

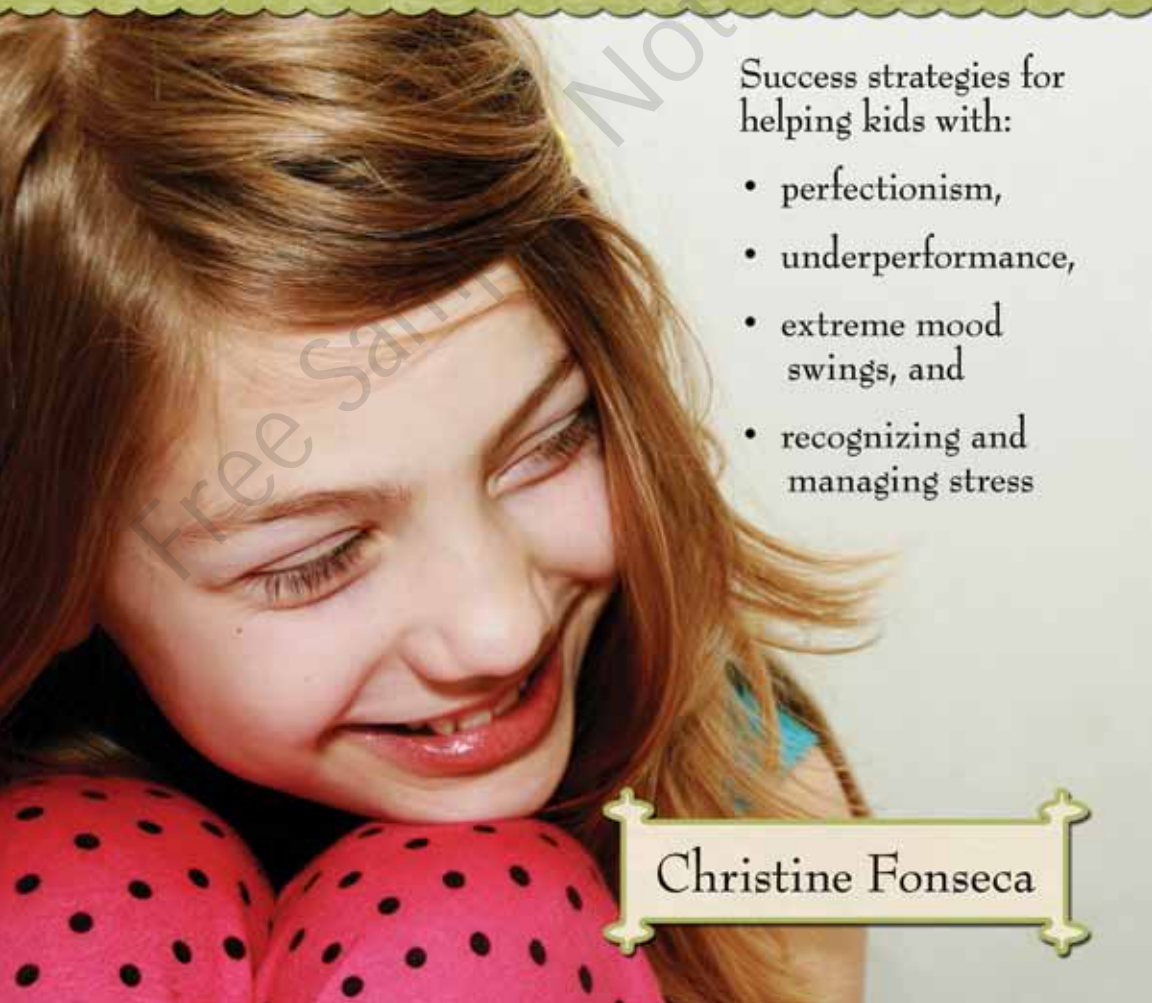
Emotional Intensity

in Gifted Students

Helping Kids Cope With Explosive Feelings

Success strategies for helping kids with:

- perfectionism,
- underperformance,
- extreme mood swings, and
- recognizing and managing stress



Christine Fonseca

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INTRODUCTION

WHY THIS BOOK

Parenting is a difficult job. You aren't given a manual when you have a child and there's no survival guide to tell you what to do. Things complicate further if your child is lucky enough to be gifted. People tell you it'll be easy raising a bright child, leaving you frustrated when your child begins to act a little . . . intense.

Fortunately there are parenting books to help—too many parenting books.

Most of these books don't address the unique needs of gifted children. In fact, as you attempt the strategies typically found in them, things often get worse. You're left feeling angry with your own inability to execute the strategies that are *supposed* to work so well.

Frustrated and resentful, you turn to other family members, friends, and the school looking for help. But the same misguided assumptions about giftedness abound, leaving you feeling even more inadequate.

As the negative feelings build, your child increases the intensity of her behaviors, adding fuel to the fire. The result? A chaotic household with few resources available to help.

That's where this book comes in. Designed to provide support for the difficult job of parenting gifted children, *Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students: Helping Kids Cope With Explosive Feelings* provides the resource you need to not only understand why gifted children are so



extreme in their behavior, but also learn specific strategies to teach your children how to live with their intensity. Presented in a readable and practical format, I use case studies and role-playing techniques to make the information come to life and provide you with the tools needed to make a positive lasting impact on your child.

