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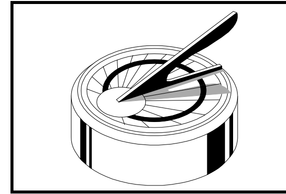

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While reading a book that discusses the rationale for publishing the Great Books of the Western World (**The Great Conversation: A Reader's Guide to the Great Books of the Western World**, 1993, Mortimer Adler, Editor), I was impressed with the essayists' emphasis on the study of the humanities. Robert M. Hutchins, Clifton Fadiman and Mortimer Adler emphasized the importance of basing education on a core curriculum devoted to the study of literature, philosophy, ethics, language, history and great scientific works. Their model for a liberal education influenced many universities, as well as high schools and community colleges, to offer such a core curriculum during the 1940's and 1950's. Unfortunately, this rational approach to American secondary and higher education declined during the 1960's and subsequent decades. Today, the sciences and mathematics have become the major concern of public schools and universities

This trend has also occurred in the books published by Gifted Education Press. During a period of about 15 years from 1980-95, there was a great interest among educators of the gifted in the numerous humanities books published by GEP. Currently, they are primarily interested in our mathematics and science publications. This movement away from the humanities appears to be a national trend goaded by the current over-emphasis on high-stakes testing. A necessary goal should be to swing the curriculum pendulum toward a middle ground involving the study of the humanities in conjunction with mathematics and the sciences.

I believe the work of all three authors who have written essays for this issue of ***Gifted Education Press Quarterly*** can help to achieve this curriculum balance. Joan Smutny is a strong advocate for gifted education who stresses the importance of teaching the humanities to gifted children. My wife and I were privileged to hear her inspiring presentation at the annual Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education Conference in April 2002. Lisa Rivero is one of the finest writers in the home schooling field. We are honored to present an essay adapted from her latest book, **Creative Home Schooling for Gifted Children: A Resource Guide** (Great Potential Press, 2002). GEP has also published a wonderful book by her, **Gifted Education Comes Home: A Case for Self-Directed Homeschooling** (2000). Michael Walters has a profound and ongoing interest in developing humanities programs for the gifted as demonstrated by his many essays published in ***GEPQ*** and in ***Gifted Education News-Page***. His current essay discusses the life and writings of John Steinbeck on the centennial of his birth.

Have a wonderful summer reading the Great Books of the Western World!

Maurice D. Fisher, Publisher

STAND UP FOR GIFTED CHILDREN: ADVOCACY IN THE SCHOOL AND HOME

by Joan Franklin Smutny National Louis University Evanston, Illinois

Gifted children are still not receiving the education they need in our nation's public schools. Certainly the field of gifted education has progressed along many fronts (e.g., more comprehensive methods of identification; a greater recognition of the needs of under represented gifted populations; instructional strategies for teaching gifted students in the regular classroom, etc.). Yet, not all of this advancement has trickled down to the schools that directly affect the lives of students with the greatest potential. Funding for gifted education continues to be a challenge as resources vary from state to state. This means that our most promising students face shrinking resources with which to develop their talents and in economically depressed areas, the gifted have little chance of discovering their potential.

I mention these facts not to paint a dim picture of our educational system, but to point to the great need for both parents and teachers to adopt a strong advocacy role on behalf of gifted children everywhere. With school districts able to devote only a minimum of support, teachers and parents are the only advocates a child has to develop his abilities. In order for this advocacy to result in real benefits for the child, both teachers and parents need to form strong and lasting partnerships.

Communication between Parents and Teachers

Sometimes, communication between a parent and teacher breaks down because of the initial stereotypes or assumptions each has of the other. Teachers tend to regard parents as potential accusers, as people who spend all day focusing on their children, who have no understanding of the responsibilities and pressures that classroom teachers have to juggle every day. As one teacher put it, "When I see a parent in the hall, I think, 'Oh-oh, what is it this time?' It just seems wrong for parents to expect so much from me when I have 30 kids to worry about, not one or two!"

Parents also have their pre-conceptions about teachers. They assume that teachers will brush them off if they try to talk about their child's problem in school. Parents of gifted children feel especially nervous about bringing up the subject of their child's exceptional ability. As one mother said, "I definitely get the feeling teachers don't like the 'g' word in this school. I could almost see my son's teacher think, 'Oh no, here's another doting mother who thinks her little Jimmy is gifted.' I have to screw up my courage just to go in there and ask for an appointment!"

While there are both parents and teachers who have made communication and collaboration difficult, this should not discourage true advocates for continuing to take a stand for gifted children. I have seen both parents and teachers create substantive changes through their persistence, ingenuity, integrity, and an ability to communicate effectively. What follows is a guide, based on my actual experience with both parents and teachers:

