



## Musings: Gifted children and the gift of friendship

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In this article, Dr. Miraca Gross explains the different kinds of friendships and relationships between average ability children and gifted children. She covers what gifted children expect from friends compared to what children of average ability expect. Also discussed is how these different expectations sometimes cause disappointment for gifted children.

The need for friendship is a driving force in both children and adults. However, even though you and I may be friends, we may have quite different expectations of the relationship. Furthermore, we may not be aware of how much our expectations differ.

There are gradations within the concept of friendship, as indeed there are within the concept of love. One partner in a relationship may define the relationship as friendship while the other views it as acquaintance; one may experience it as love while the other perceives it as friendship. This can lead to problems!

For the last three years I have been studying the conceptions of friendship held by children and young adolescents in primary, elementary, and middle school. The expectations of friendship held by intellectually gifted students differ significantly from those of their age-peers of average ability. Indeed, the conceptions of friendship held by exceptionally and profoundly gifted students (children of IQ 160+) bear little resemblance to those held by the considerable majority of children with whom they are likely to be grouped for purposes of instruction and, ironically, for purposes of socialization.

Both in Australia, where I live, and in the United States, the policy documents developed by schools objectives for the student population, but also desirable affective outcomes including high self-esteem, self reliance, positive attitudes towards schooling, and healthy "socialization." However, few policies acknowledge that the development of warm and facilitative friendships is a necessary precursor to the achievement. The majority of teachers assume that children form friendships naturally and without assistance, and that if an individual child displays difficulties in socialization, the fault must lie within the child.

By contrast, research on social relationships in childhood and adulthood suggests that problems in forming friendships may originate not so much from within the individual as from differences between the individual and other members of the groups with whom he or she is required to learn, work, or socialize.

Loneliness does not come from having no people about one, but from being unable to communicate to others the things that seem important to oneself, or from holding certain views which others find inadmissible . . . If a man knows more than others, he becomes lonely.

(Jung, 1989, p. 356)

Children's friendships: What do we know?

Research studies over many years have shown us that children tend to choose friends on the basis of similarities in mental age, rather than chronological age. When intellectually gifted children look for friends, they tend to gravitate towards other gifted children of approximately their own age or older children who may not be quite as bright as they are but who are still of above average ability. As Jung would acknowledge, they are seeking children with whom they can talk about "the things that seem important to oneself." The interests--indeed the passions--of gifted children can sometimes seem quite inexplicable to their age-peers.

Previous international studies--for example, that of Selman (1981)--have found that children's conceptions of friendship develop in stages and are hierarchical and age-related. Children in the first few years of school tend to have rather egocentric views of friendship; a friend is seen as someone who meets their needs. The capacity to move beyond one's own needs and perceptions, and see one's friend as an individual with her own needs and values, does not generally develop until around the age of 9. The perception of friendship as an intimate and mutually rewarding relationship which allows friends to draw strength from each other and contribute to each other's emotional growth does not, in general, develop until around age 12.

However, these studies of children's conceptions of friendship were conducted largely with children of average intellectual ability. The researchers did not investigate whether intellectually gifted children pass through the stages of friendship conception at the same ages, or at the same speed as children of average ability.

Similarly, research has established that boys and girls in the pre-adolescent years tend to have different expectations of friendship, with girls reporting higher levels of intimacy, trust, and loyalty than do boys in same-sex best-friendships. However, once again, these friendship studies focused on children of a wide range of ability and no attempt was made to investigate whether intellectually gifted girls or boys differed in their expectations of friendship from their same-sex age-peers.

What do gifted children seek from friendship?

My own studies, undertaken with 700 children aged 5-12, have investigated whether children's conceptions of and expectations of friendship are determined by chronological age or by mental age. The study surveyed, through a standardized questionnaire, conceptions of friendship held by children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children, and highly gifted children. It was expected to compare children with intellectually gifted children from

gifted children, and highly gifted children. I was interested in exploring whether intellectually gifted children have conceptions of friendship which are more mature than those held by their age-peers. I was also interested in whether the gender differences observed in the general population translated into the gifted population.