This book addresses:

- ◆ the assumptions most people make about giftedness;
- ◆ the cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics of being gifted and the problems created by those attributes;
- ◆ the emotional development and the intense nature of gifted children;
- ◆ the specific problems most gifted children face and strategies parents and educators can use to teach children to how to cope;
- ◆ the unique issues faced by dually exceptional children, including those who are gifted and diagnosed with learning disabilities or mental illness;
- ◆ how to utilize coaching techniques that minimize the negative attributes of giftedness; and
- ◆ how to collaborate with schools and mental health professionals.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students was designed to be a reference guide for parents and educators. After reading and understanding the first section of the book, parents and educators can rely on Parts II and III to provide specific strategies found to be highly effective in working with gifted children. Part II provides a detailed explanation of various strategies for use at home and at school, including checklists to refer

back to in times of crisis and many tips for handling specific types of problems. Part III explains how to switch from authoritative parenting and teaching strategies to a more “coaching” oriented approach. Specific role-plays are given to further teach the use of the strategies within the model of coaching and provide a way to check your own techniques.

As you begin to implement these strategies, different problems may arise. The detailed Recommended Resources section at the end of the book provides additional resources for many of the areas discussed throughout the book. Several worksheets, checklists, and tip sheets also are provided to help you implement the strategies I suggest throughout the book.

I wish you much success in being the coach your children need as they progress through their years and embrace everything it means to be gifted. My wish is that this book will provide a source of comfort and connection when things become too intense.

A WORD TO EDUCATORS

Although this book is designed for parents, many of the strategies can be easily adopted for use in the classroom. Teaching gifted children can be every bit as difficult as raising them. The intensity of their thinking, while a delight in the academic context, can be difficult with regard to their emotional development. This book is designed to address that difficulty.

Look for the “Notes to the Teacher” sections throughout the book for specific advice and strategies that can be utilized with gifted children. By working in collaboration with each other, educators and parents can make positive and meaningful impact on the lives of our gifted children.

CHAPTER I

ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GIFTEDNESS

Your 10-year-old child is easy to raise—most days. The rest of the time she is a handful. A big handful. A bit of an enigma, she possesses qualities of being both highly intelligent and completely ignorant when it comes to the mundane. She can be funny and make everyone laugh while also being serious to the point of critical. Her empathy runs high, as she cries at commercials about global warming. Yet she criticizes her friends who don't hold her worldview and often insists to you that her way is always the better way.

Her grades in school are good. But, her teachers complain that she often is sloppy in her work, makes careless errors on the simplest of math problems, and misspells basic words. She often chooses the road less traveled in all aspects of her life, wondering why others don't see that it is—at least to her—the easier way. Often a joy to be around, your child's moods can swing from one extreme to the other. The unbalanced nature of these mood swings causes you to question her emotional stability—and your own.

If you had to summarize her in one word, you would call her intense.

Parenting your child often leaves you frustrated as you vacillate between feeling lucky to have such a great kid and cursed for having to deal with her emotions.

Is she crazy? Are you?

Neither is true. You've just stumbled into the emotional world of gifted children and the drama of parenting and teaching them.

Assumptions are common with gifted children. People often assume that raising a highly curious, bright child is an easy task—something parents should be happy about all of the time. These same people feel that bright children do not fall prey to many of the problems that other children encounter, including poor academic achievement, bullying, or risky behaviors.

Although it is true that there are many rewards to being the parent of a gifted child, believing that a gifted child will be easy to raise only negates the very real challenges inherent in parenting this population. Furthermore, the emotional roller coaster that can accompany giftedness makes parenting a true challenge.

Gifted children face school challenges, difficulties with peers, and problems with overall emotional development, similar to their nongifted counterparts. However, the nature of giftedness makes these issues significantly more intense. Parents of gifted children often are conflicted in their feelings regarding their children—ranging from delight and marvel related to children's creativity and intellectual prowess, to frustration regarding children's poor stress response, to powerlessness when parents feel inept in their own understanding of how to help this unique breed of children. Educators, too, often feel a sense of powerlessness as they try to help their gifted students maintain emotional balance and control in the classroom and with their friends.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND SCHOOL

One of the biggest assumptions made about gifted children involves academic achievement. People assume that these children require little to no discipline or encouragement with regard to learning in the school setting, believing giftedness is the same as being a high-achiev-

ing student (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). Furthermore, it is assumed that gifted children will always find an intrinsic way to learn—there is no need for specialized academic programs or teacher education in the field of giftedness. Unfortunately, these assumptions do not reflect an accurate understanding of the nature of giftedness.

Many gifted children do perform well in school, equating school performance with something as fundamental as breathing. They require little to no assistance from teachers or parents.

However, a growing number of these students share a different reality when it comes to traditional learning. They are frustrated by the mundane and repetitive processes found in many classrooms. Driven by boredom, they fall out of sync with school and withdraw from the learning environment. Unlike their high-achieving counterparts, they are not intrinsically motivated by good grades, having already decided that school has nothing of particular value to offer them.

If this pattern is allowed to continue, these gifted children soon will find themselves unable to get by on pure intellect. Having missed important information in class due to the lack of engagement in learning, they struggle—typically for the very first time. By this point, teachers may not see their gifted qualities at all, and often will believe that someone must have “made a mistake” about the gifted label. If they are recognized as being intelligent, teachers will assume that these underachieving gifted children are just being *lazy*. Seldom is the problem recognized as a mismatch between how gifted children learn and what the school so regularly asks them to do: repetitive and routine tasks.

