

# Embracing the Whole Gifted Self

Patricia Gatto-Walden, Ph.D.

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## *Dedication*

I have infinite gratitude to my beloved husband Jim, who cheered and fortified this venture and in whose presence I am forever home. And to my loving and supportive children Justin, Christina, Jon, and Paul, I am thankful for your celebration of my work and for bringing such joy to my life.



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41 First Avenue  
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fax: (845) 726-3824  
email: [mail@rfwp.com](mailto:mail@rfwp.com)  
website: [rfwp.com](http://rfwp.com)



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The case histories I have used for illustration in this book are not those of specific individuals but are amalgamations of the many people I have met and/or worked with during the past 30 years. They are intended to depict common issues among the gifted. The similarity to many gifted people is intentional; any facts identical to those of a specific individual are coincidental.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Understanding Giftedness from the Inside Out

The term *gifted* as it refers to intellect is a controversial one. Among the very bright, there is a range of reactions to the merit and even the validity of this label. Some gifted people do not like the word *gifted* because it makes them feel separate from others or infers an elitist or arrogant distinction between one's ability and that of others. These individuals instead may espouse that "Everyone is gifted," meaning that every person has distinctive gifts to offer the world. Being singled out from others or being distinguished as a person of advanced ability can be uncomfortable. In addition, the gifted label is often negatively coupled with expectations to perform or produce exceptionally with absolute consistency. When this happens, the term brings unwanted pressures.

Many bright children experience this same discomfort with the gifted terminology. Some children who have been identified as gifted do not want to participate in a gifted and talented program because it separates them from their age peers. They are embarrassed when they are singled out as academically different, and the separation sometimes results in a problematic disconnection with their classmates. Like adults, these children are concerned that the expectations for them are set too high simply by virtue of the label that has been given to them. What

is worse, the quality of some gifted programs is not much better than that of the regular classroom. Children complain that there is a lack of depth and breadth of instruction coupled with increased busy work. As such, being in the gifted classes feels more like punishment than gain, especially if they are required to make up the work they missed in the regular classroom while they were in the gifted class. To these children, being labeled as gifted is synonymous with being forced to shoulder a host of problems.

Other brilliant individuals accept their intellectual distinction as representative of the uniqueness inherent among all people. They see the world as a conglomerate of vast individual differences to which they belong. Intellectual capacity is simply a personal attribute, no different from any other. The term *gifted* is inconsequential and unnecessary.

Some gifted individuals take this view even further. To these people, individuality is of primary importance, so being a part of any group—gifted or non-gifted—is undesirable. They are independent, self-sustaining, self-motivated, and self-directed. They do not want to be categorized with others in any way. They are decisively solo beings, not needing to be accompanied by—or, as they express, harnessed to—others. They think on their own, act on their own accord, and are happy to pursue their ventures and interests singularly.

In my counseling experience, this group is mostly comprised of highly to profoundly gifted individuals. They know that they are different and feel fine about it. They do not want to explain themselves or take directions from anyone. They do not need approval or recognition from others. They do not ask for others' opinions, nor do they cater to anyone else's demands.

Overwhelmingly, they are self-confident and self-reliant and are delighted to be so. Any friendships are made with those of common ability and interest; otherwise, they would not be attracted to one another or engaged in the relationship.

While some reject or disassociate from the gifted label, others find refuge and comfort in it. These individuals feel disconnected from others and lonely. Being part of a group with a common attribute—heightened intelligence—offers a sense of belonging. These gifted people feel dissimilar to most people around them in what they like to think about and how they think about it. Their enhanced emotions and passionate caring about people, places, concepts, or ideals are particularly distinct, and these intensities—as well as their interests, endless curiosity, and dedication to the pursuit of knowledge—set them apart from others. Having always felt odd and out of place, they welcome a safe haven with other intellectually gifted people who demonstrate an intensity of thinking and feeling similar to theirs. When in a community of gifted individuals, they have expressive freedom. With others of similar intellectual ability, they no longer need to edit their vocabulary or modulate their sense of humor but instead freely engage in in-depth discussions on topics of mutual interest.

