

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/chameleon.htm>

We call her Chameleon...

by Jeanne

Note: The internet has proven to be a real boon to parents of highly gifted children. It allows them to interact with each other even though they may be spread out all around the world. There are also, of course, concerns about privacy. In order to alleviate some of these concerns many parents have adopted the custom of referring to their children by nicknames. Animal names are especially common. This is the story behind my child's nickname.

A chameleon is a small lizard that changes the color of its skin to match its surroundings. My sweet, little girl began hiding her true colors at an early age. I remember the three-year-old doing puzzles with the rest of the children in her Sunday School class. She sat quietly and watched the others for a minute, then began working on a 15 piece puzzle. She rapidly placed 9 pieces in the tray, then held up the tenth piece waving it in her tiny hand.

"Teacher, can you help me? I don't know where this one goes," said Chameleon who had been easily doing 100 piece puzzles at home for over a year.

She's cute and popular and she always fits in. She's careful to never stand out. Someone's always happy to help her whenever she asks. But, what price does she pay?

Perhaps we should have called her Avis; she's always number two. She was the second child in her preschool to learn her letters, count past ten, and write her name. She's skipped multiple grades, and is still in the 99%tile on grade-level standardized tests, but she rarely gets the top grade in class. No one's threatened by her; she's content to be on the B Honor Roll. On second thought, Avis wouldn't work. She never tries harder.

She cute and popular and everyone's her friend. No one's jealous of her. Her GT teacher refers to her as socially gifted. But, what price does she pay?

According to the Legend of the Pink Monkey (Clovis, 1995), when scientists dyed a monkey pink, in order to easily identify him, the other monkeys turned on him and tried to kill him. Chameleon instinctively knows that her true colors are unacceptable to most. She knows that pink monkeys are at best put out of the tribe, at worst attacked and killed. So, she daily dons her brown monkey suit until it fits like a second skin; until she no longer remembers what pink fur looks like; until she's no longer recognizable to those who thought they knew her best.

She's cute and popular and fits in well. Her teachers drop hints that maybe she's not really quite as smart as her tests scores indicate, although they note that she is always well behaved and a pleasure to have in class. But, what price does she pay?

In "Is It A Cheetah?" Stephanie Tolan (1996) points out that it's very hard to see the cheetah's blazing speed when we keep it in a cage. A cheetah runs at 70 mph to catch an antelope. It

doesn't need to run 70 mph to catch a rabbit. When challenged, Chameleon can put forth an extra burst of speed, but she's rarely challenged. In a race, a cheetah would finish far ahead of all the other animals, but a little girl doesn't want to be far out in the front and all alone. There's no joy in running 70 miles per hour when you're the only one. There's no point in racing, when you always win. So she doesn't run anymore academically. She walks a little quicker than most, and sometimes she comes in second place, but the joy of running is gone.

She's cute and popular and doesn't stand out too much. Her classmates applaud her stories, never knowing that she carefully edits her papers to remove any traces of her advanced vocabulary. But, what price does she pay?

When Chameleon was in first grade she began singing a little song she had made up:

“Everyone is different sometimes,
but I am different all times,
No one is exactly like me;
no one is just like me;
no one is at all like me.
I try to be like them,
but no one ever tries to be like me.”

She's cute and popular and slowly dying inside. What price does she pay?