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The Essential Guide to *Talking with Gifted Teens*

Ready-to-Use Discussions About
Identity, Stress, Relationships, and More



Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D

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About Identity, Stress, Relationships, and More

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Dedication

to Reuben

Acknowledgments

Immediate and extended family, new and longtime friends, colleagues, and many, many students have taught me about development—and about giftedness. I cannot recall a time when I was not around bright people who were growing and changing. That process has fascinated me. I have appreciated and been influenced by these stimulating, challenging, highly idiosyncratic individuals.

I am especially indebted to my husband, Reuben, highly committed to his own work as an educator, for his unwavering support of my teaching, writing, and other interests. We have grown and changed together. I also want to thank my children, Sonia and Nathan, for being patient with me when they were young, sharing me with my teaching career and waiting for summer, when our lives would change dramatically for three months.

Since the first *Talk with Teens* book appeared in the early 1990s, counselors, counselors-in-training, and a variety of classroom and gifted education teachers have given me feedback and ideas for future revisions. Their adaptations, struggles with unclear concepts and guidelines, and excitement over successes have all informed me. I have especially appreciated the feedback and suggestions of Terry Bradley, in Boulder, Colorado, over several years and have included three of her many creative ideas in this book—the paired activity in “Self in Perspective,” the stress-ball activity in “Sorting Out Stress,” and the children’s book activity in “Angry!”

I am relieved that the field of gifted education is embracing the idea that the social and emotional development of gifted kids is important. I am grateful to pioneers in this area for thinking, exploring, studying, writing, presenting, consulting, organizing, counseling, leading, and publishing helpful resources, among them Nick Colangelo, Barbara Kerr, James Webb, George Betts, Michael Piechowski, Dewey Cornell, Linda Silverman, Joanne Whitmore, Tom Hébert, Sal Mendaglio, Tracy Cross, Lawrence Coleman, Jane Piirto, Donna Ford, Sylvia Rimm, Ed Amend, Andrew Mahoney, Susan Jackson, Helen Nevitt, and Judy Galbraith. Through personal contact and/or through their writing, I recognized these as kindred spirits during my initial years in the National Association for Gifted Children. Some have been consistent and important contributors to the Counseling and Guidance Division of NAGC during my years with that organization.

I want to acknowledge Penny Oldfather for supporting the discussion groups I organized when I coordinated a program for gifted students in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for five years. Group work was a fairly new idea in the field at that time, and her approval, as director of the Unique Learning Experiences program, was crucial to the viability of the group component I developed. Principal Fred Stephens, a former school counselor, supported this strand in the program, and I want to acknowledge him as well. My friend Norma Haan, a former college roommate and a longtime clinician, was a ready consultant.

Last, I want to acknowledge Free Spirit Publishing. Based on my earlier very positive experiences with Judy Galbraith and her staff, I anticipated accurately that the editing process for this book would be multi-layered and rigorous—and highly supportive. I particularly want to acknowledge the conscientious work of Cathy Broberg and Meg Bratsch, content editors, and Darsi Dreyer, copy editor. They were alert and not afraid to challenge me during the long process of birthing the book. Experts in various fields served as consultants and reviewers for Free Spirit along the way as well. I am grateful to all of these individuals for their guidance.

Contents

List of Reproducible Pages / v
Preface / vi

Introduction 1

About This Book / 1
The Nuts and Bolts of Group Work / 5
Leading the Sessions / 9
About the Sessions / 15
Getting Started / 17
A Note for Parents / 20

Focus: Identity 25

General Background / 26
General Objectives / 27

The Sessions

Developing—Similarly and Uniquely / 28
What Does *Gifted* Mean? / 31
Self in Perspective / 35
Façade, Image, and Stereotype / 39
Intensity, Compulsivity, and Control / 42
Learning Styles / 45
Perfectionism / 48
More Than Test Scores and Grades? / 52
Understanding Underachievement / 55
Giving Ourselves Permission / 60
Self-Esteem / 63
Conformity / 67
Influencers / 69
Playing / 72
Being an Interesting Story / 75
When We Need Courage / 78
A Question of Values / 80
Lonely at the Top / 84

Focus: Stress 86

General Background / 87
General Objectives / 88

The Sessions

Sorting Out Stress / 89
Coping with Stress / 92

Sensitivity and Safe Havens / 95
Procrastination / 99
Substance Abuse / 101
Cyber-Networking / 104

Focus: Relationships 107

General Background / 108
General Objectives / 108

The Sessions

Friends / 109
Being Social / 113
Authority / 118
Who Can We Lean On? / 122
Getting What We Need / 124
Gossip, Cyber-Aggression,
and Other Bullying / 128
Relationships with Parents / 132
Relationships with Siblings / 137
Relationships with Teachers / 139
Male and Female / 143
They're Going Out Now / 146
Sexual Harassment / 149
Sexual Behavior / 151
Sexual Aggression / 155
Violence in Relationships / 160
Marriage and Partnership / 163
Tolerance, Compassion, and Altruism / 166

Focus: Feelings 170

General Background / 171
General Objectives / 171

The Sessions

Mood Swings and Mood Range / 172
Sensitivity to Fairness / 175
Disappointed / 177
A Sense of Humor / 179
Angry! / 181
Anxious and Afraid / 186
The Dark Side of Competition / 191
When We Were at Our Best / 193

Proud or Arrogant? / 195	
Happy / 197	
Loss and Transition / 199	
Divorce / 203	
Family Gatherings / 206	
Dark Thoughts, Dark Times / 208	
Eating and Not Eating / 214	
Cutting and Other Self-Harm / 218	
Focus: Family	220
General Background / 221	
General Objectives / 222	
The Sessions	
Family Communication Style / 223	
Family Values / 228	
Family Roles / 230	
Becoming Separate—But Staying Connected / 233	
Making Predictions / 236	
Focus: The Future	239
General Background / 240	
General Objectives / 240	
The Sessions	
What Is Maturity? / 241	
Satisfaction in Life / 243	
Attitudes About Work / 245	
Future Lifestyle and Gender Expectations / 248	
Choosing a Career / 252	
Asking “Dumb” Questions About College / 258	
Anticipating Change / 261	
When and If I’m a Parent / 263	
Final Session	265
Ending / 266	
<i>Recommended Resources / 270</i>	
<i>Index / 278</i>	
<i>About the Author / 282</i>	

List of Reproducible Pages

Permission for Student Participation / 21
Group Guidelines / 22
Warm-Up / 23–24
Thirteen Intelligence Types / 34
How Others See Me, How I See Myself and Others / 37–38
Underachievers Anonymous (UNAN) / 59
Giving Myself Permission / 62
Rating My Self-Esteem / 66
My Story / 77
A Question of Values / 82–83
Sensitivity / 98
Friendships / 111–112
Being Social / 117
Responding to Authority / 121
Needs / 127
Relationships with Parents / 135–136
Relationships with Teachers / 142
Sexual Behavior / 154
Problem Scenarios / 158–159
Being Angry / 184–185
Being Afraid / 190
Experiencing Loss / 201–202
Feeling Bad / 213
Family Communication / 226
Family Communication Role Plays / 227
Family Values / 229
Family Roles / 232
Family Predictions / 238
The World of Work / 247
Images of the Future / 251
Career Needs / 256–257
Ending / 268
Group Evaluation / 269

Preface

The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens is a book that has come full circle in many ways. It was my work with gifted students that inspired an approach to group work that was outlined in two books published more than ten years ago. Those books were called *Talk with Teens About Self and Stress* and *Talk with Teens About Feelings, Family, Relationships, and the Future*. The original books were written for the general population, since the preventive, development-oriented discussion group format is potentially beneficial for all teens. Since that time, however, social and emotional development has received increasing attention in the field of gifted education. Though we understand that gifted teens face the same developmental challenges as the rest of the school population, *how* they experience development may be different. Their own and others' expectations regarding their development are likely to be different from what others experience. Therefore, this book assumes that highly capable teens can benefit from opportunities to talk about developmental hurdles in a group comprised of only gifted teens.

When it was time to revise the books, my publisher and I agreed that two volumes were still needed but with different foci: one for use with the general population—called *Talk with Teens About What Matters to Them*—and one geared toward gifted teens. This is the volume created for group work with gifted kids.

The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens incorporates some of the best elements of the earlier editions—in the sessions selected and in the detailed guidelines for group work, including the emphasis on expressive skills as related to social and emotional concerns. I believe these skills are important to future relationships and often are not attended to adequately in schools. Most significant, however, are new topics that reflect issues especially important to gifted teens. Current information about the social and emotional development of gifted kids, based on the latest research and literature, also is included throughout the book. The background information for many sessions has been updated and made more pertinent to the experience of gifted teens. Suggestions and sample questions have been improved and extended, with giftedness in mind.

I encourage you to let me know about your group work with gifted teens, how specific session topics and suggestions have worked for you, and what new activities or ideas you have used to adapt the sessions to your context.

You can email me at: help4kids@freespirit.com or send me a letter in care of:

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Introduction

About This Book

Description and Benefits

Gifted education teachers often focus mostly on the academic needs of their students, developing an advanced curriculum in a special program or ensuring that curriculum and instruction are differentiated for gifted students in classrooms. Traditionally, much less attention has been given to gifted students' social and emotional development. *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* is intended to meet the need of gifted teens to “just talk”—to share their feelings and concerns with supportive peers and an attentive adult. Whether or not normal developmental tasks, life events, or personal circumstances affect students' attendance, classroom performance, or behavior, the sensitivity and intensity of gifted teens may add an extra layer to their internal response to these challenges. Yet, because they are perceived as highly capable and may appear to be doing well, many adults assume that gifted children and teens are handling social and emotional concerns adequately. Furthermore, gifted teens are often reluctant to ask for help, believing, like the adults, that they should be able to deal effectively with personal problems, difficult circumstances, low morale, or low motivation by themselves. Even when family life is discouraging, deeply engrained achievement habits may allow high-achieving gifted students to continue to demonstrate excellent classroom and talent performance, again contributing to the assumption that support isn't needed. Fundamentally, little is known about the inner life of gifted teens. Adults rarely ask how these students are experiencing various aspects of life, including the day-to-day challenges of social, extracurricular, and academic life at school as well as normal developmental changes.

My experience with approximately 1,300 group sessions with gifted teens has taught me that, collectively, they have a wide range of concerns that often are not apparent to others. For many, adolescence is not an easy time. Even remarkable performers, who delight the adults around them, are growing and developing—with self-doubts and uncertainties about the present and future. Gifted underachievers may not feel as self-assured as some of them seem. Gifted rebels

may feel in control only when others stay at a distance, avoiding their speeding, looping tetherball. The ready-to-use semi-structured sessions provided here can serve as a curriculum that nurtures the social and emotional development of these and other gifted teens. The sessions have been used in programs for gifted students in public and private middle schools and high schools, in summer university programs, and in yearlong residential schools. The suggestions, activities, and written exercises in this book, along with the focused but flexible format, have been thoroughly tested.

I have witnessed the benefits of these guided discussion groups for gifted students of many ages. The groups can accomplish the following:

- allow gifted teens to focus on how and where they are, in the present, not on how or where highly invested adults may believe they ought to be
- produce inspiring results in both well-adjusted gifted students and those with significant risk factors
- help gifted students normalize “weird” thoughts, sort out personal conflict, put self- and others' expectations into perspective, and lower stress levels
- provide an opportunity to explore the notion that sensitivities and intensities are associated with giftedness
- give students who are cynical and negative about school an experience that makes it bearable
- help group members learn to anticipate problems and find support for problem-solving
- serve a preventive function by improving self-esteem and social ease (High levels of either of these should not be automatically assumed in gifted kids. Students feel better about themselves as they become comfortable and allow their real selves to show and be affirmed during group meetings.)
- give educators and counselors an opportunity to interact with many gifted students about social and emotional development at one time, maximizing time and impact

Although researchers exploring the concept of giftedness have often focused on assets rather than burdens associated with high ability, a growing trend is to look at the latter as well. Researchers in the field of gifted education are often educational psychologists, and many have explored areas such as motivation, self-regulation, cognition, problem-solving ability, higher-order thinking, the process of learning, differentiated curriculum, and underachievement as related to motivation. Others have studied gifted students' subjective experience of social development qualitatively, discovering and pursuing new research directions as a result. The session topics in this book have been chosen on the basis of research, clinical literature, and collected anecdotal reports.

For the sake of brevity and reading ease, *gifted teens* will be the phrase used to identify the target population here. A more current and more appropriate phrase would be *teens who are gifted*. The term *gifted* will be used throughout the book as a descriptor (not as a noun), rather than the phrase *gifted and talented*, in line with the national organization's name (National Association for Gifted Children) and most pertinent scholarly literature. In this book, *gifted* will refer to any kinds of exceptional talents that represent the top of a bell curve in a particular domain.

