

# **Still Gifted After All These Years!**

**Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.  
Licensed Psychologist**

**Boulder Valley Gifted & Talented  
Boulder Valley School District**

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**Gifted Development Center  
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8120 Sheridan Boulevard, Suite C-111  
Westminster, CO 80003  
[www.gifteddevelopment.com](http://www.gifteddevelopment.com)  
(303) 837-8378  
**STILL GIFTED AFTER ALL THESE YEARS!**

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Are you gifted if no one can see it? Some would say no, you are only gifted when you do something *others* deem remarkable. When giftedness is removed from the competitive realm of recognized achievement, it becomes clear that it is a form of atypical development, which leads to unique experiences throughout the life cycle. Acknowledging your giftedness leads to compassion for others and deeper understanding of yourself and your loved ones.

### **When Giftedness is Defined as Eminence**

There is a “new” movement in the field of gifted education that equates giftedness with recognized achievement. “Outstanding achievement or eminence should be the chief goal of gifted education” (Subotnik, Olszewski-Kubilius, & Worrell, 2011, p 3). We’ve been here before. Howard Gardner (1983) ushered in a host of achievement-oriented definitions of giftedness. In 1992, David Feldman called for a “paradigm shift,” which replaced the term “gifted” with “talented” and urged us to abolish IQ testing. Why? Because IQ tests do not predict fame.

Defining giftedness by its external manifestations is the legacy of Sir Frances Galton. Galton inaugurated the study of giftedness in 1869 with the publication of his book, *Hereditary Genius*. He equated ability with eminence, ranking men according to the prestige that they had attained as statesmen, commanders, literary figures, men of science, poets, musicians, and painters. He selected men of whom history makes mention and men whose biographies were accessible. His plan was to show that reputation is an accurate test of high ability, and that unusual ability runs in families (particularly his family: his cousin was Charles Darwin). “By reputation, I mean the opinion of contemporaries, revised by posterity—the favourable result of a critical analysis of each man’s character, by many biographers...” (Galton, 1869, p. 33).

As Galton suggests, it is not possible to accurately assess the impact of a life until the person isn’t living anymore and other people are writing about him (or her, but most biographies are about him). So we should wait until people die to determine if they were gifted? What if the winner of the biography contest turns out to be the horse, Seabiscuit? This “posthumous” determination of giftedness is not particularly useful for selecting and serving gifted children, or for nourishing their emotional growth.

The equation of giftedness with eminence has built-in sexist, socio-economic, and racist biases, since women, the economically disadvantaged, and minority groups are not equally represented among the eminent (Silverman, 2013b). Galton's notions were challenged a century ago by Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1914, 1926), who argued that eminence is largely the result of opportunity, closely linked to social position in the society, and generally inaccessible to women.

If opportunity were indeed the prime determinant of eminence, then we should expect those who belong to socially inferior categories to be excluded from it. This is just what we do find, since the uncultured, the poor, servants, and women are very seldom found to have achieved eminence. (Hollingworth, 1926, p. 11)

It is undesirable to seek for the cause of sex differences in eminence in ultimate and obscure affective and intellectual differences until we have exhausted as a cause the known, obvious, and inescapable fact that women bear and rear the children, and that this has had as an inevitable sequel the occupation of housekeeping, a field where eminence is not possible. (Hollingworth, 1914, p. 529)

How can we be back where we were 100 years ago? Can gifted education really believe that the elusive golden ring of eminence is a fairer, more equitable criterion of giftedness than IQ tests?

And how does it serve children? There are no eminent children. If you were identified as gifted in childhood and you do not become eminent, does that mean that you were never gifted in the first place? The disconnection between giftedness in childhood and giftedness in adulthood is illogical and does not exist in any other branch of exceptionality.

Rather than asking what children need who are developing differently, we are now asking a totally different question: "What does it take to become successful?" Our most popular journalists preach that everyone is equally endowed with intelligence, and, therefore, everyone has an equal opportunity for success. There are no differences in ability. It's all about practice, practice, practice. The doctrine that we all have equal intelligence sounds deliciously seductive to a fiercely egalitarian society. A century of evidence to the contrary doesn't appear to sway public opinion. Here we have anti-intellectualism in its finest garb: "*all* our children are gifted..."

I see giftedness as a psychological reality. It can be observed in very young children and documented on measures of general intelligence. The capacity for abstract thought, insightfulness, compassion, sensitivity, perfectionism, intensity, creative imagination, sophisticated sense of humor and unusual energy typify the gifted

individual throughout the life span and result in unusual life experiences. These lifelong characteristics mark the gifted as outsiders in society and make them vulnerable. In contrast to popular beliefs, the gifted do not make it on their own. Most hide and underachieve. Some commit suicide. And some “tall poppies” have been beheaded to preserve the fiction that we are all alike.

