

BRIGHT, COMPLEX KIDS



Supporting
Their Social
and Emotional
Development

Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

Daniel B. Peters, Ph.D.



PRAISE FOR BRIGHT, COMPLEX KIDS

“Peterson and Peters have written a practical guide exploring the topics that are most important in learning about, and understanding, bright children. I always know a resource book is valuable when reading it makes me think about students I know and how it would help them make better sense of themselves. Educators, parents, and mental health professionals will learn more about what bright students need from us and can use ideas from this book to support and nurture increased self-awareness in gifted youth. The authors help us to discern pitfalls of misdiagnosing what it truly is that these young people need us to know about them, so that they may ‘be seen’ and thrive.”

—Terry Bradley, M.A., gifted education consultant and past president,
Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented

“In *Bright, Complex Kids*, gifted education experts Drs. Jean Sunde Peterson and Daniel B. Peters combine their vast experience and wisdom as practitioners and scholars to coauthor a fantastic resource for parents and others invested in understanding the unique social and emotional needs and concerns of high-ability youth. Engaging, informative, and practical, this book will surely be a favorite on the readers’ bookshelf. Filled with keen insights, useful suggestions and strategies, and relevant case examples that bring the content to life, *Bright, Complex Kids* is a treasure trove of information and truly a delight to read. I don’t like this book—I LOVE it!”

— Michelle C. Muratori, Ph.D., senior counselor at Johns Hopkins
Center for Talented Youth and faculty associate at Johns Hopkins School of Education

“Great things happen when a well-respected scholar joins a clinical psychologist in collaborating on a project that involves a shared passion. Peterson and Peters have done just that. Through their insights, shared experiences, and scholarship, the authors bring a deep understanding of how to support the social and emotional development of highly able children and teens. Grounded in contemporary theory and research, filled with practical suggestions for teachers, counselors, and families, and delivered in an accessible writing style, *Bright, Complex Kids* will serve as an informative resource for all who work with children and teens with high ability.”

—Thomas P. Hébert, Ph.D., professor, Gifted and Talented Education, University of South Carolina

“*Bright, Complex Kids* is the book I have been waiting for! Written by two esteemed names in gifted education, this book shares with us combined treasures of wisdom from two colleagues who have grown a lasting friendship around both their shared and divergent experiences with bright and gifted children, adolescents, and adults. While predominantly a book for parents, any counselor, teacher or other caregiver will find this beautifully written and highly readable book full of helpful information, touching case studies, seasoned insight, and encouraging guidance for understanding and nurturing the bright and gifted they care about and love. Each chapter is a gem, and the combined work is an exceptionally rich and welcoming read. I cannot wait to tell my colleagues, friends, students and clients about this book!”

—Debra Mishak, Ph.D., PSC, Winona State University,
and private practitioner counseling gifted and talented teens and adults

“*Bright, Complex Kids* is a gift to the field of gifted education. Within the pages of their book, Dr. Peterson and Dr. Peters offer educators, clinical professionals, and caregivers a masterful course in understanding and nurturing the affective needs of high-ability children. Their book is filled with gentle reminders and research-based strategies (many informed by their own research) that will help adults truly open themselves to learning about the complex nature of high ability. Through a nonjudgmental and strengths-focused approach, the authors guide adults in how to meaningfully engage and interact with high-ability children. They offer hands-on strategies that are intended not only to empower bright, complicated kids, but also the caring adults in their lives.”

—Jennifer A. Ritchotte, Ph.D., associate professor, co-coordinator of Gifted & Talented Graduate Programs, and director of the Center for Gifted and Talented Education, University of Northern Colorado, and coauthor of *Start Seeing and Serving Underserved Gifted Students*

“Jean Peterson and Dan Peters have created an important book with practical advice for parents and teachers about authentically relating to gifted children and youth and helping them with their emotional issues. *Bright, Complex Kids* is a unique blend of the authors’ counseling and clinical insights, embedded in Jean Peterson’s stellar empirical research. The authors urge readers to learn from the children themselves and ‘embrace their awesome complexity.’ Highlights of the book are Jean’s asset-burden paradox and Dan’s Worry Monster. This excellent resource should be in every doctor’s office and is recommended for parent book clubs.”

—Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D., licensed psychologist, founder, Gifted Development Center/ISAD

“Jean Peterson and Dan Peters have spent decades working with—and *learning from*—bright and complex kids. This book synthesizes their knowledge and compassionate understanding to provide insights into the hearts, minds, and experiences of these bright, talented, and creative youth. The two authors share stories from the lives of the children they have worked with, and they provide resources, recommendations, and guidance for those who know, care about, love—and sometimes are confounded by—them. I can’t recommend this book highly enough!”

—Dr. Susan Daniels, cofounder and educational director of Summit Center, associate dean of Bridges Graduate School, and author of *Visual Learning and Teaching*

BRIGHT, COMPLEX KIDS



Supporting
Their Social
and Emotional
Development

Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

Daniel B. Peters, Ph.D.

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



Copyright © 2021 by Jean Sunde Peterson and Daniel B. Peters

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. Unless otherwise noted, no part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher, except for brief quotations or critical reviews. For more information, go to freespirit.com/permissions.

Free Spirit, Free Spirit Publishing, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Teacher Created Materials. A complete listing of our logos and trademarks is available at freespirit.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Peterson, Jean Sunde, 1941– author. | Peters, Daniel B., 1970– author.

Title: Bright, complex kids : supporting their social and emotional development / Jean Sunde Peterson and Daniel B. Peters.

Description: Minneapolis, MN : Free Spirit Publishing, 2021. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020049198 (print) | LCCN 2020049199 (ebook) | ISBN 9781631985867 (paperback) |

ISBN 9781631985874 (pdf) | ISBN 9781631985881 (epub)

Subjects: LCSH: Gifted children—Education. | Gifted children—Counseling of. | Affective education.

Classification: LCC LC3993.2 .P479 2021 (print) | LCC LC3993.2 (ebook) | DDC 371.95—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020049198>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020049199>

ISBN: 978-1-63198-586-7

Free Spirit Publishing does not have control over or assume responsibility for author or third-party websites and their content. At the time of this book's publication, all facts and figures cited within are the most current available. All telephone numbers, addresses, and website URLs are accurate and active; all publications, organizations, websites, and other resources exist as described in this book; and all have been verified as of September 2020. If you find an error or believe that a resource listed here is not as described, please contact Free Spirit Publishing. Parents, teachers, and other adults: We strongly urge you to monitor children's use of the internet.

Edited by Christine Zuchora-Walske

Cover and interior design by Shannon Pourciau

Free Spirit Publishing

An imprint of Teacher Created Materials

9850 51st Avenue North, Suite 100

Minneapolis, MN 55442

(612) 338-2068

help4kids@freespirit.com

freespirit.com



Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
Why We Wrote This Book.....	2
About This Book.....	4
How to Use This Book.....	7
CHAPTER 1: RECOGNIZING THEM	8
What Do the Labels Mean?.....	9
Who Gets the Label?.....	10
Determining Eligibility.....	12
Many Are Missed.....	15
Cultural Values.....	17
Points to Ponder.....	18
CHAPTER 2: MAKING SENSE OF THEM	19
The Asset-Burden Paradox.....	20
A Highly Idiosyncratic Population.....	23
Universal Developmental Tasks, Experienced Differently.....	23
Points to Ponder.....	27
CHAPTER 3: LEARNING FROM THEM	28
Paying Attention.....	29
Giving Up Some Control.....	29
Not Communicating as Peers.....	30
Making Personal Connections.....	30
Developing Skills for Listening and Responding.....	31
Ethics.....	38
Points to Ponder.....	39
CHAPTER 4: ACHIEVING AND UNDERACHIEVING	40
High Achievers.....	42
High-Ability Underachievers.....	44
Points to Ponder.....	48

CHAPTER 5: STAYING OPTIMISTIC ABOUT UNDERACHIEVEMENT	49
Learning Gradually About Bright Kids.....	51
Developmental Studies of Underachievement.....	53
Points to Ponder.....	61
CHAPTER 6: LIVING ON THE EDGES, TWICE-EXCEPTIONALLY	63
Definition	64
Impact at School.....	65
Common 2e Diagnostic Labels.....	65
What to Look For.....	66
Testing.....	68
Goals and Strategies.....	70
Guidelines.....	72
Well-Being.....	73
Points to Ponder.....	74
CHAPTER 7: WORRYING.....	75
The Worry Monster.....	78
Types of Anxiety and Worry.....	79
Approaches and Strategies.....	81
Points to Ponder.....	84
CHAPTER 8: FEARING FAILURE: PERFECTIONISM	86
What Perfectionism Might Look Like.....	87
Workshops and Small-Group Discussions: Opportunities to Inquire.....	88
Developmental Perspectives.....	90
Strategies and Approaches.....	93
Points to Ponder.....	97
CHAPTER 9: FEELING, STRUGGLING, HIDING.....	98
The Internal World.....	99
Feeling.....	100
Struggling.....	101
Hiding.....	107
Points to Ponder.....	115