Genesis

For twenty-five years, I was a teacher in public schools. For nineteen of those years, I taught mostly English literature and language to junior and senior high school students in the United States and Germany. My years in the classroom tuned me in to the social and emotional world of teens, and I observed and interacted with many who were gifted. When they wrote essays, interacted with me during yearbook meetings, worked with me in foreign-language club activities, or lingered after class, they taught me about adolescent development—and about sensitivities and intensities. Of those who were intellectually gifted (demonstrated largely through their writing insights and skills), some were high achievers and some were underachievers.

In general, students across a range of ability levels readily accepted my invitation to respond in writing to the literature we were reading. In fact, we did not discuss literature much orally; instead, they wrote in their journals about what they were reading, and I responded in the margins. There was no "correct" interpretation. They were encouraged to immerse themselves, think about the characters, apply perspectives related to other subjects and to their own world, gain insights, and learn through the process. We used class time for providing background material to help them understand the contexts of what they were reading. We sometimes discussed what they were reading, but students seemed to appreciate their autonomy in drawing conclusions themselves. In their

journals, they asked questions about what they didn't understand. I like to think that all of my students benefited from this approach, but the gifted ones seemed particularly to thrive. The process was open-ended, with no limits on their insights, creativity, or depth.

There were many reasons for this teaching approach, and some of them relate to the discussion groups I later developed. Namely, students need information, and they need to develop skills. I wanted my students to learn to express themselves on paper and to become self-reflective, independent thinkers. I also wanted to hear from everyone equally, not just from the highly verbal and assertive. I employed an interactive, constructivist approach to foster immersion in learning, with hands-on classroom activities, media and community resources, vocabulary-in-context exercises, classroom dialogue, and reading. We learned together, and the students became more and more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. Some of these strategies are similar to those I recommend for the development-oriented discussion groups described in this book.

I soon saw that the gifted students wanted to *be known*—to be recognized for their individual worth and uniqueness, not just for their intellect or talent. Some stayed after class to talk about difficult personal matters. I believe that gifted teens are hungry for acknowledgment and nonjudgmental listening. I learned that there were many important things they did not discuss with peers, and some of these teens did not have a comfortable enough relationship with a parent to ask tough questions or express concerns.

I was certainly reminded that gifted students were not exempt from troubling life events, difficult family situations, and challenges related to social and emotional development. The parents of some were divorced, unemployed, addicted, ill, absent, neglectful, or abusive. In contrast, some had parents who hovered protectively. Most important, these bright students were experiencing universal developmental challenges, although perhaps qualitatively differently from others their age. They fought with siblings, had "crushes" and breakups, and were anxious about the future. Some struggled with the hypocrisy of the adults around them and the sad state of the world as they saw it, and they responded to these and other issues with sadness, problematic behaviors, frustration, irritability, lack of motivation for schoolwork, and sometimes depression. They had difficulty managing their complex, fragmented lives. Sometimes they felt like exploding from tension. They needed someone to talk with. They needed affirmation for their humanness. They needed to have feelings and experiences validated.

Eventually, in another school, I had an opportunity to create an extensive small-group program for gifted students. Group work had never been done there. I thought back to the gifted teens in my classes. I certainly

had seen the need for support and attentive listening. I decided to offer a group experience, focused on concerns related to social and emotional development.

The groups did not catch on immediately, but by the second semester, after more than one carefully crafted invitation, there were three groups, with about ten students each. The next year there were six groups, and then ten, with two hour-long groups per day, coordinated with the noon lunch schedule. Usually once each year I invited administrators, counselors, and student teachers to join us—with no group experiencing a guest more than once, and always with only one guest—in order to learn a little about proactive small-group work (in this case, with gifted teens) and perhaps to view gifted individuals more holistically. Group members were eager to “demonstrate their group.” I was careful to choose a topic for those sessions that would not require a great level of trust (for example, “What do you wish teachers understood about teens like you—in general?”). Almost invariably, the guests would comment to me later that they had never thought that gifted students might feel misunderstood and narrowly viewed.

The students faithfully attended group meetings even though attendance was voluntary. Some came to school when they were not feeling well because they did not want to miss group. Most attended the weekly group meetings for three full years, without any lack of topics to talk about. We hardly ever discussed academics, *per se*, but we did address the stress related to the classroom and competitive activities. Group members became close through steady, undramatic weekly contact, and when a personal or institutional crisis arose, the groups were a ready support system. The students taught me, they taught each other, and they learned about themselves. The topics were not particularly heavy, but they resonated. The students relaxed and “just talked.” Some students indicated, in formal, written feedback at the end of each year, that their group had offered crucial guidance in some aspect of life. Others said their group had helped them survive a difficult year. Almost all mentioned that it was important for them to hear that other gifted teens had concerns. The most shy members said they had gained from hearing others talk about growing up. Even normally gregarious group members wrote that they realized they were not alone in dealing with personal challenges. *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* grew out of the manuals I eventually created for the groups.

In other locations, I continued to form middle and high school groups with various populations. Concurrently, I finished doctoral studies in counselor education, began university-level teaching and research, and became a licensed mental health counselor, working in one or more settings, including private practice, school counseling, alternative teen facilities, and substance abuse treatment, for several years. I often worked with highly able children, teens, and families, continuing to learn about the social

and emotional development of gifted individuals. I am now teaching in a university setting, helping counselors of tomorrow tune in to the affective needs of gifted students. From the highly capable graduate students in our selective program, I am learning about giftedness as it is experienced after high school and college.

Purpose

The purpose of these guided discussions is to support the social and emotional development of gifted teens. Whether through small- or large-group discussion, they become increasingly self-aware, and that in turn helps them to make better decisions, solve problems, and experience healthier relationships. They learn to affirm their complexity and make sense of their emotions and behavior. They feel more in control of their lives.

This support comes in the form of an environment where group members can express themselves. All teens need practice putting concerns and feelings into words. As bright as gifted teens are, and as much as some of them talk socially, they may not be skilled at communicating feelings and concerns clearly, genuinely, and effectively. Learning to talk about what is important to them and to listen attentively to others will enhance their present and future relationships. Adolescence is a good time to learn these skills. Small groups, in particular, offer two important opportunities that may be lacking elsewhere:

- a noncompetitive environment where no grades are given and where everyone is fairly equal (When focusing on social and emotional development, there is a relative absence of social hierarchy—and arrogance.)
- a safe place to talk about the journey of adolescence with others who share the experience (Everyone is navigating an uneven sea, with complex feelings, frustrations, and anxieties.)

Gifted teens gain social skills through interacting with each other in the presence of a nonjudgmental adult. The teens learn what they and others have in common, learn to listen, gain experience in initiating and responding to conversation, and become aware of how they are seen by others. All of these gains can enhance social ease and self-esteem, both of which can help make school a more pleasant, more comfortable place. In the current era of accountability, small-group work may also be viewed as a strategy for improving attitudes and test performance of gifted underachievers.

The format of *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* is not designed specifically to teach group skills or to acquaint teens with the vocabulary of group work. However, many such skills and some aspects of group dynamics will likely become familiar. The extensive introductory material here actually offers a solid overview of techniques related to group facilitation.

With guided group discussion, process is more important than product, and one goal is to enhance the skill of articulating social and emotional concerns. The focus, objectives, and suggestions for content and closure contained in each session provide a framework for solid, substantive, invigorating group experiences.

It is important to understand that the purpose of these group discussions is not to “fix” group members. Even though the questions are designed to provoke reflection and introspection, the emphasis is always on articulating feelings and thoughts in the presence of others who listen and care. These groups are not meant to be therapy groups. Yes, group work in any form has potential therapeutic value, and some noticeable changes in attitude and behavior often occur in the kind of groups promoted here. However, even when it appears that these changes have occurred because of the response and support of a group, other factors, such as changes at home, the healing effect of time, or developmental leaps, may also have contributed. Nevertheless, being involved in a group might help, and even be crucial, in times of personal crises, whether or not others in the group are aware of the distress. It is important to note here that mental health professionals can use many of these sessions in group therapy and in family counseling to foster communication and personal growth. Indeed, though few in number, providers who specialize in working with gifted clients do exist, and some do group work with gifted youth.

As is the case whenever adults stand firmly and supportively beside teens, establish trust, and participate in their complex lives, you will serve your group best by listening actively, with the focus fully on them, and offering your nonjudgmental presence as they find their own direction.

Meeting ASCA Standards

The national standards for school counseling programs, developed by the American School Counselor Association, focus on academic, career, and personal/social development of students. The focused discussions outlined in this book address standards in each of these areas, with giftedness in mind.

In relation to academic development, various sessions can help gifted students develop positive attitudes toward school, toward teachers and administrators, and toward learning. Group members become more aware of their learning preferences. Topics related to post-secondary options and transitions help students anticipate the future.

Related to career development, almost all discussion topics are intended to enhance self-awareness, including personal strengths and interests. Such self-awareness is a key ingredient in finding career direction, particularly when gifted teens struggle with *multipotentiality* (multiple interests and talents and career choices). A basic premise

of this book is that bringing gifted teens together in small groups helps them make comfortable interpersonal connections—through listening and responding, supporting and being supported, and appropriately expressing feelings and opinions. They break down cultural and socioeconomic stereotypes and learn about the perspectives of others. Interpersonal skills and sensitivity to others will enhance working relationships in the future. Group members reflect on the work attitudes of significant adult models in their lives and are encouraged to imagine themselves in future work contexts. They also learn about post-secondary educational settings and are able to ask questions and receive important information. Group facilitators are provided suggestions for organizing career-oriented experiences outside of school as well.

Most important, this book focuses on personal/social development—on simply growing up. Session topics encourage self-reflection about identity, feelings, and peer, family, and community relationships, not only in terms of universal developmental tasks, but also acknowledging that giftedness has potential impact in these areas. Members develop skills in a group, a social microcosm, potentially enhancing their lives in the present and after the school years. In addition, group members learn about emotional and physical vulnerabilities related to technology, high-risk social situations, relationships, and stress, and they consider ways to be social without putting themselves at risk.

Assumptions

The format and content of *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* reflect the following assumptions, which you may want to keep in mind as you lead your group.

1. Gifted teens have a desire to be heard, listened to, taken seriously, and respected. They want to be seen complexly—more than simply performers or nonperformers.
2. Because of their place on a bell curve of ability, they have a sense of differentness.
3. Some who are quiet, shy, intimidated, or untrusting often do not spontaneously offer comments, but they, too, want to be recognized and understood as unique, complex individuals.
4. All gifted teens need and appreciate support, no matter how strong and successful they seem to others. All have doubts about themselves at times. All feel socially inept and uncomfortable at times.
5. All feel stressed at times. Some feel stressed most or even all of the time. Many feel stressed because of overcommitment, overscheduling, or overinvolvement. All are concerned about the future.

6. Whether or not it is demonstrated outwardly, all have a high level of sensitivity to themselves and to their environment.
7. All are sensitive to family tension. Some are trying hard to keep families afloat or intact, and they may be given heavy responsibilities because of their abilities.
8. All probably have some sort of image to protect.
9. All feel angry at times.
10. All gifted teens, no matter how smooth and self-confident they appear, need practice talking honestly about feelings.

The Nuts and Bolts of Group Work

Group Settings

The session structure is appropriate for both small-group and large-group discussion, although some topics work better with small groups. Sessions are arranged in a purposeful progression for a long-term series, but may certainly be rearranged to create a short-term program or focus. Materials should be selected to fit context, purpose, and need. Here are some settings in which the sessions might be used:

- school-counseling and advisory groups for students of high ability
- summer enrichment programs for gifted teens
- residential schools for gifted teens
- leadership retreats, programs (those attending are likely to have demonstrated, or have the potential for, highly able leadership)
- music, athletics, or other organizational retreats for group-building
- at-home family discussions

Length of Meetings

Ideal meeting length varies, depending on the age of participants. Thirty- or forty-minute meetings probably suffices for students in grades six and seven—a bit longer, if hands-on activities are included. Eighth-graders and high school students usually appreciate a full hour (or class-period length)—after they settle in and gain trust. I recommend that groups that meet over lunch be allowed to leave a few minutes early from the class they're in before the group session, so that they can get their food before classes are dismissed and maximize the time available for discussion.

These sessions are also useful for weekend retreats or extended sessions for gifted teens. (I once used them for twice-weekly ninety-minute sessions at a state Governors School with groups of fifteen to sixteen.) Sequencing sessions so that activities alternate with focused discussion, with unstructured social time mixed in as well, is important, of course, as is maintaining stable group membership.