### **Characteristics of Giftedness in Adults\***

Gifted infants enter the world with a distinct set of characteristics that lead to different life experiences. The further the individual veers from the norm, the greater the impact of these attributes on development and adjustment. The following personality characteristics appear to have the greatest influence on the development of gifted individuals throughout the lifespan:

- ❑ Asynchrony
- ❑ Perceptiveness
- ❑ Complexity
- ❑ Perfectionism
- ❑ Idealism
- ❑ Overexcitability
- ❑ Intensity
- ❑ Sensitivity
- ❑ Need for meaning
- ❑ Moral concern
- ❑ Divergent thinking
- ❑ Questioning authority
- ❑ Argumentativeness
- ❑ Responsibility for others
- ❑ A strong aesthetic sense
- ❑ A tendency toward introversion
- ❑ An extraordinary sense of humor

### ***Asynchrony***

*Asynchrony* is uneven development and feeling out-of-sync with others (Silverman, 2013a). From early childhood, gifted children advance mentally much faster than they progress physically. They have heightened sensitivity, intensity and awareness, combined with age-appropriate emotional needs, social skills, physical competence and life experience. The higher the child’s IQ, the more asynchronous is his or her development. The most asynchronous individuals are twice exceptional: gifted and learning disabled. Being out-of-sync within themselves leads them to feel out of place in school, with age-mates and with societal expectations for children their age.

These feelings are carried into adulthood, causing the gifted adult to feel like an outsider in most social spheres.

### *Perceptiveness*

Greater awareness, *perceptiveness* or insightfulness, combined with honesty, often gets gifted individuals in trouble. They see through hypocrisy; they sense hidden agendas; they see the essence of a situation (Roepers, 1991). But their truth-telling is unwelcome. And they are unwilling to play the game of pretending things aren't happening when they see quite clearly what is really going on. They alienate people until they learn that they can't always say what they see.

An ability to view several aspects of a situation simultaneously, to understand several layers of self within another, and to get quickly to the core of an issue are characteristic of gifted adults with the trait of perceptiveness. ... The gifted adult must come to understand that the question is not whose world view is more accurate but how to use disparate views in ways that enhance connectedness to others and further understanding of the self. Neither the self nor the other is defective or stupid. ... The dilemma for the perceptive gifted adult is how and when to use the gift with self and others. (Lovecky, 1990, pp. 76-79)

### *Complexity*

The *complexity* of gifted minds is mirrored in the complexity of their emotions. Highly intelligent people see so many variables in a situation, so many connections between seemingly unrelated events and so many potential outcomes that they may not be able to sort through all of the information to find an appropriate path. Decision-making is simpler when one has less information. While there has been much psychological investigation of the pitfalls of black/white thinking, little has been written about the dilemma of living with an infinite number of shades of gray. If the individual is petrified of making a mistake and believes that all but one of those shades of gray will be a dreadful error, life becomes a perilous walk on a tightrope with no safety net below.

### *Perfectionism*

Perhaps the least understood facet of giftedness is *perfectionism*. This trait is maligned in psychological literature; yet, *all* gifted individuals are perfectionistic to some degree. Perfectionism has positive as well as negative implications (Silverman, 2009). It is linked to the passion to achieve excellence in any endeavor,

the love of beauty, and the drive for self-perfection. In gifted children, perfectionism is highly correlated with conscientiousness, rather than with neuroticism (Parker, 1997). Perfectionism should be seen as a powerful energy source that can be redirected to serve one's highest aspirations.

### ***Idealism***

*Idealism* is a cousin to perfectionism. Individuals with high ideals commit themselves to making this a better world. They are also on a continuous course of self-improvement. They are able to see what should be instead of only what is, in themselves and in the world (Dabrowski, 1972). If an individual feels capable of making positive changes, then the idealism becomes a potent force for personal development and innovation. However, idealism is often partnered with frustration and disappointment. This begins in childhood, since gifted children do not have the power and resources to materialize their idealistic visions. We must hold onto our ideals: they serve as beacons in a world of shadows.

### ***Overexcitabilities***

*Overexcitability* is a term from Dabrowski's theory (Dabrowski, 1967, 1972; Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977) denoting the heightened neurological response patterns of gifted and creative individuals. The overexcitabilities can be thought of as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual, and emotional energy, which cause inner turmoil, but can result in creative endeavors as well as advanced emotional and ethical development in adulthood.

