



Today's students face many obstacles; some of those issues are social and emotional in nature. This document provides guidance for teachers and school staff working with gifted students.

## Gifted and Talented Children: Addressing Social-Emotional Challenges

*The following is non-regulatory guidance designed to work in conjunction with the procedural safeguard protections for students identified as gifted and talented under Kentucky statutes and administrative regulations. Revision to guidance occurs based on feedback the Office of Special Education and Early Learning (OSEEL) receives from the State Advisory Council for Gifted and Talented Education, state shareholder groups, the KDE's interpretation of law and desk audits.*

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# **Gifted and Talented Children: Addressing Social-Emotional Challenges**

## **Gifted and Talented (GT) Students Face Unique Challenges**

One of the biggest myths about gifted children is that they will be able to succeed well on their own, but this is not necessarily the case. Children whose abilities are significantly above those of their same-age peers frequently need specialized educational services. Just as students with disabilities and other at-risk student populations have barriers and needs, gifted students may face adversities in school until they are provided with individualized services and targeted supports.

Gifted children often experience special challenges related to their giftedness. They may face risks to their social and emotional well-being that other groups may not encounter. Gifted students may experience special challenges in school as a result of:

- An educational mismatch between the student and the rest of the class, with classroom instruction not being responsive to the unique needs of gifted students in terms of pace and level;
- Inadequate accommodations for gifted students' high creativity, energy, intensity and aspirations;
- Few, if any, adaptations for asynchronous development;
- Inadequate support to deal with social pressures to conform to popular ideas, beliefs and norms;
- Few accommodations to address unchallenging or repetitive curricula;
- The student's heightened sensitivities to differences, resulting in the student trying to hide his or her talents or simplify his or her achievements;
- Frustration in finding supportive environments, producing feelings of isolation and,
- Age-appropriate social maturity that does not align with the student's advanced development in talent areas.

This document will explore some challenges, common myths about gifted children, and useful tips and resources for teachers.

## **Asynchronous Development**

Asynchronous development refers to the mismatch between cognitive, physical and emotional development that is often seen in gifted children. While everyone shows strengths and weaknesses, the contrasts are often more noticeable for the gifted child. For instance, a student may demonstrate advanced abilities in one area, such as in reading, while exhibiting age-appropriate or even delayed abilities in another area, such as writing or tying shoes. The asynchronous or uneven development of the gifted student is often most notable to those who work closely with gifted students. The more advanced the level of giftedness, the more asynchronous the student's development tends to be.

This uneven development is often evident very early in the student's school career. Sometimes parents or other caregivers will notice the advanced development of the student before they enter school. The student may walk, talk or read before the typical milestones. This uneven development may make a student feel out of step with peers. Many parents of gifted children may observe behavioral difficulties or precocious academic development on their child's first day of preschool or kindergarten. Additionally, teachers may find a need to contact parents within the first week of school to report their student's behavior was unusual for one or more reasons. For example, a kindergarten student may have moved beyond recognizing the alphabet and is able to read and understand entire sentences or chapters in books.

School problems can arise because of the gifted student's atypical development. Miraca Gross (*Small Poppies: Highly Gifted Children in The Early Years*, 1999) found in a review of other research that approximately half of gifted children start reading on their own before they start school. When a student is cognitively functioning above grade level, it can cause them to feel unchallenged by the curriculum they already have mastered, which often results in feelings of frustration for the student. In some cases, these feelings of exasperation and impatience result in challenging behavior.

When a gifted student is expected to "act their mental or academic age" rather than their chronological age, these expectations are likely to lead to adverse outcomes for the student. Some adults may expect that a student who demonstrates advanced ability academically or in another talent area will also show a level of social or emotional maturity beyond his or her age. However, this is usually not the case. Most gifted students behave socially and emotionally like their same-age peers. Asynchronous development in gifted children often results in a child demonstrating exceptional academic advancement, or talent in another area, while emotional development is in line with that of same-age peers.

## **Forms and Expressions of Psychic Overexcitability**

Overexcitability (OE) refers to a heightened experience of, or response to, certain types of stimulation. Psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski was first to describe various OEs in his theory of positive disintegration in which one or more OEs often are present in a gifted individual and it is believed that children are born with these predispositions. There are five types of OEs, and each present differently in gifted students. They are:

- **Psychomotor:** Individuals may show marked enthusiasm for and enjoyment in fast games and sports. This OE may result in a student's misbehavior or impulsive actions. When stressed, a person with psychomotor OE may display compulsive behavior, such as excessive organizing.
- **Sensual:** These individuals experience heightened sensory pleasure and/or discomfort. Students with this OE may demonstrate an exceptional appreciation of music, language and beautiful objects, such as art, gems or jewelry. Physical pain or discomfort with socks, clothing tags or certain fabrics or textures are other markers of this OE.
- **Intellectual:** Hallmarks include asking deep, probing questions and showing intense curiosity. Individuals with this OE are often avid readers and detailed planners. They may display analytical thinking, keen observation and introspection.
- **Imaginational:** These individuals demonstrate a remarkable facility for invention and fantasy. They may perceive their own experiences in a particularly poetic or dramatic way, or even exhibit magical thinking. These individuals also commonly experience elaborate and vivid dreams.
- **Emotional:** Individuals with this OE experience intense feelings (positive and negative) and extremes of emotion in response to stimuli. These individuals easily identify with and relate to others' feelings. They often have strong affective memories and show sensitivity in relationships.

