

Daimon Institute for the Highly Gifted

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Author(s): P. Susan Jackson

Source: Davidson Institute for Talent Development

Like all children profoundly gifted children have essential needs for connecting to others, for being understood, for expressing and exploring feelings and ideas, for reciprocal exchange and for friendship. The exceptional nature of PG children and their rarity in the population, however, generates inordinate socio-affective needs and unique challenges that must be addressed to insure full and optimal development.

Extraordinary Capacity and Multiple Dimensions of Development

Profoundly gifted children are endowed with extraordinary, global, integrative mental capacities. This brings into being a multifaceted dynamic which includes but is certainly not limited to extraordinary intellect. Rather, this uncommon capacity manifests as a particular developmental reality that affects all aspects of their being including intellectual, social, emotional, moral, physical and spiritual dimensions.

Social and Emotional Functioning is Nested in a Rich Developmental Matrix

The field of integral psychology has identified over two dozen developmental lines central to human experience. These include but are not limited to morals, affects, self-identity, psychosexuality, cognition, ideas of the good, role taking, socio-emotional capacity, creativity, altruism, several lines that could be called spiritual (including care, openness, concern, religious faith, meditative stage) joy, communicative competence, modes of time and space, world-views, logicio-mathematical competence, kinesthetic skills, gender identity and empathy.

It is critical to note that all aspects of a person's make up undergo development. All of these developmental lines unfold in a developmental or stage-like sequence and true stages cannot be skipped. All of these lines are relatively independent existing in certain "necessary but not sufficient" patterns. For example, empirical research has demonstrated that physiological development is necessary but not sufficient for cognitive development, which is necessary but not sufficient for interpersonal development, which is necessary but not sufficient for moral development, which is necessary but not sufficient for ideas of the good. A person can be very advanced in some lines, medium in others and low in still others all at the same time.

Asynchrony in the context of multiple developmental lines

In 1991 the Columbus group defined giftedness as:

"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

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Not to be reproduced without the Express written permission of the Author – P. Susan Jackson

in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally." (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Asynchrony refers to being out of sync internally and/or externally. All things being equal, the brighter the child, the greater the potential there is for asynchrony to be at work. Asynchronous development accounts for the state of the profoundly gifted child who develops cognitively at a much faster rate than s/he does physically. If we broaden the scope of this definition beyond advanced cognitive abilities to include all two dozen lines of development we have an appropriate context to consider the social and emotional development of the PG child.

Consider the ways in which identity, cognition, ideas of the good and social-emotional capacity are interpenetrating and interdependent aspects of growth. There is a driving force in all human beings to develop an interpersonal dimension. As a profoundly gifted person I need access to correspondingly capable individuals who process mentally in comparable ways and at a similar rate to me. Full development requires full interaction. Full interaction is dependent upon communicative capacity which is dependent, at least in part, upon cognitive capacity which in turn is dependent upon original capacity or natural endowment. As stated earlier physiological development is necessary but not sufficient for cognitive development, which is necessary but not sufficient for interpersonal development, which is necessary but not sufficient for moral development, which is necessary but not sufficient for ideas of the good.

Evidence of these interdependent relationships underscores the need for profoundly gifted children to have access to people, resources, contexts and experiences commensurate with their extraordinary integrative mental capacities. To develop social and emotional capacities our PG children have a critical need for role models, encouragement and modeling, information and meaningful appropriate learning opportunities.

The Dynamic of Development and the Role of the Self in the Lives of the Profoundly Gifted

The rich potential of profoundly gifted children and their unmitigated need to experience completely all aspects of their developing person creates a distinctive and penetrating experience of life. The PG child is compelled to reflect, to deliberate, to know, to question, to create, to connect, to penetrate, to challenge and to make manifest complex desires and deepest knowing. S/he may toil tirelessly to master a musical instrument, a mathematical theorem, the nuance of watercolor on clean canvas, the origins of a culture, codes in a complex program. On the communicative front some PG children may debate (endlessly), be moved to stillness by the language of poetry, respond to differences in verbal tone, in cadence, in emphasis, delight in complex language, and thirst for recognition of nonverbal nuances in the most basic of human exchanges. These are all attempts to develop aspects of their complex being, to make manifest his/her unique blueprint.

