

From **STRESS**
to Success

A Handbook for Parents and
Teachers of Gifted Children

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with Gretchen Hirsch

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Foreword

by Dr. Susan Winebrenner

It is both fascinating and scary to think of stress as a factor in the lives of our children. We would like to think that they are carefree and that the stressful demands of adulthood may be postponed until they are older. But we also know that the minds of gifted students don't follow the same paths as the minds of age-appropriate learners. Gifted students often worry about being accepted by classmates and teachers, and they feel pressure to maintain the excellent work outcomes that others expect because of their advanced intelligence. These are stressors that their age peers may not experience to the same painful degree.

Until now, few resources have been available to coach parents and teachers on how to navigate stress successfully with gifted students. Enter this welcome book by Dr. Carol Whitney, which helps readers understand the causes of stress and prescribes practical strategies and advice for managing it. Concerned parents and teachers can utilize these strategies for preventing the potentially harmful emotions that threaten to undermine the abilities of gifted children and the stress that might otherwise control their lives. The book also helps parents assist their children in gaining a realistic understanding of themselves and in learning to set and accomplish realistic short-term goals that will greatly relieve their anxieties.

Most important, the book answers the question “What can the adults who parent, teach, and guide gifted learners do about the varied issues that stress produces?”

Dr. Susan Winebrenner has been writing about teaching both gifted students and those with learning difficulties for more than 25 years. Her current passions in education are twice-exceptional learners and using a cluster grouping model to provide nearly full-time services to gifted students while raising achievement for other students at the grade levels being clustered.

Section I

How Stress Affects
Gifted Children

1

Why Gifted Children Are Different

Intellectual Development

Gifted children are those children who have advanced intellectual abilities. As a result, they often appear wise beyond their years. They speak intelligently and understand concepts that can be difficult for other children their age to grasp. It can be easy for parents and teachers to perceive them simply as miniature adults. But these children are not little adults; they are children, with the same need for unconditional love, safety, guidance, discipline, and boundaries that other children have. Intellectual ability does not mean emotional maturity, and we should expect that there will be times when these children act—and react—like children, no matter how precocious they are.

It can be difficult for gifted children to deal with the dichotomy between their intellect and their emotions, both within themselves and also with others around them. Adults can be insensitive and condescending, perhaps unintentionally, when a gifted child has an emotional outburst that is standard for a child his age but that would be unusual for an adult with a similarly advanced vocabulary, or when

a gifted child throws a tantrum, despite having just finished a conversation about a sophisticated academic topic. Even teenagers can get caught in the trap of being adultized by the adults around them, when the fact is that these teens are in many ways the same as all teens: they are dealing with physical and hormonal changes, they are entering a new phase in their social interactions, and they lack the experience in the world that most adults take for granted when talking with other adults. Treating gifted children of any age as though they are already the emotional age that their intellect might suggest is saddling them with expectations that are not only unfair but also inappropriate.

The reverse, however, is also true. Gifted children are not like other children. Applying the same sets of rules and expectations to them that one might apply to other children might seem brutally unfair to a child who is self-motivated but who may choose to go about assigned duties and tasks in creative ways, or a child who may be slow to transition from a topic of deep intellectual absorption—the kind of in-depth engagement that gifted children often experience in areas of great interest to them—to a more mundane task of, for example, coming down to dinner.

While all children are unique and special, experts have observed a variety of characteristics prevalent among those identified as gifted. The traits that follow appear on most lists of common characteristics of gifted children, but they are by no means exhaustive, nor do they appear in every

gifted child. They are presented here with corresponding comments from family members or teachers to illustrate how they may present in a gifted child.

- *Rapid progress through at least some of the early developmental milestones:* “Riley sat up early, walked early, and certainly talked early,” said her mother. “One day when she was six months old, her dad called from out of town. I held the phone up to her ear and said, ‘Say hi to your father.’ She cocked her head and said, ‘Hi, Daddy.’ I couldn’t believe it. After that, her speech came on rapidly.”
- *The ability to learn more quickly than age peers and to exhibit keen insights:* “After Harper hears something one time,” her mother reported, “she understands it and can use the knowledge in other contexts. It’s fascinating to watch. She has never needed drill or repetition to understand or remember things.”
- *A highly developed vocabulary and an ability to understand the creative uses of language:* A grandmother described her three-year-old grandson, Isaiah, who, after being asked to take his plate to the sink, said, “I’d be more than delighted to do that for you.”
- *A voracious curiosity about the things that interest them:* “Julian is in a dinosaur phase now, and I can’t believe what he knows,” remarked his father. “He’s six and has knowledgeable conversations with his

grandfather, who is a chemistry professor, about prehistoric life.”