## Perfectionism

Perfectionism is defined as a combination of thoughts and behaviors associated with high standards or expectations for one's own performance. Depending on how perfectionism is channeled, it has the potential to be a productive force that promotes intense satisfaction and creative contribution, or a harmful force that brings intense frustration and paralysis.

As a group, gifted students often are more perfectionistic than average ability peers. While perfectionism can be a force for high achievement, channeling it in a positive direction can be difficult. To help direct and guide perfectionistic tendencies in gifted students, parents and educators can:

- Convey courage to the student to try new things, with a focus on effort as opposed to outcome;
- Encourage intellectual risk-taking;
- Reward attempts and persistence on challenging tasks;
- Reflect on the value of mistakes and the learning that comes from them;
- Honor the time and energy invested in the learning process without sole focus on the outcome or result; and,
- Expect progress, not perfection.

## **Myths and Realities: Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students**

(Source: Edward Amend, Psy.D., of the [Amend Group](#))

**Myth: Gifted students do not know they are gifted or different from others.**

**Reality:** Although gifted children may not know the word *gifted*, they often recognize very early that they are different from other children. They may have atypical or more intense interests, or larger vocabularies that turn off other children. Their unusual sense of humor can get them branded as “weird.” Many young gifted children feel like they are unusual because they feel so different from everyone else and no one seems to understand them. Telling children they are gifted and helping them understand their strengths and weaknesses can help them better understand these differences and to view them in a more positive light.

**Myth: Gifted students can succeed without help.**

**Reality:** This is one of the biggest myths about gifted children. However, gifted children will not necessarily be “just fine” on their own. Just as many students with disabilities require specialized educational services to meet their unique needs, many gifted students need individualized supports and services to develop appropriately and reach their full potential. Research also suggests that a gifted child’s emotional adjustment is directly related to the extent to which the child’s educational needs are addressed.

**Myth: Gifted students naturally want to be “loners.”**

**Reality:** Most gifted children do feel different from their similar-age peers and like to spend some time alone. Gifted children may seek out peers who share their interests, but these friends will not necessarily be from their own age group.

**Myth: Gifted students’ emotional stability is significantly atypical relative to other children.**

**Reality:** Although the available research shows that gifted children are as well-adjusted as other groups of children, they often experience uncharacteristic social and emotional development. The tendency toward perfectionism, the susceptibility to existential depression and the uneven or asynchronous development of the gifted child can create tension within a gifted individual, both at home and in the classroom. A mismatch between the student’s needs and the educational services provided, or from inadequate support to deal with peer and societal pressures, also can result in adjustment difficulties.

**Myth: Gifted students are more mature (or “should be” more mature) than other students their age.**

**Reality:** Regardless of exceptional talent or ability in academic or other areas, gifted children generally show the same level of emotional maturity as other children their age. Adults should not expect gifted children to demonstrate a degree of maturity beyond their years.

### **Tips for Educators**

- Learn how to recognize giftedness.
  - Kentucky statute ([KRS 157.200](#)) defines a gifted individual as an exceptional student who possesses demonstrated or potential ability to perform at an exceptionally high level in one of five areas:
    - General intellectual aptitude
    - Specific academic aptitude
    - Creative or divergent thinking
    - Psychosocial or leadership skills
    - Visual or performing arts
- Be aware that there are many myths about gifted students and seek out informed guidance.
- Foster an understanding of the unique needs and acceptance of gifted individuals' differences.
- Work together to meet the educational needs of the gifted student.
- Actively listen to the student to understand his or her needs from their perspective. Help gifted students identify and accept their talents and strengths as well as their weaknesses.
- Separate the individual's behavior from the individual.
- Avoid sarcasm as gifted students often misunderstand its use.
- Challenge gifted individuals. Provide encouragement and support as they grow.
- Encourage intellectual risk-taking and make “failure” or disappointment acceptable in certain situations. Shift the focus to emphasize the student's participation in the learning process or learning opportunity.
- Help perfectionistic students set realistic goals and strive to grow in all areas.
- Individualize to address gifted students' needs when disciplining or developing lesson plans.
- Understand that a student may not be gifted in all subjects and may not always make “A” grades. Remember that a gifted student's development and maturation may often be asynchronous and not fully align with his or her level of academic achievement.
- Avoid unnecessary power struggles.



## **Organizations and Resources for Assistance**

[The Association for the Gifted \(TAG\)](#), a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), provides support for gifted children.

[The Davidson Institute for Talent Development](#) supports the needs of profoundly gifted students and their families and provides an extensive online library.

[Kentucky Association for Gifted Education \(KAGE\)](#) supports educators across the Commonwealth by providing continuing education and advocates on behalf of gifted and talented students and their families.

[The National Association for Gifted Children \(NAGC\)](#) is a national organization supporting the needs of gifted individuals across the country.

[Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted \(SENG\)](#) is a national non-profit organization providing conferences for parents and educators, continuing education for professionals and a resource library online.

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## Additional Literature

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- Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* (By Carol S. Dweck. Ballantine Books, 2007.)
- Peak Performance for Smart Kids: Strategies and Tips for Ensuring School Success* (By Maureen Neihart. Prufrock Press, 2008.)