The reality is, at least 5% of gifted children fail or drop out of school (Renzulli & Park, 2000). This is a statistic that should make educators and parents feel uncomfortable. Maybe even outraged. Closer attention needs to be paid to the unique needs of gifted students if we are going to improve student outcomes for this population. Educational strategies including acceleration, differentiation, and grouping are things that

need to be explored in order to help meet the needs of gifted children and improve their emotional and behavior outcomes.

ANDREW

Andrew is a 12-year-old sixth grader. Having been identified as gifted in second grade, Andrew enjoyed his early childhood school experiences. In third grade, he earned average grades in all classes and indicated that learning was fun. At home, he typically amused himself by taking things apart—his electronic toys, his mother's old PDA, and a broken computer. He needed to understand why things worked the way they did. His early grade school teachers reported that he was a creative and talented student. His parents could not have been more proud.

As time went on and Andrew entered fifth grade, things began to change. The curriculum, no longer new and exciting, had settled into a mixture of routine and rote activities, punctuated with occasional opportunities for enrichment (which, in Andrew's mind, always meant more work). Andrew began to show disinterest in school, avoiding homework and no longer speaking about his day with excitement. His parents became concerned and went to the teacher for help. She suggested a "token economy" to assist with homework completion, rewarding him based on work completion. This helped for a short while, only to have the problem persist.

Andrew continued to withdraw from school, finding little to stimulate his mind. At home he no longer took apart the computer. Now he designed video games, filling any available time with trying to stump his friends with his new games.

Although he completed little to no work in school, Andrew's test scores continued to be high. The teacher reassured his parents that this was just a phase, promising that he would grow out of it eventually.

However, this was not the case. By sixth grade, things had taken a serious turn for the worse. Andrew, no longer in the habit of completing schoolwork, discovered that his intellect alone was not enough to maintain passing grades. He completed no homework, failed most of

his tests, and rarely demonstrated interest in school. He still designed video games at home and won various online contests.

His parents were at a loss as to what to do. Turning to the school, they were again told that it was a homework issue; if he would only do more homework, he would be fine. His standardized scores from statewide assessments continued to demonstrate high potential, so the school felt the problem was nothing more than a matter of laziness and poor parental structure.

Although Andrew is fictional, drawn from a combination of many real cases, his story is one that exemplifies the typical challenges some gifted children and parents face in the school system. We will revisit Andrew throughout the book, as we learn more about the complex challenges facing gifted students with regard to school.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

Another commonly held myth is that gifted children get along fine in the social aspects of their lives, having little problems with bullies or friendships in general. Sometimes the opposite is assumed—that all gifted children are “geeks” or “nerds” by nature. Such stereotypes minimize the nature of the problems faced by these children as they try to build friendships (Webb et al., 2007).

Many gifted children struggle greatly in the social areas of their lives, related in part to the intensity of their behaviors, as well as the unique aspects of their personalities, both of which will be covered in more detail in subsequent chapters. In general, gifted students have a tendency to appear arrogant and unconnected to their peers, often finding interest in things other than the typical interests of their peers. Social relationships often are negatively impacted by their tendency to lose interest with the day-to-day triviality that typifies most relationships during childhood. Instead, these children would prefer to focus on larger world problems, or things that are abstract and complex—most of which is not appealing to typical nongifted peers. The result

is a combination of frustration and avoidance, neither of which move toward strong interpersonal relationships.

Peer relationships naturally change over the course of childhood, especially as children enter their middle school years. For gifted children, the process of change can be even more difficult, as the move toward fitting in with their typical peers takes on a life of its own. Unable to compete socially due to the uniqueness of their personalities, these children often will hide their giftedness, trying hard to fit in to a social structure that eludes them. They may try out for a sport that the “cool” kids like, or fail classes to fit in with a particular peer group. Sometimes these kids will avoid accolades given by the adults on campus by missing outside events that reward academic achievement or getting “sick” just before awards ceremonies.

For some gifted students the opposite may be true. Faced with the knowledge that they can never fit in with the popular crowd, and not necessarily wanting to, they take on the personae of *super nerd*, a label that allows them to be above and beyond odd. For this group, being unusual is the prime objective, often leading to significant bullying from other groups of children. When this happens, educators often are at a loss as to how to help. Instead of recognizing the problem as something related to the way in which gifted children interact with the world and teaching tolerance, they struggle with trying to either teach the gifted child to change or telling the parent the acts of bullying are just normal kid behavior. We’ve seen all too often the long-term impact of bullying on any child, let alone a population of children that process the world intensely by nature.

Whether a gifted child is trying to bend herself into a pretzel to fit in or aiming to emulate the label of “nerd,” these children suffer in their relationships, often struggling to find their own safe haven among their peers. The lack of friendships can lead to sincere pain for both the child

and the parent. Both parties are left trying to grapple with the problem, not really understanding why such social connections are so hard.

MEREDITH

Meredith is an 8-year-old gifted girl in third grade. She thinks of herself as outgoing and smart with many friends. However, when she invites friends over for play dates, very few come. She finds herself ostracized on the playground at times—especially when she becomes overwrought during a tetherball game or when she doesn't get her way at recess. Things come to a head one day when she comes home crying, saying that “all” of her friends are refusing to play with her. Concerned, her parents go to the school looking for help. They watch their daughter interact with her friends and quickly begin to understand a part of the problem, as they witness their daughter bossing everyone. They watch in horror as the child tells everyone how wrong they are, refuses to let anyone choose a game, and argues about various rules. When the other children try to tell her that she is not being nice, she immediately gets angry and accuses them of just being jealous of her.

