

The “Gifted” Label: Burden or Blessing?

In an ideal world, we wouldn't need labels of any kind. In our less-than-ideal world, labels help us to communicate, understand, make decisions—and allocate funding. The “gifted” label exists in schools today because the needs of bright, talented, creative students often aren't met by the regular curriculum. Identifying these students as gifted gives schools a way to justify special programs that come closer to meeting the students' needs, and also to select kids for inclusion in gifted programs.

The problem with the “gifted” label isn't the label itself but rather how people perceive it and use it. When it's attached to certain nouns (athlete, musician, writer, actor, etc.), it's usually acceptable and considered a compliment. But when it's used in reference to academic or scholarly pursuits, it's not necessarily an asset. In fact, many students experience the label in conjunction with such negative nicknames as “geek,” “nerd,” “dweeb,” “junior genius,” “dork,” or worse, none of which promote feelings of acceptance or popularity. And this in turn leads some gifted students to downplay or deny their giftedness.

Every gifted person we've ever taught, interviewed, talked with, worked with, or lived with admits to enjoying the benefits of being intelligent. Knowing how to think deeply, think creatively, feel intensely, understand complex concepts, explore a variety of interests, make connections that others don't see, solve problems, come up with unique ideas, and so on makes life interesting and exciting. So why does the “gifted” label—when linked with intellectual pursuits—end up as more of a burden than a blessing?

At least part of the answer lies in the way our culture values (or devalues) academic effort and achievement. Consider these facts:*

- *Americans spend less time in school than the people of most other industrialized countries.*
- *We devote less than half as much time as other nations to core subjects.*
- *Less than half of a typical American school day is devoted to academic activities.*
- *The three main television stations in one major metropolitan area give up to 30 times more coverage to student athletes than to student scholars.*
- *Two-thirds of our students state that student athletes are more respected than student scholars.*
- *The “pure scholar” (the non-athletic academic achiever) is the least popular student in a typical school.*
- *Over two-thirds of our brightest students report deliberate underachievement to avoid being labeled a “nerd” by classmates.*
- *Less than a third of our students (30 percent) report a “positive school climate.”*
- *Students report spending more time per week on virtually anything other than schoolwork, including socializing, sports, extracurricular activities, TV, work, and listening to the radio.*

“In our society to admit inferiority is to be a fool, and to admit superiority is to be an outcast. Those who are in reality superior in intelligence can be accepted by their fellows only if they pretend they are not.”

Marya Mannes

The Board of Education in one Nevada county has come up with a revealing series of euphemisms to describe students' academic performance. Those who earn D's or F's are “emerging.” Those who earn B's and C's are “developing.” And those who earn A's are merely “extending.” (As opposed to “succeeding,” “achieving,” or “excelling,” all of which might imply that the A students are doing better than the others.)

No wonder so many gifted students struggle with insensitive and uninformed comments from teachers, peers, and/or parents. For some kids, the best response is simply to ignore the ridicule. They refuse to allow others to damage or destroy their self-esteem.

Staying centered and strong takes determination and practice. One thing that helps is making a list of the pluses in your life—the benefits that come from being smart, creative, and talented. It also helps to consider the minuses—the drawbacks of the label—so you can decide which ones you'll try to change and which ones you'll just have to live with.

Some Possible Advantages of Being Gifted

- You may have access to challenging programs, classes, and other educational opportunities that match your ability level and interests.
- Being gifted may open the door to scholarships, awards, and competitions.
- Adults may assume that you're more responsible, which can lead to increased freedom.
- You are able to tackle and surmount many types of problems and challenges, often with greater speed and finesse than people of average or low ability.
- Some teachers appreciate (some even prefer) the opportunity to work with smart students. In fact, you make their day!
- Having a good mind can mean a more interesting life (depending on the choices you make).

What other advantages can you think of? Come up with your own list, then consult (and update) it frequently—or whenever the “gifted” label seems more of a burden than a blessing.*

Some Possible Disadvantages of Being Gifted

- People who don't understand what being gifted means (and doesn't mean) may equate giftedness with perfection. As a result, some people may have unreasonable expectations of you, from your grades to your behavior.
- Labels are easy excuses for put-downs and insults. Being “gifted” may make you a potential target.
- When someone asks you what “gifted” means, there really is no “right” answer, which makes it awkward to explain.
- Your classes and schoolwork are often too easy—and dull. Much of your schoolwork may seem irrelevant.
- Friends who really understand and accept you may be few and far between.
- You sometimes feel overwhelmed by the number of things you can do. How can you make good choices? How can you decide which direction(s) and interest(s) to pursue in life?
- You may feel “different” from other kids your age—and if you view being different as a deficit, you may try to suppress your true self.
- Because you are knowledgeable, sensitive, and smart, you may be more aware of and concerned about world problems than some of your peers. On the other hand, you may feel helpless to do anything about them, and that can be frustrating and frightening.

- **“BEING GIFTED ISN'T NECESSARILY A GOOD THING IN AMERICAN SOCIETY. AVERAGE INTELLIGENCE IS VALUED MORE. WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO COVER IT UP?”**
- **IVORY, 12**

- **“HOW DOES A PERSON AVOID BEING RIDICULED FOR HAVING AN ADVANCED VOCABULARY OR WHATEVER? I MEAN, SAYING ‘I CAN'T HELP IT, I'M GIFTED’ ISN'T EXACTLY A GOOD COMEBACK, IS IT?”**
- **PETER, 12**

- **“AT THE SCHOOL I GO TO, PEOPLE STRIVE TO PUT THEIR TALENTS AND INTELLIGENCE TO GREAT CHALLENGES. WE AREN'T LABELED FREAKS, AND IT'S ACTUALLY ‘COOL’ TO BE GIFTED.”**
- **JAY, 15**

“In this world people have to pay an extortionate price for any exceptional gift whatever.”
Willa Cather

* TIP: If you enjoy journaling, you may want to keep a journal as you read this book. Use it to record your lists, thoughts, questions, reactions, and ideas.