

Introduction

Gifted kids are so much more than high grades and test scores. You probably know that already; that's why you're reading this book. But for teachers just starting out (or burning out, or overwhelmed with the day-to-day concerns of their job), it's sometimes difficult to see past all that achievement and potential to the child, adolescent, or teen who may be filled with anxiety, pressured to be perfect, lonely, alienated, confused, and unsure of what the future might bring.

We can both remember the specific incidents that first called our attention to gifted kids' social and emotional needs.

Jim: Craig entered my life and my classroom at the same time. A fifth grader, he was fascinated by anything intellectual, and his sensitivity often caused him to see life from an altruistic angle seldom observed in boys his age. He drove his teachers nuts, though. He seldom finished anything he started, for once his fascination for a topic was sated, he felt it was time to move on. For two years, Craig was enrolled in my gifted program, and for two years, I had to fight to keep him there. He wasn't your stereotypical high-achieving gifted child, but he was, indeed, a gifted child. I came to realize that the greatest needs he had were not in academics, but in the social and emotional realms of growing up gifted. Craig, and others like him, have guided my life ever since, and they have shown me the importance of looking beyond high achievement and glossy projects to find the gifted child beneath the academic veneer.

Judy: Early in my career as a gifted education specialist I worked with teens. One day, three boys hung around after class, and I overheard them talking. "Now I get to go be my family's identified patient," one said. Another asked, "Have you ever taken a Rorschach test?" The third said, "I'm seeing a psychiatrist." I suddenly realized that all three students had personal experience with mental health issues, and I wondered: What about the others? It was a wake-up call for me. Not long after, another of my students attempted suicide. When I looked at my program with new eyes, I saw that it was based entirely on meeting gifted kids' academic needs. It occurred to me that if a student's mental health is off-center significantly, or even a little, what point is there in trying to push academic challenge when that's usually the easy part of life for gifted kids? I made it my personal mission to educate myself about mental health, and to balance my academic program with life skills—learning about oneself and others.

It's important to know that there isn't a big difference between addressing students' academic and emotional needs. You don't have to be a counselor with a degree. You don't have to have all the answers. We certainly don't! What we do have are years of experience working with gifted kids, studying gifted kids, reading about gifted kids, getting to know them, caring about them, and trying our best to help them.

We wrote this book to share what we've learned, to share what other experts say (including gifted kids themselves), and to give you some strategies, activities, and ideas you can start using right now to support the social and emotional needs of your own gifted students.

About This Book

■ In **Chapter 1: What Is Giftedness?** we describe the general characteristics of gifted children and some problems associated with those characteristics. We present various definitions of giftedness and invite you to come up with your own definition. We spotlight many of the myths and misconceptions about giftedness (including the pervasive, pernicious myth that gifted education is "elitist"), and we consider the "gifted" label. This chapter includes two important information-gathering tools: a "Teacher Inventory" and a "Student Questionnaire." We strongly encourage you to complete the inventory and have your gifted students complete the questionnaire. Both will provide you with valuable insights.

■ In **Chapter 2: Identifying Gifted Kids**, we wonder (as you do) why identification is so complex, suggest ways to improve the identification process, look at some questionable practices in current identification methods, and present common questions about identification—along with answers we hope you'll find helpful.

■ In **Chapter 3: Emotional Dimensions of Giftedness**, we describe some of the challenges gifted kids face from within and without, including super-sensitivity and perfectionism. We talk about different ways of being gifted and focus in on three categories of giftedness which may predict emotional needs: gifted girls, gifted students from ethnic and cultural minorities, and gifted children with physical and learning differences. We point out some trouble signs you can watch for, including symptoms indicating that a student may be deeply depressed or even suicidal.

■ In **Chapter 4: Being a Gifted Teacher**, we empathize with you and the challenges you face in your job. We understand; we've been there! We offer some ideas for explaining gifted education to parents, colleagues, administrators, and others who may not understand what you do or why it's necessary to do it ("Aren't all children gifted?"). We consider what makes a good gifted education teacher and suggest

specific actions you might take to build your own strengths. Then we offer strategies you can use to create a supportive environment for your students, both as a group and one-on-one.

■ In **Chapter 5: Understanding Gifted Kids from the Inside Out**, we describe the difference between self-image and self-esteem and identify specific issues gifted children and adolescents face that set them apart. Then we present several activities related to those issues that help gifted kids explore their perceptions, consider their lives, learn more about themselves, be their own advocates, and like themselves more.

■ In **Chapter 6: Underachiever or Selective Consumer?**, we consider a label that's often applied to gifted kids who don't live up to others' expectations: "underachiever." We distinguish between underachievement and nonproduction, which we prefer to call "selective consumerism." We review the literature and research on what has historically been called "underachievement." Then we suggest strategies for reversing patterns of underachieving and selective consumer behaviors through curricular and counseling interventions.