Large Groups

The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens can be useful in a self-contained classroom for gifted students or classrooms at residential or other schools for gifted students. Weekly discussions, or a daily series of units limited to a week or two, can be part of the curriculum. Homeroom, administration periods, or community time can use one or two activities or discussion catalysts effectively if the time allowed is adequate (at least twenty minutes). Sometimes gifted students are placed in the same homeroom for the purpose of group discussion geared toward social and emotional development.

Small Groups

Group Size

For small-group work, ideal group size varies according to age level. For younger gifted students, a group size of six to seven seems to work best. Regardless of age, however, I do not recommend more than eight students. These are general guidelines. My counseling students and I have experienced successful small-group discussion with as few as three students, who bonded well and developed trust after other members moved away.

Meeting Location

For small-group work, I recommend a small room (instead of a classroom). Such a space is more likely to be private and uninterrupted, to have fewer visual distractions than a classroom, and to promote a sense of intimacy. I also prefer to sit around a table—not only for comfort, but also because many sessions involve writing. Sitting at student desks also usually works well. Lying or sitting on the floor for an entire session actually becomes less comfortable than sitting in a chair for some.

Group dynamics differ, of course, depending on whether a particular class or group has thirty members or ten, but the focus and most of the strategies here work with both sizes of groups. Since a discussion of an activity sheet can easily take an hour with a group of eight verbal students, adjustments must be made when activity sheets are used with larger groups. For example, full-size classes can be divided into small groups (three to five members) for sharing, with appropriate directions for discussion.

Group Composition

Most of the guided discussion sessions in *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* are appropriate for

gifted kids at any point in adolescence. Ideally, groups are “closed,” with membership not changing after the group begins. Each time someone is added, a group usually must focus again on developing trust, since it is a “new” group. Losing a member also changes group dynamics. Therefore, group organizers need to consider students’ school-attendance patterns when determining group size. Some gifted teens have poor attendance.

I have found that the best groups are often those whose members do not know each other well outside of the group. They seem to feel free to share, and they do not have to preface all comments with “Well, someone in here has heard me say this before, but . . .” It shouldn’t be assumed that gifted students are well acquainted with each other. Gifted teens who are involved in some activities may not be acquainted with gifted teens in other activities, even when both activities are under the athletic or music umbrella, for instance. And gifted teens with heavy home responsibilities or after-school jobs may not be involved in activities at all. On the other hand, I have had well-functioning groups where most of the members knew each other well. The groups helped them know each other better. Even best friends may not typically discuss topics like those in this volume.

However, depending on the size of the student population you draw from, you may not have a choice. If some members of your group know each other, it is important to move the group beyond the natural division of friends and nonfriends. Having a focus, with specific activities and written exercises, helps to ensure that the students who are friends do not dominate or irritate the others with “inside humor.” Encouraging them to change seating each time can also be helpful, although it is important to make that a group norm at the outset, since groups—especially middle school groups—may be resistant to doing that later.

I like to promote the idea of using the groups to break down social barriers. In general, I prefer a membership balance between achievers and underachievers, at-risk and not at-risk, highly involved in school and not so involved, and representatives of various ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The mix helps members to break down stereotypes and discover common ground.

If several groups are being formed at one time, distribution can be accomplished by initially compiling a list of all students who accept the invitation to participate and then sorting the list. Of course, recruitment will have to target those less likely to feel welcome. In some cases, the highest-functioning students may be the most reluctant to join, fearing that the groups are geared only to “problems” and “counseling” and that participation will somehow stigmatize them. These students might also feel some anxiety about the focus on nonacademic areas. Underachieving students and those with other risk factors may think that they will be the only ones in the group with stresses, vulnerabilities, fears, and problematic

performance or attitudes. The latter can benefit from realizing that everyone has developmental concerns. That reality should be included in any recruitment material. For example, stress from high expectations can be mentioned as a common denominator among many gifted teens.

All social, cultural, and socioeconomic groups have a great deal to learn from each other, and the group setting can be an ideal learning environment. Gifted teens may not feel comfortable talking about developmental concerns in intellectually diverse groups, but they are apt to open up when a group is composed entirely of gifted teens, including those with various levels of *achievement*. In fact, such group composition can foster highly productive discussions. Often, underachievers are amazed that achievers have social and emotional problems; some achievers are equally amazed that underachievers can be highly intelligent and extremely articulate. Discovery of common ground is a good overarching goal. Gifted students with behavior problems, difficulty with authority, or poor social skills are usually well served when group membership is mixed (for example, at least half of them with good interpersonal skills, behavior, and achievement). The group may be a rare opportunity for them to communicate with those who don’t struggle with these developmental issues.

If mixing is not possible in your setting, or if your group has been brought together because members share a common concern or have a specific purpose and agenda, you can still use these guided discussions with confidence, since they deal with common developmental issues. In fact, I often recommend to my counseling students that talking about developmental challenges can help even the most angry or disruptive students. In other words, the topic does not have to be anger or behavior, *per se*, even though it might be helpful to brainstorm strategies for improving behavior at some point. Simply having a chance to connect with others, express concerns, and feel more comfortable with themselves and with the school environment can help to reduce problematic behaviors. Talking and being heard are important in helping students feel that school is an accommodating and comfortable place.

When forming a group, you also need to consider whether to have a mixed-gender or same-gender composition. With gifted teens in high school, I prefer mixed-gender groups. It is important for teens this age to learn about each other in a safe and nonjudgmental environment, outside of the regular classroom and apart from usual social settings. It is also important for both genders to learn how to communicate with, and in the presence of, each other.

Especially for gifted teens who are shy or who lack social contact, a discussion group can provide a chance to have contact with the other gender. But even for the highly social, a group can raise awareness of gender

issues and enhance the ability of boys and girls to function effectively with each other in relationships now and in the future, including in marriage and other partnerships, in employment, and in board rooms.

At the middle school level, sometimes same-gender groups work best, probably because of the typical social and emotional developmental gap between boys and girls at that time, a gap which tends to diminish during high school. Boys generally talk as well as the girls, as a group, when separate. Girls often appreciate the safety of talking with other girls. However, I have indeed had successful mixed-gender groups in middle schools.

When students understand the purpose of the groups, and after they move beyond initial discomfort with the nonacademic emphasis, they can relax, invest, and appreciate the opportunity to talk with others at their intellectual level about growing up. For gifted teens, one key ingredient in trust and feeling understood is relatively equal ability.

Forming groups where students are of the same age is another key ingredient. Because the sessions are geared to social and emotional development, not to cognitive and academic concerns, it is best to set up age-based groups—especially when gifted students have skipped grades and are in a grade with older students. A twelve-year-old in eighth grade is developmentally different and has different concerns from eighth-graders who are fourteen, for instance, and even thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds can have difficulty connecting with each other about social and emotional concerns. Gifted seniors are likely looking ahead in ways that even juniors are not, so seniors of any age might have common career-development and college concerns. However, socially and emotionally, a thirteen-year-old senior probably would connect better with gifted age peers. Relationship issues differ along the age continuum, and it is best when students can communicate with others in their own age group about these concerns. Intellectually, and in regard to interests, even very young gifted children might feel most comfortable talking with gifted teens or adults. But socially and emotionally their developmental needs and challenges are likely to be similar to those of age-mates.

Inviting Students to Join a Group

In a school, the best way to encourage students to join your group, if membership is voluntary, is to invite them personally. In any event, I recommend that you not call it a *counseling* group when describing it to prospective group members, even if you are indeed a counselor, but certainly if you are not, since then there are liability concerns. Some students are automatically turned off and turned away by the counseling label. Later on, if someone asks if it is a counseling group, explain that counseling is basically talking and listening with someone trained in that process. In that regard, if you are a trained counselor,

your group could be called a counseling group. *Support group* is appropriate when there is a common, specific agenda, or a shared problem area. However, if the group is largely preventive, with self-awareness and personal growth as goals, then *support* probably is too problem-oriented for many students. *Discussion group* is always my preference in school settings.

In schools, I have contacted students individually to explain a proposed group, and I have also called in small groups and full-size discussion groups to hear the plan. In either case, you need to assure the students that joining the group is not a high-risk thing to do. That message is important for gifted teens, especially those who are not used to venturing into the unknown with confidence that they can adapt to whatever transpires. The advantage of calling in the group as a whole is that the students can see who else will be attending. On the other hand, some might decide against joining for that very reason, hanging on to stereotypes, without giving unfamiliar or unknown gifted peers a chance. When meeting with students individually, you might give them the names of a few prospective members—but only if they ask, and if it is possible to share names in advance. If a student wants to ensure that friends will be in a group, I prefer to say, simply, “I encourage you to come and be surprised. It’s good to get to know new people, and sometimes it’s good *not* to know anyone else well at the outset. If you decide later that you are not comfortable with the group, you have the option of not continuing.” If you decide to meet with all prospective members together, be prepared to do at least a typical, brief activity to demonstrate what the group will be like.

Be sure to emphasize the social, as well as the emotional, purposes of the group. Gifted kids may be surprised and intrigued by that information, since elsewhere in their lives the emphasis may be largely on academics and talent. Tell them that it will be a rare opportunity to connect with gifted peers about nonacademic life—even those they interact with regularly otherwise. I routinely mention stress and stereotypes as sample topics for discussion, and these seem to resonate. Explain that, beyond pursuing general goals, the group will determine its own unique atmosphere. That much of an explanation usually suffices. If students want to know more, show them the contents of this book. The session titles are varied, and students usually find them interesting—and unexpected.

If you use this book with gifted high school students, it helps to tell them, in addition to other potential benefits, that once you get to know them better through the group experience, you will be able to write more complete job, college, or scholarship recommendations for them. Explain that you will also be a better and more informed advocate for them if they ever need assistance.

Students Who Have Significant Risk Factors

If, as a professional counselor, you want to form groups for gifted teens around a major concern, a variety of developmental topics in this volume are appropriate for generating discussion. A common concern related specifically to giftedness might be any of these:

- lack of family affirmation of high ability
- anxiety
- perfectionism
- profound giftedness
- dual-exceptionality (learning disability and giftedness)
- bullies and those who are bullied

Other life events and circumstances are certainly possible concerns as well:

- family disruption
- parental or student substance abuse
- physical or sexual abuse
- family tragedy
- lack of family support for school attendance or achievement
- a potential for dropping out of school
- terminal illness in a family member
- frequent family moves
- poverty
- bereavement
- parental military deployment
- school crisis
- pregnancy
- being new in school

For several of the above concerns, faithfully applying the guidelines of this book and focusing on development can provide sufficient support and helpful interaction. However, unless you have counseling training, facilitating groups with the others (for example, abuse, tragedy, and bereavement), and forming groups composed solely of individuals who struggle with depression, hyperactivity, or behavioral or emotional disability is unwise, unethical, and potentially unproductive. There are also significant privacy issues related to grouping kids together with a stated concern. Even for trained professionals, such grouping often is not recommended. One common guideline is not to have the same pathology in all group

members. In this regard, however, underachievement should not be seen as pathology; grouping gifted underachievers together can indeed be productive.

Students may not be eager to join a group. If attendance is voluntary, I recommend that you meet first with these students individually. Explain that you will be leading a discussion group for gifted students, and you are inviting them to participate. If the student has difficulty with authority, is an underachieving student, or is known as a “joker” or a “rebel,” for example, state that you are looking for interesting, complex students who can help to make a good group. Say that you are looking specifically for students who express their abilities in unusual ways because you do not want a group that is afraid to challenge each other and think, and you do not want only students who always do what is expected of them. Reframing characteristics usually considered troublesome in this positive way often takes students by surprise and encourages them to participate.

However, no matter what a particular student’s behavior might be, always present the group’s purpose honestly: to give gifted students a chance to talk about issues that are important to teens. Be sincere, accepting, and supportive in your invitation. With students in distress, as with all prospective group members, take care not to frighten them away by sounding invasive or therapy oriented. Give them time to warm up to the idea of interacting with others about growing up.

Primary and Secondary Prevention

The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens is appropriate for primary prevention in the form of focused, development-oriented discussion meant to prevent problems and enhance development. It is also appropriate for secondary prevention, for use when there appears to be potential for problems. For such purposes, the sessions are potentially beneficial for groups composed of a variety of gifted populations. Gifted students need attention to social and emotional development as much as other students, and their giftedness might even put them at unique risk for poor emotional and/or educational outcomes. Circumstances can also put them at risk.

Teens experiencing family transitions can benefit from the sessions in the Stress section. They might also find affirmation and be able to express uncomfortable feelings in some of the sessions in the Identity section. Some of the family-oriented sessions in the Relationships section might also be helpful during transitions, as well as some sessions in the Feelings and Family sections.

Gifted teens at risk for poor personal or educational outcomes might benefit from these sessions:

- “Façade, Image, and Stereotype”
- “More Than Test Scores and Grades?”

