

Asynchrony*
Encyclopedia of Giftedness, Creativity and Talent

Dr. Linda Kreger Silverman
Gifted Development Center
2007

Giftedness is not mere precocity—getting “there” sooner. There is a qualitative difference in the inner experience and awareness of the gifted. A young child who has heightened emotions coupled with advanced cognitive awareness of the perils in the world feels helpless and afraid. Developmental discrepancies create vulnerability. We recognize the vulnerability of having a 17-year-old body and a 9-year-old mind. However, we have yet to grasp the magnitude of the challenge of a child who has a 17-year-old mind trapped in the body of a 9 year old. Societal support is offered to families of children with developmental delays, but those whose minds are light years ahead of their bodies don’t arouse much sympathy.

Developmentally advanced children, like the developmentally delayed, are at risk in a society that prizes sameness. The albino bird is often destroyed by the normally-colored members of the flock. Countless gifted children eat alone every day in the school cafeteria. They aren’t invited to other children’s birthday parties because they’re too “different” from their classmates. If they strive to attain excellence, they may be taunted by their classmates for acting “so smart,” and if they hide their abilities in order to fit in with their peers, they’re often chastised by their teachers for not working up to their potential. Such experiences dramatically affect the development of gifted

children's self-esteem. Would these issues be resolved by reminding them of their potential for leadership in adult life?

Traditional definitions of giftedness focus on potential for recognized achievement in adult life, or on methods of identifying and developing talents. But achievements and talents are just the tip of the iceberg—the products that ignite envy. Defined in this manner, the gifted are too often perceived as an “advantaged” group in the competition for grades, social status, glory or material gain. Achievement is very much a function of opportunity (Hollingworth, 1926), since greater opportunities for success are available to those who have greater financial resources. To really understand the phenomenon, one must plumb the depths of the gifted experience.

Asynchrony is a relatively new way of looking at giftedness, with deep historical roots. Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1930a, 1930b, 1931, 1939, 1942), 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. She established that the farther removed the child is from average in intelligence, the more pressing adjustment problems become. Many contemporary researchers have documented that adjustment difficulties increase with IQ (Dauber & Benbow, 1990; Kerr, 1991a; Kline & Meckstroth, 1985; Roedell, 1985).

To have the intelligence of an adult and the emotions of a child combined in a childish body is to encounter certain difficulties. It follows that (after babyhood) the younger the child, the greater the difficulties ... The years

between four and nine are probably the most likely to be beset with the problems. (Hollingworth, 1931, p. 13)

Giftedness as asynchrony highlights the internal experience of the gifted, their vulnerability, the difficulties that increase with IQ, and the important role of parents, teachers, and counselors in their optimal development. The practitioners and parents who gathered to construct this new vision were deeply concerned with the emphasis on products, performance and achievement in modern conceptions of the gifted and talented. The construct of giftedness as asynchrony builds upon the child-centered insights of Leta Hollingworth (1931), Lev Vygotsky (1962), Kazimierz Dabrowski (1964; 1972), Jean-Charles Terrassier (1985), and Annemarie Roeper (1982).

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. (The Columbus Group, 1991)

Asynchrony literally means being out-of-sync. The gifted are out-of-sync both internally and externally (Terrassier, 1985). Developmental unevenness of the gifted is often noted in the literature (e.g., Gowan, 1974; Hollingworth, 1942; Kerr, 1991b; Manaster & Powell, 1983; Roedell, 1984, 1989; Webb, Meckstroth & Tolan, 1982). The clearest example of this unevenness is the rate at which mental development outstrips physical development. Studying young gifted children, Wendy Roedell (1989) observed that rather than demonstrating high abilities in all areas, they had peaks of extraordinary performance, as well as valleys. Their intellectual development usually surpassed the

development of their physical development and social skills. They were only likely to excel in those physical tasks that involved cognitive organization.

Binet constructed the *mental age* as a means of capturing the degree to which a child's mental abilities differ from those of other children his or her chronological age (Binet & Simon, 1908). The concept of mental age has been enormously helpful in our understanding of the discrepancies in children with developmental disabilities. Mental age predicts the amount of knowledge mastered, the rate of learning, sophistication of play, age of true peers, maturity of the child's sense of humor, ethical judgment, and awareness of the world. In contrast, chronological age predicts height, physical coordination, handwriting speed, emotional needs, and social skills (Silverman, 1995). Although unpopular for several decades, mental age is beginning to have a comeback in the testing industry. "Test ages" are reported for subtest scales on the *Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition* (WISC-IV). The test publisher has produced extended WISC-IV norms that stretch the maximum IQ and index scores up to 210 points. Rasch-ratio IQ scores can be derived on the *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale, Fifth Edition* (SB5), based on the disparity between the child's test age (mental age) and chronological age, and an extended norm table generates scores up to 225 (Roid, 2003). Extended norms on both scales allow a better picture of the degree of asynchrony in highly, exceptionally and profoundly gifted children.