Her parents are shocked. Their own daughter is acting like a brat. Frustrated, they go home and talk with her that night. She cries, stating that she wasn't doing anything wrong. She goes on to say that she doesn't mean to sound bossy and that she just wants friends. The parents' frustration continues long after the conversation ends, as they feel powerless to change the situation. They don't know how to help the other children see the wonderful qualities that Meredith typically demonstrates at home.

Meredith's story—far from unique—paints the picture of what can happen as gifted students begin to enter the social arena of school, as well as the pain that can occur when children are unable to find success in that setting.

GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR EMOTIONS

Existing myths regarding gifted children not only reflect school performance or peer interactions, but also emotional development. One of the more commonly held beliefs is that gifted children are more prone to anxiety and/or depression than other children. Furthermore, some people in the general population believe that there is little to do regarding the anxiety and depression, other than treat it through therapy and/or medication. The truth about gifted children is actually quite different. Recent research indicates that gifted children often are more resilient than their nongifted counterparts (Mueller, 2009). Furthermore, the depression and anxiety-like behaviors that seem to go hand in hand with many gifted children may not be a *disorder* as much as a natural aspect of the gifted child's personality. These children are more emotionally intense than their nongifted counterparts, resulting in a host of behaviors that simulate anxiety and depression, among other things (Sword, 2006b). The cause of the behavior, however, is substantively different—something often ignored by both the educational and mental health fields.

Gifted children do struggle with their emotional development overall, despite good long-term prognoses. Problems regarding the stability of mood, existential depression, and performance-based anxiety are typical with this population, but for different reasons than similar traits in other children. Gifted children behave in this way as a direct outpouring of the intensity that defines this population, as opposed to a dysfunctional aspect of personality that needs to be fixed. Although the latter responds well to treatment designed to “fix” the problem, the former does not, as it is a normal aspect of many gifted children's development. These children require interventions that stem from a thorough understanding of the emotional nature of giftedness and an understanding of the typical intensity inherent in gifted individuals.

Such interventions need to focus on coping strategies as opposed to changing traits that are inherently part of who they are.

EMILY

Emily, a 16-year-old gifted student, is a high achiever. She also considers herself a fraud. Faced with a definition of being bright and high achieving given by the adults in her life, Emily assumes that she should not have to work as hard as she does to maintain her grades. She watches her high-achieving friends and feels that “they” must be gifted, because “they” do not appear to be working nearly as hard as she is. She has to study diligently, stay up late, and work very hard to uphold the 4.3 GPA she insists on maintaining.

In addition to school, Emily plays the piano, swims competitively, and participates in journalism and political clubs. In an effort to complete her required courses and get a head start on college, Emily takes additional classes at the local college campus. She also tutors younger children to help supplement the funds required for her college education.

Emily is under a lot of stress. She deals with the stress in somewhat explosive ways, often melting down into a heap in her room. During these times, Emily will throw things and yell at anyone who asks her anything. This includes siblings and her parents, especially her parents. After her tirades, Emily will feel extreme remorse, causing her to sob and cry, sometimes for hours on end. When Emily looks back on her behavior, she believes that something is wrong with her—that she is somehow damaged or crazy.

Emily’s parents are extremely frustrated with her. Her mood swings have raised havoc in the household, causing major disruptions in everyday routines. They feel there is something seriously wrong with her. Unsure of how to proceed, they discuss the problems with her school and their medical doctor; both of whom suggest counseling. The counselor, taking in the information provided by the parents, becomes concerned with anxiety, depression, and mood problems. A treatment plan involving significant amounts of medication, as well as therapy, is

developed. Although Emily is happy to get help, she can't help believing that getting help means she really *is* crazy—very crazy, in her opinion.

Emily's story is not as simple as it may sound. The behavior certainly could point to mental health issues. However, the behavior taken out of the context of Emily's intellect does not paint a complete picture. The intensity of her emotions is extreme, and it does mimic a mood disorder. However, differentiating between a mood disorder and the normal intensity of behavior associated with giftedness and stress requires thoroughly understanding the giftedness in order to develop an appropriate treatment plan—something that is not always considered.

Overall, the many assumptions regarding the true nature of giftedness serve only to misrepresent the joys and problems of being gifted. True challenges in academic, social, and emotional arenas are overlooked and misunderstood, resulting in the negation of the difficulties really faced by teachers, parents, and children. The next few chapters will further explore the truth behind the characteristics of giftedness, and the impact of these characteristics on overall functioning.

NOTES TO THE TEACHER

The vast majority of assumptions and myths surrounding giftedness revolve around education. The Fall 2009 edition of *Gifted Child Quarterly* (GCQ) identified 19 popular myths related to giftedness (see Treffinger, 2009). These myths aren't new. In fact, a 1982 edition of the same publication originally identified many of these concerns in an editorial by Don Treffinger. And yet, despite advocacy, research, and the support of organizations like the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), the mythology continues. Worse, perpetuation of these myths and assumptions serves only to distort the true needs of gifted children and maintain the status quo in education.

Some of the assumptions unique to education include the belief that specific teaching strategies geared toward this population are not

necessary because gifted children learn in all settings. Others include the belief that all children have the capacity for giftedness; therefore, as long as a teacher is challenging all students, no specific understanding of giftedness is necessary. Both of these myths negate the very real and unique aspects of giftedness related to personality and emotional attributes. Furthermore, they oversimplify the realities facing many teachers of gifted students who underachieve, placing blame on the student and parents instead of recognizing the need for collaboration between all parties in order to improve student outcomes.

