

PEER RELATIONSHIPS

According to James R. Delisle of Kent State University, a gifted high school student once said to him, "I don't know what's more difficult about being gifted—living up to the label for my parents and teachers or living it down in front of my friends." When a student is identified as gifted s/he possesses a certain trait that is neither common to, nor appreciated by, all: "heightened intelligence." Giving him/her the opportunity to discuss the sensitive and relevant issues related to acceptance by age-mates will allow him/her to see that others, too, may experience similar acceptance problems. (Delisle 1992)

For many high ability students, the number one priority is finding a friend. Gifted students often select friends who are their mental age rather than their chronological age. According to Roedell (1985) "the term 'peer' does not mean people of the same age, but refers to individuals who interact at an equal level around issues of common interest." In essence, the more highly gifted a student is, the less likely s/he will find true peers among age mates.

Keeping this in mind, special efforts are needed to help high ability students find companions with similar interests and abilities. "With true peers, gifted students can be themselves, laugh at the same jokes, play games at the same level, share the depth of their sensitivity, and develop more-complex values" (Silverman 2000). In addition, Silverman believes that "children learn to love others only when they have achieved self-love." This process typically involves the following stages:

1. self-awareness;
2. finding kindred spirits;
3. feeling understood and accepted by others;
4. self-acceptance;
5. recognition of the differences in others; and, eventually,
6. development of understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of others.

Counselors may be asked to assist gifted students find true peers, help them gain self-acceptance, and guide them toward accepting others. (Silverman 2000)


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CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED CONCERNS WITH PEER RELATIONSHIPS


- The student doesn't have an opportunity to find a "true peer" (Silverman 2000) due to heightened intelligence.
- Gifted students often struggle to balance the expectations of family, teachers, and friends.
- High ability students often view themselves as different from their age peers which can be either positive or negative. For example, "I feel as though I don't have the same interests as my friends" or "I feel out of place in my class."
- As children mature and become more socially conscious, they also become more aware of what behaviors are considered normal or regular by the majority. This awareness can lead to the desire for conformity.
- If the high ability student is from a minority background, "true peers" may be limited. In addition, peers from their minority group may perceive the gifted student as trying to be "white."

COUNSELING ASPECTS OF GIFTED PEER RELATIONSHIPS

- High ability students benefit from unrestricted social interaction with other high ability students.
- Group counseling sessions of homogeneous gifted students encourage understanding and acceptance from peers.
- Individual counseling sessions can foster self-acceptance.
- Mentoring and "near peers" often help high ability students find their "true peers." Near peers is an affective program where older gifted students are paired with younger students and serve as a mentor or a tutor.
- Share books about other successful nonconformists.

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- Encourage students to find an email pen pal or to join special interest clubs, such as chess club, model cars, or Mensa.
 - Suggest students enroll in a Saturday or evening class they might enjoy.

FAMILY CONCERNS WITH GIFTED PEER RELATIONSHIPS

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- Parents of gifted students often put more emphasis on their social adjustment than with their scholastic development.
 - Unpopularity and poor peer relationships may lead to maladjustment and social problems in adulthood.
 - Giftedness is *someone you are*, not *something you do*.
 - Discuss with your child why some kids are well-liked.
 - Talk about behaviors that aren't generally accepted by other kids.
 - Talk about the differences between being popular and being a friend.
 - Be aware that most gifted students want to *belong* more than they want to be *smart*.