CHAPTER 10: COPING WITH ADVERSITY	116
What Is Resilience and When Does It Fall Short?	117
Building Resilience	118
Points to Ponder	128
CHAPTER 11: DIAGNOSING AND MISDIAGNOSING.....	129
Increased Mental Health Diagnoses.....	130
Characteristics That Can Be Misinterpreted and Misunderstood	130
Common Misdiagnoses in Bright Kids.....	132
Reasons for Referral.....	133
Factors to Consider When Diagnosing.....	134
Impact of Misdiagnosis.....	137
Points to Ponder	138
CHAPTER 12: PARENTING	139
Hierarchy	140
How the World Works.....	141
Practical Approaches for Parenting Bright Kids	142
How to Help Bright Kids Become Anxious and Unbalanced.....	143
What Parents Do Matters.....	144
Parallel Development	145
Parenting Suggestions.....	146
Points to Ponder	149
REFLECTING	150
REFERENCES	152
INDEX	159
ABOUT THE AUTHORS	165



Introduction

CHILDREN and teens with high ability are “different”—different enough from age peers that programs are developed to address their needs and concerns. Their exceptionality affects all aspects of life—not just intellectually, but also socially and emotionally. When they or their parents seek help, however, the professionals they consult may have had little or no formal preparation for working with this complicated, highly idiosyncratic population. For example, school counselors very rarely get pertinent information about high-ability kids (Peterson and Wachter Morris 2010). Even the brightest professionals may be unaware of perspectives that could help them relate comfortably and effectively with highly capable children and teens. This practical, user-friendly book begins to fill that information gap.

A bell curve is often used to illustrate how intellectual ability is distributed in the general population. See the diagram “Distribution of Intellectual Ability” on page 2 (Davidson Institute for Talent Development 2020). The highest section of the curve represents the largest percentage of the population—the middle or average range of ability. The curve on either side tapers to the smallest percentages—the lowest and highest levels of ability. At each end of the curve are people who differ greatly from those with average ability. Noteworthy is that individuals at one end, with exceptionally high ability, are as far from the middle, and are as different from the middle, as are those at the other end. Children and teens at both ends warrant, and can benefit from, special services in education.

This book is about the high-ability children and teens who are in the upper end of the curve. We include some information about kids with exceptionally high ability, but our main focus is on high ability in broad terms—beyond just the top 2 to 3 percent. We will often refer to “bright” or “high-ability kids” in the same generic way that the gifted-education field refers to “gifted kids,” because we want to help our readers understand options, policies, and constraints, regardless of how they were established, whether they make sense, and whether they seem fair. We will indeed be referring to children and teens whose abilities fit into the upper area of the bell curve. However, our descriptions, explanations, and examples will also reflect what we have seen in bright kids who cannot (because of disabilities or

“

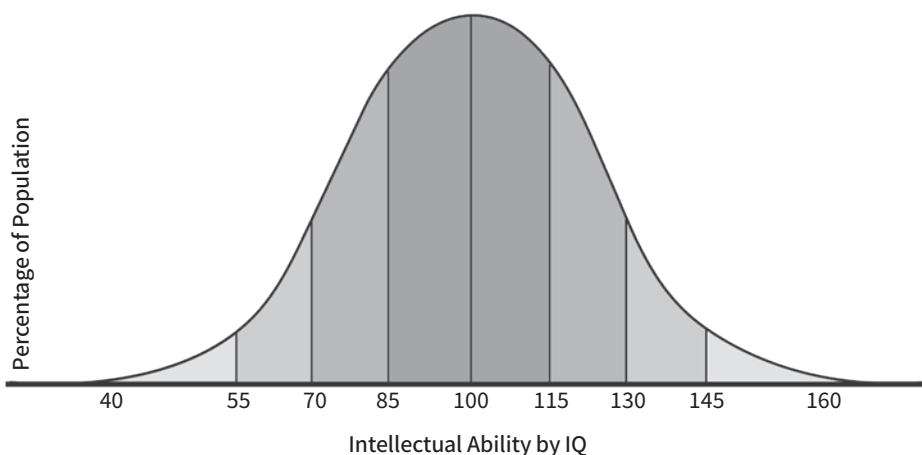
Individuals with exceptionally high ability are as far from the middle, and are as different from the middle, as are those at the other end. Children and teens at both ends warrant, and can benefit from, special services in education.

