

What Your Kids Want You To Know

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by Jane Hesselein

As a teacher of the gifted, I am involved daily in the relationships between students and parents, working to keep each “team” apprised of what the other is thinking. At the beginning of the year, I tell parents what I have learned from earlier classes about what it is like to be 10 and very bright. During the year, the students and I chat informally about many of their social and emotional issues.

A few years ago, during one such class conversation, we were discussing topics that might occupy a young teen’s mind: identity; status; boyfriends; girlfriends; connections outside the family; independence; etc. Then I told them how parents see each of those topics.

One student said, “Wait a minute. You talked to our parents about how we feel, and you’re talking to us about how they feel?”

“That’s right. I think it’s only fair.”

“You’re a double agent!” he concluded.

He’s right, actually. Though “double agent” makes it sound clandestine, I am working to help both teams understand each other better. I’ve come to think of it more as being an interpreter.

Last June, I asked my fifth graders to list five things they think are important for parents of highly able children to know. I told them I wanted to share their ideas with a group of parents, and I promised them anonymity. They were excited for the opportunity to be both opinionated and useful.

Their responses showed me that they are sensitive, open, articulate, and blunt. While they are eager to talk about themselves, they are still learning to take others’ feelings into account. They are also self-contradictory, which suggests that parents need to be flexible in finding solutions. A sense of humor helps enormously.

Several themes emerged in their writing. The following is a distillation of what your kids want you to know, in order of the frequency of their responses and corrected for grammar.

1. **When I get home from school, I need a break from “school thinking” before I tackle whatever is next.**

Whether they mention a need to “just sit,” “to unwind,” or “time to process,” 23 (out of 38 responses—22 girls and 16 boys— in a class of 45) mentioned this. And 15 of them mentioned it first on their lists. The transition from school is clearly important to them.

Maybe try not to bombard your kid with questions about school during the car ride home. They may be tired or need time to think about the school day before explaining it. Try asking questions later, at the dinner table, perhaps.

When I get home from school just let me relax because my brain has been working hard all day.

Everyone has busy after-school schedules. There should be some quiet transition time for those who need it.

2. **I want to do my own work.**

Fifteen students mentioned this, and they were specific about their needs. Some even had advice for parents.

Let me do my own projects and don't impose your ideas forcefully.

...Things at school don't always make sense at first, so don't be worried if they don't.

If I don't want your help, it doesn't mean I'm against you.

I get overwhelmed when I get a big project, but only at the beginning. If you just give me a little boost or tell me something that inspires me, then I'll be done with being overwhelmed.

Most of us have some traits of a perfectionist, so if we need help on our homework, we might be acting like a ticking time-bomb. Personally, I get entirely frustrated if I can't solve a problem, because, well, this is the homework that our teacher assigned us, so I should know this!

If I have homework that you don't know how to do, don't guess on how to do it because you will probably get it wrong.

If I tell you to stop "helping" me, I would work better if you actually did.

As much as we'd like to be helpful, these students are looking more for guidance than for answers. When it comes to research, for instance, it is better to show them how to find information than it is to find it for them. (What are the key words? What would your second choice be? Can you access the public library's databases?) Some may want to be left alone to work it out. Some said they will ask for help when they need it. Others just want you nearby for comfort, or only at the beginning of a project.

3. Respect me.

Nearly half of them brought up the topic of respect for their ideas.

When I say something, don't shoot it out of the water right away.

If something I do or like seems stupid, let me be. If you say it's dumb then I feel bad.

They need respect for their abilities and their methods of tackling work.

If I don't do what you asked me to do, it's not because I didn't listen, but that I envisioned the task differently.

When I remember something, it's usually right.

How am I going to prove I'm ready when you never let me try?

Perhaps most important, though, is that they need recognition of who they are.

I am different from you.

They want to wrestle with and master hard work on their own, even if it's an assignment you'd love to do (or can do!). To keep the conversation going, try asking questions about their thinking. (How did you decide on this topic? Would you choose it again?) It may even help them clarify their ideas for the next project.

4. I am learning to manage my feelings.

This road is not smooth, but the 12 students who had ideas about this offered good openings to talk with your children. Some want to be left alone when they are upset, asking for time to cool down.

When I overreact to something, leave me alone for a while and I will be fine.

Don't talk to me when I am stressed.

They suggested that they might be tired or need food. (I'll admit that the one who suggested food will eat anything anytime. I wish I knew if he'd been smiling when he wrote it.) No one suggested loneliness, though that is another element in the acronym HALT (Hungry? Angry? Lonely? Tired?). That might be a starting place for parents in considering why a child is cranky.