One of the most common education-related assumptions is that acceleration is socially damaging to gifted children. Although grade skipping can have a negative impact on some gifted children, the research indicates that this is not true for all students (Kulik, 2004). It is important to be well grounded in an understanding of giftedness and the unique needs of the individual student when making educational placement decisions. This is particularly true in both cases of acceleration and in dealing with gifted students who are dually exceptional (these students also are sometimes called twice-exceptional students).

The last myth I want to specifically mention is the commonly held belief among educators that a student identified as having exceptional needs (e.g., learning disabilities) cannot be gifted. This myth negates the very real cases of gifted and learning-disabled students and allows schools to continue to ignore the needs of giftedness when providing for the disability (Webb et al., 2005). I will focus more on the specific social and emotional struggles of dually exceptional children in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 11

RELATIONSHIP ISSUES

Relationships are difficult in the best of situations. This particularly can be true with gifted children, as the rigid nature of their thinking patterns and the overly sensitive emotional nature of their personality can cause conflicts with both peers and adults. Typical relationship issues, including developing healthy friendships, bullying problems, trying to “fit in,” and handling peer pressure, are appropriate topics for role-playing and parent coaching.

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Developing healthy friendships can be difficult for gifted children. Many times these children struggle with social skills, resulting in poor interpersonal communication and poor friendships. Take the following scenario. How would you help your child navigate through it?

SCENARIO

Your child received detention at school for yelling at a classmate during recess. You discover the detention when going through the backpack the next morning.

INITIAL PARENT-CHILD DIALOGUE

Parent: Jessie, what is this?

Child: Nothing. Just a stupid detention. Becky told the noon-duty I was yelling at her. But she lied.

Parent: Well that doesn't seem like Becky. Did you yell?

Child: Yes, but it wasn't my fault.

Parent: Jessie, you always say that. But if you were yelling, it is your fault.

Child: But . . .

Parent: I don't want to hear it. You have to stop getting mad at your friends, sweetie. Or you're not going to have any friends to yell at.

Child: You never listen to me. (Child bursts into tears and runs from the room)

ANALYSIS OF DIALOGUE

In this scenario, Jessie is having difficulties controlling her anger and expressing herself to her friends. The dialogue between mother and daughter does nothing to help Jessie understand why yelling resulted in a problem and a detention. Let's look at the specific problems with the dialogue.

Parent: Jessie, what is this?

Child: Nothing. Just a stupid detention. Becky told the noon-duty I was yelling at her. But she lied.

Parent: Well that doesn't seem like Becky. Did you yell?

The parent's word choice conveys the message that her child is not telling the truth. Although this may be true, the way this is stated

presents a major roadblock to communication and guarantees a defensive response.

Child: Yes, but it wasn't my fault.

Parent: Jessie, you always say that. But if you were yelling, it is your fault.

Again, the word choice prohibits a true dialogue from occurring. Although the child needs to be coached on how to accept responsibility, dictating *what* the child is supposed to think doesn't teach the child how to figure this out.

Child: But . . .

Parent: I don't want to hear it. You have to stop getting mad at your friends, sweetie. Or you're not going to have any friends to yell at.

The parent is no longer interested in the excuses of the child. This presents a major roadblock to communication and prevents the child from learning through this experience.

Child: You never listen to me. (Child bursts into tears and runs from the room)

NEW DIALOGUE USING COACHING STRATEGIES

Using successful coaching techniques, as well as some of the strategies previously mentioned, let's see how this scenario can be improved.

Parent: Jessie, what is this?

Child: Nothing. Just a stupid detention. Becky told the noon-duty I was yelling at her. But she lied.

Parent: What exactly happened honey?

(This gives the child a chance to tell her part of the story.)

Child: Becky wasn't playing nice on tetherball. She kept cheating. I told her to stop and play right or I wasn't going to be her friend anymore. Then she went to the noon-duty and told her I yelled. But mommy, I didn't yell. Honest.

Parent: Is it possible that it felt like yelling to her?

This asks the child to look at the impact of her behavior on others. When this becomes a regular part of the dialogue the child learns to evaluate the impact of her own behavior.

Child: I guess. But she didn't have to tell on me. I don't want to be her friend anymore.

Parent: I understand how you feel, but let's not decide friendships right now. Let's stay focused on the detention. Sometimes when people are mad, their voice gets really loud. Is it possible that yours got loud—even if you didn't mean to yell?

The parent redirects the child to the actual problem without letting the conversation deteriorate. She provides examples and guides the child to a particular way of looking at her behavior.

Child: Yeah, I guess so.

Parent: So, is there a different way you could have handled this without being angry with your friend? One that didn't result in yelling?

(Again, the parent is prompting and guiding the child.)

Child: I tried talking to her, but she didn't listen.



TIP SHEET 14: CONFLICT RESOLUTION SKILLS

Teach your child to do the following:

- ✓ Calm down.
- ✓ State the problem using “I” statements.
- ✓ Allow the other person to state her perspective.
- ✓ Each person needs to “own” his or her part of the situation.
- ✓ Brainstorm a solution.
- ✓ Thank the person for helping to solve the problem.

Parent: So, if she wasn't listening to you, what else can you do to solve the problem?

