

Director's Corner: The Psychosocial Development of Gifted Children

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Director's Corner: The Psychosocial Development of Gifted Children



By Stephen Chou

"I did it! I can do it! I can do anything!"

Success, success, and more success. Though this is not the experience of all children who are gifted, as there is such diversity and challenges even within the gifted community, is this not on some level often the experience of many gifted children? Gifted children have been known to achieve and succeed in various facets of life ... and early (Clark, Barbara, 2008, NAGC/SENG, Pfeiffer, 2009, Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007). They are lauded for their achievements by their mothers, fathers, grandparents, teachers, doctors, and even peers and siblings. And, why shouldn't they be? In fact, in *Gifted Child Today*, the article entitled "Gifted Children and Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development" by Tracy L. Cross (January 1, 2001) emphasizes the importance of recognizing and assisting gifted children in their successes such that they navigate and overcome Erickson's psychosocial crisis stages. Indeed, the praise encourages these gifted children and provides them confidence in what they do. This forms a positive self-esteem and self-concept for them.

Yet, gifted children still encounter a myriad of difficulties within the socioemotional realm, contrary to the common-held myth that these "High-Ability Students Don't Face Problems and Challenges" (*Gifted Child Quarterly* October 2009 53: 274-276). In fact, Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries (2007) state that "large numbers of intellectually gifted youngsters experience underachievement, perfectionism, procrastination, and stress. Many gifted children experience challenges relating to peers and sibling." [Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries, 2007, p. xvii] They further note, "Certain types of depression may be more common among gifted persons, and these youngsters may even have a higher risk of suicide. Research indicates that some gifted children face particular risks simply because they *are* gifted." [Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries, 2007, p. xvii] Pfeiffer, 2009, suggested that some gifted children and adolescents may be challenged with learning

disabilities, and/or behavioral, social, and emotional problems, rendering some of these children to be termed as 'twice or thrice exceptional.'

How then do we understand all the myriad developmental possibilities and repercussions for gifted and talented children and youth? One possible explanation returns to and utilizes Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Erikson's Psychosocial Stages provides one well-known explanation of the development of our sense of self, or ego identity, through social interaction. (Erikson, E.H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: Norton.) According to Erikson, our ego identity is in dynamic conversation between ourselves and our environment. Erikson also believed that a sense of competence, if mastered, or sense of inadequacy, if managed poorly, develops as a result, which motivates our behaviors and actions. According to Erikson, there are eight stages of psychosocial development in which people experience a conflict that serves as a turning point in development. In Erikson's view, these conflicts are centered on either developing a psychological quality or failing to develop that quality. During these times, the potential for personal growth is high, but so is the potential for failure.

Some gifted children naturally seem to succeed and thrive rapidly through Erikson's psychosocial stages of Autonomy versus Shame and Doubt, Initiative versus Guilt, Industry versus Inferiority, and Identity versus Role Confusion, stages 2 through 5, posited to occur from age 2 to adolescence. But perhaps, for gifted children these are entirely and precociously attained at 10, 9, or even 8 years old. They are praised for their ability to do things independently, autonomously and so well, and supported for their initiative and in their becoming competent and effective in activities valued by adults and peers. They are propelled through these psychosocial stages and find themselves quickly in forming an identity of being bright and capable people.

What happened to the other side of Erikson's psychosocial stages? How often do gifted children feel shame and doubt? How often do they feel guilt? How often do they feel inferior? Since these stages have been succeeded through, have they actually been warp-speed traversed?

For gifted children, "Since they are accustomed to learning things quickly and independently, they soon grow to believe that they *should* be able to handle all of their problems. They are equally reluctant to ask for assistance, fearing they will lose their status as 'bright and capable' if they ask for help." [Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries, 2007, p. 117] Interestingly, this powerful identity is thus far their greatest feat, and more significantly may also be their greatest detriment.