All of these positions are individual viewpoints along a continuum of experience. In a group of people who have a common denominator of advanced intelligence (specifically two or more standard deviations above the norm as measured by intelligence tests), there are numerous interpretations of what is important or valid. Their divergent perspectives of the term *gifted* by themselves demonstrate that generalizations regarding distinctions between

gifted individuals and the broader population may have value or meaning to some individuals but not to others.

## Defining What It Means to Be Gifted

In 1972, the U.S. Department of Education put out the Marland Report, which provided a federal definition of what it means to be gifted. The definition stated that gifted individuals are: "... students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities."

In practical terms, most children who are gifted demonstrate high academic ability or talent in some capacity. Typically parents or teachers notice a particular aptitude in the child. Advanced abilities can occur within any subject or discipline, such as math, science, language arts, or history. Sometimes the child seems to be strong in just one or two areas, but some children appear to be gifted at every subject they encounter. Alternatively, children can display talent within any creative or artistic domain, including poetry, visual arts, theater, dance, or music. These displays of children's gifts and talents are often bolstered by high IQ scores, achievement or aptitude test results, scholastic productivity, and/or grades, which often enable the children to be admitted into the school's gifted and talented program.

Since most educators believe that the purpose of school is to help children live up to their potential, it follows that the educational experience should support the development of these youngsters' gifts and talents. Gifted programs across the country and gifted



organizations, including the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), aspire to establish education programs that will help students develop their gifts and talents optimally.

The problem might seem obvious. What about children who don't achieve but who are still gifted?

Many gifted children demonstrate their exceptional abilities at school, but some do not. There are myriad reasons why a child might not achieve academically, such as boredom, test anxiety, illness, or problems at home. A child with a fever on test day, for example, may not perform well. One who is fretting over her parents' looming divorce may be distracted and unable to focus on schoolwork. One who is bored may decide that there's no point in completing work that is too easy. These children will not demonstrate their giftedness, but that does not make them any less gifted. Consequently, schools that predominantly use scholastic performance to identify gifted children can inadvertently omit a significant number of gifted students.

Classrooms geared toward the average learner do not offer the challenge that gifted students need in order to stay engaged in their learning and interested in a topic. The enthusiasm and knowledge of teachers in their subject matter and the quality of the instruction also affect gifted students' concentration and motivation to perform. When there is little or no challenge to the material, gifted children become disengaged and bored. And in this way, they can become invisible to teachers.

One young teen, a 13-year-old, said it clearly: *"When you take our enthusiasm and passion away by not allowing us to challenge ourselves in the classroom, it's like something's dying inside of*

*you, and it actually made me really depressed from fourth grade through seventh grade. And it was really not fun! I don't want to do that again. I need to learn. I want to learn and be challenged."*

Another gifted child, age 12, talked about his enthusiasm for learning: *"I always want to know more things. I want to have more skills and more information, and I want to expand my understanding and ability in the world. Constantly. In as many directions as I can. In my public school, that is not the norm! Most people are pretty comfortable being spoon-fed information, and that's okay, but you can't hold the people who excel the most down to that level! You really need to give them challenges and the possibilities to go where they want to go and do what they want to do and learn how they want to learn—and as quickly as they want to learn and as much as they want to learn."*

If schools only admit students into gifted programs on the bases of test results, high grades, or demonstrated advanced capabilities, they are sure to miss many gifted students. School systems are advised instead to incorporate a multifaceted means of identifying students, which includes demonstrated academic ability but also other typical gifted traits, such as advanced vocabulary and memory, complexity of thinking or conceptual acceleration, endless curiosity, vivid imagination, creativity, artistic expression, "out of the box" ideas, highly developed sense of humor, fascinations and interests outside of the age norm, a preference for relationships with older children or adults, and other personality and temperament attributes (Silverman, 2002).