For the Parent

- Expect the teacher to be reasonable, no matter what you've heard from other parents or your child. Even teachers unsympathetic to gifted students respond better to parents who approach them positively than to those who are already on the defensive.
- Start by thanking the teacher for giving you time to talk about your child. Teachers have never been more burdened with extra responsibilities than now. Any expression of appreciation at the outset will help your cause.
- Always begin your communications with the teacher. While relationships can always be patched up later, it's best to avoid even the appearance of going behind a teacher's back. Only if the teacher proves unwilling to help in any way should you turn to the principal or someone other than the teacher.
- Get straight to the point. State the reason why you felt it necessary to meet with the teacher and say it in a diplomatic way. For example, instead of saying, "My son is really bored in your math class" try this: "My son already knows this material in math and since he really loves this subject, I wondered if we could discuss other options for him in math."
- Listen carefully to what the teacher says. His objections to certain requests aren't necessarily rejections. Keep pressing for other options and have some ideas of your own. If he says, for example, "I have no time to create a separate set of activities for your child," offer to work as a partner. If he argues that your child has been inattentive, sloppy in her work, or misbehaving, don't automatically interpret this as a criticism. Say something like, "I'm sorry if she's not been following rules and I'm happy to work with her on that. But could you also allow her to spend more time doing some independent projects when she's finished her work?"
- Work for a consensus. Your goal is to find a solution for your child. Try to find some common ground. Be flexible in areas where you can be flexible, but firm on the points that really matter. If your child is working at a third of his capacity, it is unjust for him to sit in his seat day after day learning almost nothing. But you might be able to be flexible in negotiating *how* changes are made. For example, the teacher may not be

able or willing to offer an alternative curriculum, but may be able to talk to the principal and other teachers about letting your child attend a higher grade in some subjects.

- Have a time line for follow-up steps. Without some agreement about *when* certain things will happen, chances are, they won't happen. If the teacher says she'll talk an issue over with a principal, a curriculum coordinator, or anyone else, ask for a time when this will be done. You should also provide deadlines for your promises as well.
- Follow up on whatever promises or agreements you have made and stay in touch with the teacher on his or her promises.

For the Teacher

- Agree to meet with the parent at a time when you feel the least pressured (e.g., end of the week). If you squeeze the parent in when you are already feeling burdened, he or she will automatically be another burden to you.
- Be aware of your own attitude about gifted students. Do you think too much is made of them? That they have no real needs? Do you think all parents think their kids are gifted? Be aware of these biases and how they may influence your response.
- Be sensitive to the parent's concerns. Helping the parent will enable you to help not only this child, but other gifted students in your room. Parents of gifted children only want what every other parent wants—for their children to learn at the level of their ability. If you dismiss their concerns outright, they will think you are turning a blind eye to a real problem and this will only increase misunderstanding.
- Before meeting with the parent, review your own observations of the child's performance, including tests, class assignments, and any insights from your daily interactions.
- Make some notes to yourself on what you need as a teacher in order to help a gifted child. What are your time and resource constraints? Do not feel that you have to do all the work. Examine areas where you can do more and areas where you need assistance.
- Focus on the needs of the child. If you're a teacher who is advocating for a gifted child in a case where parents are unaware of their child's talents and uninformed about giftedness, discuss the special needs of gifted children in an assuring way. Suggest resources for them to learn more about it.
- Explore what can be done to provide more challenge and support for the gifted child with the idea of creating a partnership with the parent. Teachers are used to assuming a great deal of responsibility and this sometimes makes them feel resentful of anyone who asks for extra help. You can avoid this by suggesting ways that parents can help as well. If their child needs more advanced work in math and science, for example, what are parents willing to do to help the teacher structure this (e.g., through contract learning where parents can monitor the child's progress at home and help keep track of weekly assignments, etc.). Would they be willing to work with a small group of gifted students in content areas where they have expertise?
- Do not promise more than you can deliver. Clearly communicate the demands on your time and the resources you have and work from there. Show the parent that you are willing to do all you can for the benefit of the child, but that the constraints on your time and resources demand that they also take an active role in the process.
- Be open to the possibility of gifted children in your classroom. Many teachers have discovered that gifted students can be a wonderful resource in their classrooms (e.g., as resident experts in certain areas, as catalysts for creative activities in the curriculum).

After a parent-teacher conference has concluded, the question is: Did it accomplish anything? How do I know if it was successful? Here is a useful list of criteria for determining how well the meeting went (adapted from Smutny 2001, pg. 109):

- the child was the main focus, not the opinions or agenda of parent or teacher
- both parent and teacher listened to each other and considered each other's point of view
- the parent and the teacher negotiated for solutions that would meet the student's needs without disregarding the teacher's other classroom responsibilities or the parent's knowledge about his or her child
- both parent and teacher came to an understanding on how to proceed even if they had different opinions
- both agreed to work on a solution that would help the child and to continue working together
- both made commitments and scheduled actions.

In discussions, parents and teachers should explore as many possibilities as may help the child. Would the school consider test results from sessions the child had with an independent psychologist who specializes in gifted children? Can the child be placed in a higher grade for certain subjects where she has special abilities? Could she spend a morning or day at home once a week to work on projects that interest her? If the teacher, for whatever reason, cannot provide more advanced content in certain subjects, could the child have a mentor who would work with her after she had completed or tested out of subject matter she already knows? Would the parent be willing to mentor a small group of gifted students in some subjects? Could the parent and teacher plan an in-service session at the school to raise awareness of gifted students in the school and to learn new strategies for teaching gifted students in the regular classroom?

Both parents and teachers can be resources in this process.

One of the most effective partnerships I witnessed had an uncertain beginning. The parent felt the teacher didn't care about her child and the teacher felt the parent had unrealistic expectations about what she should be doing for the child. The relationship gradually changed when both focused on the needs of the student and what each could realistically accomplish to give the child the education he needed. The parent shared evidence of his work at home—books he'd read, art and science projects, and stories he wrote. The teacher discussed areas of the curriculum where she thought they could make changes. As the year progressed, the parent got involved in assisting the teacher on certain days and was a partner in designing and monitoring alternative assignments and projects for her gifted son.

