person but talk negatively about them when they are not there, makes little sense to these gifted children. To them, truth is more important than feelings, and they seek and tell the truth, sometimes with little regard for how others might feel.

Perceptive thinkers appear to adopt either of two cognitive/emotional positions regarding their relationships with others. These are not necessarily permanent positions as perceptive thinkers can move from one to the other over time. In the first, gifted children wonder why what they see as true is different from what others see. They focus on the perceived cohesion of the others' viewpoint and wonder what is different about their own. Because they want to connect to others, they perceive this difference as a defect within themselves. Since they have no idea that others are less perceptive than they, they tend to believe what they are told by others and to suppress the doubts they feel. Over time they learn to distrust their own perceptions. Jodi, for example, readily accepts the blame for much of what goes wrong in her life. Because she has so much insight into the underlying causes of problems, she can see ramifications for any action she takes, and she accepts a great deal of personal responsibility for making "wrong" choices.

The second type of perceptive thinker views the world from a standpoint of rightness, not understanding how others can be so lacking in perceptiveness since it is perfectly obvious what is right. They expect adults to be examples of virtue and to practice what they preach. Their view of truth is absolute. This rigid concept of right and wrong is a common developmental issue for all children, but is a particular problem for gifted children who can be insightful, even while being rigid.

The foolishness and unfairness of adults in authority can be particularly difficult for these gifted children to tolerate. To them, it makes no sense that anyone would not want to know the truth, have a mistake corrected, or know the best way to do something. Part of the problem is their intolerance of ordinariness. For these children, everything is important, and they tend to paint the world in larger than life terms because that is how they feel. Rumer Godden discusses this idea when describing her early attempts at writing, much of which was quite melodramatic (Godden, 1987). Helping gifted children learn to tolerate the ordinary, without embracing it, is the challenge for parents and teachers. Hollingworth (1942), in her work with exceptionally gifted children, helped them focus on ways to "suffer fools gladly" by emphasizing tolerance of the ordinary in life.

To perceptive children, the pursuit of truth, the drive to know what truth is, and the need to understand justice and fairness, can supersede awareness of others' needs. The long term goal for gifted children is to do what they know is right, despite opposition, while at the same time not using all their energy in railing against fate and other people for not recognizing what is so clearly evident. Having the capacity to really understand what underlies expectations for self and others can help gifted children to deal better with the conflict they feel. For example, at about age 12, Annie Dillard (1987) began to explore her own capacity for perceptiveness by wondering how much noticing of herself and others she could do. Too much and she was too paralyzed in her actions; too little and she would miss a whole level of experiencing that provided richness to her life. Finding the balance was what she saw was required.

Interventions

The existential dilemma faced by perceptive gifted children is how to learn to be trusting (but not naive) in a world whose limits and defects they see all too clearly. Trusting relationships, based on mutual respect, that teach children to examine what people really mean and to judge the applicability of coping strategies for particular situations, need to be fostered. Within the context of such relationships, differences of opinion can be explored in an effort to understand how other people experience truth, what most hold as basic truths, and how truth is derived as an absolute. This includes discussion of the difference between absolute right, including moral right, and fairness in dealing with others.

It can be helpful for these children to learn when truth is important and when feelings count more. Since many have trouble making that judgment, parents can be helpful in role playing and thinking aloud about the feelings engendered by the words used. As children learn that feelings also count, and that there can be other opinions that are equally valid, they also learn that there is room for compromise and negotiation.

Also, gifted children should learn that direct action is not always possible. There are times when children and adults cannot speak up or prevent an injustice. In those cases, other strategies that focus attention on a problem may be possible. For example, Amnesty International uses witnessing and reporting from a distance to document such atrocities as slavery, Apartheid, concentration camps, and other violations of human rights. It is important for gifted children to learn how such techniques have led to later change, for example, in South Africa. Also, letter writing, fund raising and other such mundane appearing strategies, often not so visibly successful to gifted children looking for solutions that are larger than life, can accomplish much.

Fostering a sense of interconnectedness with others in the world through the teaching of empathy and ethics is vital in developing the high sense of justice and truth these children possess (Roeper 1989).

Some gifted children have trouble understanding the behavior of age peers. It makes no sense to young gifted children that other children might not want to be shown the best way to do something, or might prefer to do things the way they always have, even if it is not very fair.

These gifted children often profit from an approach in which they study peers as an anthropologist might to discover the rituals and beliefs of other children. For example, it can be very useful for children who are sensitive to teasing to see that most children do not share their sensitivity, and may, in fact, regard teasing as a sort of game. This "Margaret Mead" approach also may help them to understand how fairness and truth may look to peers. Perceptive children may need help with adult relationships as well, particularly in understanding that adults, who are less perceptive than they, may be threatened by what they see. The story of the emperor's new clothes may be useful in discussing what might have happened were the emperor less willing to know the truth.

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