

# Asynchronous Development

by Jean Goerss

"I don't want to be gifted, Mom! I hate school!" cried my son after a particularly hard day. What makes a child want to deny who he is?

"He has to learn to deal with all kinds of people and situations eventually. You are being over-protective." intoned the principal. "Boys will be boys, after all."

Is he right? After 10 years of investigation, I conclude, no.

Asynchronous development is the hallmark of giftedness and in a very real sense, as gifted children mature they "grow into" their intellect and become more balanced, more normal. The more extreme the intellectual advancement is; the more extreme is the asynchrony. Social and emotional development depends on the way we perceive and process information and therefore is profoundly influenced by our intellect.

An analogy may make my point clearer:

The major developmental task of a 30 week fetus is to prepare for life outside the womb by putting on a layer of fat to buffer the cold and to provide sustenance while she will be learning to breastfeed. In addition, important maturation of the brain is occurring that will enable her to stabilize her body in response to changes in the environment. When these developmental milestones are achieved, she is ready to cope with the environment she will encounter outside the womb.

If, instead, she is born prematurely, thin, weak and metabolically unstable, she will suffer from her lack of preparedness. She may be unable to cope with temperature changes; she may not be able to breastfeed. She may not be ready to cope with the new environment. She may suffer physical complications that could result in handicaps. In fact, she may die without assistance. Should she go home with her mother? Is it wise to "see how it goes" before resorting to special care? After all, she has to cope with the environment eventually.

If there is a place to keep her warm and stabilize her body temperature and a method to feed her while she finishes her physical preparations for the world, she will probably thrive. Is this over-protective? Will she be dependent on these interventions for the rest of her life? Clearly not.

The major developmental task of a five year old child is to prepare for life outside his family by developing a strong sense of belonging in a world in which he is not the center of attention. He becomes comfortable among peers. Normal social development depends on his ability to identify with and bond to other individuals. This bonding prompts him to conform to minimum behavioral standards that will allow him to be effective in the larger world. A sociologist would say he must acculturate. (While it is important to develop independence, he must wait until his teens to tackle that task.) To acculturate, he must have some success in navigating and coping with expectations and he must develop an affinity for; a camaraderie with his peers.

The gifted child, because of his asynchronous development, cannot identify with the peers he finds in the local school. He usually does not share their interests and may find their behavior puzzling. He may be unable or unwilling to respond to his peers as they expect; or to conform to the school's expectations. He may not be ready to cope with this new environment and, thus he may be unable to complete a basic developmental task. If so, he will suffer social and emotional complications that could profoundly affect his future.

If there were a place to meet peers with whom he could identify, with adults who understand how to help him cope

and with the intellectual stimulation he craves, he could thrive. Is this overprotective? Will he be dependent on these interventions the rest of his life?

I believe many gifted children are irreparably damaged socially and emotionally in the first few years of formal schooling. Given that the environment in which we develop has a profound, physical affect on the development of the brain, it is no less urgent that we care for a child's social and emotional health than their physical health.

Academic and personal success depend more on normal social and emotional development than on curriculum. Effective personal habits, good attitudes, social competence and emotional stability all depend on social and emotional learning and maturation. If normal social and emotional developmental tasks are not accomplished, the best curriculum in the world will not make up for the resulting handicaps.

For further reading on asynchronous development, myths about gifted children, and how to enrich your child's emotional life, peruse these articles from SENG's online [Articles Library](#)

[Competing with myths about the social and emotional development of gifted students](#)

[Appropriate expectations for the gifted child](#)

[Factors in the social adjustment and social acceptability of extremely gifted children](#)

[Developmental phases of social development](#)

Jean Goerss is a pediatrician with training in genetics and epidemiology, and the mother of two gifted sons. Co-author of *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses in Gifted Children and Adults*, she founded Bove Institute, which is starting a school for young highly gifted children in Phoenix, Arizona.