- “Learning Styles”
- “Intensity, Compulsivity, and Control”
- “Influencers”
- “Authority”
- “Getting What We Need”

Group members who are feeling sad or depressed often find some of the sessions on stress to be helpful. In addition, the following can be valuable:

- “Self in Perspective”
- “Intensity, Compulsivity, and Control”
- “Playing”
- “Lonely at the Top”
- “Getting What We Need”

Gifted students returning from, or currently in, treatment for substance abuse or eating disorders might also find these sessions helpful, including when they are quietly integrated or re-integrated into a “regular group” (that is, without a common concern). The prevention- and development-oriented sessions specifically focused on substance use or eating disorders are not necessarily appropriate for these students, although they might be. But basic developmental topics are appropriate regardless of situation. Gifted teens can indeed be using substances and/or involved with potentially life-threatening behaviors. They do not fit the stereotype of “gifted kids,” but do certainly exist, whether identified for special programs or not.

Leading the Sessions

Facilitators

These sessions are designed to be used in a variety of settings with gifted teens. Group facilitators may include the following:

- school counselors
- counselors and advisors at residential or other programs/schools for gifted teens
- teachers in school programs for gifted students
- counselors and social workers in community agencies, treatment centers, or private practice
- group builders and wellness advocates at retreats for gifted youth
- parents or primary caregivers (in informal one-on-one or family interaction)

Are You Ready to Lead a Discussion Group?

Especially if you are not used to dealing with large or small groups in an informal discussion setting, you may find the following suggestions and observations helpful:

- Discussion related to social and emotional areas involves more personal risk and is much less “controllable” than that related to the intellectual realm. Such loss of control can feel frightening for anyone (facilitator or group member) accustomed to using cognitive and verbal strengths to control situations.
- It is important to recognize that some members may be more intellectually nimble than you are (a common admonition during training of teachers for education of gifted kids). A group member may be, literally, 1 in 100,000 or 1 in 1,000,000 in terms of intellectual ability. Do your best to make this a nonissue, regardless of how you perceive your own ability. Acknowledging it overtly calls attention to something that might always be a distancer for the gifted teen. Instead, keep the attention on emotional, not cognitive, development. Group members all are developing socially and emotionally, probably not easily.
- If you are careful to keep the focus on social and emotional issues, there will be little opportunity for group members to play competitive, “one-up” verbal games with you or with each other.
- Significant adults in gifted teens’ lives might have focused more on behavior than on feelings, more on academic than on social and emotional needs, or more on performance than on personal development. Some teens will be eager and immediately grateful for the emphasis on the social and emotional, but some might be uncomfortable or even frightened by the developmental focus initially, especially those whose families guard privacy at extreme levels and view emotional expression as problematic. Regardless, your concentrated attention on social and emotional concerns will probably be a new experience for them. Discomfort may even generate problematic behavior at first. Social and emotional concerns are not likely to be debatable, but, because of anxiety, some “debaters” might want to deflect attention onto political or other issues initially—until you rein them in.

You might also want to consider your own motives for establishing groups for gifted teens, as well as your sense of security around them. When I train counselors and teachers to work with gifted individuals, I advise them to carefully consider the following questions:

- Can you avoid feeling competitive with gifted teens, or needing to assert control over them?
- Can you be confident around them, not threatened by their abilities?
- Can you stay focused on the social and emotional, no matter what comes up?
- Can you deal with gifted students simply as human beings with frailties, insecurities, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, regardless of their school performance and/or behavior?
- Can you avoid needing to “put them in their place”?
- Can you accept their defenses, including arrogance and bravado, and give them time to let themselves be socially and emotionally vulnerable?
- Can you recognize that they may not be accomplished risk-takers socially, academically, and/or emotionally, and that they might need to be encouraged to take appropriate risks?
- Can you look honestly at some of your own stereotypes or negative feelings about gifted kids that might interfere in your work with them, and can you put these aside for the duration of the group experience?
- Can you let group members teach you about themselves without judging them?
- Can you avoid voyeurism (being preoccupied with ferreting out details about families and personal lives)? That is not what these groups are about.
- Can you resist the urge to psychoanalyze members and to interpret behavior?
- If you are a teacher, can you indeed move away from an evaluative mode and adopt a supportive posture?
- Can you leave an adult-expert position and accept that teens know themselves and their world better than you do—and that you need to learn from them?
- Can you enter their world respectfully?
- Can you keep in mind that gifted teens may have no other place to talk that is noncompetitive, nonjudgmental, nonevaluative, nonperformance-oriented, and nonacademic—so that you don’t slip into any of these modes?

If you can answer yes to all or most of these questions, don’t worry. You’re ready to take on a roomful or small group of gifted teens. If your answers were mostly negative or unsure, perhaps you should consider other

ways to work with gifted teens or should (if you are not a counselor) consider co-facilitating a group with a counselor at least initially. Such co-facilitation may help you develop listening and responding skills and move toward an objective, nonjudgmental posture.

General Guidelines

The following general guidelines are designed to help you lead successful and meaningful discussion groups with gifted teens. You may want to review these guidelines from time to time over the life of a group.

1. The function of the group leader is to facilitate discussion. The best posture is “learner,” not “teacher,” with the group members doing the teaching—about themselves. Adolescents talk when adults step back and apply active-listening skills.
2. Be prepared to learn how to lead a group by doing it. Let the group know that this is your attitude. If you are a trained counselor, you may need to become comfortable with *focused* discussion. In addition, even if you lead groups regularly, reviewing basic tenets of group process might be beneficial. If you are not a trained counselor and are not able to co-facilitate a group with a counselor, as mentioned above, ask a counselor for information on group process and listening and responding.
3. Don’t think that you have to be an expert on every topic covered. Tell the group at the outset that you want to learn with them and from them, and you want them to learn from each other as well. It is better to be “one-down” (unknowing) than “one-up” (expert) in your relationship with gifted teens. That is an appropriate place to start, and they will respond. For most sessions, having information is not the key to success. Trust your adult wisdom. That is one thing you have that your group members do not. But, again, recognize that your job is largely to facilitate discussion, not to teach.
4. Monitor group interaction and work toward contribution from everyone without making that an issue. Remember that shy students can gain a great deal just by listening and observing. You can encourage everyone to participate, yet not insist on that.
5. Keep the session focus in mind, but be flexible about direction. Your group may lead you in new directions that are as worthwhile as the stated focus and suggestions. However, if they veer too far off track, with only one or two students dominating, use the focus as an excuse to rein in the group.
6. It is probably best to go into each session with two related session ideas in mind, since the one you have planned might not generate as much response as

expected. You can always unobtrusively guide the group into a new direction. Try several approaches to a topic before dropping it, however. It might simply require some “baking time.”

7. Be willing to model how to do an activity, even though it is usually not necessary. The activity sheets are fairly self-explanatory, but on occasion, you may need to demonstrate an appropriate response. If you are not willing to share your thoughts and feelings, your group may wonder why they should be expected to do so. However, your doing only one small, discreet, carefully selected self-disclosure early in the life of the group may suffice—for an entire series of meetings. The modeling you do should be only for the purpose of facilitating student responses. Too much can actually inhibit response. Attention should be focused on group members, not on you.
8. Every now and then, especially after the group has established a rhythm (perhaps after five or six meetings), check out how group members are feeling about the group. Is there anything they would like to do differently or change? Are they comfortable sharing their feelings and concerns? What has been helpful? Have they noticed any problems that need addressing, such as discussions being dominated by a few, not enough flexibility in direction, a personality conflict within the group, or too much leader direction? Processing group dynamics (*process* is an important verb in the counseling profession) provides an opportunity for members to practice tact in addressing group issues (see #10).

Incorporate student suggestions that fit the overall purpose of the group. If you do not yet feel comfortable as a facilitator, and if the students are being negatively critical, tell them that you are still learning about groups, and they are as well. Be aware that some may press for “no focus” for a long time. You should review the rationale for focus outlined on page 15 prior to your first request for feedback. Depending on group composition, you may choose to delay questions about format until the benefits have become fairly clear. Or simply be prepared to explain the purpose of the format while emphasizing that the format is flexible. Support the group and give guidance as they make progress in overcoming group problems. Above all, try to be secure in using a focus. If you seem unsure and ask too frequently about the format, you may experience “mutiny,” especially if there has not been sufficient time for the group to bond and appreciate the benefits of some structure. I often ask for feedback midway and also late in the life of a group, otherwise relying on members’ level of cooperation to tell me

how the group is functioning. If lack of cooperation is a problem, I process that (see #10 below).

9. If group energy consistently or increasingly lags, discuss that in the group. Let the members help you figure out how to energize the discussions and/or deal with group inhibitions. However, do not readily reject the idea of maintaining a focus for each session. Perhaps you need to alter your questioning style (see page 18), or more deftly follow some directions that come up spontaneously. Or perhaps you need to be more selective when choosing topics. The written exercises and activity sheets often help to encourage sharing. Thoughtfully creating your own activities related to the focus, or incorporating various media into the meetings, can also energize a group.
10. Anything can be processed in the group—crying, interrupting, disclosing something unexpected, being rude, being sad, belching, challenging the facilitator, group negativity. That is, group members can discuss what just happened—in the present. A facilitator can say, “What was it like for you to challenge me just now?” or “How did the rest of you feel when she challenged me?” or “How are you feeling right now, after she disclosed that?” or “That comment was a surprise. How is it affecting us?” Processing what happens in a group gives members a chance to reflect on their own feelings and on the group’s interaction and to learn skills in articulating emotions.

Choosing and Adapting Session Topics

Group facilitators are often reluctant to adapt the format to their particular groups. Yet it’s important to approach the topics creatively, responding to the uniqueness of each group. At the very least, time constraints may mean that some written exercises need to be shortened. Depending on the age level or language ability of your group, some vocabulary might need to be changed. In addition, some of the suggestions provided for each session might not fit your setting. In that case, ignore them or devise your own unique approach to the focus. Examine the sessions to determine which ones might be most helpful, enjoyable, and appropriate for your group. Finally, be aware that intellectually precocious teens may be only average, or even *below* average, in social and emotional development; take that into consideration when selecting topics. Too often, adults forget that gifted kids are “just kids.” However, beware of underestimating group members’ awareness of the world or need for information just because they are chronologically young.

Two additional cautions are in order here. Even though it is likely understandable to gifted teens, the background material at the beginning of most sessions is intended for

teachers and counselors (and parents who use this book for family discussion), not to be read to the group. It is meant to provoke thought, raise awareness, and provide a perspective. In addition, always be aware of, and respect, community sensitivities. For example, parents and other members of the community might object to discussions related to sexual orientation, sexuality and sexual behavior, gender roles, and family roles. Even discussions about depression might not be deemed appropriate.

Ethical Behavior: Confidentiality

Counseling codes of ethics provide behavioral guidelines for counselors, in order to protect those who are counseled. Your behaving ethically as a group leader is crucial to the success of your group work. For instance, sharing group information in the teachers' lounge, with parents, or in the community will not only be hurtful, but may also ultimately destroy the possibility of small-group activity in your school. When trust is lost, it is difficult and sometimes impossible to re-establish.

If you plan to conduct groups in a school setting but are not a counselor and are unfamiliar with ethical guidelines for counselors (including those specifically related to group work), get a copy of such guidelines from your school counselor and read them carefully. Be especially aware of your responsibilities regarding confidentiality. These include familiarizing yourself with situations in which confidentiality must be breached, such as when abuse is suspected, when someone is in danger or may be a danger to others, or when someone is planning to disrupt or damage school mission, personnel, or structure (the last item is specifically stated in the school counseling code). The "informed consent" aspect of group work can be addressed by discussing format, content, confidentiality, limits of confidentiality, and purpose at the first meeting.

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group. Explain what actions you will take to protect confidentiality, but emphasize that you can guarantee the behavior of only yourself, not of group members. However, since trust is so essential for comfortable group discussion, strongly encourage group members not to share what is said in the group outside of the group. Tell them that not keeping comments "inside the group" can destroy the group and even prevent *any* groups from existing in the school or organization in the future because of lack of trust. Facilitators should not use the word *secrets*, however, because it may raise unwarranted concerns and because it may be frightening to students whose families direct them not to share personal information. Discussion about confidentiality should not be threatening or overblown.

You may wish to address these issues in a letter to parents asking their permission for their children to attend the group. For a sample letter, see page 21. Please

note that this letter is appropriate for groups not designed for specific problem areas. Feel free to adapt it.