2 BRIGHT, COMPLEX KIDS

other personal circumstances) or will not (because of developmental hurdles or a cultural valuing of wisdom, not knowledge) demonstrate their ability through classroom or test performance.

High ability can be both an asset and a burden, both a strength and a vulnerability. This book is about that paradox—and the importance of understanding and supporting bright children and teens.

Distribution of Intellectual Ability



WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

We believe that parents and guardians, grandparents, classroom teachers, school administrators, directors, coaches, school and community counselors, school and other psychologists, professors, undergraduate and graduate students, youth program leaders, and others who interact with children and teens need a user-friendly book to help them make sense of school-age kids with high ability—and, perhaps, of themselves as well. We wrote this book to share what we have learned about the concerns, needs, and social and emotional development of this complex, widely varying demographic group. We drew from our teaching and clinical work to show how various concepts and characteristics are applied or demonstrated. We make suggestions about what invested adults can do to support bright individuals, regardless of their performance on standardized tests and in the classroom, and regardless of socioeconomic and other personal circumstances, including disabilities. To gain enough trust for a comfortable, constructive relationship with highly able children and their families, adults need particular skills, knowledge, and awareness.

We have worked with high-ability kids and their families for many years. Dan is a psychologist, consultant, advocate, and author focused largely on bright children and adolescents. Jean, though officially retired as a counselor and researcher, continues to work

as a consultant, speaker, author, and creator of social and emotional curricula. For many years, we paid attention to each other's work, realized how in sync our perspectives are, copresented at conferences a few times, and appreciated each other's passionate investment in the social and emotional development of highly able kids. After discussing this book project for several years, we finally decided to commit fully to it.

The perspectives we offer are based on our experiences in our various professional roles and as parents. Jean's observations during twenty years of classroom teaching, and fifteen concurrent years with a summer foreign-language day camp she and her husband directed, informed her subsequent years of teaching high-ability adolescents. In the high school gifted-education program she eventually directed, development-related small-group discussions with students inspired her to pursue master's and doctoral degrees in counseling and counselor education at the University of Iowa, where she was supported by a fellowship in the Belin-Blank Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development. Her clinical work and consulting there led to her second career, as a counselor and an educator of counselors. Her cross-disciplinary research continues to inform the gifted-education and counselor-education fields about each other.

Dan's doctorate in clinical psychology is applied at the multisite Summit Center in California, which he cofounded and directs, focused on bright children and adolescents. He shares his perspectives, based on his extensive clinical practice, through the informative Summit Center website; through his own consulting and conference presentations and workshops; through his books, blogs, and podcasts; and through Camp Summit.

In addition to our hands-on work with high-ability children and teens, we have stayed current through formal professional development, reviewing journal manuscripts, and receiving feedback after our consultations and presentations. Giants in the fields of counseling and clinical psychology, many of whom are cited and discussed in this book, grabbed our attention early, and we are indebted to them. Those who paid attention to our work along the way, such as James Webb, Michael Piechowski, and Linda Silverman, nudged us forward. In this book we share what we have learned.

We hope our book helps readers not only feel more informed, but also feel more competent and confident. Our focus is on what we believe adults need to know about bright children and teens, as well as on what caring adults might do to engage them meaningfully. We are painfully aware that many bright kids do not feel understood or supported. Many who have high ability are not perceived as smart because they do not demonstrate behaviors that teachers believe reflect giftedness, such as verbal assertiveness, contributing to discussions, compliance, strong social skills, or high academic performance. A learning disability, anxiety, depression, learning English as a new language, difficult family circumstances, and cultural values, for example, may inhibit those behaviors. As a result, some high-ability students are not identified as eligible for special programs.

