

The Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Children

2021 – 2022 Article Series: Adapted from *I'm Not Just Gifted* by Christine Fonseca (2015)

According to Christine Fonseca (2015), giftedness is more than high achievement as demonstrated by a student's performance on standardized intelligence and achievement assessments. Giftedness is the collective talents and traits that impact a person's cognitive abilities, personality, and social-emotional development. Over time giftedness is developed and greatly influenced by one's environment and personal identity. Drawing from over 20 years of research in gifted education, Fonseca (2015) highlights the following traits that most influence the social-emotional development of gifted students:

1. **High Performance Standards:** Gifted students often hold themselves to impossibly high standards. Not only do they hold

themselves to these high standards, they often have hidden expectations of others for exceptional performance as well. This can also be seen in a gifted student's participation in extracurricular activities as well. Having a high performance standard becomes a concern when it morphs into unhealthy perfectionism that can lead to severe procrastination or severe mood swings based on the gifted student's perception of meeting their personal standards.

2. **Internal Motivation:** This trait can be described as the ability to overcome personal adversity. It is characterized by a gifted student's ability to stay focused on his or her goals – especially those aligned to the student's area of giftedness.
3. **Emotional Intensity:** Often described as a cornerstone trait of giftedness, emotional intensity involves the gifted student's deep emotional sensitivity to themselves and the world around them. This trait can also be accompanied by perfectionism when a gifted student becomes overly self-critical if they hurt another person emotionally.
4. **Empathy:** Whereas sympathy is the action of feeling sorry for someone because of their situation; empathy is the ability to “put yourself in someone's shoes” and have an emotional connection to their situation. Some gifted students demonstrate high levels of empathy and are able to express concerns impacting our global community, such as war, the environment, and social justice.
5. **Moral Maturity:** This is the ability to demonstrate and use advanced moral judgment when faced with peer pressure to engage in acts that may compromise one's values.
6. **Self-Actualization:** This is the fulfillment of one's talents. Many gifted children have a strong desire to perform to their perceived potential.
7. **Resilience:** Many gifted children from historically underrepresented populations often display resiliency, which is the ability to “bounce back” after a setback. Because they have had to readjust to various life circumstances, “resilient children often demonstrate similar skills to gifted children, including intellectual curiosity, internal motivation, and strong problem-solving skills” (Fonseca, 2019, pg. 5).

The seven traits listed are the most often mentioned in research that addresses the social-emotional characteristics of gifted students. As a parent, understanding how to support the social and emotional needs of your advanced student will ensure that your child's affective domain aligns with their cognitive abilities. The next page provides an activity you can do at home to enhance and begin to understand the social and emotional needs of your child.



Social-Emotional Learning for Academically Gifted Students: At Home Activity

Activity: Not Just Academically Gifted!

Academic giftedness is much more than doing well in school. When a student is academically gifted, their academic talent impacts how they think, see, and interact with the world around them. As a parent, you can help your academically gifted student make sense of their feelings by providing them opportunities to reflect on their strengths, interests, and traits (such as those highlighted on page 1 of this article).

For this activity, your child will use the t-shirt template below to create a design that uses pictures and words to express how their academic talent impacts who they are not only in school but in all aspects of their life. After your child has designed their t-shirt, spend time in a one-on-one conversation with them regarding their shirt. As you listen, focus on opportunities to help your child:

- Develop a growth mindset approach to combat feelings of perfectionism or the need to always “be right”.
- Hear your personal stories of when you had similar feelings.
- Learn how to use the strengths they see in themselves to shore up areas that they feel they can improve.
- Find ways to use their academic talent outside of the classroom to address community issues.