Group Members Who Betray Trust

If you or a group member learns that confidentiality has been breached, processing the experience will be crucial. Barring the betrayer(s) of trust from continuing in the group is not the only appropriate response and may not be appropriate at all. Since these groups are focused on development, the situation is an opportunity to discuss trust ("What are your thoughts about the trust level of the group?"), feelings in the group ("What are you feeling right now?"), prospects for regaining trust ("What would we need to do to regain trust?" "How long do you think it might take?"), what the breacher(s) can/will do in the future ("What would ___ need to do to regain your trust?"). Maintaining poise and objectivity as you conduct the discussion models that difficult feelings and situations can indeed be discussed, shame and guilt can be "worked through," and repair of trust is possible, though not likely to be quick. These are important revelations to teens, who otherwise may not know that such a discussion and such outcomes are possible. Teens can be empowered by the discussion, take ownership of their future, and decide what to do about the situation. Betrayal of trust, in itself, is not a crime and does not automatically warrant expulsion from the group, but the ripple effect can be significant.

Group Members Who Are Quiet or Shy

Groups can actually help to affirm quiet personal styles by overtly recognizing quiet members' listening and observation skills, which gregarious members may not have. However, although listening can be as valuable as speaking in finding commonalities and gaining self-awareness, it is important for reticent individuals to be heard by their peers, even if only at modest levels. Earnest efforts to ask students who are quiet or shy for at least one or two comments each meeting can help them to feel included and gradually increase their courage and willingness to share. The written exercises and activity sheets can be used to provide them with a comfortable opening for sharing. Even uttering a simple phrase from a sheet can feel huge for a shy teen and may represent significant risk-taking. Small talk between a leader and a shy student while everyone is getting settled may also contribute to comfort and ease, which eventually might generate spontaneous comments. However, the value of communication with peers, in contrast to communication with the group facilitator, should not be underestimated. Gifted students with little social contact or verbal interaction with peers may feel poorly informed. Post-group feedback in my group work has indicated that quiet group members gain as much or more than assertive members from the group experience.

Group Members Who Dominate

One strategy for dealing with verbal dominators is to revisit the group guidelines (page 22) as a group, with no one the target. Processing group discussion, after the fact, can also be used to raise awareness (for example, “How does it feel to be in the group at this point? How are we doing in making sure that everyone gets a chance to talk and that no one dominates?”). If you notice someone rolling eyes when a dominant group member talks, call attention to that (for example, “I was just noticing a facial expression in the group. _____, would you be willing to share with the group what is on your mind? It might be important for helping us to be a better group.”)

Counseling Individual Group Members

When a level of trust has been established within a group and between members and facilitator, individuals with pressing needs sometimes, understandably and appropriately, seek consultation outside of the group if the leader is accessible. A trusted facilitator, sought out during a crisis, may indeed play a crucial role in ensuring the well-being of a group member. The following are general guidelines related to such situations, but if you are not a counselor, refer to “Handling the Unexpected” below for additional information.

If you will not be on the premises every day, it is important to tell the group, at least at the outset of the group series, about times when you will be available. I do not recommend giving out your phone number or email, since it is easy for particularly dependent students, and those with poor boundaries, to abuse access. On the other hand, it may be possible (even though not easy) for you to model boundary-setting if the email or phone calls become invasive. Anyone can usually find contact information on the Internet if persistent enough—another reason for not giving it out to the group. As in everything, moderation is the key—and caution as well.

It is important to note that too much emphasis at group sessions on outside conferencing can turn off members who do not want to connect the groups to “counseling” and might also encourage some to steer their communication away from the group in order to have a special relationship with the facilitator. Facilitators should certainly not refer to outside conversations in group meetings. In addition, if members complain about the group to the facilitator between sessions, they should be encouraged to bring their concerns to the group, putting responsibility on the group for improvement and giving the group an opportunity to gain skills in resolving conflict.

Handling the Unexpected

Most gifted students are appropriately discreet in what they share in small- and large-group meetings, especially when the facilitator does not pry for private information,

does not appear to “need” it, and does not unduly reward those who share it. However, you can probably expect a highly charged moment to occur once in a while.

What happens when something shocking comes out, when someone breaks down and cries, or when intense conflict arises within the group? No one can predict these events, since every group has unique dynamics, and groups are full of surprises. However, keeping basic cautions in mind, you will learn to trust your instincts. With experience, you will become increasingly ready and able to handle whatever comes up.

Have tissues handy for the student who cries, and simply convey a silent request to a nearby group member to pass the box to the member who needs it. It is important to affirm the expressed emotion in your facial expression and body language and accept the tears with poise. In fact, your empathetic composure will model for group members that it is all right to cry and express emotions genuinely, that others do not have to rush in to “fix” the situation, and that it is important not to be hyper-reactive to others’ discomfort, since objectivity and ability to help may then be lost. When appropriate, ask the individual if he or she would like anything from the group. Overt support? Just listening? No attention, for the moment? It may be helpful to process an outburst, after the fact, asking the group questions like “How did it feel to have someone express emotion through crying?” or “Is there anything you would like to say to (student who cried)?” Then ask the latter, “What was it like for you to hear that?”

If a student makes a dramatic revelation, immediately remind the group about the importance of confidentiality. You might say, “It probably took courage for (name of student) to share that. She/he trusted you as a group. What was said should stay in the group. If you are tempted to share this with someone outside of the group, keep quiet. That’s very important. We want to protect our group.” Beware of exaggerated responses, nonverbal and verbal, which can promote the idea that a particular revelation is “too much to handle.” The sharer might, in fact, have been testing that belief.

If you work in a school and are not a counselor, consult with a school counselor or administrator to learn what to do in specific situations. For example, if a student drops a “bomb” (or even just a hint) about abuse or suicidal thoughts, you should know how to follow up (see the session “Dark Thoughts, Dark Times,” pages 208–213, for some guidelines). Your school or organization likely has guidelines specific to these issues. It is best to know them ahead of time. If students seek you out independently about a personal concern, remind them that you are not a counselor, but that you will certainly listen and that you may subsequently encourage them to see a counselor (or accompany them there), depending on what the concern is.

If you are a counselor, it is of course important to follow up a revelation about abuse or neglect with a one-on-one

meeting with the student to determine if the revelation was made genuinely, and, if so, to validate the experience through supportive comments and call a child protection agency.

Groups are ideal settings for practicing conflict resolution. You can help those in disagreement to talk it out and listen carefully to each other. If you're a counselor, you might gather material on conflict resolution to share with the students or simply apply your expertise. If you are not a counselor, ask your school counselor for strategies to help your group deal with disagreements and perhaps even consider having the counselor conduct mediation. Be aware that your own fears, discomfort, or emotionality about conflict might actually prevent members from handling contentious situations in a healthy manner.

Announcing the Session Topic

If your group is voluntary and a session topic is announced in advance, some teens may decide not to come if the topic does not sound interesting or relevant. You want group attendance to be consistent, and it is distracting and detrimental when all students show up one week and only two the next. Therefore, I recommend that you use a "trust me" response when students ask about the next session's topic. Suggest that they show up and be surprised. Remind them that one can never anticipate the interesting directions a particular topic might take. Besides, many topics are more complex than they first appear.

Journal-Writing

Depending on the purpose of your group, group members' class and activity loads, the level of access members have to you outside of group meetings, and time available for group meetings and for you to respond to the journals carefully and briefly in writing, you might consider including journal-writing in your group's experience.

In general, I prefer to use the entire group time for open, semistructured discussion, with or without activity sheets. Adding discussion related to journals diverts time and attention away from the new focus, since journal entries are probably related to preceding, not present, topics. While I am a proponent of using journals to respond to literature, I do not recommend personal journals in classrooms or during group work in schools and summer institutes because of the potential for voyeurism and for other reasons detailed below. I have known language arts teachers who faced difficulty when parents found students' personal journals and challenged the teachers for not informing them about the activity and for infringing on family privacy. For group facilitators who are not trained counselors, a great amount of personal information may be shared, placing a burden on them regarding what should be revealed and how to respond.

Keep the following points in mind if you consider using journaling as a strategy:

- Fundamentally, the emphasis in this group approach is on *oral* expression.
- Some gifted teens eagerly write about their feelings. Through writing, they can articulate, clarify, expand on, and sort ideas and issues that are important to them. They may be more likely to remember ideas and issues they want to bring up in the group, and shy group members, especially, may feel more confident about expressing them.
- However, other gifted teens have a strong aversion to writing. Some highly talented visual artists, musicians, and kinesthetic learners, for example, find it difficult or bothersome to write. Regardless of impressive strengths in other areas, gifted teens may also struggle with poor small-motor skills or have learning disabilities that affect their ability to write. Some simply may not be highly verbal. For these reasons, adding journal-writing to a group experience might not be wise. If you do incorporate it, reassure the group that it will not be graded or edited, since this kind of group work is meant to be nonjudgmental. What is important is what they have to say. Your saying this might be a relief for both achievers and underachievers, certainly for those who do not enjoy writing. But it may not be enough to encourage reluctant writers.
- In schools where there is considerable journal-writing in language arts classes, students are less likely to welcome journals in the discussion groups, regardless of their writing skills. There can definitely be journal burnout. If you do use journals, explain that this experience will differ from journal-writing in regular classes. Here, they can explore feelings and issues related to discussion topics. However, journal-writing is not a good idea if it is part of one or more of members' classes otherwise.
- Teens sometimes need strong enticement to join groups, especially when groups are first being established in a school. Students are most receptive when the group experience does not seem like work. Journal-writing can easily be perceived as just one more classroom assignment, amid many, in high-pressured academic environments and might actually discourage group attendance. In addition, though gifted immigrant students with low English proficiency can gain both receptive and expressive language in a group, writing may be especially challenging for them and may create enough discomfort that they will drop out of the group, thus losing an opportunity to make connections with other gifted students.

- Journals can give group members a chance to communicate privately with you about important concerns. Facilitators can then carry on a dialogue with members who may not feel comfortable talking about their thoughts and feelings in the group. Conscientious, well-considered feedback is essential. However, journals should not take the place of talking. Remind reluctant talkers that while you appreciate their sharing their thoughts with you, it is important that they contribute to the group.
- Recognize that if members share journals with you privately, you will need to mentally keep track of which information has been presented in the group and which in the journals. That can be a difficult dance. There is already a great deal to keep track of. Do not share journal information with the group, even if the writer encourages you to do that. Journals should be considered private communication, and group members should share thoughts orally.
- You might simply encourage group members to keep a private journal at home, written only for themselves as a way to process group meeting.
- English/language arts teachers might use suggestions in sessions as pre-writing exercises or questions as writing prompts.

About the Sessions

Focus

Why have a focus for each session? Development is the common denominator for the sessions—not a particular issue, behavior, need, or goal, as is common in group therapy. Nevertheless, working with an explicit focus, or theme, is indeed worthwhile, as it provides a starting point for discussion and an excuse to rein in group behaviors, including dominance. It also insists on addressing topics that might be somewhat uncomfortable but important and developmentally appropriate. In addition, all gifted teens are not as flexible as they might appear, and product-oriented members may quickly tire of “not really doing anything.” Some need structure to contain their anxiety and impulsivity. On the other hand, some teens are quite flexible, and, especially if they are verbal and spontaneous, they may prefer a looser format. In fact, they might say, “Just let us come in here and talk about whatever we want to talk about.” The structure recommended here can benefit a wide range of personalities and meet many needs. Even teens who resist structure often find the variety of semistructured approaches interesting and worthwhile. Consider carefully how much structure is warranted. Complaints

may initially reflect only apprehension about addressing developmental concerns.

Individuals who like order and structure and are uncomfortable when there is no “map” or clear purpose usually want group time to be worthwhile in specific terms. Linear thinkers, sequential planners, and perfectionist group members, in particular, may object to meetings with little structure. Lack of focus, if the group is a voluntary activity, may mean that students do not attend when something else seems preferable—including reviewing for an exam or eating with friends in the lunchroom. They may also object when assertive members set the pace and topic each time. Teens with new and dramatic needs each week can quickly dominate, and others may then either defer and listen or leave, frustrated that their own issues or interests are not being addressed. Discussion groups should not be just for natural talkers.

On the other hand, group discussions need not be rigidly programmed. Although *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* proposes a focus for each session, sometimes with several sessions building on a theme, there is great potential for nimbly changing direction during discussion. A flexible facilitator can adapt the session to themes that emerge, yet still gently steer the group to closure, overtly acknowledging that the focus inspired unexpected directions. Especially with topics that members view as intimidating and difficult, the focus is an excuse to persist with tough questions and issues, not just gripes and frustrations, gossip and banter.

Having a focus also helps group facilitators to communicate with administrators, parents, and other faculty about the group and its activities, an important consideration in today’s educational climate. Many outsiders assume that discussion groups are for teacher bashing, airing family secrets, or simply “hanging out”—the first and third of these being of particular concern when key gifted students have a reputation of being critical of teachers or for acting “entitled.” Being able to say, “We’ve been dealing with stress the past four weeks, a problem for most gifted teens” or “We’re focusing on self-awareness this semester,” or, more specifically, “We’ve been talking about bullying” helps to lessen anxiety or suspicion. Listing even a few topics underscores that groups deal with significant issues and are worth the time and energy that the logistical challenges of group work often require.

