

# Encouraging Emotional Intelligence

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We know that in the U.S. today, the prevalence of mental health problems among children and youth — including those who are gifted — is alarmingly high. Some authorities estimate as many as one in five students has significant psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, low self esteem, eating disorders and social maladjustment. Although growing up has never been easy, today's youth face new and more challenging social pressures. Gifted children are not impervious to developing psychological problems. And, in some instances, what makes gifted children special paradoxically can serve to increase their risk for social and emotional difficulties.

I've written elsewhere on parenting principles that can help serve to protect a gifted child from developing psychological problems. At the upcoming 2006 NAGC conference in Charlotte, N.C., I will be speaking about how these very principles promote healthy psychological development among gifted children and youth. I would like to take this opportunity to introduce SENG readers to one of the principles, encouraging social intelligence. I will include a brief description of a gifted child who I worked with in my clinical practice to help illustrate the relevance of the principle.

Encouraging social intelligence ensures that your gifted child develops the important skills to be courteous, a good listener, likable, helpful, trustworthy, a team player, able to get along with others, and empathic. These important social skills have been variously labeled in the professional literature as emotional intelligence, social competence, social maturity, and interpersonal intelligence. In my clinical practice, I like to consider these skills part of social intelligence. These skills do not automatically develop. In working with gifted children and their parents in my consulting office and during my tenure as director of Duke University's summer gifted program, I have encountered many extraordinarily gifted and talented children with extraordinarily underdeveloped social intelligence. Guiding your gifted child to develop social intelligence will increase the likelihood that your son or daughter will enjoy a rich, meaningful, and successful life.

Gifted children with well-developed social intelligence are at ease with peers and adults, self-confident, able to rein in emotional impulse and master stress, and accurately read social cues and tolerate frustrating situations. They present themselves as friendly and appealing, almost as if they have taken a Dale Carnegie course in "How to Make Friends and Influence People!"

Margot (this child's name has been disguised to protect her anonymity) was an intellectually gifted 7-year old who was quickly developing a bad reputation in her private school as a troubled student. At the headmaster's encouragement, I was invited by her parents to observe Margot in her classroom. I quickly observed that her problems represented underdeveloped social intelligence. Margot was reluctant to share with others or respect her classmates' property, would not wait her turn, was uncooperative in group activities, and demonstrated little respect for teacher authority.

Rather than viewing Margot as a troubled child with deep-seated emotional problems (or conversely, as a misunderstood gifted child), her parents and I embarked upon a course of treatment that focused on teaching Margot important social skills. In less than three months, combining individual, family and parent counseling sessions, we identified friendship-making problems and how to correct them, instructed Margot in social etiquette and good sportsmanship, and provided Margot with a vocabulary of emotional words to help her better identify the feelings of others. Outside of sessions, I assigned Margot's parents literature and popular movies to further reinforce social skills and deepen our work in building social intelligence. For example, while watching a movie at home with her parents, Margot was asked to identify good and bad social behavior among the various actors.

Margot and other gifted children do not come into the world knowing these important skills. Even highly gifted children need to learn from their parents about virtuous habits, good manners, and how to get along with others. This is an important component of what we consider character development. The ingredients for teaching social intelligence include:

- **Set a good example.** There is nothing more powerful than teaching by quiet example.
- **Make standards clear** and expectations high, but not unreasonable.
- **Talk about right and wrong.** Don't preach but rather hold Socratic dialogues with your gifted child.
- **Avoid rescuing your child.** Although it is tempting to want to solve your child's problems, it robs your son or daughter of the opportunity to develop problem-solving skills, confidence and self-sufficiency.
- **Look for warning signs.** The following behaviors may suggest that you need to give greater attention to your child's social intelligence: acts like a poor loser, lacks confidence, plays too aggressively, doesn't have a friend, upsets easily or quickly becomes angry, acts bossy, doesn't share or respect others' property, uncooperative, doesn't do well in group situations, doesn't respect authority, rarely compromises, shows little or no empathy for others' feelings, acts discourteously. If you think that your gifted child is exhibiting one or more of these warning signs to a degree that is excessive, unreasonable, and/or adversely impacting upon their school, family or social life, consider seeking a professional consultation.

## Conclusion

Although the great majority of gifted children enjoy better-than-average social adjustment, some gifted do experience stressful psychological problems. As a parent, you have the responsibility and opportunity to teach your gifted son or daughter a myriad of social skills to help him or her more successfully navigate the often turbulent social and emotional waters of childhood and adolescence. Encouraging social intelligence is one important parenting principle that provides your child with an important set of social skills that increases the likelihood that he or she will enjoy a rich, meaningful, and successful life.

[Steven Pfeiffer](#) is a professor in the Psychological Services in Education program in the Department of Educational Psychology and Learning Systems at Florida State University. Prior to attaining tenure at FSU, Dr. Pfeiffer was at Duke University, where he served as Executive Director of Duke's internationally renowned Talent Identification Program for gifted students (TIP). Professor Pfeiffer is lead author of a new scale to identify multiple types of giftedness, the *Gifted Rating Scales*. He also coauthored the *Devereux Scales of Mental Disorders* and the *Devereux Behavior Rating Scale-School Form* and he recently co-edited a popular book for parents of young gifted children entitled *Gifts: Recognizing and Nurturing Children's Abilities*. Dr. Pfeiffer maintains a private practice where he works with children, adolescents and families.