From this point the parent can continue teaching and guiding the child, coaching, until the child has the problem solved and has determined a new solution to the problem. Tip Sheet 14 has some suggestions for teaching children conflict resolution skills.

BULLYING

Bullying happens in a variety of ways and for a variety of reasons. Gifted children are not immune to it, finding themselves in both the position of the bully and the victim. The extreme emotional nature of gifted children makes dealing with bullying particularly difficult, as the situations often deteriorate rapidly and lead to a host of other problems including significant anxiety and depression.

The following scenario presents the gifted child as the victim of bullying. It is important to note that giftedness can lead to bullying behaviors just as easily.

SCENARIO

Your child tells you she is scared to go to school because her best friend is being mean. This happens on the same day that her best friend's mother has called you and told you that the girls have been fighting at school. The other parent is concerned that your daughter is treating her daughter poorly.

INITIAL PARENT-CHILD DIALOGUE

Parent: Emma, what's going on between you and Shelly?

Child: I don't want to talk about.

Parent: We have to. Her mom called and said you guys are fighting.

Child: It's no big deal. But I don't feel well. Can I stay home?

Parent: No, you have to go to school. But why is Shelly's mom calling if there isn't a problem? I need you to tell me what's going on.

Child: (Child gets angry and starts to yell) I told you—nothing's wrong. I just can't go to school. Please mom. I can't. (Child starts crying inconsolably)

Parent: Look, you can either tell me what's going on or not. But either way, you have to go to school.

Child: Fine. But I hate it there. And I hate Shelly. (Child runs out of room and slams door to bedroom)

ANALYSIS OF DIALOGUE

In this scenario, Emma is having problems with her friend and no longer wants to attend school. The other parent is involved, asking Emma's mother to talk with Emma. The dialogue that ensues does not move Emma toward a clear discussion of her feelings or result in a plan to deal with them. Instead, both mother and daughter leave the

conversation feeling powerless. Let's look at the specific problems with the dialogue.

Parent: Emma, what's going on between you and Shelly?

Child: I don't want to talk about.

Parent: We have to. Her mom called and said you guys are fighting.

Child: It's no big deal. But I don't feel well. Can I stay home?

Parent: No, you have to go to school. But why is Shelly's mom calling if there isn't a problem? I need you to tell me what's going on.

This initial phase of the exchange starts well. The parent asks good questions and sets an appropriate boundary. However, her demand for information could lead to a highly defensive response from Emma.

Child: (Child gets angry and starts to yell) I told you—nothing's wrong. I just can't go to school. Please mom. I can't. (Child starts crying inconsolably)

Parent: Look, you can either tell me what's going on or not. But either way, you have to go to school.

Although this may appear fine initially, as the parent is staying detached and setting an appropriate boundary, she is not making use of the opportunity to teach her child about the connection between her feelings and the friendship situation. Without the information such a conversation could deliver, the parent cannot know how to proceed.

Child: Fine. But I hate it there. And I hate Shelly. (Child runs out of room and slams door to bedroom)

The child has ended the dialogue completely in this scenario—with nothing resolved and a bigger emotional concern.

NEW DIALOGUE USING COACHING STRATEGIES

Using successful coaching techniques, as well as some of the strategies presented earlier in the book, let's see how this scenario can be improved.

Parent: Emma, Shelly's mom called and told me you guys are having some problems. What is going on with you guys?

Child: I don't want to talk about.

Parent: It sounds like she has made you pretty mad. Sometimes talking about it can help.

The parent is cueing her daughter as to her apparent feelings without "naming" them directly. If the child has learned to develop an emotional vocabulary, this may be enough to cue her that she needs to regulate her moods a bit.

Child: It's no big deal. But I don't feel well. Can I stay home?

Parent: Staying home isn't going to make your feelings go away sweetheart. Why don't we try to figure out the problem and see if we can talk about it?

(Here the parent is setting a boundary and providing the roadmap needed to solve the problem.)

Child: It's too hard mom. (Child starts crying)

Parent: (Parent consoles child) I know, baby, but we have to face the problem or it will only get bigger. Did Shelly hurt you yesterday? Did you argue?



TIP SHEET 15: REPORTING A BULLY

- ✓ First clarify what a bully is and is not with your child.
- ✓ Determine if the school has an anonymous way to report bullying. If it does, allow the child to use that format. If it does not:
 - » Determine a “safe” time to talk with the administration of the school.
 - » Encourage your child to always report incidents of bullying.
- ✓ If your child is the victim of bullying, be sure to spend time teaching the child how to work past the negative impact of the bully.
- ✓ See the Recommended Resources pages for more information.

In this setting, the child is more likely to respond positively and begin to speak about the problem. Once the child begins to talk, the parent can guide her to a solution to try and get her to school—without the drama of the previous dialogue.

Emma’s case seems to be more of a problem of two friends arguing, but in some cases, gifted children can experience more painful bullying. Tip Sheet 15 provides parents with advice for reporting bullies in their child’s school.

CONFORMISM AND PEER PRESSURE

Nothing screams preteen and teen like peer pressure. With gifted children, the push for “normal” can be intense. And the more intelligent a child is, the further away from normal he or she often feels. This creates internal stress that eventually can result in underperformance at school or participation in risky behaviors, simply for the opportunity to fit in.

SCENARIO

Your child is failing at school. His standardized test scores are high, and he is doing all of his homework. Yet nothing is being turned in and he is failing several of his classes.