Effective Teacher-Parent Partnerships

Teachers often express surprise when I tell them that, according to research, parents are the most accurate judges of their children's ability day one through age seven or eight. Consulting with them enables teachers to make a real difference for the gifted students in their classrooms. What do they enjoy doing at home? What strengths do their parents see in the home and neighborhood—intellectual, artistic, athletic, leadership? Recognizing that families have a mine of information about their children, teachers can create comprehensive learning profiles at the beginning of the year as a guide to intervention. This can be particularly helpful for students from culturally different families who may not realize their special gifts. Partnerships that become well established usually involve the following:

- regular communication with parents (via letters, phone calls, face-to-face meetings, etc.) regarding child's abilities, challenges, preferred learning styles, interests
- regular information-sharing on the subject of giftedness and what parents can do to further support their child's growth
- a system for two-way reporting between parents and teachers on the child's progress, changing educational needs, etc.
- involvement of parents in classroom activities—as aides in group work, specialists in certain areas of curriculum, bilingual/multicultural counselors
- collaboration between teacher and parents in monitoring progress on independent projects, alternative class work (this could take the form of independent study contracts, outlines of activities that challenge the child's abilities and talents).

My experience with gifted children of all backgrounds has proved the importance of creativity in the regular curriculum (see Smutny, Walker & Meckstroth 1997: 57-120). Teachers can integrate creative activities quite easily into most content areas and meet the needs of all students in the class simultaneously. Because creative assignments have no ceiling on learning, the gifted can advance to sophisticated levels without requiring additional planning from the teacher. In addition, creativity is a great equalizer. For culturally different gifted students, it provides a language for them to express their strengths. Examples are as follows:

- In history, children choose a conflict, issue, or problem raised by a text and stage a debate, with different students assuming the role of specific historic figures.
- In a language arts class, children write and dramatize stories and compose short free verse poems in response to art and music
- In a math class, students explore how artists estimate distances and heights in their work. They test their perceptions by putting a six-inch stick into the ground, measuring the length of the shadow, and then the length of the shadow of a nearby tree. How would the students calculate the height of the tree? The children devise their own system for figuring this out. They can diagram, use paintings, photographs, etc.

For gifted students, the arts provide new media in which to perceive, sense, analyze, and solve problems in all subject areas. A first-grade teacher in an urban, multicultural district once told me that her gifted students discovered new math problems by creating their own money system, imagining mathematical (often humorous) scenarios, and then acting them out. One child never had enough money for what he wanted to "buy" and so asked the clerk to put it on his tab. The gifted students enjoyed the process of figuring out the balance of this child's tab which involved calculating the price of goods he wanted to buy, plus the amount he owed on his tab, minus the money he brought with him to the store. This process helps creative young children to discover new concepts they might never encounter in traditional math class.

Gifted students need this kind of creative nurturance at home as well as in the school. Strong partnerships between teachers and parents can make it possible. I have known several teachers who directly involved parents in the creative work their children were doing in the classroom. The following are examples from real classrooms:

- A kindergarten teacher gave each student a picture and asked the parents to spend a little time with their child looking at the picture and imagining: What happened just before this picture? What happened after? The parents wrote down what their child said. In class the next day, each child showed their picture and talked about the story they made up around it.
- A fourth grade teacher asked parents to help their children generate interesting questions for interviews of family members and relatives in order to write an oral history about a particular event, geographical area, etc. Parents also support their children in producing art work, photographs, collages, or any other related project.

- A third grade teacher requested parents to help their children create a small-scale illustration of their neighborhoods. Using rulers, a stick (at least 8 inches long), pencil and examples of other maps, parents helped their children figure out compass points (north, south, east, west) and choose a scale (e.g., one inch for each block). In school, they continued to work—creating symbols for landmarks such as homes, bridges, railroads, and churches —and drew and labeled streets.

These are some examples of how teachers can involve parents in their gifted child's education. Few parents understand how vital their role is until they experience it. A Haitian parent in one of my programs once said that she always felt that she "should just leave education to the experts." In the program, however, her second-grade son told her that he had to write a short description of himself as an object and he wanted her to read it and guess what the object was. The mother reported: "It was like a game for us, and I realized that I was missing something by not paying attention to my son's work. He wrote a funny description—really witty! Since that time, I always touch base with what he's doing in school and I've gotten more involved in his regular school." By encouraging parents to participate in the education of their children and to share their concerns and insights, teachers will accomplish far more for these promising students than they could ever do alone.

A Final Note

Despite growing recognition of the importance of intervention, most gifted children in our country attend schools that have modest funds for gifted education or the knowledge and expertise to develop their talents. At present, therefore, the responsibility must fall on teachers and parents to become advocates for gifted children and develop ways to meet their special learning needs.

Teacher-parent partnerships are essential to prevent the loss of talent among this neglected talent pool. Networking as a team enables both teachers and parents to become more effective advocates and to develop alternative educational programs suited to these children's unique strengths and learning styles. Certainly, the potential loss of talent should concern all of us and become a rallying call for collaborative effort and action for the future.

Where is the Mirror?