The intelligence quotient is simply the ratio of mental age to chronological age multiplied by 100. Binet viewed intelligence as a rich, complex, multifaceted gestalt—a

myriad of dynamically interrelated abilities, including emotion and personality. He believed that intelligence is highly influenced by the environment, and can be improved through appropriate instruction. From Binet’s developmental perspective, intelligence is a continuously evolving process, not a static amount of raw material which stays the same throughout life. Consistent with Binet’s philosophy, the IQ should be seen as a *minimal estimate of asynchrony*—the extent to which cognitive development (mental age) diverges from physical development (chronological age).

Asynchrony cannot be thought of as static; it is dynamic, constantly changing. At age 6, a moderately gifted child with an IQ of 135 has a 6-year-old body and an 8-year-old mind; at 9, the child has a 9-year-old body and a 12-year-old mind; at age 12, the child will be mentally 16. By comparison, an exceptionally gifted 6 year old, with an IQ of 170, has a 10-year-old mind; at 9 the child has a 15-year-old mind; and at 12, a 20-year-old mind. The situation becomes even more complicated when it is understood that psychologically the child is an *amalgam* of many developmental ages and may appear to be different ages in different situations. “She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still” (Tolan, 1989, p. 7).

Uneven development is mirrored in external adjustment difficulties since the gifted child often feels different from, or out of place with, others. External asynchrony is the lack of fit with other same-aged children and with the age-related expectations of the culture (Terrassier, 1985). The greater the degree to which cognitive development

outstrips physical development, the more “out-of-sync” the child feels internally, in social relations, and in relation to the school curriculum. Age is not an appropriate ruler for either a gifted child’s social or academic needs: degree of asynchrony must also be taken into account.

Defining giftedness as asynchrony enables twice exceptional children and underachievers to be recognized as gifted. The most asynchronous children are those who are both gifted and learning disabled. A remarkable number of gifted children have learning disabilities, such as Central Auditory Processing Disorder, Sensory Processing Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, writing disabilities, visual perception weaknesses, spatial disorientation, dyslexia, and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (Silverman, 1995). Giftedness masks disabilities and disabilities depress IQ scores, so that the child may appear average (Silverman, 1989). Asynchrony can be seen in the scatter of subtest scores on IQ tests. Twice exceptional children tend to obtain high scores in subtests richly loaded in abstract reasoning and demonstrate significant weaknesses in subtests measuring processing speed and working memory. Underachievers often have extraordinary visual-spatial strengths, combined with auditory-sequential weaknesses in reading, writing, spelling, and calculation, which prevent them from being identified for gifted programs (Silverman, 2002). Many underachievers are actually twice exceptional.

The gifted not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently. Asynchrony implies *greater complexity*. Complexity affects all aspects of one’s development throughout the lifespan. Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) observed five

realms of heightened intensity and complexity: psychomotor, sensual, imaginal, intellectual, and emotional. Neural activity substantially beyond the norm in any of these five dimensions is called “overexcitability,” and represents an abundance of physical, aesthetic, creative, intellectual or emotional energy.

Each form of overexcitability points to a higher than average sensitivity of its receptors. As a result, a person endowed with different forms of overexcitability...sees reality in a different, stronger, and more multisided manner. Reality for such an individual ceases to be indifferent but affects him deeply and leaves long-lasting impressions. Enhanced excitability is thus a means for...a wider range of experiencing. (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7)

Correlations of overexcitabilities with giftedness have been established in dozens of studies (see Silverman, 2008, for a summary).

Cognitive complexity and emotional intensity lead to awareness for which the child may not be emotionally ready. While other children their age are blissfully unaware of the gross inequities in the world, gifted children may be profoundly affected by the plight of the homeless or children dying in Iraq. “Gifted children see the complexities of the world but feel powerless to contend with their advanced awareness” (Roeper, 1995, p. 147).

Vygotsky (1962) elucidated the inextricable relationship between cognition and emotion. Children respond emotionally to information they receive cognitively, and this inner awareness has an impact on the course of their development. Gowan (1974) likened precocious cognitive awareness to premature rupturing of the protective placental shell during the prenatal period. Too early exposure to environmental realities can be as precarious in post-uterine as in prenatal development. Gifted children need

child-centered parents, teachers and counselors who are willing to listen to them and understand them, who appreciate their fragility, and who are not trying to mold them to fit better into society or produce more.

The idea of asynchrony was partially derived from the experiences of parents:

We were told that at age 9 he displayed “cognitive reasoning skills way beyond his years.” I wish he came with a blinking sign on his forehead to let me know just who I am dealing with: the 3-year-old, the 14-year-old, or the 25-year-old.

It’s the tension of being caught between all those ages I just mentioned. . . . I live by it every day in order to give some organized definition to what’s going on. (Estes, cited in Kearney, 1992, pp. 1, 8).

This perspective is very useful in attempting to gain support for the gifted. It bypasses the perennial concern about elitism. Most other definitions equate giftedness with high achievement; therefore, special programs often sound like more advantages for an already-advantaged group. Since asynchrony is not a competitive concept, it is less likely to invite envy. More asynchrony is not better. Giftedness becomes atypical development—a set of qualitative differences that need to be addressed at home and at school. It occurs in all cultures (Silverman, 1995), all ethnic groups (Silverman & Miller, in press), and all socio-economic levels (Dickinson, 1970). Whereas giftedness as the potential for recognized achievement is gender-biased, giftedness defined as asynchrony is gender-fair (Silverman & Miller, 2009).