INITIAL PARENT-CHILD DIALOGUE

Parent: Eric, I got a call from your teachers today. They said you haven't been turning in your work all semester. What's going on?

Child: It's no big deal, Mom. I can bring the grades up by the end of the year.

Parent: That's not the point. You are failing your classes now. What are you doing with the work, Eric?

Child: (Says nothing)

Parent: Eric! I am speaking to you. What is going on? (Parent's voice is raised)

Child: It doesn't matter Mom. I told you—I'll bring up my grades.

Parent: It does matter. And I don't want to hear it. Get the work turned in now, or I'll make sure you just fail the year and repeat it. (Parent storms off)

ANALYSIS OF DIALOGUE

In this scenario, Eric does the homework but doesn't turn it in, resulting in grade problems. The dialogue does not elicit responses that are going to solve this particular problem. In fact, this piece of dialogue results in little to no communication at all. Let's analyze this a bit:

Parent: Eric, I got a call from your teachers today. They said you haven't been turning in your work all semester. What's going on?

Child: It's no big deal, Mom. I can bring the grades up by the end of the year.

Parent: That's not the point. You are failing your classes now. What are you doing with the work, Eric?

The parent is no doubt very frustrated with Eric's choices. This frustration easily bleeds into the tone of voice, typically putting the child on the defensive.

Child: (Says nothing)

Parent: Eric! I am speaking to you. What is going on? (Parent's voice is raised)

Now the parent is in argument mode. From this point on, the focus is not on problem solving, but being right. This is true for both the child and the parent.

Child: It doesn't matter Mom. I told you—I'll bring up my grades.

Parent: It does matter. And I don't want to hear it. Get the work turned in now, or I'll make sure you just fail the year and repeat it. (Parent storms off)

Obviously this is a no-win situation. The child is not going to change his behavior—and neither is the parent. Both are fully entrenched in their need to be right in this situation.

NEW DIALOGUE USING COACHING STRATEGIES

Using successful coaching techniques, as well as some of the strategies previously mentioned, this scenario can have a positive end.

Parent: Eric, I got a call from your teachers today. They said you haven't been turning in your work all semester. What's going on?

Child: It's no big deal, Mom. I can bring the grades up by the end of the year.

Parent: I am sure that you can, and you already know that Dad and I expect passing grades. I am more concerned with why this is happening. You do your homework every night, right?

The parent has established the boundary and expectations, while refocusing the conversation toward problem solving.

Child: Yes.

Parent: OK, good. Doing the work isn't the problem. So, what happens when you go to turn it in?

The parent validates the parts of the situation that the child is doing correctly, while analyzing the specific aspects of the problem that she needs information on.

Child: I don't know. I just don't turn it in.

Parent: Hmm. What would happen if you did turn in your work?

Child: I'd get good grades.

Parent: And when you don't?

Child: You know already—I fail my classes.

Parent: And your friends, what kind of grades do they get?

Child: Mixed.



TIP SHEET 16: DEALING WITH UNDERPERFORMANCE

- ✓ Try to determine the cause of the underperformance. Boredom and difficulties with peer status are common reasons.
- ✓ Work with the school to address the reasons.
- ✓ Brainstorm solutions with the child based on the cause of the underperformance.
- ✓ Be willing to be flexible and creative when developing a solution.

This whole section is fact finding. Simple, nonjudgmental questions designed to collect information helps the parent discover the reasons behind the behavior. Only then can a solution be found.

Parent: How do they react when you get good grades?

Child: Some of them call me a brainiac.

Now we are getting somewhere. Maybe the child doesn't like that. Maybe the kids he wants to hang out with are average students, or students who tend to fail. This is critically important information. The parent has done a good job here. From this point, the parent can coach the child into long-range planning and help point out any of the problems in the child's thinking. In situations like this one, the parent may need to deal with the problems of underperformance, commonly called underachievement. Tip Sheet 16 suggests ideas for parents to consider when dealing with underperformance in their gifted children.

NOTE TO THE TEACHER

Just as there are many opportunities to work with relationship issues between parents and children, there also are ample opportunities to work

on these key issues within the school setting. Let's revisit the bullying scenario, changing the players to include a teacher and a gifted student.

SCENARIO

Your fifth-grade student tells you she is scared to go out to lunch because her best friend is being mean "all the time." This happens on the same day that the parent of the other student has e-mailed you with a concern that someone is bullying her at lunch. The other parent specifically named the student talking to you as being the student bullying her daughter and expects you to do something about it.

INITIAL TEACHER-CHILD DIALOGUE

Teacher: Emma, is there anything going on between you and Shelly at lunch?

Student: I don't want to talk about it.

Teacher: I think we have to. You are telling me you are afraid to see her at lunch and she seems upset too.

Student: It's no big deal. Can't I just stay in and help you with something? I hate going out to lunch anyways.

Teacher: No, you have to go out to lunch. No one will be in the class, and I want you to work out whatever the problem is with Shelly. There is a problem, isn't there?

Student: (Student begins to cry) There's nothing wrong.

Teacher: Then why are you crying? Emma, you can either talk to me or we can go to the principal to talk about it.

Student: (Student refuses to look at teacher and is still crying) I just don't feel good today. Nothing else is wrong. Can I have a pass to the nurse? I think I'm going to be sick.

Teacher: You can have a pass, but I'm still going to have you talk

with the principal about this. You have to go to lunch. I can't have you two girls causing all this drama all the time.