Where is the mirror?
I don't see it here.
All I see are trees and fields,
Full of wilds
here and there.
The rain's magic always makes
One of me….not two.
Where is the sun?
There it is!
Where is the rain?
There it is!
Where am I? Where is my sha….?
Oh! My Shadow!
Me,
The rainbow
grows in my pen.

—Natalie, gifted second-grader

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Joan Franklin Smutny is the director of the Center for Gifted at National-Louis University, and has authored and edited eight books on gifted education.

IS YOUR SCHOOL SETTING HEALTHY OR TOXIC?

by Lisa Rivero   Milwaukee, Wisconsin

(Reprinted and adapted from the book, ***Creative Home Schooling for Gifted Children: A Resource Guide***, by Lisa Rivero, Great Potential Press, 2002)

These children have no greater obligation than any other children to be future leaders or world class geniuses. They should just be given a chance to be themselves, children who might like to classify their collections of baseball cards by the middle initials of the players, or who might like to spend endless afternoon hours in dreamy reading of novels, and to have an education that appreciates and serves these behaviors. - Jane Piirto (1999)

Are there some educational programs, practices and philosophies that are actually harmful to gifted children and are toxic academically, socially and emotionally, while other learning environments, whether public school, private school, charter school or home school, are healthy and effective?

We sometimes fool ourselves by thinking that certain educational experiences and settings contain a social and emotional component while others do not. The truth is that *all* learning and social environments shape the child emotionally in some way. Settings that expect gifted children to fit one mold are toxic and have a harmful effect on the child—especially if they expect the child to be like most other children in that grade level, without recognizing the wide variances in ability and personality common with gifted children, or if they equate social and emotional health simply with good behavior or being able to fit in.

Often we think of the well-rounded, emotionally healthy child as the child who fits in, the child who doesn't stand out in any embarrassing way, the child who cooperates effortlessly and participates willingly. The advanced and sensitive gifted child, however, often does *not* fit in with other children and *does* stand out whether she wants to or not. In addition, this advanced learner has a different understanding of cooperation and may prefer to participate on his or her own terms.

Social and Emotional Needs

Three important realities about the social and emotional needs and development of gifted children are particularly relevant.

(1) **Many social and emotional needs of the gifted child are no different from those of any other child** (Webb, 1993; Webb, 1994). In other words, goals of *acceptance*, *understanding of others*, and *fulfillment of personal potential* are common to us all.

When gifted children are socially and emotionally vulnerable, it is usually due to a lack of fit between characteristics common to the gifted—precociousness and asynchronous development, intensity, perfectionism, sensitivity or complexity—and the child's environment (Webb, 1993). Too often the professionals in educational settings do not understand common traits and behaviors of gifted children, resulting in a setting that is toxic to gifted learners. A child who enters kindergarten already able to multiply numbers in her head, but unable to write, may not be easily accepted by other children (or teachers) who see the child as different or strange. The child will know she is "different" from others and may feel "not O.K."

(2) **What may be normal for gifted children will at times be different from what is normal for their same age peers** (Meckstroth, 1992). The gifted child's excitability may be mistaken for ADHD; his questioning of life's mysteries may be seen as a mood disorder; or his love of organization can be misread as obsessive-compulsive behavior. Likewise, a discrepancy between the speed of this thoughts and his ability to write them down, often quite normal for many gifted children, may be diagnosed as a learning disability (Webb, 2000a). Not surprisingly, parents often remark that sending their child to school feels like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

(3) **A child's social and emotional health is intricately bound up with academic needs**. When a child is challenged and able to learn at an appropriate pace and level, the child is closer to *knowledge of self* and *acceptance of others* than if the child is tied to a lockstep or inappropriate curriculum. Children who are not adequately challenged may never know, understand or realize the full extent of their abilities, and because they do not need to *work* to master academic material, may have difficulty accepting and understanding different learning needs of more average learners.

Three important but common gifted characteristics are often misunderstood or ignored by school settings—uneven *development, perfectionism, and complexity*. Here are some questions to consider concerning the relative health and toxicity of learning settings, along with practical strategies.

Does the Setting Ignore—or Accommodate—Uneven Development?

Children who learn quickly sometimes have areas of uneven,

or asynchronous, development. The gifted child is more likely than other children to experience a mismatch between intellectual and psychomotor development, language ability and reasoning development, or intellectual skills and emotional development (Terrassier, 1985). A gifted elementary school youngster might read at a high school level, for example, but will not be ready emotionally to deal with themes—such as those in books about war or the Holocaust. A gifted youngster might say to a stranger, not realizing his questions are inappropriate, "Are you married?" Or, "Do you have a new car?" Examples like this illustrate the mismatch of intellect and emotional maturity common to many gifted youngsters.

A toxic setting ignores this mismatch and expects children to be even, or at least close, in their developmental levels, and expects emotions and academic performance to also be in sync. Children in such a setting will be considered normal or "O.K." only if they have few "gaps" or discrepancies in ability as evidenced by select areas of strength. For example, too often schools make a child wait to do challenging work in math simply because his skills in all other subjects aren't yet at that same high level. Regrettably, this prevents the child from fulfilling her potential.