Regardless of how bright they are, how well they achieve academically, or whether they are identified for special programming, highly able children and teens are like their age peers in some ways. They all face developmental challenges as they grow and change,

and they may face dangerous, toxic, unstable, insecure life situations. However, the sensitivity inherent in high ability may exacerbate how bright kids experience and respond to developmental challenges, life circumstances, and environmental stimuli. In this book, we offer ideas about how invested adults can interact comfortably and effectively with them while gaining entrance to their internal world, including how to listen and respond, how to self-monitor adult biases, how to avoid communicating awe of high ability because of the potential impact on trust and openness, how to apply knowledge of learning disabilities, and how to help high-ability children and teens make sense of themselves.

Various books are available that address some of the topics we address. However, many of these books for teachers, clinicians, and researchers are too large, unwieldy, academic, and expensive for easy purchase, reference, and application. We offer our book as a useful, efficient, and practical bridge to the social, emotional, and cognitive world of highly capable kids.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The chapter titles in this book are all active, because bright kids and the adults in their lives—and the relationships between them—are continually developing. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 11, and 12 are about adults' involvement. Chapters 4, 6, 7, 8, 9, and 10 focus primarily on social and emotional dimensions of bright kids' lives as they actively develop. Chapter 5 is about both kids and adults, because both have reason to be optimistic even while motivation to perform ebbs and flows.

Chapter 1: Recognizing Them

Identifying high ability can be challenging, and this chapter details many potential hurdles. Applying multiple criteria (not just performance on standardized tests) is now a mainstream perspective, as are casting a wide net and using group strategies to identify and nurture potential. This chapter explains the complexity of identification, including social and emotional implications of being identified, the variety of definitions of giftedness, and how behavior and verbal and social skills may affect selection for programs.

Chapter 2: Making Sense of Them

When we conduct conference sessions, we usually discuss some characteristics associated with high ability, such as heightened sensitivity and intensity. These characteristics affect how bright kids (and likely their parents) respond to life events, social interactions, and complex situations and changes at school and home. This chapter comes early in our book because it informs later chapters.

Chapter 3: Learning from Them

Professional preparation for interacting with bright kids often involves a top-down approach: learning *about* them from experts. Our approach as clinical professionals

includes learning *from* them. This chapter offers detailed, practical guidance for listening and responding, since kids' internal world of stressors and perspectives is often inaccessible to adults or peers otherwise.

Chapter 4: Achieving and Underachieving

The gifted-education field often emphasizes performance—basing eligibility for selective programs on academic success; using high performers identified for programs as convenient subjects for studies of mental health, motivation to achieve, and career development; and giving little (usually negative) attention to underachievers who have high ability. Recent trends in the field include more research attention to underachievers, social and emotional development, qualitative research methods, and the whole child.

Chapter 5: Staying Optimistic About Underachievement

Adults often focus on the deficits of bright underachievers and on changing them. As clinical professionals, we stay alert to possible contributors to low academic performance, nonjudgmentally enter their world, and collaboratively work to improve their well-being, which in turn might affect their achievement. Findings in several Peterson studies about when academic performance declines, when it is resolved, and the role of development in both offer evidence that parents, guardians, teachers, directors, coaches, and other invested adults can be optimistic about better-than-expected outcomes.

Chapter 6: Living on the Edges, Twice-Exceptionally

Giftedness is one exceptionality. Any kind of disability—obvious or not—is another exceptionality. When high ability and disability occur together in a child or teen, the common descriptor is *twice-exceptional*. In this chapter, we and other experts offer explanation, strategies, and affirmation for this subpopulation in the high-ability world.

Chapter 7: Worrying

Anxiety is a common concern for children, teens, and adults who are intensely self-reflective, who have unusual emotional depth, and whose brains are hyperalert to contexts, change, loss, uncertainty, lack of control, perceived threat, self-expectations, expectations of others, and thoughts about the future. This chapter includes clinical perspectives about anxiety in bright children and teens.

Chapter 8: Fearing Failure: Perfectionism

Perfectionism, another common concern among highly capable people, may be obvious—or not. This chapter offers clinical and other information to help invested adults make sense of this phenomenon in bright kids, including distinguishing between a healthy striving for

excellence and a debilitating fear of mistakes, of not meeting expectations, and of failure. Perfectionistic tendencies can prevent appreciation of the *process* when involved with projects—and preclude feelings of enjoyment and satisfaction along the way.

Chapter 9: Feeling, Struggling, Hiding

Highly able children and teens can hide distress expertly. They may be unwilling to risk their own or their family's positive image by talking about their distress. These kids are usually keenly aware of others' expectations of them, and they may actually have stressful, adult-like family roles because they are so capable. Adults might therefore be unaware of hidden struggles with eating, sleeping, doubt, shame, a learning disability, intense relationships, peer or adult bullying, or depression and thoughts of suicide. This chapter includes strategies for helping bright kids develop expressive language and cope with troubling situations.