Student: Fine. (Student walks out, deciding she can never speak about any of this with an adult ever again)

ANALYSIS OF DIALOGUE

In this scenario, Emma is having problems with her friend and no longer feels comfortable at school during more social activities (like lunch). The other child is involved, as her parent is already contacting the school for help. The dialogue that ensues does not move Emma toward a clear discussion of her feelings or result in a plan to deal with them. Instead, both the teacher and the student leave the conversation feeling powerless. Worse, the situation is not resolved and Emma feels as though there is no one to turn to on campus. With no clear understanding of the problem, none of the involved people can find resolution. Let's look at the specific problems with the dialogue.

Teacher: Emma, is there anything going on between you and Shelly at lunch?

Student: I don't want to talk about it.

Teacher: I think we have to. You are telling me you are afraid to see her at lunch and she seems upset too.

Student: It's no big deal. Can't I just stay in and help you with something? I hate going out to lunch anyways.

Teacher: No, you have to go out to lunch. No one will be in the class, and I want you to work out whatever the problem is with Shelly. There is a problem, isn't there?

Student: (Student begins to cry) There's nothing wrong.

Teacher: Then why are you crying? Emma, you can either talk to me or we can go to the principal to talk about it.

This initial phase of the exchange starts well. The teacher asks good questions and sets an appropriate boundary. Problems occur as the conversation pushes forward, and the student is placed in a highly defensive position. The conversation begins to deteriorate quickly at that point.

Student: (Student refuses to look at teacher and is still crying) I just don't feel good today. Nothing else is wrong. Can I have a pass to the nurse? I think I'm going to be sick.

Teacher: You can have a pass, but I'm still going to have you talk with the principal about this. You have to go to lunch. I can't have you two girls causing all this drama all the time.

Here, the teacher is stating an appropriate boundary. However, without knowing the actual dynamic of the problem, the teacher is pushing the student into a higher and higher state of defensiveness. The teacher has missed an opportunity to let the student talk with her about the problems and teach the student about the connection between her feelings and the friendship situation. Without the information such a conversation could deliver, the teacher cannot be certain as to whether or not actual bullying has occurred or the actual nature of the problem.

Student: Fine. (Student walks out, deciding she can never speak about any of this with an adult ever again)

The student has ended the dialogue completely in this scenario—with nothing resolved and a bigger emotional concern.

NEW DIALOGUE USING COACHING STRATEGIES

Using successful coaching techniques, as well as some of the strategies presented earlier in the book, let's see how this scenario can be improved.

Teacher: Emma, is there anything going on between you and Shelly at lunch?

Student: I don't want to talk about it.

Teacher: You sound really upset Emma. Talking about it could really help.

Here the teacher is cueing Emma as to both her feelings and that it is "safe" to talk about it with her. If Emma has a strong enough emotional vocabulary, the cueing will be enough. If not, the teacher can continue cueing, making Emma feel safe to talk.

Student: It's no big deal. Can't I just stay in and help you with something? I hate going out to lunch anyways.

Teacher: Staying with me won't make any of the problems at lunch go away. But why don't you help me a little today and we can figure out what the problem is so you don't feel this way tomorrow.

(The teacher does a good job giving the student a path toward a solution to the problem.)

Student: (Student begins to cry) I can't talk about it. Really, there's nothing wrong.

Teacher: (Teacher consoles student) Things won't get better if you hold it all inside. I know it's hard to talk sometimes, but you can trust me. Is it Shelly? Did you two get into an argument?

Assuming there is a good connection between the teacher and the student, Emma may be willing to disclose the problem at this point. If she is still unwilling, the teacher can use distraction by having the student help her with some other task and change the subject. After the student has calmed down, she can try asking about Shelly again. Typically, the student who wants to talk will do so at this point. Once the conversation begins, the teacher can help problem solve with Emma, without any of the drama.

If the child is not willing to talk, the teacher has a couple of options—let it all go and see what happens, inform the parents of the problem and see if they can solve it, or let another staff member try. In this case, I would advise informing the parents of the problem, while providing some strategies to help the parents resolve the issue.

We've gone through several of the more typical situations that come up in the area of relationships and peer interactions. In each of the scenarios, simple changes in the words we use when talking to our child, the tone of our voice, and the kinds of questions we ask can make all the difference in the word.

Next we'll go through situations related to gifted children and their performance in school.



Designed to provide support for the difficult job of parenting and teaching gifted children, *Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students: Helping Kids Cope With Explosive Feelings* provides the resource parents and teachers need to not only understand why gifted children are so extreme in their behavior, but also learn specific strategies to teach gifted children how to live with their intensity.

Presented in an easy-to-read, conversational style, *Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students* uses real-world examples through case studies and role-plays that show parents and teachers how to interact with gifted children in a way that teaches them how to recognize, monitor, and adjust their behavior. Worksheets, tip sheets, and checklists are included to help parents, teachers, and the students themselves learn to cope with the explosive feelings that often accompany giftedness. Specific strategies for stress management, underperformance in school, perfectionism, and social anxiety make this a must-read for anyone wishing to make a positive lasting impact on the lives of gifted children.

About the Author: Relying on her expertise as a school psychologist, Christine Fonseca has been a resource to parents and educators for understanding the social and emotional needs of gifted children. She holds a master's degree in school psychology and has served as a school psychologist, speaker, consultant, parenting coach, and trainer. Currently, Christine conducts trainings for parents and educators in the Southern California area, where she lives with her husband and precocious gifted daughters.



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