The sessions that focus on self-esteem and friendship in this volume look at those concepts from several angles, including developmental. I have found that focusing on self-esteem, motivation, or friendship more narrowly is often not productive in small-group work. That is not to say that enhancing these is not a worthy goal. However, meaningful discussion, connections with peers, new social skills, and information about development can all potentially enhance how gifted teens view themselves,

peers, and schoolwork. Both self-esteem and motivation are probably related to developmental challenges, and friendship skills can be improved through making connections *about* development. Therefore, focusing on development-related topics makes sense if general goals include increased self-esteem, motivation, and friendship. I also believe that focusing on strengths (a hallmark of counseling), rather than on limitations, deficits, or problems, is key to helping gifted teens stay on, or move to, solid ground during adolescence—including socially and academically.

Background Information

The background information at the beginning of most sessions is designed to help you prepare for the session and think broadly about the topic at hand; to provide basic information that might be useful during the session; to inspire further reading; to anticipate student concerns; and to assist you in determining a possible direction for the discussion, according to the needs of your group. It is not appropriate to read this information to the group unless directed to do so, since that might inhibit some teens from thoroughly exploring the topic. A resource section in the back of the book provides trusted sources for additional information on some topics as well as resources that are appropriate to recommend to teens who request information.

Objectives and Suggestions

The objectives listed for each session tell you what to work toward and what to expect if the general suggestions are followed. They may also help you communicate content to administrators, parents, and teachers who wonder what your group is doing. You may want to prepare a list for parent conferences, for example. The objectives are not meant to be read to group members.

The suggestions are just that—suggestions. Use all, some, or none of them, and adapt those you use to meet the needs of your group. Time limits, group temperament, and group history are three of many factors you should consider when choosing which suggestions to follow. For most sessions, there are more suggestions than you will have time for. Teachers and counselors have told me that they appreciate having several suggestions to choose from.

Activity Sheets

Several of the sessions include activity sheets that may be reproduced for group use. They can also be downloaded using the instructions on page v for easy printing and copying. In my experience, these written exercises do not make discussions too structured, and most teens do not resist them. However, receptivity depends on how the sheets are used.

Especially when activity sheets are not used too often, groups of gifted teens have told me that they appreciate the handouts for giving them a chance to think quietly and focus at the outset of a meeting; to write, objectify, and edit their thoughts; and to ponder complex issues. Even highly verbal group members like being able to see expressive vocabulary on the sheets, terms they then can use during discussion about feelings and concerns. It is a new vocabulary for them, in some cases. Perhaps having time to pause helps them to feel a sense of control, especially if they are not used to taking social risks. The sheets also give everyone a chance to be heard. Introversion, common among gifted individuals, is less of a problem when activity sheets are used, since shy members can share responses on the sheets without having to compete with assertive peers. Discussion can involve only a few or all of the questions or items on a sheet, and group members can be polled efficiently for categories of responses or asked for specific answers to a few or all of the items. Even with those choices and limits, group members may communicate more with the sheets, more complexly and more openly about their social and emotional development than elsewhere in their lives.

Activities using paper, pencils, index cards, or other items that can be manipulated provide opportunities to consider thoughts and may help teens express their feelings and opinions. On the other hand, with some teens, those items easily become paper airplanes, something to “rattle,” and a distraction. If group members can contain impulses to throw them, soft balls, bendable plastic sticks, and small stuffed animals can give them something to “fiddle with” and to provide safe distraction when topics evoke uncomfortable emotions. However, if your groups can handle discussion without these items, I recommend that you not make them available. I actually have never used them with groups of gifted kids, but I know that some facilitators regularly use them, especially at the middle school level. Manipulatives can indeed be helpful.

You may want to keep file folders for all group members in a secure place and have students file their folders at the close of each session, ensuring that personal information does not end up on the classroom floor or circulating through the halls. (When activity sheets contain questions about family or sensitive issues, I recommend collecting and disposing of the sheets after a cursory glance to check for serious concerns or notes written intentionally for you to see. Out of respect for family and individual privacy, I believe it best not to store these.) At the final group meeting, I recommend that members simply take time to look over the accumulated stash, consider the variety of developmental issues addressed, and then shred the sheets. The *process* of glancing over them, rather than the content, is the key—and is sufficient. Shredding them reinforces their right to privacy, affirms the developmental challenge of establishing a separate

identity, and confirms the respect of the group leader for both of these elements. Another option is for you to simply dispose of all sheets at the end of each session, ideally by shredding them.

Under no circumstances should the sheets be shown to any school personnel. However, because you have been clear at the outset that abuse, neglect, and danger to self and others must be reported (see page 12), group members who share that kind of information on the sheets will be aware of your responsibility. Meet individually with students who indicate a threat to safety, remind them of your responsibility, check out the seriousness of the situation, encourage contact with an available counselor (if you are not one), accompany them to the counselor's office, and follow through, if appropriate, with a report to child protection services. In the case of suicidal ideation, make sure that you or a counselor contacts the student's parents and provides appropriate guidance or, if parents are not available, ensures the safety of the teen.

Session Closure

Each session includes a suggestion for closure. It is always a good idea to end a session with a summary activity, whether you provide it yourself or solicit it from the group. Attending to closure reminds the group that the discussions are purposeful, that members share common concerns, and that they have been heard. If an important new thought or issue is introduced in the closing minutes, it is still good to have some kind of deliberate closure, even if it includes suggesting that the group continue with the new idea next time or expressing regret that there won't be time to pursue it. Normally I recommend that session topics not be continued into the next session. Each is meant to stand alone or be combined with another topic for one session. The purpose is to learn through the process, not to cover content. It is fine to conclude discussion on a topic before it feels "done." You will have provoked thought and provided an opportunity for skill-building in that session, and that is the value. The topic may actually "run dry" after just a few minutes at the next meeting, if continued.

If you complete the session and closure and still have time left over, you might use it to begin the next writing activity or to ask questions that will encourage thinking about the next session or focus.

Getting Started

How to Begin

Begin the first meeting by letting students know how pleased you are that they will be part of the group. Remind them that the purpose of the group is to "just talk"—about various topics related to growing up. Their contribution will be to share feelings and concerns and to support each other.

Explain your role in the group. If you are a teacher or other professional without counselor training, tell the students that during group meetings you will not be a "teacher" in the usual sense of the word. Instead, you will be a discussion leader or facilitator, and the focus will be on them. It will be *their* group, developing uniquely. You will be their guide, listening carefully, sharing insights when appropriate, and helping them to connect with each other. Emphasize that you will all learn from each other.

Move next to introductions and a get-acquainted activity, such as the "Warm-Up" (pages 23–24). Tell the group to read through the sentence stems silently and slowly and then provide entire thoughts, when possible, rather than one-word answers. Then invite responses—either to one sentence at a time across the group or with each member, in turn, reading the entire sheet all at once. Or, if you prefer, go directly to another session you have chosen to begin the group experience. During your first meeting, since it is important that group members learn what being in the group will be like, avoid becoming bogged down with rule-setting and warnings. Instead, conduct an activity that generates interaction and helps them become acquainted in a new way. Explain that at each meeting they will similarly talk and do things together.

At some point during your first or second meeting, distribute copies of "Group Guidelines" (page 22). Go over the guidelines one at a time, with volunteers reading them. Ask if anyone has questions or if there is anything they do not understand. Tell the group that everyone—including you—is expected to follow these guidelines for as long as the group exists. Explain that they will be learning and practicing these skills over the life of the group. Stay positive, indicating that the guidelines are simply common sense.

How to Proceed

First-year groups, particularly at younger ages, often need more structure than more experienced groups. First-year groups of older teens usually attain depth more quickly than younger groups. It does take any group a while, though, to establish ease and fluidity in discussion, especially when members are not acquainted outside of the group. When experienced, teens are able to deal with personal topics readily, and they are likely to be patient and tolerant when new formats are experimented with.

Follow the suggestions in each session description for introducing the topic, generating discussion, and managing the activities. You may find it difficult to follow the printed text while leading the discussions. Rather than reading anything word for word to your group, familiarize yourself thoroughly with the content of a session before your meeting. Then you will have a general direction in mind and some ideas for other

discussion directions, while keeping an eye on the session materials, if necessary. Be prepared for the possibility that your group may generate a good discussion for the entire session on only the first suggestion. This is not unusual. Be flexible. Never feel you need to finish all suggestions. Then move to another session focus for the next meeting.

Be aware that even when students in a school enjoy a group, they can forget to come to meetings—in spite of their exceptional abilities. If your group is voluntary, you may need to remind them for several weeks about meeting times and places. Eventually attendance may become a habit for most. However, in schools I have found it worthwhile and beneficial to the group to send reminders to everyone (usually a classroom “pass”) for every meeting. Students can even fill out their pass for the next time at the outset of a meeting. Reminders for meetings held at school outside of school hours might be able to be filled out and distributed similarly. Email and other technology might also be used.

Tips to Keep in Mind

1. Remind the group that anything said in the group stays in the group. Confidentiality is important whether or not sensitive information is shared. Gifted teens usually take this “rule” quite seriously, given their rare place on the bell curve and their consequent sensitivities and concerns about trust and safety.
2. Ask open-ended questions, not “yes” and “no” questions, to generate discussion. Questions beginning with *How*, *What*, *When*, and *Where* are preferable to closed questions beginning with *Do*, *Does*, *Is*, *Are*, *Have*, and *Has*, since they require more than a yes or no response. However, for reluctant contributors, closed questions such as “Was it a sad time?” offer low risk and are also appropriate in conjunction with open-ended questions when a point of information is needed. In general, entire discussions can be facilitated without using any questions at all. Statements can actually be more facilitative than questions (for example, responding to a group member’s comments with “School can be challenging,” “You’ve had a rough week,” or “I can hear that it was very upsetting”). When someone feels validated, more ease and information often follow.
3. When a member offers a cryptic comment, which gifted teens are quite capable of offering, respond with “Tell us more about . . .,” “Put words on that feeling . . .,” “Help us understand . . .,” “Can you give an example of . . .?” or “What do you mean by . . .?”
4. Always allow group members to pass if they prefer not to speak during any group activity,

whether activity sheets, checklists, or discussions. Be clear from the beginning that nobody ever *has* to speak, even though you hope you can all become acquainted through the discussions. Being able to say, “I’d rather not” may represent a new ability to set a boundary in a life where others normally invade personal space and privacy.

5. Don’t preach or moralize. Teens probably hear enough of that already. This experience should be different.
6. Don’t judge. Let your group “just talk,” and accept what they say. Feel free to say, “That’s an interesting view” or “Pretty risky, huh?” if they share experiences related to unwise decisions or behaviors, make comments that are not convincing, or say something inflammatory. In responding calmly, without judgment, you are establishing a rare context where teens can feel free to explore thoughts and developmental challenges with an adult present.
7. Take them seriously and validate their feelings. For some gifted teens, this might be a new experience. Paraphrasing (“You felt she didn’t understand” or “You had a long, difficult day”), checking for accuracy (“Did I hear you correctly? This happened a week ago?”), asking for more information (“Tell us more about that”), acknowledging feelings (“I can see how disappointing that was” or “It makes sense that you would feel that way”), or simply offering an “Mmmm” in response to a comment shows that you are listening and want to understand.
8. Relax and let the group be more about process than product—more about trip than destination. It may not always be apparent that something specific has been accomplished, but as long as members keep talking thoughtfully, you’re on the right track.
9. Beware of sharing your own personal experiences too often and in too much detail. Always remember that the group is about the group members, not about you. Every time you self-disclose, you take the attention away from them. They will feel that and may quickly tire of hearing about your family or your adolescence. Your personal experiences are also often not as helpful or pertinent as you might think. I rarely fill out the activity sheets myself, and therefore I do not participate in a “go-around” with the sheets. Having a posture of limited self-disclosure from the outset establishes an appropriate facilitator role. If someone asks you a personal question, consider saying something like, “This group is for you, not for me. Discussions in groups like this should be among peers. I’m just the leader. I want to be careful to do my part well.”