In their heroic quest toward full spectrum living – engaging all aspects of the developing being -- PG children may experience annoyances and deep frustration, awe, inexorable perceptions and insights, complex original fantasy images and deep connections to others and ideals. These are normal occurrences needing acknowledgement and healthy expression. There is an enlivening, animating quality to these complex intellectual and emotional experiences that has the possibility of being creative and transformative.

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Not to be reproduced without the Express written permission of the Author – P. Susan Jackson

There is most often an absolute and compelling quality to this core generative quality; the need to create and to know and to experience deeply is the hallmark of the PG person. These experiences serve as an undeniable call to manifest the child's inner core – the self. The PG child can appear undeterred and to the outside world, seemingly incomprehensible. Overall this lived experience is an undeniable call towards self-understanding and self-realization. **The engagement of this self- the integrative force in the developmental matrix of the profoundly gifted child -- is the goal towards which all psychic life is aimed.**

Three Core Needs for Integral Development of the Self of the Profoundly Gifted Child

The three invariant elements feature in a full and healthy development of the profoundly gifted child. The PG child has deep needs for the following:

1. Communion ~ A Crucible for the SELF

Complex, in-depth needs for meaningful reciprocal spiritual, emotional and intellectual exchange.

Experienced by the child as a feeling of "I am known and I am connected and I am connecting"

Intellectual, emotional and "gift-related" exchange are all sought under the banner of communion needs

Communion is life sustaining, invigorating and essential for development of all life forces and for all aspects of development.

2. Knowledge ~ Food for the SELF

The know and comprehend the nature and the meaning of phenomena from the material to the metaphysical

To understand phenomena, self, others, the Kosmos

Self-knowledge or agency is also essential to development; agency is necessary for the communion exchange

3. Expression ~ Renders the SELF as manifestation in the world

Transforming ideas into words, art form, thing or movement

The act of manifesting perception of experience internally or externally for self or others

The Relationship between Communion, Agency and the Developing Self

In order to develop fully as a profoundly gifted person I must be able to identify, access, and express my core self. It is necessary that I have access to people and environments that can recognize respond and anticipate aspects of my developing self. There are two major forces which must be in balance for me to activate all aspects of my development in relationship to other people and the world. They are agency and communion.

The distinctive feature of agency is self-preservation. Agency refers to our autonomy or wholeness. It is indicated by the sense of Self as an enduring pattern. Agency is revealed by the experience of coherence. If I have developed agency I have the sense that I can preserve my individual, stable and relatively autonomous pattern even during times of rapid growth or disintegrative experience.

Gifted persons experience agency in an inner life of indeterminate fullness and rich activity. Profoundly gifted persons experience agency as dynamic, organic, full of tension and tendency. It is expressed in deep compulsions, deep affiliations and accord with particular people, experiences, and knowledge. Gifted children may be described as undeterred, willful, or unyielding as they explore and validate this essential and

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Not to be reproduced without the Express written permission of the Author – P. Susan Jackson

deepest sense of self. **Agency is my “suchness”: my idiosyncratic interests, tendencies, driving purpose.**

Communion is the natural balance to agency. **Communion can be described as my “partness”.** Communion involves a relational exchange with the environment. Communion refers to our participatory, bonding or joining tendencies. Communion is an essential force as all organisms exist by virtue of their interlinking relationships or context. The essential stuff of communion requires the capacity to register, accommodate and fit into an existing environment. As a gifted person my need for communion – to participate, register and be registered – is as integral to my well-being as any other person. Communion is an irreducible need: I cannot grow, learn or flourish without efficacious communion.

Too much agency or self-preservation will cause me to experience deep alienation; I will be repressing my innate and life-giving capacities for relatedness and connection. Too much communion or self-adaptation will cause me to feel indistinct or negatively fused with my environments. I will feel at a loss; unable to distinguish my sense of self from the environment.