The study confirmed that children's conceptions of friendship do indeed form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations and beliefs about friendship becoming more sophisticated and complex with age. The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

**Stage 1: Play partner** In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on "play-partnership." A friend is seen as someone who engages the child in play and permits the child to use or borrow her playthings.

**Stage 2: People to chat to** The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between "friends" are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged.

**Stage 3: Help and encouragement** At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support, or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; the child does not yet see himself as having the obligation to provide help or support in return.

**Stage 4: Intimacy/empathy** The child now realizes that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flows both ways, and, indeed, the giving of affection as well as receiving it becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy, an emotional sharing and bonding.

**Stage 5: The sure shelter** The title comes from a passage in one of the books of the Old Testament that doesn't appear in standard Bibles. "A faithful friend is a sure shelter: whoever finds one has found a rare treasure" (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity, and unconditional acceptance.

However, children of differing intellectual abilities pass through the five stages and at different ages at different rates. This study demonstrated strongly that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age but by mental age. A strong relationship was found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. Gifted children were beginning to look for friends with whom they could develop close and trusting friendships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability were looking for play partners.

The differences between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the primary school years and in the early years of elementary school than in the later years. In grades 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children have the conceptions of friendship which characterize average ability children three or more years older.

As stated earlier, many previous studies have suggested that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age or older children of above average ability. The present study suggests that the intellectual compatibility of mental age-peers; they may also be looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

Many years ago the psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926) noted that the social isolation experienced by many highly gifted children was most acute between the ages of 4 and 9. The present study strongly supports Hollingworth's findings. Children of IQ 160+ tend to begin the search for "the sure shelter"---friendships of complete trust and honesty---four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage. Indeed, in this study exceptionally and profoundly gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12.

As might have been expected, substantial gender differences were noticed. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls were, on average, significantly further along the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. Exceptionally gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability, as they will appear so dramatically different from the majority of boys their age. This may explain why, in the early years of school, highly gifted boys sometimes prefer the company of girls.

It is ironic that schools in Australia and the United States so seldom develop ability grouped programs for gifted students in the early years and that teachers are so reluctant to allow young gifted children to grade advance. This study suggests that it is in the earlier grades, rather than the upper grades, that placement with chronological peers, without regard to intellectual ability or emotional maturity, is more likely to result in the gifted child experiencing loneliness or social isolation.

In an earlier edition of *Understanding Our Gifted* (Gross, 1998), I told of the plight of 8-year-old Tessa. Her first three years of school had been deeply unhappy. She was extremely bored in class and completed little of the repetitive and undemanding work that was presented to her, escaping in her imagination to a fantasy country which she peopled with great composers and writers such as Beethoven and Tolkien. She was friendless and socially rejected. Her teacher interpreted her inability to form productive social relationships with other children as emotional immaturity. Actually, like many highly gifted children, she had already passed through the stages of friendship development appropriate to her chronological age, and was already seeking the trust and affective bonding that characterizes close friendships between girls several years older.

When Tessa's teacher looked at her frequently incomplete work and her seemingly inept attempts to bond with other children, what she thought saw was a "clingy" child with learning difficulties, and she recommended that Tessa repeat 3rd grade. Fortunately, the principal decided that Tessa should be IQ tested. The test revealed a child who was functioning intellectually at the level of a 12-year-old. Grade advancement and placement in a special class for academically gifted students gave Tessa access to challenging work and the companionship of other girls who thought and felt as she did.

Tessa is a musician. She described her newfound, but deeply important friendship with two other highly gifted girls

as "Something like a D major chord. Each of us is a separate note, but when you put us together something beautiful and better happens."

The sure shelter of true friendship is, perhaps, the greatest gift we can offer to a gifted child.

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