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Practice opportunities with gifted children and their families

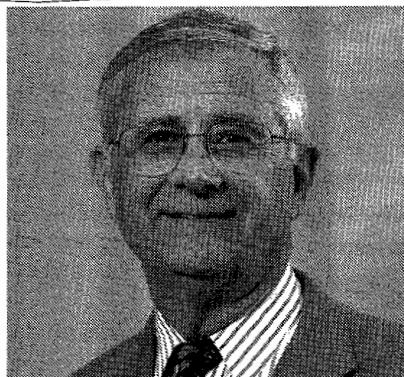
Bright individuals, particularly those having atypical conditions, may be misunderstood and could be misdiagnosed as they develop their talents, including such well-known historical figures as Leonardo Da Vinci, Mozart and Winston Churchill.

What about today? Gillian Lynne, renowned ballerina, theatre director and choreographer of *Cats*, *Phantom of the Opera* and other Broadway musicals, was fidgety, distractible and underperforming in kindergarten and would have been diagnosed with ADHD and medicated had her pediatrician not convinced her mother to enroll Gillian in dance classes at age 5.

Paul Orfalea, founder of Kinko's (FedExOffice) failed second grade, was diagnosed with dyslexia and ADHD and barely graduated high school by being polite, participating in class and complying with homework. "I never worried. I knew I would someday start my own business and get lots of help to do it," he has commented.

Temple Grandin, an animal scientist born with autism, now avidly advocates for a better understanding of the Autism Spectrum (AS). Speaking to audiences nationwide, she describes her experience with AS, including intensive speech therapy at age 2½, behavioral approaches to modify echolalia, screaming and rocking behavior, playing categorizing games to develop flexible thinking, coaching for proper manners and social conventions, trying new experiences, learning to focus on one-task-at-a-time, thinking in images rather than words, working with patient mentors, striving to master specific tasks that bring about real change in daily life, maintaining a healthy diet and vigorous exercise and managing panic attacks with low-dose antidepressants.

An important, yet neglected, area of practice for psychologists involves the education required to work confidently and knowledgeably with gifted and talented children and their families. Clinical and educational practice strongly focuses on disadvantaged children and little awareness exists



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that talented and gifted children are at risk for, say, underachievement, peer relationship issues, power struggles, perfectionism, existential depression and misdiagnosis.

Some "twice-exceptional" children, intellectually bright with a specific learning disability, may mask their giftedness or deficit, rendering one or both conditions invisible, and thus remain unacknowledged and unsupported.

Few psychologists currently receive urgently needed training about the characteristics or special needs of gifted children and generally complete graduate school believing that "gifted children will make it on their own." Similarly, psychologists are typically unaware that gifted children reach developmental milestones earlier than expected with implications for peer relations, school issues and educational planning.

Research indicates that although many gifted children do function quite well, others do not, and certain gifted children are more at risk precisely because of their characteristics, particularly if they are educationally misplaced and/or if their parents lack appropriate information and support.

Parents of gifted children are increasingly looking to counseling professionals for information, advice, support, diagnostic clarifications and treatment. Primary care clinicians are likewise referring more children to counseling due to parental concerns and time constraints in their practices. Yet, it may be difficult for parents of gifted children to find psychologists knowledgeable about giftedness, though this need not remain the case if proper giftedness education is made available to psychologists.

Three common areas for which gifted children and their families need counseling and guidance are: 1) personal and social concerns with families, peers or teachers 2) academic planning and career opportunities and 3) special outside-of-school experiences.

Currently, it is not uncommon for psychologists and other health care professionals to fail to recognize that the unusual intensity, sensitivity, advanced mental abilities and other characteristics of bright children, when coupled with educational mismatches and peer relation problems, can easily be mistaken for a psychological disorder.

Of course, some gifted children can also

GIFTED TRAITS COMMONLY MISDIAGNOSED AS MENTAL HEALTH PATHOLOGY

High activity level

Impulsivity

Worrier

Sensitive to loud sounds

Sensitive to textures in clothing

Highly emotional

Refuses to do schoolwork

Fails to complete tasks

Stubborn

Difficulty with transitions

Impatient

Interrupts

Argumentative

Frequent mood swings

Distractible

Reading difficulties

Poor handwriting

Doesn't pay attention

Poor sleeper

Poor eater

Atypical sense of humor

Language/speech delays

have psychological disorders. However, lack of giftedness awareness can result in many talented and gifted children without psychological conditions being misdiagnosed with disorders such as attention-deficit disorder (ADHD), Oppositional Defiant Disorder or Asperger's Disorder. ADHD is particularly important as recent research reports a dramatic rise in ADHD prevalence of 66 percent in just the past decade.

Additionally, there is strong clinical support that some disorders occur more often in gifted children, adolescents, and adults – for example, perfectionism, anorexia, obsessive-compulsive behaviors and existential depression.

Without additional training and education, psychologists will seldom realize the contribution giftedness makes to these difficulties or problems, nor will they sufficiently appreciate the need to provide the gifted client with authentic intellectual respect.

SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of Gifted) – a nonprofit organization – strives to educate psychologists and other counseling and health care professionals, as well as families, about the characteristics of gifted individuals and the implications for diagnosis and treatment. SENNG contributes to this mission through hosting continuing education courses, national conferences, webinars, and publications. SENNG recently launched an international public awareness effort to decrease misdiagnosis in gifted children.

Interested professionals can find more information at www.sengifted.org.

References available from the authors

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