10. Be prepared to protect members from each other and themselves. For example, pertinent to a situation already alluded to in "Handling the Unexpected," if a group member begins with something like, "I've never said this to anybody—it's about something pretty bad that happened to me," you may want to encourage the individual to pause before continuing. To do that, reach out one hand toward the speaker, palm away, and ask, "Are you comfortable about sharing this with the group?" Then ask the group, "Are you ready to be trusted? Remember what we said about confidentiality." Then go back to the speaker: "Do you still want to share this with the group?" In doing this, you give the student time to reconsider (especially if the student prematurely assumed group trustworthiness), and you also remind the group about their responsibilities. After the speaker finishes, you might process the telling with the group: "What did that feel like to be trusted with that information?" The focus remains on feelings and support.
11. In situations where members of the group verbally attack each other, you need to intervene (for example, removing the students from the room or calling for assistance, if the situation is dangerous, or perhaps simply holding up your hand, palm out, and saying firmly, "Whoa!"). The group can also process what has happened by sharing their feelings about the conflict. In fact, processing the experience can in itself defuse conflict. When there is conflict, process it. ("What is/was that like for us to have conflict in the group?" "What did/does it feel like?" "What would you need to hear to help your anger fade?" "Is anyone able and willing to say that—from the heart?"). This is an excellent opportunity to practice talking honestly about feelings and to experience conflict resolution.
12. If anyone expresses emotion with obvious discomfort or tears, offer verbal support, a tissue (which should be handy), or touch (a pat on the arm, perhaps, if in proximity). Group members may follow your lead. However, be aware that some may not want to be touched at all. In fact, beware of assuming that a hug is "best." Even a hug may meet the facilitator or other group members' needs more than the sad teen's needs. For some, touch understandably means danger and discomfort. You might say, "It's okay to express emotion. Let us know if you need something. We'll continue."
13. Listen carefully to whoever is speaking, but also monitor the nonverbal behavior of those who are not speaking. Are they showing discomfort (averted eyes, moving back, facial tics), frustration (agitation, head-shaking, mumbled negatives), or

anxiety (uneasy eyes, unsteady hands, tense face), impatience, boredom, judgment? Depending on the situation and the student, you might want to ask sensitively about what you are noticing.

14. Be genuine in your comments and compliments. Watch for opportunities to tell group members that they articulated complex feelings and situations well ("You put words on a very complex feeling" or "You explained that very well"). Avoid insincere, noncredible comments about members' strengths. Instead, be on the lookout for courage, compassion, kindness, wisdom, common sense, responsibility, and problem-solving abilities, for example. Gifted teens are as hungry as anyone for feedback about their personal strengths, and whatever positive support you give them will be taken seriously. Elsewhere, for them, academic performance or nonperformance may be the main focus.
15. If you are in a school, you might want to update parents periodically on topics to be discussed in an upcoming series of group meetings. If you are in a summer program, a list of general topics might be included in orientation information for parents. They will probably appreciate that communication. If parents ask about what their child has said in the group, assure them that you would/will contact them if there is cause for alarm (such as suicidal or homicidal thoughts or a plan to commit a crime). However, in general, confidentiality will be honored, in order to protect trust in the group. Reassure them that the discussions are focused on growing up in a teen world, not on private family concerns, and also that the focus is on discussion, not on your presenting information as a teacher.

Endings

How to end a series of group meetings should be carefully considered, since members might have become quite attached to the group. It is wise to wind down purposefully. "Ending" (pages 266–269) can be used to conclude a series of meetings.

Important in any final session, and possibly in the last two sessions, is the need for teens to talk about what they have experienced in the group. I have found that asking them to write a few paragraphs during a final session is helpful. Sometimes, when group attendance was voluntary, I have asked, "Why did you keep coming to the group?" At other times, I have simply invited members to talk about what they have gained in personal insights, what they have appreciated, what they regret, what they have learned about adolescence, what common ground they have discovered, and if and how they have changed since the group began.

All groups, whatever their size and duration, need to prepare for the time when the group will no longer meet.

Members will likely miss the group and feel a sense of loss. Especially if they have grown to depend on the group for support, they may feel anxious about being without the group in the future. If they have made friends in the group, they may wonder if they will lose touch once the group disbands.

A few sessions prior to ending, mention casually that there are only a few meetings remaining. Continue to do that until the next-to-last session. At that time, tell the group what you have in mind for the final session, or ask the group for suggestions. You might plan a party, have food brought in, and/or take a group photo. Be aware, though, that changing the “mode” of the group might create discomfort at a time already stressful because of the ending. After all, the focus until then has been on discussion. Even the addition of food or music changes group dynamics. Everyone must interact in a new way, with little time to become comfortable with it. With that said, however, use your own judgment. You know your group.

Be sure to leave time at the final session for the teens and you to say good-bye. If they will likely not have much future contact with each other, provide a way for them to share home and email addresses and phone numbers and wish each other well. Be aware that you will be modeling strategies for ending something that has likely been a profound experience. For many people—adults and teens—that is a difficult process.

Evaluation

It is not always easy to “read” a group of gifted teens and to know whether they are moving in a positive direction. Individuals who readily and frequently give feedback cannot speak for everyone. Quiet members may be gaining insights that they simply are not sharing. A session that seemed to generate an indifferent or poor response might, in fact, have made an impact, but the effect may not be readily apparent. Groups are complex, and members differ in their needs and what they respond to. Therefore, it is wise periodically to have group members fill out an evaluation, particularly at the end of the group experience.

On page 269, you will find an evaluation form to copy and use. Or you may choose to create your own form, tailored to your group and to what you hope to learn. Feedback provided on such evaluations can be invaluable when assessing current groups and planning for future groups. To administrators, teachers, or funders, evaluations can also help to defend group work as part of a curriculum for gifted youth, as part of a school counseling program, or as a program at some other facility focusing on gifted students.

A Note for Parents

The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens can help parents know their adolescents in new and important ways. It can help parents to access what their teens are thinking and feeling; the issues that are important to them; their current concerns; and their hopes and plans for the future.

Parents and teens sometimes have difficulty sustaining conversations. Teens may become increasingly private and reluctant to talk at home. Sometimes parents don't know what to talk about beyond schoolwork, family members, video games or other technology, chores, and food. They initiate conversations unsure about which subjects are “safe” and which are not. Sometimes all topics seem to be off limits. *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* provides a potentially intriguing way for teens and parents to break down barriers.

By scanning the background information and suggestions, parents can find possible topics and conversation-starters. They can also discover insights into developmental issues that they and their children may be wrestling with. It is easy to forget what adolescence felt like, and the background information can help parents understand the complexities of life for a gifted teen today.

Most of the sessions—especially those in the Identity, Relationships, and Family sections—can help to generate family discussion. Some teens ask for extra activity sheets to take home for their parents to fill out. Since many personal issues persist into adulthood, they are good to discuss even with young adolescents, who are beginning to be aware that some of their parents' issues are theirs, too. Such sharing can be helpful to gifted teens as they forge a separate identity and prepare to be launched into the next developmental stage.

Several of the sessions in the Stress section are also worth discussing as a family. Coping strategies, procrastination, and sorting out stress are particularly good topics for family sharing. Adults themselves are never done with such concerns, and it is good for them to acknowledge their humanness and ongoing development to growing children. Nonauthoritarian “realness” can help create dialogue, especially if adults do not dominate the conversation and if they communicate genuine interest (without judgment) in the teen world.

Permission for Student Participation

Dear Parent/Guardian/Caregiver,

I have invited your son or daughter to participate in a discussion group for gifted teens at school, and he/she has expressed interest in attending. The purpose of the group is to provide an opportunity to talk about growing up and to improve skills in talking and listening. Such skills are important to students now in relationships with peers, teachers, and parents—and later with spouses, coworkers, and children. In general, the group will offer support for gifted teens as they deal with the challenges of adolescence and prepare for the future. Format and content will be based on *The Essential Guide to Talking with Gifted Teens* by Dr. Jean Peterson.

Adolescence can be stressful in even the best of situations. Not only are there physical changes, but also new emotions and new expectations. There are new activities, academic choices, and the future to think about. Social relationships are probably also changing. Stress levels may increase. Gifted teens face developmental challenges like anyone else their age. However, because of their exceptional abilities, their experience of development may be somewhat different from the experience of others. They usually appreciate being able to discuss developmental challenges with peers with similar ability, who can understand.

Our discussion group will focus on development. Even though we may discuss academic concerns now and then, the group will be different from the often competitive school world. Students will relax with each other and find out what they have in common, including the challenges of adolescence. They will learn how to support each other. They will become acquainted with classmates—for the first time or simply better than before.

If your teen participates, you may soon notice positive changes both at school and at home. Communication may improve. Talking about stress, developing strategies for problem-solving, gaining a clearer sense of self, feeling the support of trusted peers—all of these group experiences may improve your teen's self-esteem and overall well-being.

The group will begin very soon. If you give permission for your teen to be involved, and if he/she decides to participate, please sign below and return the form to me as soon as possible. If you have any questions, please contact me at _____

(email and phone)

(Signature of facilitator)

_____ has my permission to participate in the discussion group.

(Name of student)

(Parent/Guardian/Caregiver signature)

(Date)

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Group Guidelines

The purpose of this group is to “just talk”—to share thoughts, feelings, and concerns with each other in an atmosphere of trust, respect, caring, and understanding. To make this group successful and meaningful, we agree to the following terms and guidelines.

1. Anything that is said in the group stays in the group. We agree to keep our conversations confidential. This means we don't share information outside of the group. We agree to do our part, individually and together, to make this group a safe place to talk.
2. We respect what other group members say. We agree not to use put-downs of any kind, including words, body language, facial expressions, and sighs. We agree to control our own behavior so that everyone feels valued and accepted.
3. We respect everyone's need and right to be heard. We agree that no one will dominate the group. We also understand that listening and keen observation are valuable skills. Someone who is shy may be quite aware of what is going on in our group.
4. We listen to each other. When someone is speaking, we look at him or her and pay attention. We use supportive and encouraging body language and facial expressions.
5. We realize that feelings are not “bad” or “good.” They just are. They make sense, under the circumstances. Therefore, we don't say, “You shouldn't feel that way.”
6. We are willing to take risks, explore new ideas, and explain our feelings as well as we can. However, we agree that someone who doesn't want to talk doesn't have to talk. We don't force people to share when they don't feel comfortable sharing.
7. We are willing to let others know us. We agree that talking and listening are ways for people to get to know each other.
8. We realize that sometimes people may feel misunderstood, or may feel that someone has hurt them accidentally or on purpose. We agree that the best way to handle those times is through talking and listening—to the individuals involved. We encourage assertiveness, not aggression.
9. We agree to be sincere and to do our best to speak from the heart.
10. We don't talk about group members who aren't present. We don't criticize group members who aren't here to defend themselves.
11. When we do need to talk about other people, we don't refer to them by name. For example, we may ask the group to help us solve a problem we are having with someone, but we won't name the person.
12. We agree to attend group meetings regularly. We don't want to miss information that might be referred to later. Most of all, we know that we are important to the group. If we can't attend a meeting, we will try to let our leader know ahead of time.

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Warm-Up

Name: _____

Complete these sentences:

1. I think being in a group will _____

2. Something interesting about me is _____

3. When I have free time, I like to _____

4. Something I have that is very special to me is _____

5. You might be surprised that I'm good at _____

6. What am I not good at? I'm not good at _____

7. Probably the most exciting thing I've ever done is _____

8. I'm glad that I can _____

9. I like people who _____

(continued)

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Warm-Up (continued)

10. I'm probably most relaxed when I _____

11. I'm probably most tense when I _____

12. If I could, I'd always get up in the morning at _____

13. What is going well so far at school this year is _____

14. Someday I probably will _____

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FOCUS Identity

FOCUS Identity



General Background

Developing a personal identity is an important developmental task, and it may be a particular challenge for teens with exceptional talents and/or intellect. High achievers may have an identity as a stellar student, athlete, or musician, for instance, but may not feel the need or freedom to explore identity further. I have known high achievers who wondered, as they finished high school, who they were—besides an achiever. Gifted teens who have negative parental models may feel an urgency to be separate from family, therefore contemplating identity earlier than those with nurturing, competent parents. Similarly, for better or for worse, underachieving gifted teens—at least those for whom nonperformance is a choice (and not a paralysis of will)—may already have moved toward differentiating themselves from achieving parents, siblings, or friends, if, in fact, that is their situation.

In general, teens develop an identity through hearing what others say about them, identifying what they feel and value, and thinking about themselves in relationship with others. The messages they receive may be positive and helpful. However, even when performing well, some gifted teens receive mostly negative, critical messages as their “definition.” In addition, parents may not be positive models for relating to others, and the behavior of bright, capable teens in turn may preclude their receiving positive messages about themselves. They also may have little opportunity to talk about their doubts and fears related to identity.

During identity formation, confusion and doubt can lead to tension, sadness, acting out, underachievement, hyperachievement, perfectionism, and relationship problems. In contrast, knowing and being comfortable with the self may help gifted teens to accomplish other developmental tasks, including finding career direction, establishing a mature relationship, developing autonomy, and resolving conflict with parents.