## Twice-Exceptionality

There is another reason why gifted children might underperform in school. Some gifted children also struggle with physical disabilities, learning disorders, or emotional or social difficulties. These can inhibit the demonstration of knowledge, even though comprehension of information is intact. When children are very bright, adults assume that they can think clearly and show on paper what they know. It is confusing to these children and to the adults around them when they can speak profusely on topics of interest but then get poor grades on tests.

*Twice-exceptionality* is the term used for the dual experience of gifted intelligence and thwarted demonstration of knowledge. Diagnosing twice-exceptionality can be difficult since gifted children may be bright enough to compensate for their deficiency and still receive superior to average grades. The higher the child's intelligence, the more advanced his or her thinking capability will be and the more likely a learning deficit will be hidden.

Some twice-exceptional children may show an inconsistent pattern of achievement, at times doing very well and at other times earning average or even below-average scores. It is common for teachers and parents alike to attribute average grades of gifted children to other causes (for example, boredom, laziness, lack of motivation), when in fact there may be a diagnosable problem interfering with these children's learning. Some gifted children are actually placed in remedial classrooms due to their lagging performance since teachers cannot see evidence of them understanding the material.

Erratic patterns of achievement are just one hint that a child may be twice-exceptional; most symptoms are specific to the diagnosis

of which disability or disorder the child has. However, a few common behaviors that may suggest twice-exceptionality are avoiding or struggling with homework, continually misplacing worksheets and homework, losing track of time, a cluttered or disorganize desk or backpack, having difficulty following or remembering directions, making careless mistakes, and difficulty with daily routines and time transitions. Many twice-exceptional children avoid homework altogether, and they often end up in protracted arguments with their parents over their spending more time procrastinating than what it would take to complete the assignment.

The discrepancy for twice-exceptional children between what they understand and what they are able to show they understand is frustrating and baffling to everyone—children, teachers, and parents. It is common for these children to squelch their frustration or academic lack of confidence while at school and then, upon returning home, have emotional meltdowns, either imploding or exploding.

It is exhausting for twice-exceptional children to try to compensate for their inadequacies in the classroom. The drain on many of these children's physical energy and their adrenal system can cause chronic low-grade illness. But even if they stay physically healthy, twice-exceptionality affects a child's academic confidence and performance, overall self-esteem, and relationships at home and school.

Joanna, age 13, talked about the discrepancy of her traits: *“Giftedness can show up in babies—like they’re less likely to fall down the stairs because they understand the danger. And my parents told me I began talking and asking for what I wanted by*

*nine months old. I was not satisfied with status quo toys either; I would play with my brother's puzzles—he is three years older than me. But not everybody develops everything early or reads at age one—like I developed normally in other areas and didn't even get comfortable reading until about the third grade because I'm dyslexic."*

Due to the numerous difficulties twice-exceptional children encounter, a diagnosis by a professional of what is interfering with the expression of their true capability is essential. With a professional diagnosis in hand, twice-exceptional children are then eligible for a 504 education instructional plan to provide educational accommodations to enable and support their academic success. Further, having an understanding of what is actually causing the difficulties relieves the confusion for children and parents alike, and instead of battling one another over homework or grade issues, they can become allies working together to overcome the difficulty.

### A Better Definition

Clearly, gifted children may not achieve academically; twice-exceptionality is only one reason for this. But recall that the federal definition of giftedness focuses on achievement. Thus, it is an inadequate definition; it is founded on a principle of what children show they can do, not of who they inherently are.