The Uncommon Communion Tendencies of Gifted Individuals

As a gifted person, likely from birth, I am faced with tremendous challenges in fully engaging my communion capacities. As a profoundly gifted person my communion capacities differ from others in many ways. I may register depths, nuances and rhythms in communicative exchanges that are literally unavailable to others in my environment. I may be completely unaware of this difference in my communicative capacity and enormously frustrated in my attempts to engage and breathe life into my intentions. I may glean insights and make leaps in both intellectual and emotional understanding that surpass the perceptions of those around me. For best developmental response I will need people around whose heightened awareness and capacity to model respectful, responsive and valid exchange is intact and operative.

There is an explicit hierarchy to the communion phenomenon. Communion exists at many levels of human functioning, in different ways in varying milieus. In first order communion, for instance, common interests, shared knowledge or common purpose provide a basis for shared experience, common understandings, mutuality. First order communion is extremely important for overall development as it provides a vital and valid context for ordinary human exchange.

The Order of Communion

First Order Communion

Communion involving common interests, shared knowledge, common purpose. Important for overall development; often the precursor for second and third order communion

Second Order Communion

Communion involving reciprocal exchange having a strong emotional content. An irreducible need for advanced human development of any kind; the basis for deep motivation in learning and in spiritual development

Third Order Communion

Deep connection, sense of oneness with a person, place, experience or entity

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Not to be reproduced without the Express written permission of the Author – P. Susan Jackson

Considered by many traditions to be evidence of the highest of human callings, the most advanced of human functioning; the stuff of the mystic, the sage, the great thinkers, great artists, physicists and philosophers
Strategies for Finding Communion and Developing Meaningful Community

First Order Communion

Creation of family or group ritual, celebrations, shared meaningful practice: expectancy, constancy and novelty balanced

If you live/learn in the home/classroom you participate in the home/classroom : responsibility, creativity, tasks, systems of action

Sharing hobbies of interest, planting a communal garden, celebrating seasonal turns or the celestial happenings, bake chocolate chip cookies: access to the immediate and wider natural and human created communities we exist in

Be open to and support, within reason, the expressed interests of the child: some interests may fizzle, others may become all consuming. Allow for discovery and experimentation without censure

Provide avenues and support for community service, outreach opportunities: mentors and independent study, service or products that are meaningful and useful

Second Order Communion

Respect the uniqueness and idiosyncratic nature of the gifted learner's passions and/or deep interests

Listen to the child and provide unstructured, free time to explore, on their own and with others

Gifted children in our product/materially driven culture need encouragement to and validation for the creation of "inner space": a knowing of self and a clearing of mind that is peaceful, recuperative and highly integrative. This may be simple relaxation strategies that the child develops or more structured meditations, prayers or other body-mind practices

Search for and provide consistent access to people who are like-minded and motivated to interact in meaningful ways; these may be unconventional in terms of age/status

Encourage and model respectful, authentic, reciprocal interactions with like-minded others; the gifted child may be anxious and lacking in skills for authentic relating

Allow the gifted learner time, space and opportunity to truly "sink into their passions": unusual practices of creative initiation and an extremely focused process of engagement may result

Students need to know and be encouraged to value themselves "beyond their intellect/product"; the risk taking and intuitive knowing that is part of second order communion may be unsettling to the uninitiated

Third Order Communion

Many developmentally advanced gifted children have or will develop experiences of oneness with the human, material and non-material realms

It is common for some exceptionally aware children to feel deep compassion for others, for animals, for the earth; they may feel bliss, they may feel anxiety, they may feel inordinately responsible for things as they are or things as they should be

It is common for the exceptionally aware child to long for deeper understandings and reflection of this undeniable way of being and becoming

We can support this children through practices of prayer, meditation, advocacy skills, advocacy practices and avenues to effect change, quiet listening and acceptance of their uncommon understandings

An Integral approach to the Social and Emotional Development of the Profoundly Gifted

Not to be reproduced without the Express written permission of the Author – P. Susan Jackson

Spiritual practice for the PG child (i.e. reading, meditation, prayer, service) may need to be moderated, to promote healthy, timely growth of this transpersonal way of being. There must be a balance in the growing person for healthy development to occur. Temperance and grounding mechanisms are essential for healthy unfolding of this potential. There may be great benefit in the child having access to mentors or “elders”