There are five forms of overexcitability (OE): psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual and emotional. They occur in different combinations and to varying degrees. Individuals endowed with one or more overexcitabilities react much stronger than the norm to various types of stimuli. Psychomotor OE is an abundance of physical energy, which can be displayed as hyperactivity or workaholism. Sensual OE is heightened sensitivity of the senses and desire for sensory pleasures. Imaginal OE may be expressed as vivid memories, terrifying nightmares, artistic talent, or visionary endeavors. Intellectual OE may appear as the love of debate, fascination with theories, intellectualization of emotional experience or superb problem-solving capabilities. Emotional OE is the intensification of emotional experience, deep capacity for empathy, strong emotional ties and attachments or concern with death.

Overexcitabilities propel emotional growth, as they enhance one's developmental potential to reach high levels of moral and emotional development (Piechowski, 1979). Children who experience intense physiological reactions to the bombardment of a variety of stimuli must continuously make choices in order to

function. This provides daily practice in setting priorities and gaining inner direction, the same skills needed later in life to construct a strong sense of values.

### ***Intensity and Sensitivity***

*Intensity* and *sensitivity* are functions of the overexcitabilities of the gifted. The OEs are sometimes referred to as “intensities.” Gifted individuals are wired to experience all of life more powerfully. There is no such thing as moderation. Anything worth feeling is worth feeling *intensely*. Nothing is simple, bland or colorless. Everything is electrically charged with rich, multicolored layers of meaning. Michael Piechowski (1992) writes:

One of the basic characteristics of the gifted is their intensity and expanded field of their subjective experience. The intensity, in particular, must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic. It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding—a way of being quiveringly alive. (p. 2)

Heightened sensitivity is the essence of Emotional OE. The gifted see multiple meanings in situations, are easily wounded and have greater capacity for empathy. Emotional sensitivity is the most frequent characteristic parents use to describe their gifted children (Silverman, 1983). “She wears her heart on her sleeve.” “He has no skin.” Sensitivity is a positive characteristic. It sure beats insensitivity.

### ***Need for Meaning***

A most compelling attribute of the gifted is their insatiable *need for meaning*. Gifted individuals are willing to cope with loneliness, being the perpetual outsider and even lack of joy, if they can perceive that their experience is meaningful. As children, the gifted often say that they want to make a difference with their lives. Gifted adults are willing to make great sacrifices and endure hardship and poverty in the cause of a meaningful existence.

### ***Moral Concern***

Most gifted children appear to have deep moral sensitivity and *moral concern*. This may not always translate into moral action, because of the asynchrony between their intellectual awareness and their emotional maturity. Gifted boys, in particular, are at risk for losing their moral sensitivity along the way if they become the targets of teasing or bullying (Lovecky, 1994). Some gifted children who have been abused may squelch this part of themselves and taunt other sensitive children. Others are

more resilient, with the inner resources and external support to enable them to transcend the abuse.

### ***Divergent Thinking***

It is fortunate that moral concern generally accompanies high intelligence, as a gifted mind without ethics is a positive menace to society (Drews, 1972).

Divergent thinkers also have to deal with being different. Although they do not accept the status quo, conform well, or fit in with peers and are often subjected to teasing, they do not know why they are different, or why they upset other people. Often they feel entirely alone, with no one to understand them, even in their own families. A number of such youngsters become severely depressed in adolescence because both self-esteem and a sense of connection to others is affected. (Lovecky, 1993, p. 33)

Divergent thinking, seeing the world differently, marks an individual as an outsider throughout the lifespan. Even in the company of other divergent thinkers, this person is alone in his or her unique perception of the world. A second issue divergent thinkers may face is post-partum depression (Gowan, 1974), which typically occurs after the birth of a creative product. Creative individuals find Dabrowski's theory (1967, 1972) relevant and uplifting.

### ***Questioning Authority; Argumentativeness***

The tendency to question authority is a common companion of giftedness. Questioning is natural for an inquisitive mind. All gifted children argue; for them it is a form of mental exercise. Those who are extremely polite or introverted may not voice their disagreements, but when asked, they will admit to arguing with others *in their minds*. In some gifted families, argumentation is the basic form of communication. *Arguing* and *questioning authority* are lifelong pursuits of the gifted.

Leta Hollingworth (1939), the first counselor of the gifted, found that the higher a child's IQ, the more argumentative he or she was likely to be. If individuals who have authority over the child are perceived as illogical, irrational, erroneous or unjust, the child is likely to develop a negative attitude toward authority. This is one of the most difficult issues for gifted adults, as well. Hollingworth recommended teaching gifted children the fine art of argumentation: how to argue with oneself; the etiquette and art of polite disagreement in a private setting; and arguing in public. Her emotional education program also included helping them learn to balance candor with tact and teaching them how to handle the apparent foolishness of others with patience and love.