In group discussions, members can gain skill in articulating thoughts and feelings. Discreetly talking about what is “inside” is practice for friendships and relationships in the workplace and at home. Sharing thoughts and feelings can also help teens discover what they have in common, learn that they are not as different as they might believe, get feedback from peers and the facilitator, and answer a vital question: “Who am I?”

General Objectives

.....

- Gifted teens affirm that they face universal developmental challenges.
- They make progress in defining themselves as unique individuals.
- They discover what they think and feel by sharing thoughts and feelings with the group and receiving and evaluating feedback.
- They apply what others share to their own self-assessment.
- They recognize and accept their comparative learning differences.



Developing—Similarly and Uniquely

Objectives

- Gifted teens recognize and affirm that they and others are continuously developing.
- They recognize and affirm how they are similar to and different from age peers who are not identified as gifted.
- They feel connected to others with similar intellectual ability.
- They learn that their giftedness may make their experience of “normal development” different from the experiences of others their age.

Suggestions

1. To introduce the topic (and the group experience, if this is the first session), explain that the focus will be on development—figuring out who they are, where they are going, how to get along with others, how to manage conflict, how to move toward autonomy, and how to find satisfaction in life.

Ask the group to define *developing*, as it applies to what you just said. They might mention “growing up.” Ask what kinds of development they are currently experiencing.

You might mention four general areas: physical, cognitive, social, emotional. Ask for examples of each area, including how they think they have changed since last year. You might give a quick example of how you are different from a decade ago—to emphasize that adults continue to develop. (Then immediately refocus group attention on them.)

2. Ask how they know that everyone else in their extended family is, like themselves, continuing to develop (oldest children leaving home, youngest entering school, teen with a new driver’s license, grandparents retiring, mom starting a new business, dad promoted).
3. Ask them how they are the same as all others in their grade level at school. (All are facing similar developmental challenges, tasks, and changes.) Then ask how they might differ from others in their grade level. If they mention giftedness, explore whether intellectual or creative gifts affect the experience of growing up. If no one mentions differences, accept that. Accepting what they share will set the tone for the group experience—that is, you will not be judgmental and evaluative, and their opinions and thoughts will be received and affirmed.

Scholars who have written about characteristics of people with high capability have suggested that giftedness is connected to certain kinds of sensitivity; to a strong sense of fairness; to a drive to accomplish things; and to intensity. Explain that you probably will discuss characteristics like these at a future meeting. However, ask here if they think that these perceptions are accurate. Some gifted teens may resist the idea that they are different from others their age, depending on how much they have incorporated giftedness into their identity.

4. In order to explore similarities and differences within their group, invite students to line up along one wall of the room (or form an angle where two walls meet). Tell them they have just formed a continuum. Designate one end as “10—to a great extent/a lot” and the other end as “0—not at all.” Explain that you are going to read a series of statements. As you read each one, they should physically move to the point on the continuum that best represents where they think they belong.

Read aloud each statement from “Uniquenesses and Similarities: A Continuum Activity” on page 30. After each statement, and after group members have found their places on the continuum, select only two to four teens to explain why they placed themselves where they did. Be sure not to ask the same few to report each time, and avoid spending too long considering individual statements. Their considering each statement and then moving physically on the continuum can enhance self-awareness even without discussion.

5. For closure, ask the group if they noticed any trends among themselves (similarly creative, flexible, impulsive, perfectionistic, organized, orderly?). Can anyone offer a general statement describing the group? Then, process the experience (see page 11 for guidance): “How was it to participate in this activity?” “What was the best part of it?” “What was the hardest?” If this is your group’s first meeting, explain that at each future meeting they will be discussing aspects of development, sometimes with activities. Thank them for being willing to take some risks and for letting themselves be known a little to each other.

Uniquenesses and Similarities: A Continuum Activity

1. I like tough challenges and feel best when I am challenged.
2. I am cool in a crisis, and I can even lead others in a crisis.
3. I can change direction easily when I am doing something—for example, if suddenly someone wants/needs to do something different or do it in a new way.
4. I am organized in every part of my life.
5. I am a dreamer, spending a lot of time in fantasies.
6. I work rapidly in whatever I do.
7. I am a highly creative person.
8. I am a perfectionist in almost everything I do. I like things to be “just right.”
9. I prefer to work alone, rather than with others, on most things.
10. I prefer to *be* alone, rather than with others, if I have a choice.
11. I am quick to respond to almost all situations.
12. I am impulsive, often wishing I had thought first before doing something.
13. I can work effectively without encouragement from someone else.
14. I like to work with my hands.
15. I am an avid reader.
16. I am quite critical of others.
17. I worry a lot.

FOCUS Identity



What Does Gifted Mean?

Background

I like to begin a group series with at least one other topic before addressing giftedness, per se. Since the focus of this book is on development, discussing development in general—without considering achievement, lack of achievement, or the “gifted” label—conveys that development is a universal phenomenon and that it deserves discussion apart from a person’s place on a bell curve of ability. However, the label and the concept of giftedness are both worthy of discussion. The experience of development is likely to be qualitatively different for gifted teens than for others, and the gifted label may feel heavy. The concept and label are also controversial. This session is an opportunity to explore, in a safe setting, how giftedness is interpreted and experienced.

Objectives

- Gifted teens understand how giftedness is interpreted and identified in their school or other setting.
- They recognize that *giftedness* and *intelligence* are terms applied to abilities, characteristics, and skills that are valued in a particular culture.
- Through articulating personal strengths, they affirm capabilities and enhance self-esteem.
- They learn that it is all right to have limitations.
- They learn more about themselves and become better at assessing themselves realistically.
- They learn to value their own and others’ strengths.

Suggestions

1. Ask the group what they understand about giftedness. Let them be the teachers. It is important that you find out what they know before offering new information. Some may not have thought much about the concept, may not consider themselves gifted, and may not embrace the term, even if they have been identified for a program. Some may wear the label as a badge of honor; others may reject it.

Be prepared to explain the program philosophy and identification criteria used in the teens’ school(s) or district(s) (if you are aware of those). Offering the following information may help establish a group climate that values genuine thoughts, feelings, and opinions and is not preoccupied with “right” and “wrong” responses.

Be aware that creating an atmosphere of unconditional respect and trust takes time. Receive whatever the students say without judgment or challenge.

Important

Cultures differ in what is deemed to be gifted. One of my own studies found that U.S.-dominant-culture classroom teachers, when nominating children for a special program, generally valued individual, competitive, conspicuous achievement—looking for verbal assertiveness, “standing out,” and a strong work ethic in classroom work, for instance. These are the same values held by the U.S.-dominant culture as a whole, according to anthropologists. In contrast, representatives of a Latino community mentioned most often arts as a means of expression (not as performance) and humility when identifying “gifted” individuals. In an African American community, representatives mentioned selfless service to community and handiwork most. In an American Indian settlement, residents declined to identify anyone as gifted, since they did not believe in standing out, although they respected individuals who could be comfortable in both white and Indian cultures “without assimilating.” Adaptability was most highly valued by recent Asian immigrants, who often mentioned the importance of education in the United States in that regard. In a low-income white community, both adults and high school students placed the highest value on nurturing of children and service to others. Overall, participants from the nonmainstream cultures valued “nonbookish” wisdom, not knowledge. It is important to recognize that the cultural values of one group are not better or worse than others, just different. Your group might find it interesting that all cultures do not necessarily value, and thrive in, a highly competitive school culture that demands intelligence and talents be demonstrated.

2. Have the students list on paper their personal strengths—what they can count on, have confidence in, or trust about themselves, both as they interact with others and when they are alone (read the following list, if needed). You might ask, “What do other people value in you?” Encourage them to share their lists. Tell the students they will need to speak or write about themselves with confidence during job interviews, on scholarship applications, and in college-application essays. Students whose cultures value humility, rather than self-promotion, may find this exercise difficult. Acknowledge potential cultural differences, but without making assumptions. U.S.-dominant-culture teens may not have considered that some cultures do not value standing out.

organized	a good listener
responsible	kind
compassionate	energetic
personable	even-tempered
patient	an eager learner
athletic	a good dancer
helpful	not moody
intelligent	good sense of humor
witty	verbal or mathematical skills

mechanical gifts musical or other artistic talent
good with elderly people and/or young children

Important

Teens usually are willing to share their lists, even when the group is just beginning. Contributions help build a group. However, remind the group that they always have the right to “pass” if uncomfortable about responding to a question or participating in an activity.

3. Have the students list on paper their characteristics, habits, and flaws that keep them from being how they’d like to be (read the following list, if needed). Encourage them to share their lists. If the students list more limitations than strengths, don’t be surprised. If time permits, ask the group for opinions about why this might happen.

unmotivated	bad-tempered	trouble with authority
spreads gossip	disorganized	not a team player
impatient	irresponsible	bossy
messy	mean	easily distracted
trouble listening to others	critical	self-critical
naive	easily depressed	impulsive

4. Some theorists believe that intelligence is a general quality. Others believe there are different kinds of intelligence. In *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), Howard Gardner identifies several intelligences, most of which are reflected in the first nine items on the “Thirteen Intelligence Types” activity sheet (page 34). Group members can rank the items, according to the directions, or simply identify three they feel quite strong in, as well as at least one that is relatively less strong. (NOTE: The activity sheet lists more intelligences than Gardner has identified because the goal here is to generate discussion of strengths and limitations related to effective living, not necessarily intelligences, per se.)
5. In addition to #4, or as an alternative activity promoting active listening, divide the group into pairs and ask them to tell each other about something they enjoy or are good at. You might want to write prompts on a wallboard (for example, What do you know a lot about? How long have you been into it? Could it turn into a career? Do others share the interest? Has someone mentored you?). Then each student tells the group about his or her partner’s strength or strong interest. Finally, ask students how they showed they were interested and how their partner showed interest—even without talking.
6. For closure, ask the students which strengths and limitations were common in the group. Then ask, “How did it feel to talk about your strengths and limitations?” If you included the partnering activity, ask the group how they felt during it. If you used activity sheets, dispose of them or add them to group folders.

Thirteen Intelligence Types

Name: _____

Rank the following types of intelligence, from 1 (lowest) to 13 (highest), according to how you see your strengths and limitations.

- _____ Verbal (you are sensitive to the nuances of written and oral language)
- _____ Mathematical, scientific (you enjoy working with numbers and symbols, readily recognize patterns, and are good in math and science)
- _____ Social (you have good interpersonal skills, can read social cues, and find it easy to be around people)
- _____ Artistic (you appreciate color/hue, shape, line, spaces, and arrangement in many areas of schoolwork and elsewhere, including in science, and/or are good in art)
- _____ Physical (you are athletic, coordinated, and have a good sense of how your body moves)
- _____ Mechanical (you like to tinker with machines; you have a curiosity about how machines work)
- _____ Self-aware (you know yourself well; you interpret your emotions accurately)
- _____ Musical (you are attuned to rhythm, tone, counterpoint, and musical forms and/or perform music impressively)
- _____ Influential (classmates observe and admire you; they follow your example, whether it is negative or positive)
- _____ Creative (you think outside of the box, have unusual ideas, and create unique things)
- _____ Insightful (you are perceptive and can make sense of complex matters, seeing them in new ways)
- _____ Practical (you make good decisions, solve problems, use common sense, are tuned in to the real world)
- _____ Resilient (you show inner strength, no matter what you have to deal with)

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FOCUS Identity

Self in Perspective



Background

Depending on what is generated in discussion, this session might be divided into two sessions. Part 2 and/or 3 of the activity sheet might be discussed at the second session.

Objectives

- In the presence of supportive peers, gifted teens thoughtfully compare their real, their disliked, and their ideal selves and assess how different or similar these three selves are.
- They learn how members of the group perceive them.
- They compare others' perceptions of them to their perceptions of themselves.
- They explore the role of appearance in creating impressions.

Suggestions

1. Have the group complete the activity sheet (pages 37–38) with single words or phrases. Tell them they will be invited to share whatever they are willing to share.

Encourage them to share their responses from Part 1. Afterward, ask the group if they were surprised about anything listed and/or if they want to say something supportive. Then ask the following:

- ~ How similar or different are your “The Way I Really Am” and “How I’d Like to Be” lists?
- ~ How comfortable are you with the parts of yourself you don’t like (on a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “very comfortable”)? What would you like to change? How might the changes affect your life?
- ~ Which traits listed under “How I’d Like to Be” would be possible for you? What can you do to move in those directions?
- ~ On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being “totally,” to what extent do you accept your “real self”?

Then move to Part 2. Ask these questions when they are finished reading their responses:

- ~ How do people send messages about themselves nonverbally?
- ~ (NOTE: Ask the following one at a time.) What nonverbal messages suggest that someone is arrogant? nervous? critical? uptight? content? tired? secure?