



JAN FORD MUSTIN, PH.D.

## THE SPECIAL NEEDS OF THE GIFTED AND TALENTED

By

**Jan Ford Mustin, Ph.D.**

Perhaps one of the most under-served groups of children and adolescents in our society is that of the Gifted and Talented. This special group is defined as those children who enjoy a high performance capability in intellectual, creative, or artistic areas, leadership ability, or specific academic fields. The problem of this group's being under-served may stem from the myth that gifted children are better adjusted, more popular, and happier than children without such remarkable attributes. The corollary to this fact is that gifted or talented children are faced with their own set of unique challenges related to acceptance with peers, self-esteem, motivation, creativity and achievement.

While it is assumed that most gifted children are happy and well-adjusted, sometimes the opposite may be true. Special abilities and gifts can bring childhood experiences that are painful and stressful and adjustment problems may occur because these children may not fit in well with their peers. Similarly, gifted children often embrace perfectionistic standards in addition to competitiveness and may not only suffer from anxiety, harsh self-judgment, but rejection from peers as well. Some claim that the Gifted and Talented child seems to live as though a little adult, missing the carefree and playful days of childhood and growing up too soon. Once believed to be exempt from adjustment challenges and emotional pain, the gifted and talented child deserves and needs our attention, understanding and our care.

Parents and educators of the highly intelligent, creative child are often at a loss as to how to provide them with the stimulating and challenging educational opportunities that help them develop at an optimal level. This may owe partly to the fact that our society has focused for over forty years on the special needs of the disadvantaged child, the ethnic minority or the child with special needs, such as the learning disabled, mentally retarded or other health-impaired. As early as the 1970's national legislation mandated the provision of an equivalent education for all children, regardless of ability or handicap (Public Law 94-142). Since the Gifted and Talented child has been perceived to be advantaged, rather than disadvantaged, and the unchallenged assumption has been that they present no particular demand for customized educational opportunities. As a result, serving these children has lagged behind serving children with other learning abilities.

With advances in Neuroscience and diagnostic research, we are coming to understand that the reality of the Gifted and Talented children is especially complex, requiring study and understanding in order that we respond appropriately to their unique needs. In order to help these children develop to potential, we must first recognize the challenges and problems they experience.

Beyond adjustment issues, parents, educators and clinicians are also faced with advanced diagnostic challenges with the very bright child. For example, frequently, these children have been referred for testing and treatment related to behaviors that mimic attentional disorders such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. A highly accomplished child is often quite restless, impulsive and given to day-dreaming and high activity levels. The genesis for these behaviors, however, must be determined and great care exercised in order that the child not be given a false positive diagnosis for AD/HD. Beyond the cluster of symptoms known as AD/HD, characteristics of the Gifted and Talented child may mimic numerous other diagnostic categories. Fortunately, advances in Neuro-imaging such as the Quantitative Electroencephalogram (QEEG) and other precision diagnostic tools are making it possible for an accurate diagnosis to be made.

As a clinician providing both diagnostic and treatment services, it has been my frequent observation that very young Gifted and Talented children present with uneven development in their intellectual assessments as well as their social development. Typically, these children experience adjustment problems with both social and academic repercussions. The unevenness of their intellectual assessment may suggest that they may suffer from a Nonverbal Learning Disorder or even Asperger's Disorder. Concerned parents and educators rely on our expert clinical skills to provide them with differential diagnostics that accurately sort out their child's giftedness from what might be confused with a disorder.

Adjustment issues continue as a child matures into the latency ages and beyond. I have found that youngsters in their early teenage years often experience a particular set of problems related to their considerable talents. These children and teens are sometimes singled out, even bullied or scapegoated and may really struggle with feeling alienated from their peers. Rather than allow these youngsters to be misdiagnosed or misunderstood, it is incumbent upon parents and professionals to help them understand their talents and develop coping strategies to help them make a proactive adjustment to their world.

At the Peak Performance Institute we have the privilege of working with a disproportionate number of Gifted and Talented youth and adults. Since it is our belief that every individual is best served when the focus is on potential rather than deficit, our positive, goal-oriented approach appeals to parents of the Gifted and Talented. Similarly, a high percentage of our clients are either star athletes or competitive in gymnastics, cheer or other activities. Our programs for treatment are designed to help the youngster reach their potential rather than approximate "normal."

Each individual presents with unique gifts, regardless of their level of achievement or capacity. Therefore, we customize our programs and tailor them for each person with his or her presenting challenges and goals in mind. Starting with precision diagnostic information from a Neuropsychological Evaluation and Peak Performance Profile we provide accurate diagnostics and make treatment recommendations to help each individual reach unique goals of adjustment, achievement, productivity and fulfillment.

Among the components of our Gifted and Talented Program that we frequently recommend for the capable individual are the following:

- Individual psychotherapy for taking ownership of one's gifts and related challenges
- Small group psychotherapy for peer adjustment issues and building self-esteem
- Cognitive Training, computer-assisted with therapist
- Meta-cognitive Skills Training
- Creativity Therapy (art and music-assisted)
- Divergent Thinking Development
- Stress Management, Clinical Hypnosis and Brainwave Entrainment Exercises
- EEG Neurotherapy (EEG Biofeedback or Brainwave Biofeedback with therapy)

All of our programs are criterion-referenced and progress is monitored with preliminary, intermediary and final evaluations. We also recognize parents as the most important sources of guidance for their children and as the "therapists in residence." We collaborate with parents of the children we serve to coordinate their care in a consistent manner to ensure an optimal outcome. The success of our Gifted and Talented programs owes largely to the coordination with parents and teachers of the activities and treatments that we implement for each child.

If you have any questions about our programs for the Gifted and Talented, please feel free to speak with me. Our program development is always evolving and improving as we incorporate the advances in technology, education and philosophy.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Dr. Jan Ford Mustin has over twenty-nine years experience as a Licensed Psychologist in private practice. She also holds licenses as a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist, a Licensed Professional Counselor and Licensed Chemical Dependency Counselor. Dr. Mustin enjoyed teaching in both the public and the private schools before becoming a psychologist. Her keen interest in the unique needs of the Gifted and Talented child stem from her own background as a high achiever. She is bilingual in English and Spanish and holds advanced degrees in Spanish Culture as well as Spanish Literature from the University of Madrid. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa with the highest grade point in the College of Arts and Science at the University of Arkansas. A poet, author and public speaker, she completed her Doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin in two and one half years with a four point GPA..*

Copyright 2007. All Rights Reserved by Mustin & Associates.