Asynchrony is gaining in popularity because it offers a pathway to understanding the inner experience of the gifted child. It reminds us that gifted

children are vulnerable and at-risk, and that we are obliged to respond to their differences with supportive parenting, teaching and counseling.

References

- Binet, A., & Simon, Th. (1908). Le developpement de l'intelligence chez les enfants. *L'Annee Psychologique*, 14, 1-94.
- Columbus Group (1991, July). Unpublished transcript of the meeting of the Columbus Group. Columbus, OH.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. London: Little, Brown.
- Dabrowski, K. (1972). *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*. London: Gryf.
- Dabrowski, K., & Piechowski, M. M. (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development* (Vols. 1 & 2). Oceanside, NY: Dabor Science.
- Dauber, S. L., & Benbow, C. P. (1990). Aspects of personality and peer relations of extremely talented adolescents. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 34, 10-15.
- Dickinson, R. M. (1970). *Caring for the gifted*. North Quincy, MA: Christopher.
- Gowan, J. C. (1974). *Development of the psychedelic individual*. Northridge, CA: John Curtis Gowan.
- Hollingworth, L. S. (1926). *Gifted children: Their nature and nurture*. New York: Macmillan.
- Hollingworth, L. S. (1930a). Personality development of special class children. *University of Pennsylvania Bulletin. Seventeenth Annual Schoolmen's Week Proceedings*, 30, 442-446.
- Hollingworth, L. A. (1930b). Playmates for the gifted child. *Child Study*, 8 (December), 103-104.
- Hollingworth, L. S. (1931). The child of very superior intelligence as a special problem in social adjustment. *Mental Hygiene*, 15(1), 1-16.
- Hollingworth, L. S. (1939). What we know about the early selection and training of

- leaders. *Teachers College Record*, 40, 575-592.
- Hollingworth, L. S. (1942). *Children above 180 IQ Stanford-Binet: Origin and development*. Yonkers-on-Hudson, NY: World Book.
- Kearney, K. (1992). Life in the asynchronous family. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 4(6), 1, 8-12.
- Kerr, B. A. (1991a). Educating gifted girls. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (pp. 402-415). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Kerr, B. A. (1991b). *A handbook for counseling the gifted and talented*. Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling and Development.
- Kline, B. E., & Meckstroth, E. A. (1985). Understanding and encouraging the exceptionally gifted. *Roeper Review*, 8, 24-30.
- Manaster, G. J., & Powell, P. M. (1983). A framework for understanding gifted adolescents' psychological maladjustment. *Roeper Review*, 6, 70-73.
- Roedell, W. C. (1984). Vulnerabilities of highly gifted children. *Roeper Review*, 6, 127-130.
- Roedell, W. C. (1985). Developing social competence in gifted preschool children. *Remedial and Special Education*, 6(4), 6-11.
- Roedell, W. C. (1989). Early development of gifted children. In J. VanTassel-Baska & P. Olszewski-Kubilius (Eds.), *Patterns of influence on gifted learners: The home, the self, and the school* (pp. 13-28). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Roeper, A. (1982). How the gifted cope with their emotions. *Roeper Review*, 5(2), 21-24.
- Roeper, A. (1995). *Annemarie Roeper: Selected writings and speeches*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
- Roid, G. H. (2003). *Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scales interpretive manual: Expanded guide to the interpretation of SB5 test results*. Itasca, IL: Riverside.
- Silverman, L. K. (1989). Invisible gifts, invisible handicaps. *Roeper Review*, 22(1), 37-42.

- Silverman, L. K. (1995). The universal experience of being out-of-sync. In L. K. Silverman (Ed.), *Advanced development: A collection of works on giftedness in adults* (pp. 1-12). Denver: Institute for the Study of Advanced Development.
- Silverman, L. K. (2002). *Upside-down brilliance: The visual-spatial learner*. Denver: DeLeon.
- Silverman, L. K. (2008). The Theory of Positive Disintegration in the field of gifted education. In S. Mendaglio (Ed.), *Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration: A personality theory for the 21st century*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.
- Silverman, L. K., & Miller, N. B. (2009). A feminine perspective of giftedness. In L. Shavinina, Ed. *The international handbook on giftedness* (pp. 99-128). Amsterdam: Springer Science.
- Terrassier, J-C. (1985). Dyssynchrony-uneven development. In J. Freeman (Ed.). *The psychology of gifted children* (pp. 265-274). New York: John Wiley.
- Tolan, S. (1989). Special problems of young highly gifted children. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 1(5), 1, 7-10.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: M.I.T. Press.
- Webb, J. T., Meckstroth, E. A., & Tolan, S. S. (1982). *Guiding the gifted child: A practical source for parents and teachers*. Columbus, OH: Ohio Psychology.
- * Silverman, L. K. (2009). Asynchrony. In B. Kerr (Ed.), *The encyclopedia of giftedness, creativity and talent* (Vol. 1, pp. 67-70). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.