5. I need to move.

Did you assume that the boys raised this topic far more often than the girls? Of the 11 students who mentioned the need for action, five were girls. Some wrote of sports or play.

Everyone needs play time.

I need sports. They calm me down and keep me happy.

Others need to move after being quiet for a while.

I can't sit still for so long, so don't force me to sit for hours. I need to stretch my legs.

Some are driven to be in motion.

I need to be active and moving or else my mind becomes clogged and confused.

I cannot sit somewhere without moving. I always need something in my hands to tinker with.

6. I am aware of my overexcitabilities and you need to know them, too.

Our class discussion of Dabrowski's overexcitabilities (OEs) was lively and enlightening. The students loved finding their descriptors ("That is so totally me!") and knowing that they were not alone. Many of the comments above include references to some of the OEs. Here are a few comments tied to specific OEs.

Psychomotor: *I don't mean to be rude by interrupting, but I do love to talk.*

Sensual: *There might be a child plugging their ears when someone is talking to them, seemingly rude...but in reality the voice or music is too loud. Even though they are plugging their ears, they are still listening.*

Emotional: *I try not to, but when you go away I have to cry because I am very emotional.*

Intellectual: *I'm not prying into your business, I'm just curious.*

Imaginational: *When we remember elaborate dreams, do not think that you have to interpret them. I just remember my dreams.*

Just because I'm not physically doing something doesn't mean I'm not having mental explosions. (Don't talk to me during this time.)

The SENG website has a [bank of articles](#), including some on the OEs. Go over the descriptions with your family, looking to see who exhibits which traits. The similarities may bring you together in celebration, and the differences may lead to better understanding.

If your kid has special intensities, try supporting those intensities.

7. I need a bedtime routine that suits me.

Several students mentioned the transition to bed. Their needs varied a great deal, but they were clear about what those needs are.

Before I go to bed I need some time to calm down.

When I go to sleep I have to have an hour of cool-off time, where I can not be wild, for my brain to stop processing.

At night, if we can't go to sleep, just keep in mind that we are probably contemplating the day tomorrow.

One student mentioned that seeming to be tired in the morning did not call for an earlier bedtime, just a better transition routine at night. Imagine what led to that comment!

8. I can't always tell you what I'm thinking.

A large part of smoothing the wrinkles in a relationship is communication. Clearly, there is much your children want to tell you, but they feel they can't say it directly.

Sometimes when kids say they don't want to talk about it, it can mean they just don't want to talk right there, (but) maybe somewhere more private.

Your kid might have an overly busy schedule but can't find a good way to tell you about it. Try bringing up the subject for them by asking them if their schedule is too busy. They will probably be glad of the chance to tell you.

Maybe you could open the door to that conversation with some of the quotes here. Ask your child's opinion on the topics, knowing they are important to other similar children.

And once that door is open, prepare to be surprised. The last word is some advice on discipline from a student who is an old soul at 11.

Use the carrot with the stick. Taking privileges away may seem like the perfect solution, but it only escalates the problem. Offering a reward makes us come to expect it. The best solution is to offer both in relation to the problem. For example, if somebody complains about a proposed dinner, offer them two choices—helping to make a different dinner, or not complaining.

There is much your children want you to know and a great deal to be gained by hearing them.

Suggested Further Reading

Burruss, Jill D., and Kaenzig, Lisa. ["Introversion: The Often Forgotten Factor Impacting the Gifted"](#)

Comallie-Caplan, Lori. ["Perfectionism: Finding a Healthy Balance"](#)

Delisle, James. ["Risk-taking and Risk-making: Understanding When Less than Perfection Is More than Acceptable"](#)

Patel, Vidisha. ["Stress Management and Gifted Children"](#)

Patel, Vidisha. ["The Gift of Balance"](#)

Rief, Sandra ["What Parents Can Do to Help Their Children Get Organized"](#)

Sword, Leslie. ["Emotional Intensity in Gifted Children"](#)

Jane Hesslein's professional orientation has focused on gifted children from the beginning. Currently teaching fifth grade Humanities at Seattle Country Day School (an independent school for the gifted), her career has also taken her to public and private settings in New Jersey, Texas, Ontario, and Minnesota. Jane continues to present at national meetings on a variety of pertinent topics and to write about gifted children. She embraces ambiguity, and in that spirit carries dual U.S. and Canadian citizenship. Jane excels at connecting people to people and programs to programs. She has advised publishers, film companies, and toy developers, connecting them all to her students, and sometimes to each other. She has been a board member for Concordia Language Villages and continues to promote language immersion as one way for her students to venture outside their own boxes. A SENG facilitator since 1989, Jane's goal is to promote SENG awareness and sensibilities among the teachers and families of the gifted.