Chapter 10: Coping with Adversity

The main focus of this chapter is resilience—being able to recover from difficult circumstances and move forward. It includes details and examples of personal qualities and circumstances that scholars and clinical professionals have associated with resilience, as well as perspectives from national experts on how to help kids develop resilience. It also explains the user-friendly concepts of grit, mindset, and brain-based parenting.

Chapter 11: Diagnosing and Misdiagnosing

Overexcitability, a concept associated with the intensities and sensitivities of high ability, can be psychomotor, intellectual, sensual, imaginal, and/or emotional. Associated behaviors may come to the attention of a counselor, school or clinical psychologist, or pediatrician. Overexcitabilities can be advantageous and viewed positively, or they can contribute to social and emotional challenges and even be misdiagnosed as psychological disorders. This chapter explores both misdiagnoses and “missed” diagnoses and emphasizes the importance of differentiating between diagnostic symptoms and characteristics associated with high ability.

Chapter 12: Parenting

This chapter looks at parenting from many angles. Parents are important models—for being kind to oneself, respecting others, embracing cultural diversity, exploring interests, playing, responding to mistakes, coping with stress, and enjoying the process of doing something challenging. What parents do affects how their bright children and teens view and respond to the world. Also discussed are parenting style, family hierarchy, creativity, and parental development.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

As we put this book together, we imagined it as a short course for adults wanting to build a base of knowledge for understanding their own bright kids, students, friends and relatives, employers or employees, business or therapy clients, or medical patients. In addition to this information, we have included suggestions and strategies for interacting effectively with high-ability children, teens, and older individuals. Detailed guidance about listening and responding, for example, can be put to use immediately. The information about characteristics, anxiety, perfectionism, resilience, underachievement, twice-exceptionality, and hidden distress might generate a meaningful, overdue discussion at home or with adult friends and acquaintances: “This is what I learned. Does it make sense to you? Tell me what you think of it.”

The book is intended to be a rare resource for educators, clinical professionals, and parents and guardians. We can also imagine pediatricians and other medical professionals telling their patients or clients about our book or making it available for checkout when presenting issues might be explained by characteristics associated with high ability instead of or in addition to pathology. We can imagine teachers (whether in gifted or general education) doing the same, perhaps offering a descriptive flyer for parents, who might want their own copy. In one of our first conversations about this project, Dan pointed out that he hoped we could create a book to put into the hands of parents who bring their bright children and teens to him for counseling, to help them make sense of themselves and their kids.

Based on feedback after our many presentations and workshops at conferences and schools, what we have included in this book is not common knowledge. Bright individuals in our audiences routinely tell us afterward that they’d never heard anything that resonated so thoroughly with them. They tell us that we helped them make sense of themselves—and their kids, relatives, students, or clients. That is what we hope for you as you read this book.

Jean and Dan



Recognizing Them

TWO years ago, Justin was identified through state-mandated group testing as needing accelerated instruction; however, his rural school has no system in place for further assessment and for addressing his need for a more challenging curriculum. Now in his first year of middle school, he has become listless, anxious, and discouraged. One of his teachers recently expressed concerns about Justin's well-being to his parents, who then consulted with the school counselor, who in turn suggested that they search for mental health help in a nearby city. The counselor is unfamiliar with clinical professionals there, but she and Justin's parents plan to collaborate on a search for professional help. Unfortunately, none of them knows what to ask an agency as they pursue a good fit for this bright boy.

.....

A CLASSROOM teacher has referred Cristina, a third-grader, to the gifted-education teacher for possible participation in the program for high-ability students. English is an unfamiliar language for Cristina's mother, and her father grew up in a low-income urban US neighborhood. They have asked to meet with the classroom teacher not only because they need to give permission for an assessment, but also because they are not familiar with special programs. They wonder what the term *gifted* means, what the program involves, if they need to pay for Cristina's participation, and if she will no longer be with her friends in school.

.....

What do *high-ability* and *gifted* mean? What are the criteria for deciding who gets the *gifted* label? How is ability measured and giftedness identified? What should parents, teachers, counselors, and psychologists know to help them advocate for bright children and teens and, when warranted, seek services in and beyond the school district?

