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Being a Gifted Boy: What We Have Learned

August 8, 2006

Several months ago the parents of a highly gifted fourth grader, Trent, called me for advice about his development. They expressed considerable concern about his increasing unwillingness, as they put it, “to shine.” Having always performed academic tasks superbly and nonacademic ones reasonably well, Trent was entering the preadolescent malaise experienced by many gifted and nongifted children alike. However, because his previous scholastic performance had been outstanding, the decline was glaring. His performance in extracurricular activities also had declined. His parents were beside themselves. Were they not stimulating him enough? Were they having him take on too much? Was the school program too narrow? Too broad? Should they change schools? Should they encourage him to find different friends? Was he depressed? Did he need therapy? So I asked them a question: Had they discussed their concerns with Trent in a supportive, nonjudgmental manner?

Several studies have shown that family support is critical to the academic achievement of gifted boys. Those who attain success both in and out of school view their families as more closely knit and supportive than those who show superior ability and achievement only in mathematics and the sciences. Families should provide social, emotional, and scholastic encouragement and support, as well as skills in goal setting, socialization, and identification. On the other hand, some studies suggest that excessive support or emphasis on achievement and competition can be just as damaging to gifted boys as too little support.

Finding a balance between supporting and pressuring children is always difficult, but especially in homes where one or more children have superior potential. Since many gifted children do many things exceedingly well, it is hard to gauge appropriate levels of support for them. The situation is exacerbated for gifted boys, who also have to cope with society’s demand that they achieve at all costs.

One day Trent declared that he would like to play the trombone and asked his parents for a new instrument for his birthday. The shiny new instrument arrived, and Trent began weekly lessons in addition to instruction at school. Soon, however, Trent’s parents recognized that he was not interested enough in the trombone to practice it regularly. “It was like pulling teeth each and every day,” reported his mother. Sadly, they reflected on other occasions when he had given up on sports, Scouts, church groups, and summer camp. Although they were always after him to persevere, they had never discussed their concerns with him except in a reproachful manner. Particularly with gifted children, who can understand the nuances of situations, parents need to address their concerns directly with their sons amid an open, honest, and supportive ambience.

Parents need to understand that gifted boys and girls alike benefit from exploring many activities and do so best when they are not expected to excel at or stick with all of them. Social pressure exists for boys to be decision makers—meaning that they need not only to decide but to adhere to their decisions. Exploration without demands for permanent involvement allows decisions to be temporary. Trent only

wanted to try out the trombone, but he was expected to make a long-term commitment to it. His parents should have allowed him to experiment with a rented instrument, without private lessons. He could have done so for an agreed-to period of time and just as easily decided not to play any longer at the end of it. Time parameters set in advance permit gifted boys to try their hand at many activities and interests. Indeed, this kind of experimentation should be encouraged and supported as late as the first or second year of college.

Boys who are expected early on to know exactly what they want to do with their lives probably fail to develop their full range of talents. Keep in mind that most men transition through several careers and savor differing vocations and avocations. Often they find the most satisfying ones after renewed exploration in middle age. Imagine the social and emotional resilience that a gifted boy might develop if allowed to explore in the same way during childhood. Such a boy grows into an adult who brings real passion to his self-selected areas of interest.

Gradually, Trent's parents realized that expecting perfection of him was undermining his self-confidence and producing in him a fear of failure. Moreover, they began to recognize that bragging about his abilities in front of his friends was setting him up for peer problems. Little wonder that his motivation to succeed had begun to drop.

Gifted Boys share many traits with gifted girls; however, they eventually experience their own gender-related differences.

Gifted boys can have low social self-concepts, are often self-critical and pessimistic, tend to internalize their own concerns, and learn to avoid assistance. Parents and professionals must watch for these habits, particularly as boys enter adolescence. They should support the giftedness of boys yet accommodate the self-deprecation that characterizes their development. However, gifted boys mired in self-condemnation to the point of harming themselves can learn cognitive techniques to shift their energies and focus to examining and solving personal and global problems.

Research has shown that referrals for special educational services, such as those for learning disabilities and behavioral or attention disorders, are seldom made for male or female gifted students who are actively engaged in real-world problem resolution. Helping gifted boys participate in extracurricular activities, such as volunteering, running a business, or, more typically, becoming involved in musical, dramatic, and athletic organizations, is one way to ensure their healthy self-image. Starting up a pet-sitting service, for instance, helped propel Trent back to solid school performance.

Such activities often open the door to mentoring relationships. Positive role modeling is critical to the development of gifted boys, because they tend to gauge their behavior by external comparison. A mentoring relationship with an adult expert in a field of interest offers a gifted boy a strong opportunity for self-development, and such relationships have been beneficial in reversing underachievement and discouragement. Male biography and gender-specific counseling can also be powerful tools for boys to use in plotting their own course.

Gifted boys have three important attributes, with corresponding needs:

- They are children, so they require nurturing.
- They require academic curricula and instruction appropriate to their abilities.
- They require attention that balances cultural and familial expectations of males.

Although rearing a gifted boy requires persistence, parents who place the proper emphasis on these attributes will protect his development. All parents hope, like Trent's, that their sons will mature into contented, well-adjusted men. Vigilantly addressing these three requirements is the first step toward actualizing healthy maturation.

—F. Richard Olenchak, Ph.D.

F. Richard Olenchak is professor, psychologist, and director at the Urban Talent Research Institute at the University of Houston. He is president-elect of the National Association for Gifted Children.

Suggested Readings

- *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, by Daniel J. Kindlon, Michael Thompson, and Teresa Barker, Ballantine, 2000
- *Smart Boys: Talent, Manhood, and the Search for Meaning*, by Barbara A. Kerr and Sanford J. Cohn, Great Potential, 2001
- *Speaking of Boys: Answers to the Most-Asked Questions about Raising Sons*, by Michael Thompson and Teresa Barker, Ballantine, 2000
- *200 Ways to Raise a Boy's Emotional Intelligence: An Indispensable Guide for Parents, Teachers, and Other Concerned Caregivers*, by Will Glennon, Conari, 2000

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