

Nurturing the Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Children

Introduction

The social and emotional development of gifted children is important and should be a focus of practitioners, parents, and researchers. For healthy intellectual growth and talent development to occur, we must intentionally nurture the development of gifted children, including all aspects of their development: physical, social, emotional, psychological, and cognitive/intellectual. Nurturing the social and emotional development of gifted children can and should be viewed as a vital component to meeting their needs. NAGC believes that all children need support in social and emotional development, and gifted and talented children may need support for unique psychosocial needs due to their exceptional cognitive abilities and advanced learning capabilities.

Discussion

Depending on one's definition of giftedness or framework for understanding giftedness and talent development, researchers, practitioners, and parents may use different terminology and different approaches in their quest to meet the social and emotional developmental needs of gifted children (Dai & Chen, 2014; Rinn, 2024a). That is reasonable, because there is likely not a one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the needs of all children, including the gifted population, and particularly as talent development becomes more specialized and nuanced.

Individuals with advanced intellectual and cognitive development are often assumed to be vulnerable to an array of negative social, emotional, and psychological concerns (see Rinn, 2024a). Most research shows, though, that nothing about being gifted *causes* negative social, emotional, or psychological outcomes (see Aykutlu et al., 2024; Francis et al., 2016; Tourreix et al., 2023). Some research suggests various samples of gifted children and adolescents have unique social and emotional experiences (e.g., twice-exceptional individuals; see Desvaux et al., 2023; Duyar et al., 2023; Foley-Nicpon et al., 2010), reaffirming that there is likely no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the social and emotional developmental needs of gifted individuals. As gifted children move into adolescence and early adulthood, and into the more specialized and nuanced

aspects of their domain-specific talents and career fields, focus on the social and emotional domain should become increasingly differentiated with mentoring and psychosocial interventions, further supporting the unique needs of each individual.

Best Practices

Nurturing the social and emotional development of gifted children can be accomplished in the following ways. First, as teachers and practitioners aim to meet the needs of all children, physical, social, and emotional development should be attended to along with cognitive/intellectual development. Many districts aim to meet children's academic and nonacademic needs through various federal and state initiatives, including social and emotional learning, which is mandated by more than half of the states in the United States (Dermody & Dusenbury, 2022).

Second, care should be taken to address any social, emotional, or psychological needs that may be unique among gifted children, particularly those with additional identities (e.g., students who are profoundly gifted, twice exceptional, and/or from minoritized backgrounds). There are numerous published workbooks and curriculum manuals designed to address the social and emotional learning and needs of gifted children (e.g., Fonseca, 2015; Galbraith & Delisle, 2015; Hess, 2021). Best practices for educating gifted children, including acceleration and instruction with similar ability peers via various gifted services and programming, can also meet some social and emotional developmental needs. Most research indicates grouping with intellectual peers fosters positive social (and academic) outcomes for gifted individuals (see Vogl & Preckel, 2014). For example, one study showed that gifted adolescents taking advanced coursework had larger networks of and more engaged friends than equally able adolescents who were not enrolled in advanced coursework (Barber & Wasson, 2015). Spending time with children with similar interests and abilities can help develop a sense of belonging within a peer group, a healthy identity, and a healthy development of self-beliefs, among other positive outcomes.

Third, as a child moves further into developing their talent, as they move into adolescence and early adulthood,

more individualized attention and care is needed to hone psychosocial skill development; unique emotional or psychological needs of the individual; and the culture, community, and/or environment that may impact the individual moving forward in their talent development trajectory. Psychosocial skills are developmental, and individuals may need different domain-specific psychosocial skills at each stage of talent development, as well as different approaches to intervention, mentoring, and coaching of psychosocial skills (Olszewski-Kubilius et al., 2019; Rinn, 2024b; Subotnik et al., 2011, 2018).

Along this entire timeline, gifted children should be provided a holistic battery of services including pediatric, psychiatric/psychological/counseling, and educational enrichment, as needed, and by practitioners with training in gifted education and related to the needs of gifted children. Finally, teachers and practitioners should consider culture, context, and community in all attempts at meeting the social and emotional needs of gifted (and all) children.

Focusing on healthy social and emotional development during childhood can help set the stage for optimal overall development as well as talent development as the individual moves through life. More research needs to be conducted on all of these aspects to continue to develop and refine best practices for nurturing the social and emotional development of gifted children.

Conclusion

The social and emotional development of gifted children is important and should be a focus of practitioners, parents, and researchers. Nurturing the social and emotional development of advanced learners can and should be viewed as a vital component to meeting their needs. NAGC believes that all children need support in social and emotional development, and gifted and talented children may need support for unique psychosocial needs due to their exceptional cognitive abilities and advanced learning capabilities.

Resources

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