### ***Responsibility for Others***

Those with higher ability are often called upon to take *responsibility for others*. It is a natural role as they are usually empathic, wanting to help others, conscientious and good problem solvers. However, there are pitfalls in being the responsible one. The person with a take-charge personality may be resented by others and perceived as controlling. Highly responsible people may have difficulty saying “no” to all the demands made of them. They are easily overcommitted and overextended because they see the need and think they are the only ones who can fill it. They may know very little about how to take care of themselves. They may feel that they must give more than others. People who give a great deal to others need a great deal of support from others as well. They may not be aware that they need this support and, even if they are, they are usually reluctant to ask for help. It is important to learn (1) how to ask for assistance; (2) when and how to delegate; (3) how to set priorities; (4) how to discern when you are really needed from when you are habitually taking charge and depriving others of the opportunity to contribute.

### ***Strong Aesthetic Sense***

In 1939, Leta Stetter Hollingworth wrote that she had never met a gifted person who did not have a love of beauty. *Strong aesthetic sense* comes with the territory and can become a driving force of the personality. The desire to create beauty can express itself in gardening and flower arranging; taste in clothing; the care with which one decorates one’s home; delight in music, art, and sunsets; orderliness; a love of mathematics...

Beauty is both expensive and time consuming. Gifted individuals with limited funds may become depressed by inelegant surroundings. Family conflicts can erupt when mothers with a strong need for aesthetics strive to maintain a high level of order in their homes. (One mother insisted that her teenage son hang all of his clothes in the same direction in his closet. Mom, pick your battles...) It is difficult to balance one’s aesthetic needs with the priorities of others in one’s family.

### ***Introversion***

Introversion increases with IQ. In the highly gifted population, approximately 25% are extraverts and 75% are introverts (Meckstroth, 2013; Silverman, 1998). Extraverts get their energy from interaction and introverts from inner reflection. Introversion is often misunderstood. Alone time is a necessity for recharging one’s battery. Introversion should not be confused with shyness. Shy individuals experience social anxiety. Introverts can be very socially adept, but they tire of

social interaction easily (Dembling, 2012; Olsen Laney, 2002). They need more time to warm up, as well as exit strategies when they've had enough of people. Bathrooms provide an excellent escape. When extraverts and introverts marry, part of their marriage vows should involve taking separate cars to parties. Separate vacations aren't a bad idea, either.

### ***Extraordinary Sense of Humor***

Gifted individuals are blessed with an *extraordinary sense of humor*. Leta Hollingworth (1940) found humor to be the saving grace of the gifted, because it enables them to cope with the foolishness they see all around them. Humor often works wonders with power struggles with gifted children. After the fourth explanation, try putting your hands on your hips and announcing, "That's why I'm the Mommy. When you get to be the Mommy, we do it your way."

### **Conclusion**

Few grasp the fundamental experience of giftedness—the outsider status in a society suspicious of outsiders. Those in the very highest ranges are at the greatest risk. The higher the individual's IQ, the more intense is the struggle for identity, meaning and connection. The vast majority of gifted adults were never identified as gifted in childhood and do not recognize their giftedness (Kuipers, 2010). They have no positive way to describe the feelings and attributes that make them feel like outsiders. They only know that they don't fit in.

It is not possible to "outgrow" giftedness, anymore than one can outgrow significant intellectual disability. The issues faced by this group in childhood simply morph into new variations in adulthood. One of those issues is asynchrony. Asynchrony is uneven development, advanced cognitive complexity, and heightened sensitivity and intensity, leading to unusual awareness and the consequent feeling of being out-of-sync with others on the planet, as well as within oneself. It does not disappear when one reaches adulthood. One's strengths become stronger with years of focus and one's weaknesses become weaker with years of avoidance.

When giftedness is removed from the realm of recognized achievement, it becomes clear that it is a form of atypical development, which leads to unique experiences throughout the life cycle. Gifted individuals are vulnerable. They view all of life as a complex set of ethical dilemmas pitting integrity against accommodation.

It is not hubris to recognize your giftedness. It is healing. Deeply healing. Maybe there isn't something wrong with you after all. Maybe you're just gifted. Instead of railing at all the people you work with who can't see what is as obvious to you as the nose on your face, you can develop greater compassion. If you think you're average,

everyone else seems “stupid.” Once you realize that your mind works differently, you have the potential of becoming more patient—suffering foolishness gladly (Hollingworth, 1942).

We need to see beyond the narrow lens of competitiveness to grasp the deeper significance of giftedness. Everyone’s gifts are needed. We are not in a race. There are no winners.

Every gift contains a danger. Whatever gift we have we are compelled to express. And if the expression of that gift is blocked, distorted, or merely allowed to languish, then the gift turns against us, and we suffer. (Johnson, 1993)

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