Conversely, a healthy educational setting will acknowledge, accept, and accommodate for the fact that it is normal for gifted children to have uneven developmental levels or mismatches between intellect and emotions. Healthy settings will help gifted children deal with these mismatches in development in three important ways: 1) by not forcing the child's development to meet a generic timetable, 2) by being flexible and creative with curriculum materials, and 3) by encouraging self-directed, child-initiated study.

By avoiding generic timetables of development, adults can allow children to accelerate in individual subjects when necessary and can offer them individuated and appropriate work in areas of strength (Rogers, 2002). When a child is working at a higher than age-based grade level, curriculum materials should be chosen with the child's other developmental needs in mind. History resources, for example, could cover high school level material in a way that respects the gifted child's high sensitivity, or a writing program could accommodate the still undeveloped small-motor skills of a young precocious learner.

Adults can also accommodate gifted children's uneven development by giving children greater choice in topics, allowing them to self-regulate levels of challenge and progression of study. Many experts in education recommend that children be given more control over their learning and education (Whitmore, 1980; Span, 1995; Cohen & Gelbrich, 1999; Cohen & Kim, 1999). Prolonged and carefully developed self-directed study can be found in a thematic unit approach, where a topic is studied for a long time, or in the Autonomous Learner Model (Betts & Kercher, 1999), which integrates cognitive, social, and emotional needs.

Adults can *gradually* incorporate self-direction into a child's education, by beginning with one or two subject areas, such as math or reading (Whitmore, 1980). Children can be asked to set their own learning goals for an area of strength. If a child is good at math, for example, the child can work with the teacher or parent to choose curriculum resources and to set learning goals. As the child becomes more comfortable with taking responsibility for her learning, she can slowly add more subjects. The goal becomes that of being a *life-long learner* rather than simply a *good student* (Betts & Kercher, 1999).

Accommodating uneven development, then, means respecting the child's individual developmental timetable through flexibly seeking appropriate curriculum materials. Carefully developed self-directed study can allow the child to learn according to unique internal growth patterns without external pressure to perform according to a generic model of development.

Does your educational setting ignore — or accommodate — uneven development?

Does the Setting Promote Debilitating — or Pragmatic — Perfectionism?

Gifted learners are almost by nature perfectionistic, in part because they so easily discern the discrepancies between what is and what could be. They are able to envision perfect achievement, whether or not such achievements are realistic. Consider, for example, a young perfectionistic child who is learning to print. She sees the flawless examples in her handwriting workbook, and does her best to copy the letters on the lines provided for practice. But, as hard as she tries, her letters never look as good as the examples. If she receives grades on her work, a less than perfect grade may cause her to panic. Whereas most of her classmates can accept a "B" or "C" as acceptable work, she may drive herself to develop perfect penmanship at the expense of deeper learning. Or she may give up, refuse to write anything that is not strictly required, and thus avoid facing her inevitable imperfection. The child then thinks of herself as a non-writer, a belief that becomes self-fulfilling. In either case, perfectionism leads to the confusion in her mind of effective verbal communication—writing—with the mechanics and aesthetics of handwriting. Before assuming that an underachieving child is lazy or unmotivated, ask yourself whether she is simply so scared of inevitable imperfection that doing nothing is easier than trying anything.

A toxic setting is one that either refuses to recognize perfectionism or places unrealistic expectations on the child.

Parents and teachers often do not recognize the tendency of the gifted child to expect too much from herself. Instead, the paralyzed perfectionistic child is labeled "lazy" or "uncooperative" while the high-achieving perfectionistic child is perceived as successful. Adults, who may assume that they have the responsibility to set high goals and standards for children, are often unaware of the potential dangers to the sensitive child's self-concept. Perfectionistic children usually put enough pressure on themselves to perform; they don't need outside pressure, too. Or, adults might ignore perfectionism, treating it as something that can be cured or, if it is ignored long enough, as something that will just go away.,

Uneven development, then, often leads to unrealistic expectations on the part of the child or significant adults, which only exacerbate a child's tendency toward perfectionism. In other words, if a child excels in one area, others often expect the child to be superior in other areas. Instead, parents and teachers of gifted children need to accept and understand perfection and put it into its proper perspective.

A healthy educational setting accepts the "drive to perfect"—a "hard-wired" trait of the gifted (Jacobsen, 1999)—as normal, and promotes healthy, *pragmatic perfectionism* by helping children to accept themselves and take necessary risks. The drive to perfect is not always a bad thing. Who would want to be in the hands of a surgeon or a pilot who was not a perfectionist? Silverman (1989) reminds us that perfectionism is "the root of excellence." The urge to perfect is what allows for the joy of learning to play a Chopin etude or to be able to design a bridge that doesn't collapse.

A pragmatic perfectionism allows us to keep in mind overall goals and realistic time frames, as well as expectations of quality. It means being able to say "enough" when necessary and move on to the next activity or day, as well as knowing when it is right to persist toward high goals and standards. Silverman (1989) suggests that children develop healthy perfectionism and set realistic, rather than unreachable, goals when they gain self-confidence. Parents and teachers can support children's confidence in their abilities by allowing them to be involved in complex activities without fear of excessive evaluation, by supporting their desires to set reasonably high goals for themselves, and by encouraging them to appreciate and develop their own unique abilities. We can also help children to understand that whatever high standards we set for ourselves should not be imposed on others, and we can help them view perfectionism as a tool that they can use when needed, and put to the side when it is not. Finally, children should not be ashamed of being able to see how things should be, or of having an urge to perfect (Silverman, 1989). When a child becomes anxious about handwriting, or any other product or performance that isn't quite perfect, we can both accept her feelings and provide some perspective by saying, "I see that you want to be able to do this better. It is difficult right now. But, in time, it will get easier." Parents and teachers can share with their children times in their own lives when they thought they would never get something right (typing, golf) but eventually did, or times when their expectations were unrealistic, or times when they made mistakes, big and little, and failure led to self-knowledge or other growth.