- *The ability to read and write earlier than other children:* “Nora couldn’t hold a pencil, so she dictated her stories to me when she was four,” said her mother. “Now that she’s seven, she can write them herself. They’re quite advanced for someone her age, and the punctuation is all correct, too. I love reading her work.”
- *A delightful sense of humor, which is often surprisingly mature:* “Samuel, who is six, came into class one day all revved up,” said his teacher. “He’d made up a riddle, and he was excited to tell it to me. ‘What’s the dullest animal?’ he asked me. When I said I didn’t know, he smiled and said, ‘A boar!’ We had a big laugh about that one.”
- *An exceptional memory:* “I think Chloe remembers everything up to and including the day she was born,” her father explained. “Any time I recount an event that she was involved in or present for, even peripherally, if I get a detail wrong, she corrects me.”
- *An active imagination:* “We think Jackson will end up in the performing arts,” said his father. “From the time he was very young, he was thinking up his own plays. He creates the costumes and the sets, and he arranges the ‘theater,’ which is usually the living room. He also acts all the parts. His level of creativity is impressive.”

- *Unusual sensitivity, empathy, and intensity of feelings:* “When he was in the third grade, Asher learned about ‘buddy benches,’ and he thought his school should have one,” his mother explained. “He talked to the principal about it. Then he gathered up some other kids, and they started a fund-raiser. There’s a buddy bench on the playground now because the kids did a pretty compelling presentation to the parent-teacher organization, and the group provided last-dollar funding. Asher just didn’t want other kids to be left out. He worried about it, and then he did something about it. We were—and are—very proud of that kind of thinking.”
- *Independence in thought and actions:* “I’ve never seen a more independent kid,” said Grace’s grandfather. “From the time she was three, it was ‘Do it myself.’ And she does. She’s 10 now. She tries different ways to make things happen until she’s successful, and she never wants help. We give her a little advice now and then, but she wants to do the work herself.”
- *Diverse interests and abilities:* “We never know what Carter’s newest thing is going to be,” said his mother. “His library is stuffed with books. First it was Harry Potter, then weather patterns and events, then the Roman Empire, and now African animals. He wants to learn new things all the time. Sometimes it’s hard to keep up!”

While most of these traits keep parents and teachers hopping, they generally are seen as positive qualities. However, each of them can become problematic in certain contexts or when exhibited in certain ways. The child who is independent in thought, for example, may resist help that would genuinely set her on a more productive path. Or she may be seen as standoffish or antisocial if she does not want to work with her classmates on group projects. The child with in-depth knowledge of a topic of interest, or one with advanced language skills, may be taunted by peers who cannot comprehend what he is trying to say. That child also may feel as though there is no one his age with whom to share his passions. Any time a child exhibits characteristics that are out of the norm, that child risks feelings of alienation and isolation by peers who see him or her as different. What is remarkable and impressive at home can be interpreted quite differently at school or in other social situations.

Asynchrony

Asynchrony is one of the fundamental traits that defines giftedness. It means that gifted children's development is uneven. Their cognition often runs far ahead of their physical abilities and their emotional maturity. It is not uncommon, for example, for a first grader to have the intellectual skills and interests of a student in second or even third grade. However, this child's physical competence and her ability to control her emotions oftentimes do not match her bright mind.

Ethan wants to be a concert violinist. He has a particular song that he wants to play. He understands the music note for note. He knows exactly how the piece should sound. However, at six years old, his fine-motor skills have not kept pace with his intellectual growth and his artistic sensibility. Although he is talented, he can't manipulate the bow or handle the fingering well enough to create the melody he hears in his mind. The result can be extreme frustration, and this frustration may carry over into other aspects of his life as he tries and fails to reach the idealized goals that his intelligence demands and his physical maturity cannot deliver.

Additionally, this gifted six-year-old has more in common—at least intellectually—with children who are a few years older than he, and he may want to be friends with them. The problem, however, is that most older children aren't interested in the friendship of someone so young, and they may even consider him a nuisance. Where, then, does he turn for friendship and peer relationships? His age peers don't understand him, and older children ignore him.

Intellectually advanced asynchronous children learn early that they are different from other children. The sense of “otherness” that arises from their differences can make them feel as though they don't belong anywhere. They may find it difficult to fit in with their peers and make friends. Even if they try hard to be like other children, they just aren't. The result often is isolation, loneliness, and stress.

Intensity

Another factor that may complicate life for gifted children is what are known as *overexcitabilities*, sometimes called supersensitivities. “Overexcitabilities are inborn intensities indicating a heightened [response to stimuli]. Found to a greater degree in creative and gifted individuals, overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity.”¹

There are five areas of overexcitability, and most gifted individuals exhibit at least a few of them, although some demonstrate only one, and some seem to have them all. “A person who manifests several forms of overexcitability sees reality in a different, stronger, and more multisided manner.”² The five overexcitabilities (OEs) are as follows:

- *Intellectual*: This is the OE that is traditionally associated with what we think of as giftedness. These are the children who want to learn as much as they can wherever they can gather information. They generally love to read and can concentrate on a subject of interest for long periods of time. They are usually competent at solving problems, planning, and research, which can make them good members of learning teams. However, many of these individuals are independent thinkers, which may lead them to be in conflict with others in a group. In addition, they can become frustrated and impatient with others who don't share their passions or who can't grasp