In an effort to distinguish giftedness from achievement and performance, in 1991 the Columbus Group forged a definition that focused on a key characteristic of gifted individuals everywhere: their asynchrony. Asynchrony is the difference between a gifted child's development and that of children who fall into the average

range on the intellectual spectrum. What society expects children to think and to feel and to do, and indeed what most children do think and feel and do, does not apply to gifted children. They tend to reach milestones earlier, learn more rapidly and with less repetition of information, and care about issues more passionately and at a younger age. Simultaneously, there is asynchrony within these children; their cognitive abilities advance at a faster pace than their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development, and so they are often seen as many ages at once, holding high intellectual conversations with a neighbor one minute, for example, and throwing a temper tantrum the next.

Thus, the Columbus Group definition states: “Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally” (1991).

This definition infers that as cognitive abilities increase from the gifted to the highly, exceptionally, and profoundly gifted, so does asynchrony, intensity, and divergence from the norm. However, it caused great controversy within the gifted educational field when it was first introduced, creating a schism of educational philosophy between two camps of professionals. One perspective advocated talent development, achievement, and performance as proof of a child’s intellectual giftedness, while the second focused on the intrinsic characteristics that differentiate gifted youth from their age peers. The true beauty of the Columbus Group definition

is that it does not denounce talent development nor the importance of advanced curriculum for gifted youth. It merely changes the focus from a purely external orientation of talent and productivity to an internal focus of individual differences between gifted individuals and others.

### Common Personality Traits of Gifted Individuals

Over the decades, I have seen with utter consistency five personality traits in gifted individuals of all ages, irrespective of their academic or work performance. How one chooses to demonstrate giftedness is a choice; however, these qualitative differences are innate. They augment the Columbus Group definition of distinguishing attributes. These common characteristics are asynchronous development, depth and breadth of perceptivity, physical and/or emotional sensitivity, intensity, and perfectionism. Each individual's personality and temperament accentuate or minimize these attributes, but whatever their expression, these characteristics seem to be foundational qualities within the gifted. The chapters in this book focus on each of these traits in depth.

But before we discuss the inherent characteristics of gifted individuals, we must understand that being intellectually gifted does not just affect the way a person thinks; it affects all of who that person is. It is all-encompassing, pertaining to every aspect of the person's being. The following quotes from gifted children describing how they experience being gifted are illuminating.

Will, age 10: *"I think that gifted kids definitely see the whole world in a completely different way. I love to see the world by thinking of it on multiple different levels: the physical level, the spiritual*

*level, the atomic level, and all kinds of other levels, and it seems that normal kids get bored by that.”*

Cameron, age 12: *“Most of the attention is put into intellect, but it’s also intense emotion and even spirituality. There is other stuff besides intellect that makes you gifted.”*

Tim, age 11: *“To me giftedness isn’t just about learning things and the intellectual point of view; it’s also about feeling and understanding other people’s feelings in a different way and being more advanced in that way and a little more sensitive. I often feel like we’re not seen as whole people; we’re only seen for our strengths and talents.”*

In a family with gifted parents, we typically find gifted children. The adage “the apple does not fall far from the tree” is true. Gifted attributes can be seen across generations, often forming an entire family tree of gifted individuals. Since gifted parents create gifted children, and all family members have gifted traits and act in gifted ways, then everyone in the family can feel a sense of normalcy in the home. Within the family, asynchrony, perceptivity, sensitivity, intensity, and perfectionism are usual ways of being.

When many children first venture outside the home, they discover that what they know in their family is not how the rest of the world is, and the older they get, the more they discover that they are outside the norm. What is so desperately sad is that most often, gifted individuals take their differences as negative attributes. They may not fit in, may have few or no close friends, may not be invited to social events, might even be teased or bullied for their differences. Many assume that something is wrong with them. When out of the “gifted normalcy” of their home, gifted



individuals' everyday behaviors make them seem unusual to others. The higher the intelligence of these people, the more they deviate from the norm, and the more socially atypical they are.

But giftedness is not a deficiency. It does not have to be met with dismay, isolation, or loneliness. It can be a beautiful way of meeting the world—with curiosity and depth of feeling and passion. However, gifted individuals must learn the most important step toward self-love: they must embrace their whole gifted self.