

Exceptional Children Require An Exceptional Approach

Issues in counseling gifted children

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While there are many methods of counseling, there are few specific modalities designed for counseling gifted children. Because of the exceptional nature attributed to giftedness, it would be naive to assume that conventional approaches to counseling would suffice when working with this population. For this reason, this description contains just a few of the many nuances related to assessment, the counselor's role, and the counseling process itself.

Beginning with assessment, it is extremely important that the counselor make a precise distinction as to the etiology of the child's problem. In other words, is the problem indicative of a psychiatric disturbance, an implication of something related to giftedness, or a complex combination of variables?

One of the reasons this distinction is critical is that a mislabel or misdiagnosis may be harmful to the child. There are several psychiatric symptoms and diagnostic categories that resemble characteristics of giftedness. The following are some of the more commonly observed psychiatric diagnostic categories which, because of their relatedness to giftedness, counselors should be consider carefully as they assess and diagnose their patients:

- ▶ ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
- ▶ OCD: Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- ▶ Bi-Polar Disorder (Manic Depression)
- ▶ Depression/Dysthemia
- ▶ Somatic Disorder

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- ▶ Borderline Personality Disorder (or any of the Axis II Diagnostic Categories)
 - ▶ PDD: Pervasive Developmental Disorder
 - ▶ Autism
 - ▶ Anxiety Disorder
 - ▶ Any other psychiatric diagnostic category that may be atypical in nature

In addition, the counselor's role is shaded by subtleties that pertain specifically to her giftedness and her knowledge issues related to giftedness. To be fully prepared to effectively work with gifted people, counselors should:

- ▶ Know their own giftedness. A counselor needs a clear concept of his or her own identity as a gifted person, attributes and deficits alike.
- ▶ Have a strong theoretical base and knowledge of the characteristics of gifted children.
- ▶ Be aware of the resources available for gifted children: support groups, parent organizations, educational opportunities, bibliographies, etc.
- ▶ Be creative in the approach to counseling. Conventional counseling methodologies may not be the best choice for relatively unconventional clientele.
- ▶ Remember that gifted children have exceptional abilities. It is easy to be fooled by exceptional intellect and interpersonal abilities.
- ▶ Ask for help. Exceptional cases require exceptional help. One of the main characteristics of gifted children is their strong sense of independence. Model interdependence and seek the insight of more knowledgeable colleagues.
- ▶ Gifted children often demonstrate deviant behavior. Counselors should be mindful of their value structures for deviant behavior and be conscious of their real feelings.
- ▶ Be an advocate. This may require you to expand your role as counselor by educating others involved with the child and coordinating services for them.
- ▶ Be yourself. Gifted children require authenticity in relationships. They see right through contrived methodologies. They seek and require relatedness in their interactions.

Some of the more relevant issues to be addressed in the counseling process are:

► **Identifying Giftedness and Forming a “Gifted” Identity** The child needs the opportunity to know precisely how he is gifted, what that giftedness means to him, and how that giftedness plays a role in his identity and life. Identity is perhaps the most significant issue to be addressed in counseling.

► **Denial of Giftedness** Many gifted children are distressed because they lack awareness and acceptance of their giftedness. Help them know and accept the construct of being gifted as it applies to them. The same issue applies to the parents of the gifted child.

► **Struggling with Deviance** The denial that giftedness may exist can happen in part because having deviant behavior is not always an accepted trait. The child’s deviance in behavior can lead to a whole host of social and emotional problems. It is important to assist the client to be aware of his deviance and develop methods to foster their differences rather than be distressed by them.

► **Family Issues** These are complex and too numerous to cover here, but it is crucial that the parents have a strong involvement in the counseling process, either through family therapy, parent education, or other support services.

► **Facing Deficits** This is one of the primary themes and most delicate to deal with in counseling the gifted. Once the counselor has first assisted the client in identifying specific areas of giftedness, the process can then move forward in helping the gifted child identify areas of deficit. Facing these deficits will be the most challenging aspect for the child and the counselor and will be the most rewarding for both.

Identifying the issues of counseling gifted children in the areas of assessment, counselor’s role and the counseling process will assist counselors in providing an exceptional approach to these exceptional children.

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