Learning to fail and to deal with *necessary* risk may be one of the most difficult but one of the most important tasks for young gifted children (Adderholdt-Elliott & Goldberg, 1999). This does not mean that adults should push their children to fail any more than they should push them to succeed, but parents and teachers of gifted children may need to work harder than other parents to find opportunities for their children to experience failure and, more importantly, to see that life goes on, that failure is sometimes necessary for growth, and that it is okay to pursue an activity "just for the fun of it." Sometimes being a good parent or teacher means saying, "An 80% on that quiz is fine for now."

Parents and teachers can also ask themselves if they model a healthy drive to perfect. Do your children see you practice skills, try new things, struggle, fail and succeed, even when doing so results in something that is less than perfection? Are you able to laugh at mistakes and failures rather than model an attitude of anxiety and being "up tight"? Everyone needs areas in which standards of perfection can be relaxed.

We can take *unnecessary* risk out of learning by looking for ways to de-emphasize competition while at the same time encouraging excellence of thought. This helps with perfectionism and also conveys to the child that he is valued for himself, not just for what he can do or how he can perform. Webb (2000b) recommends that parents find just a few minutes on a regular basis to spend one-on-one time with each child, with a rule that the shared activity be non-competitive in nature. Conversation, nature walks, singing, playing catch, or doing a puzzle together are some ideas for parents to try. Teachers can try to find the same one-on-one time with each student once a week, even if only for one or two minutes, when they discuss some topic other than the day's curriculum.

Teachers and parents can find creative ways to take competition out of learning. Try playing Scrabble by sharing each other's letters and without keeping track of points. Play card games such as SET (a matching game) by putting the discovered "sets" in one pile rather than awarding them to individual players. Favorite board and card games can also be played in a non-competitive spirit. In this way, adults can encourage their children to strive for excellence even when there are no individual stakes involved.

Does your educational setting promote debilitating—or pragmatic—perfectionism?

Does the Setting Emphasize—or De-Emphasize—Grades?

Objective measures, such as report cards that break the child's learning into parts, may make it harder to see the big picture in terms of a child's educational needs and achievement, as Roeper reminds us:

> [O]bjective measurements imply that we do not try to see who a child is, but think of children in terms of what they can do, academically, physically, or socially. This leads to a partitioning of the individual—the math part, the reading part, the social part, the organizing part. As a result, we confront children with a variety of expectations, and then draw conclusions about each child without truly understanding them as complete individuals. We never put Humpty Dumpty together again. (Roeper, 1995, p. 136)

A toxic setting emphasizes grades at the expense of excellence and love of learning. Clark (1992, p. 372) writes that "under the threat of grades, bright students balk at venturing into the unknown or trying any area in which they are not sure they will succeed." She notes, "there is little if any correlation between high school or even college grades and later success" (Clark, 1992). In addition, an emphasis on grades and other extrinsic motivators may put students at risk for the Performance Syndrome, where looking smart and not making mistakes are valued more than learning and doing one's best (Amabile, 1989).

A healthy educational setting keeps evaluation in perspective and emphasizes learning. Parents and teachers may be amazed at just how little formal assessment of needs and evaluation of learning is actually necessary for learning to move forward. Often, learner feedback is built in as a natural and informal part of a learning activity, such as when a very young child learns how tall he can build a tower with blocks before the blocks all fall down, or when an older child sees the highlighted misspelled words in the draft of a computer e-mail message. Children who are learning long division can be encouraged to multiply to check their answers and then revise, if necessary, *before* showing the work to adults. Older children can be given the answer key to textbooks or workbooks they are using, and be encouraged to check their own work upon completion. When learning—not grades—is the goal, cheating becomes meaningless.

Simple family conversation provides natural and enjoyable opportunities for children to see gaps in their learning as well as areas in which they've grown. At home or at school, card games and board games allow parents to provide scaffolding for their children's math and logical thinking skills in a way that has been shown to be more effective in teaching math to young children than computer programs (Healy, 1998). If your child needs practice in mental addition and subtraction, making time for some "unplugged" interactive board and card games may be better than buying the latest CD-ROM or curriculum workbook.

When evaluation or assessment is necessary, adults can think carefully about exactly what needs to be measured and what form is least intrusive in the learning process. Portfolios of student work, self-evaluation (not in comparison to other children), and allowing students to set and track their own learning goals are good alternatives to number or letter grades. Parents and teachers can also help children to see the positive aspects of pursuing excellence. Careful and consistent practice of a violin solo, honing physical skills necessary to do a back flip, or taking the time to learn to bake a tasty loaf of bread can give children a feeling of joy and success. These pursuits of excellence, however, should not be the basis for the child's sense of self-worth. If the violin solo misses a beat, if the back flip results in a fall or the bread collapses, the child needs to be able to put the events in perspective and not see himself as a failure. The book *Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good* by Adderholdt-Elliott and Goldberg (1999), offers other good suggestions.