After a lifetime, such that it is, filled with success after success, what happens when these gifted children fail? Isn't that an impossibility? No, it can't be an impossibility, though it is a rarity. When they *do* fail, the child breaks down. Oftentimes, parents, teachers, and therapists see this anecdotally in adolescence. Some parents describe this as a "nervous breakdown" or "meltdown." Some say they "cry like they're two." Whatever the outward show, "when approval is linked with performance, the gifted child may begin to feel that the reason people love her is because she is smart, and not because of her whole self. The catch is that there may come a time when she doesn't

achieve, and her unspoken fear may be that she will no longer be loved. Next, these high-achieving gifted children may start to feel like imposters, attributing their success to luck rather than talent.” [*The Perils of Parenting—Top 10 Things Not to Say to Your Gifted Child* by Nancy N. Heilbrunner; June 2008; Parenting for High Potential] And when they hit the wall, they fail, and they are unprepared for the intensity and myriad of emotions felt. This is a devastating pain.

All the previous stages’ failings may return and are experienced fully, the shame and doubt, the inferiority, and the guilt. Their sense of self becomes lost, their ego disintegrates. This is painful. This hurts. They are at once and acutely feeling regret and responsibility for their actions or inabilities, shame about oneself as a person who is able and autonomous, inadequate, self-doubt, guilt and self-blame or self-contempt at having done something that he or she should not have done or conversely, having not done something he or she believes one should have done, and discouraged for being less than or even mediocre, which may spiral into feelings of weakness, helplessness, or dependency

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shame>, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guilt>, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Inferiority_complex). Their identity is now in crisis or disintegrated entirely. Gifted children may, as a result, innately protect themselves from these painful feelings or experiences, and psychologically try to keep their identity intact. Because the experience of shame and doubt, guilt, and inferiority are not felt fully nor are they directly confronted and appropriately managed in early childhood, these feelings become even more pronounced and intensify later in life. Parents then have a difficult time recognizing it or helping their child/youth cope. In addition, the gifted and talented children’s understanding of emotions may be accented and heightened through their own overexcitabilities (Lind, 2001). There are five areas of overexcitabilities (OEs) that include Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional OEs. A person may possess one or more of these. “One who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger, and more multisided manner” (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7). Experiencing the world in this unique way carries with it great joys and sometimes great frustrations. These painful feelings or experiences of shame and doubt, guilt, and inferiority are hence intensified, making that pain or hurt even greater and more significant to protect against.

Perhaps this is why gifted children learn to hide themselves. They don’t want to hurt, because sometimes when they do, they hurt more intensely. Hence, they become perfectionistic so that their limit of ability is never reached and they never have to experience this pain. Or, they underachieve, such that their expectations are set so low they will never fail, or they have sufficient control over their achievement or non-achievement. More dire possibilities for gifted and talented youth are manifested to protect against this pain or hurt, indeed, to defend against this emotional turmoil that overtakes and incapacitates them from functioning well at home or at school. This includes, but is not limited to, psychiatric disorders including anxiety disorder, major depressive disorder, oppositional defiance disorder, conduct disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and narcissism.

In a manner of speaking, when propelled through Eriksonian stages of psychosocial development, gifted children's emotional growth has actually been underdeveloped. Perhaps the feelings of shame and doubt, inferiority, and guilt have not been entirely experienced, or at least not experienced enough. These emotions may not have been successfully resolved. This means that other prosocial attributes that can develop well and allow the child to become resilient, including but not limited to empathy, humility, or perseverance, could derive from feelings of shame and doubt, inferiority, and guilt. These difficult-to-face feelings are at times hidden or covered by intelligence, as a mere oversight, but also at times as a fully conscious decision to not face them. Why would gifted children want to feel the pain associated with these feelings when they may continue in life with their successes? For that matter, why would parents want their children to feel pain associated with feelings of shame, doubt, guilt, or inferiority?

It is, however, paramount that parents, teachers, and other care providers recognize the importance of allowing gifted and talented children and youth to navigate through each of Erikson's stages in a balanced manner, such that they will grow up with the will and motivation, purpose, and competence to form an identity that is also flexible, empathic, and humble. And, if they do hit that wall, as we all do, provide them the understanding and guidance to help them attain an identity that is resilient, well-rounded, and most of all happy.