WHAT DO THE LABELS MEAN?

Language is powerful, and a label (or lack of it) can have life-altering impact during the school years. A label indicating high ability may not matter to some students or their families. But for others, this label may be the only ticket available for special opportunities, and it may affect how the students see themselves and how others see them.

The label *gifted*, when referring to students who have outstanding intellectual ability, is not universally embraced—even in the field of gifted education. Other common terms associated with high ability are *highly able*, *high capability*, *talented*, *gifted and talented*, *bright*, *high potential*, *advanced learner*, *profoundly intelligent*, and *highly intelligent*. When it seems necessary to distinguish points in the small uppermost section of the bell curve of intellectual ability, professionals use terms such as *exceptionally gifted*, *extreme ability*, *severely gifted*, and *profoundly gifted*. Giftedness researcher François Gagné (2018) used the following terms for levels of intellectual or talent ability:

- mildly gifted: IQ greater than 120 (1 in 10 people)
- moderately gifted: IQ greater than 135 (1 in 100 people)
- highly gifted: IQ greater than 145 (1 in 1,000 people)
- exceptionally gifted: IQ greater than 155 (1 in 10,000 people)
- extremely gifted: IQ greater than 165 (1 in 100,000 people)

Clinical neuropsychologist John Wasserman (2007) gave different numbers for the final two categories, defining *exceptional ability* as having an IQ greater than 160 and *profoundly gifted* as having an IQ greater than 175. Labeling levels of giftedness is important because it may be used to determine the level of differentiation a child or teen needs in services. The higher the ability, the greater the social and emotional complexity, and the greater the need for differentiated academic and social and emotional curriculum.

However, a label can have social and emotional impact. For example, a child or teen, or their parent or guardian, might be uncomfortable if the term *gifted* is applied to their high level of measured intelligence. That label might have social costs, time costs, and pressure costs. In philosophical and political terms, with equity of opportunity

in mind, the term can seem elitist. *Gifted* is usually not questioned when used to describe athletes, visual artists, musicians, and writers, but it is possible that educator language and tone, narrowly focused academic programs, and inappropriate identification practices do reflect elitism. For this reason, some professionals, school districts, and states have moved away from the term *gifted*. In this book we will usually use some form of the phrase *high*

“

The higher the ability, the greater the social and emotional complexity, and the greater the need for differentiated academic and social and emotional curriculum.

ability when referring to standing out, having much more ability than average, and having high enough ability to warrant adjustments in school curriculum. We will use *gifted* when referring to gifted-education research findings and perspectives that apply that term. Our view is that high-ability students not only are complex individually, but also vary widely collectively. We embrace bright underachievers, bright kids with learning disabilities, bright individuals in complex home situations, and culturally and economically diverse gifted children and adolescents who are bright. Our language reflects that high ability—even intellectual brilliance—is not a narrow, precisely demarcated concept and can be found in any context.

Too often, only cognitive strengths and academic performance are considered when adults plan and deliver curriculum for highly able children and teens. Developmental tasks (related to identity, direction, relationships, and autonomy, for example) are basically universal, but how highly able kids *experience* developmental challenges differs from how other children and adolescents experience them. Our emphasis is therefore on social and emotional development, not just academic performance, and on the whole child, not just the child's performance.

WHO GETS THE LABEL?

School districts in the United States vary in their eligibility standards for special programs. The gifted-education field has long recommended some combination of the following for determining eligibility:

- a high score on a standardized (nationally field-tested and normed) assessment of cognitive or intellectual ability (memory; capacity to see connections, solve problems, learn) or achievement (knowledge accrued and/or applied), administered individually or in a group
- high classroom achievement and nomination by a teacher, parent, or self
- a portfolio of classroom or artistic products

When classroom achievement is the only eligibility criterion, the program offered is likely geared to high classroom *performers* only, regardless of *ability*. Because standardized group assessments often focus on math, science, and reading (and not on social studies, abstract thinking, creativity, spatial strengths, or writing), students identified by these assessments might be suited for advanced classes in one of those areas—but not necessarily in all three. In addition, some students might not be willing or able *at that time* to perform well in large-group testing; others can demonstrate accumulated knowledge in these tests in spite of a history of low classroom grades and in spite of circumstances. Individual ability (intelligence) testing is usually considered ideal for determining ability level, but conducting individual tests is labor-intensive and therefore expensive, making individual assessment access an economic equity issue.