■ In **Chapter 7: Understanding Gifted Kids from the Outside In**, we present a series of group discussions you can use to help students explore and understand the "Eight Great Gripes of Gifted Kids." The "Great Gripes" are problems and feelings that gifted kids have identified as common to their experience: being bored in school, dealing with others' expectations, worrying about world problems and feeling helpless to do anything about them. The "Great Gripes" aren't new; in fact, gifted kids first told us about them almost twenty years ago. It's significant that these issues still loom so large in their lives. Our discussions allow students to explore them in depth and feel more empowered to cope with them.

■ In **Chapter 8: Making It Safe to Be Smart: Creating the Gifted-Friendly Classroom**, we focus on ways to make gifted students feel welcome, wanted, and able to be themselves. We discuss the relationship between self-esteem and school achievement. We introduce the idea of "Invitational Education" and present specific strategies you can use to make your curriculum, grading procedures, student evaluations, classroom environment, and even your disciplinary procedures more supportive. We also talk about ways to feel better about yourself as a teacher.

Our goals throughout this book are to call attention to gifted students' issues, problems, and feelings; to support your efforts on behalf of gifted kids; to answer some of the "tough questions" you may have (or be asked by others); and to provide you with concrete, easy-to-use strategies and activities for meeting students' social

and emotional needs. The goals of the strategies and activities are to help gifted kids understand what giftedness means; to invite them to embrace giftedness as an asset in their lives; to inspire them to take more responsibility for their learning and their actions; and to help them build lifeskills for dealing with perfectionism, conflicts with others, self-esteem issues, and other mental-health concerns.

The strategies and activities you'll find here have been used in many classrooms, some for many years. We're confident that you'll have success with them, too. Watch what happens as your gifted students learn to understand and accept themselves, understand and accept others, and realize that being gifted is a blessing, not a burden.

A Few Words of Encouragement

Naturally, we have no idea what kind of gifted program you teach in—or even if you teach in a gifted program. Maybe you're one of the lucky ones, with a full-time program or even a gifted magnet school that's strongly supported, generally understood, and adequately funded (at least for now). Maybe you staff a resource room where gifted students spend part of each day. Perhaps you're a "pull-out" program teacher who travels from school to school, spending an hour or two each week with each group of gifted students (and you have many groups). Maybe you teach an enrichment class, AP (Advanced Placement) classes, or an after-school, weekend, or summer class for gifted students. Maybe you're a mentor to a gifted child.

Or maybe you're a "regular" classroom teacher, where your inclusive, mixed-abilities classroom may include students who range from highly gifted to gifted, "average" students, those who have learning differences, kids at risk, students who are severely disabled, homeless kids, students for whom English is a second language, and recent immigrants who don't yet speak English. If so, you're probably being asked by your administration to differentiate the curriculum, or you will be at some point in the not-too-distant future.

Differentiation means changing the pace, level, or kind of instruction to meet each student's individual learning needs. In a time when gifted programs are being challenged or eliminated, differentiation is a way of ensuring that gifted students are given the learning opportunities they need. Depending on your situation, these opportunities may include curriculum compacting (compressing curriculum material into a shorter time frame, and allowing students to demonstrate mastery of content they already know); ability grouping (putting gifted students together for instruction in a particular subject area); flexible grouping (putting students together on an assignment-by-assignment basis); cluster grouping (putting all identified gifted students of the same grade level in the same classroom, usually one led by a teacher with training in gifted education); or individualized instruction (independent study projects).

Whatever your own situation might be, and however many gifted students you teach, we hope you know how truly essential you are. Over and over again, gifted students have told us about teachers who have made a tremendous difference in their lives. Gifted adults get misty-eyed when remembering grade-school teachers who took the time and made the effort to know them and guide them. Yes, you'll have bad days, maddening days, frustrating days, and days when you wish you'd followed a different career path altogether. Join the club! But please . . . keep teaching.

And please be willing to deal with the emotional lives of your students, not just their intellectual needs. Actually, working with students' affective needs may be (in the words of one teacher) "the best thing we can do for them." In an average busy day, with a tight schedule and loaded curriculum, it seems difficult to depart from the teacher's guide to deal with feelings. But as many people have pointed out, if students don't have good self-concepts and good interpersonal relationships, everything else comes to a screeching halt.

Affective education belongs in the teacher's guide. And that's what this book is.

Stay in Touch

We'd love to hear from you. Please let us know what's been helpful in this book, what works for you (and doesn't). Are there other strategies and activities you've discovered or developed that seem especially effective with gifted kids? We'd appreciate your sharing them with us. Are there stories from your own experience that make a point, illuminate a need, or support the importance of gifted education? Send them our way. We're always learning from "teachers in the trenches"—people like you. You may contact us by regular mail or email:

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We hope to hear from you. And we wish you continued success in your efforts to understand, teach, and encourage social and emotional growth among the gifted students in your care.

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