If you have a child who has been a chronic underachiever in school, as evidenced by grades, don't look for a different school setting as a way to "shape him up" by turning or changing him into a high achiever. Instead, look for a setting that de-emphasizes grades and emphasizes love of learning and personal excellence. Achievement may come in time, but the child must choose it freely; it cannot be forced.

Does your educational setting emphasize—or de-emphasize—grades?

Does the Setting Rely on—or Resist Using—Unnecessary Labels for Children?

Labels can be useful abbreviations for constellations of traits and behaviors. By referring to the "visual-spatial learner" or the "gifted learner," we immediately confer a complex meaning to the reader or listener without having to go into a more time-consuming explanation. However, the very complexity of an idea or a child can easily be reduced by the unnecessary use or overuse of labels. Learning styles and personality traits are as varied as are individual children, and no two gifted children are alike.

A toxic setting is any setting that reduces the complexity of children to a label. While understanding a child's preferred

modes of learning or dominant personality traits—such as a visual-spatial learning style—can be valuable for both parents and children, a healthy, creative learning environment presumes that such "diagnoses" are never ends in and of themselves, but rather, jumping off places for broader understanding. A healthy educational setting respects the complexity of children and does not label children or force a particular learning style or characteristic, but, rather, encourages children to explore all facets of their personalities and resists the temptation to limit children's views of themselves.

For example, if a child has demonstrated a preference for rational thinking and "staying within the lines," the parent can accept and value this preference, while at the same time being sure to offer the child opportunities to explore safely the passionate side of learning, to extend herself beyond the lines without fear of "not being herself." The adult will be very careful not to call the child "left-brained" in the child's presence, or to show the child overtly or covertly that divergent or more creative behavior is not expected (Liedloff, 1986). This approach is very different from the notion of strengthening a child's weaknesses, because here the non-preferred dimensions are not seen as weaknesses, but only or merely as options previously seldom chosen. The child remains in control of the choices; the adult provides options, guidance, support and acceptance.

Complexity is one of the more difficult traits of giftedness to understand, but supporting complexity can be as simple as not acting overly surprised when your usually introverted daughter asks to take a theatre class, or offering an outgoing child time for solitude and daydreaming, or making available a wide range of materials and approaches to learning. Parents should also refrain from making defining or "referential" statements like these in their children's presence, such as, "Joe is my logical child, but Jane is my creative one," or "Hannah just isn't a math person," or "Sam is so messy!" or "Jordan has ADD, you know" (Rimm, 1997). Such statements set up and reinforce the child's expectations for his sense of self, and may hold the child back from necessary risk and personal development. Likewise, parents should be careful not to compare a child to other children in the child's hearing (Webb, 2000b). When a child feels no artificial boundaries to her personality or thought processes, when expectations are neither too low nor too narrow, that child is free to experiment with many new ways of being and learning.

Adults can support the complexity of their children by refusing to limit or define them with labels. Does your child's educational setting give children unnecessary labels, or does it resist the use of unnecessary labels and instead encourage complexity of thought and action?

One can debate forever the value of generic types of schools and programs, but more important is the specific individual setting, whether public or private or charter, or home school. The bigger question should be, "Is the learning setting healthy or toxic?"

Checklist for Health/Toxicity of Educational Settings

Gifted Characteristic: Asynchronous Development

Healthy: Treats uneven abilities and asynchronous development as normal. Follows the child's developmental timetable. Is flexible and creative with curriculum materials. Encourages self-directed, child-initiated learning.
Toxic: Ignores or punishes uneven abilities and mismatches of development. Forces children to fit generic timetables of development. Relies on one-size-fits-all curriculum materials. Discourages learning that is self-directed and self-initiated.

Gifted Characteristic: Perfectionism

Healthy: Treats perfectionism as a normal trait of many children. Promotes pragmatic perfectionism by building self-confidence, having realistic expectations, encouraging healthy and necessary risk-taking, and valuing effort and excellence over perfection.
Toxic: Ignores or punishes perfectionism. Promotes debilitating perfectionism by making children feel ashamed of their drive to perfect, insisting on unrealistic expectations, discouraging healthy risk-taking, and valuing competition and perfection over effort and excellence.

Gifted Characteristic: Complexity

Healthy: De-emphasizes grades. Emphasizes love of learning and pursuit of excellence. Uses as little formal evaluation as necessary. Resists reliance on unnecessary and reductive labels for children. Does not limit children with defining and descriptive statements.
Toxic: Emphasizes grades. De-emphasizes self-evaluation and love of learning while emphasizing objective measures of worth. Relies on much formal evaluation. Gives unnecessary labels to children. Makes referential statements in children's presence.

Conclusion

A child's social and emotional life is never separate from the rest of the child's life. It is not a subject area like math or spelling or physical education, but is fully integrated in every activity, every thought, every experience, including learning settings and tasks. Rather than debate the relative value of generic school settings, parents can evaluate how their child's specific learning settings acknowledge and accommodate common gifted characteristics, such as uneven development, perfectionism, and complexity.

Parents and teachers can use these specific strategies to nurture positive social and emotional growth:

- Support and model healthy risk taking.
- Find ways to de-emphasize competition.
- Reduce unnecessary evaluation of children's activities.
- Value self-directed and self-initiated learning activities.
- Avoid making referential statements in front of children.
- Encourage children to feel good about their gifted characteristics.
- Treat uneven development, perfectionism, and complexity as normal.
- Make time for family conversation and regular special time with each child.

