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# Asynchrony: A New Definition of Giftedness

January 23, 2007

Asynchrony, a relatively new way of looking at giftedness, has deep historical roots. Leta Stetter Hollingworth, the foremother of gifted education, viewed giftedness as a set of complex psychological issues arising out of the disparities between these children's mental and chronological ages. Hollingworth established that the farther removed children are from the average in intelligence, the more pressing their adjustment problems become. As IQ increases, so do difficulties with peer relations. Lewis Terman recognized this issue as well:

Underachievers are highly asynchronous, with large gaps between their strengths and weaknesses.

Precocity unavoidably complicates the problem of social adjustment. The child of eight years with a mentality of twelve or fourteen is faced with a situation almost inconceivably difficult. In order to adjust normally such a child has to have an exceptionally well-balanced personality and to be well neigh a social genius. The higher the IQ, the more acute the problem.

Jean-Charles Terrassier, a French psychologist, coined the term "dyssynchrony" to describe the psychological and social ramifications of the uneven development of gifted children. The Columbus Group created a more extensive definition of giftedness as *asynchronous development*, encompassing Hollingworth's and Terrassier's concepts of the impact of uneven development on awareness and social adjustment. In addition, it incorporated Dabrowski's notion of the intensities (overexcitabilities) that beset the gifted personality throughout the lifespan.

Asynchrony means being out-of-sync within oneself (uneven development), out-of-sync with age mates and the expectations of the classroom, having heightened emotions and awareness, and being vulnerable, due to all of these developmental and psychological differences from the norm. Here is the exact definition:

Giftedness is **asynchronous development** in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching, and counseling in order for them to develop optimally.

All gifted children are more advanced mentally than others of the same chronological age, and most have disparities between their intellectual abilities (as indicated by mental age) and their physical abilities (closely aligned to chronological age). The definition focuses on the vulnerability of the gifted child. To have the mental maturity of a 14 year old and the physical maturity of an 8 year old poses a unique set of challenges analogous to those which face the child with a 14-year-old body and an 8-year-old mind.

Asynchrony intensifies as IQ increases, because of the greater discrepancy between the child's mental and chronological ages. Asynchrony also increases with increased discrepancies between strengths and weaknesses. The construct of asynchronous development is particularly applicable to gifted children with learning disabilities. The most asynchronous children are twice exceptional, as they have the largest disparities in their development. Many have extraordinary visual-spatial strengths, combined with auditory-sequential weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling, and calculation, which prevent them from being seen as gifted within achievement-based school contexts. Underachievers are highly asynchronous, with large gaps between their strengths and weaknesses. Many underachievers are actually twice exceptional, having learning or behavioral difficulties as well as giftedness.

The concept of giftedness as asynchrony is useful in attempting to gain support for the gifted. As most other definitions equate giftedness with high achievement, special programs often sound like more advantages for an already-advantaged group. The perennial concern about elitism is bypassed by adopting this perspective. Asynchrony is not a competitive concept. More asynchrony is not better. It is a way of viewing giftedness as a set of qualitative differences that need to be addressed at home and at school.

—Linda Kreger Silverman, PhD

Linda Kreger Silverman is the director of the Institute for the Study of Advanced Development and its subsidiary, the Gifted Development Center, in Denver, Colorado.

## Web sites

- [www.gifteddevelopment.com](http://www.gifteddevelopment.com) (<http://www.gifteddevelopment.com>)
- [www.visualspatial.org](http://www.visualspatial.org) (<http://www.visualspatial.org>)

## By the Author

- *Counseling the Gifted and Talented*, by Linda Kreger Silverman (Ed.). Love, 1993
- *Upside-Down Brilliance: the Visual-Spatial Learner*, by Linda Kreger Silverman, DeLeon, 2002.

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