Are we teachers and parents doing all we can to create healthy learning environments for gifted children?

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BOOK REVIEW FROM GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE DECEMBER 2001-JANUARY 2002 ISSUE

Stand Up for Your Gifted: How to Make the Most of Kids' Strengths at School and at Home. (2001) by Joan Franklin Smutny. Foreword by Jerry Flack. Free Spirit Publishing, Minneapolis, MN.

This book addresses an important need in the gifted field by providing parents with clear and concise information on many topics

pertaining to identification, education and advocacy issues. Smutny has also presented numerous case studies related to each topic that will help parents understand the daily problems of raising and educating their gifted children. Each major section (***Starting at Home***, ***Going to School***, and ***Moving Into the Community and Beyond***) has several chapters discussing the advocacy issues parents should learn about and apply in their homes and schools. For example, the section on ***Starting at Home*** has chapters on Understanding Giftedness, Understanding Your Child's Gifts, Providing a Haven for Learning, and others related to this section. The ***Going to School*** section includes chapters on Understanding Gifted Education, Getting to Know Your Child's School, Getting Involved in Your Child's Education, and Searching Out Other Education Options. The Final section, ***Moving Into the Community and Beyond***, contains the following chapters: Connecting with Other Parents, Taking a Stand in Gifted Education, and Taking Care of Yourself. In the ***Other Resources*** section of this book, Smutny has included a list of publishers of gifted education materials and national organizations concerned with educating the gifted. We highly recommend this book to all parents who need a comprehensive resource for understanding the gifted field and learning how to provide the best possible education for their gifted children.

Related Resources ***(FROM GIFTED EDUCATION NEWS-PAGE DECEMBER 2001-JANUARY 2002 ISSUE)***. In Joan Smutny's discussion of the characteristics of giftedness, she says that sensibility is one of the key characteristics. Here are additional resources that discuss the importance of accessing and stimulating gifted children's sensibility levels:

Fisher, Maurice D. (1992). Early Childhood Education for the Gifted: The Need for Intense Study and Observation. **Journal of the Illinois Association for Gifted Children**, 11, 6-9.

Fisher, Maurice D. (1994). **Fisher Comprehensive Assessment of Giftedness Scale: What to Look for When Identifying Gifted Students**. Manassas, VA: Gifted Education Press.

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An Appreciation of John Steinbeck (1902-68) by Michael E. Walters Center for the Study of the Humanities in the Schools

"Men seem to be born with a debt they can never pay no matter how hard they try." **Sweet Thursday**, 1954, p. 20.

It is the Centennial of the birth of John Steinbeck, American writer and Nobel Prize winner (1962). His uniqueness vividly displays itself in many of his lesser known works – particularly **The Log from the Sea of Cortez** (1951) and **Sweet Thursday** (1954). **The Log from the Sea of Cortez** is one of the finest nature books written by an American writer. In the beginning of this book, he described his fascinating friend, Dr. E. F. Ricketts, who was a marine biologist. This account of his friend described an individual like himself who had a blend of mystical and scientific characteristics. Doc Ricketts was a 20th Century Thoreau and Steinbeck's mentor. The book is similar to Thoreau's **Walden** because it shows how individuals can learn about nature's lessons for humanity. Moreover, it is one of the most important nature books for the insights it provides concerning ecology's significance to human beings. Steinbeck captured the joy of physically interacting with nature – not to subdue it, but to find one's connection with the planet Earth.

Sweet Thursday was written as a post World War II statement for the need for psychological and spiritual renewal. The site of this book is Cannery Row, a part of Monterey, California which was a major area for canning fish. Because of the demands of the war, the fishing industry was curtailed. As Steinbeck tells it: "When the war came to Monterey and Cannery Row everybody fought it more or less, in one way or another. When hostilities ceased everyone had his wounds." (p. 1). The healing of these wounds came only as a result of developing new perspectives concerning one's emotional and spiritual role in life.

Gifted students will appreciate both the style and sensibility of Steinbeck's writing. He did not refrain from deep and profound thoughts. However, these thoughts were expressed in a subtle and deceptively simple style that was a blend of the journalistic, scientific, poetic and religious. His themes were simultaneously universal and specifically American. It is interesting to note that even though Steinbeck is an American writer, his stories have resonated across the world. He belongs in the same category as Thoreau, Jack London and Ernest Hemingway for appealing to the aspirations and needs of all human beings.

Steinbeck's concerns were not only personal-emotional, but were also about social issues. He was very sympathetic to the problems experienced by poor people (**The Grapes of Wrath**, 1939, Pulitzer Prize; movie, 1940). Handicapped individuals were also one of his major concerns (**Of Mice and Men**, 1937; movies, 1939, 1981, 1992). In this book, which also became a great play and movies, the main problem is that of a mentally challenged individual and society's insensitivity toward him. Steinbeck's sense of humanity makes the concept of multiculturalism to appear to be a political cliché. In **The Pearl** (1947; movie, 1948), he showed how the individual's human worth can overcome cultural barriers and prejudice. Gifted students will find in Steinbeck's works cognitive, aesthetic and spiritual attributes that will enrich and empower themselves.