

# Coping With Problems: When To Worry

*From The Survival Guide for Parents of Gifted Kids: How to Understand, Live With, and Stick Up for Your Gifted*

*Child*, by Sally Yahnke Walker, 1991

## **What Gifted Students Want from Their Parents**

According to our survey, these are the top ten things students wish their parents would do (or not do):

1. Be supportive and encouraging; be there for us; be on our side.
2. Don't expect too much of us; don't expect perfection.
3. Don't pressure us, be too demanding, or push too hard.
4. Help us with our schoolwork/homework.
5. Help us develop our talents.
6. Be understanding.
7. Don't expect straight A's.
8. Allow some independence; give us space; trust us.
9. Talk to us; listen to us.
10. Let us try alternative education; special programs.

From *The Gifted Kids' Survival Guide: A Teen Handbook*, by Judy Galbraith and Jim Delisle, 1996

## WHEN TO WORRY

HOW CAN YOU TELL when one of your child's problems has gotten out of hand and it's time to call in the cavalry? Occasionally it's well worth the effort to seek out a school psychologist, therapist; or some other professional who has seen and dealt with similar situations before. But the dividing line isn't always obvious between "It's just a passing phase" and "Uh-oh, this has gone too far and has been going on too long."

Be open to the suggestions of school personnel. Be ready to hear both positive and negative things about your child without trying to rationalize or defend his behavior. School officials often complain that too many parents deny that a problem exists when it plainly does.

### Ten Tip-Offs to Trouble

How can you tell when something beyond the regular and routine is happening in your child's life - something that may cause real problems, now or later? Here are some danger signs to watch for. Don't ignore them! When you deal with difficulties early, they don't become unmanageable. And if it turns out that you were worried over nothing, allow yourself a sigh of relief.

- 1. Self-imposed isolation.** Start to worry when your child spends all of his time avoiding you, the rest of the family, and every kind of social situation, even ones involving friends he used to like. It's normal for young people to lock themselves in their rooms for lengthy periods, but it's usually to talk on the phone with their buddies. If your child seems to spend most or all of his time alone, consider this a warning sign.
- 2. Extreme perfectionism.** If the only tasks your child enjoys are those he can do perfectly, and if he's not willing to take a single risk or try anything new, then this is a degree of perfectionism you can't ignore. Also be alert to the child who gives up easily and won't try anything at all because he lives in terror of failure. Either way, he's probably miserable and could use some help.
- 3. Deep concern with personal powerlessness.** We all need to feel that we can have some influence on the world and what happens to us. The gifted child who feels utterly powerless is convinced that he can have no effect on his surroundings and may, in some cases, strike back by developing a negative attitude or an undercurrent of anger, or by name-calling or putting others down. He may begin sulking and withdrawing.
- 4. Unusual fascination with violence.** TV and movies aren't the only culprits, but these ever-present media do expose children to violence and brutality beyond their comprehension. Some become immune to it. Others become fascinated by it. Don, a bright boy who learned by doing, was such a case. His parents were used to his constant questions and experiments. Yet they noticed a definite change some time after he began bringing home dead animals to dissect. At first, he was led by pure scientific curiosity. Gradually his interest took a bizarre twist, and he began mutilating and torturing animals. Cruelty to animals is a red warning flag.
- 5. Eating disorders.** In our society, thin is generally considered beautiful. It's not hard to understand why girls in particular may become obsessed with being very slender. When they fear that a single additional ounce will make them less attractive, they may go so far as to nearly starve themselves to death. This disorder is called *anorexia nervosa*. Even if the dieting girl is actually quite slender, in her mind's eye she sees FAT.

Take Ann. Her slender older sister is a cheerleader, homecoming queen candidate, and all-around good student. Ann wishes she could be more like her thin, beautiful sister. Although Ann is a good student, too, she doesn't view herself positively. She wants to be more perfect, more like her sister. Looking at herself in the mirror, she sees herself as fat, although at 14 she's a trim 95 pounds. So she decides to diet. "If don't eat, I won't gain weight; she tells herself. But soon, not gaining weight isn't enough- she wants to *lose* weight. She's sure that if she does, others will like her more. The pounds don't come off soon enough for her, and her parents become upset with her for not eating. They insist that she eat, and so she does, only to go into the bathroom and throw up afterwards. She may even binge eat and then

regurgitate, which is typical of *bulimics*.

Two studies reported in the *Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry* indicate that gifted girls may be more prone toward eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia. Both studies found that the girls' self-concept was the most important factor. Those with symptoms of eating disorders tended to have problems with low self-esteem, hypersensitivity to the opinions of others, loneliness, and confusion about their feelings. Those who lacked support systems at home and school were especially vulnerable. The characteristics of being highly self-critical and hard on themselves that gifted kids exhibit are found in most anorexics, although in an extreme form.

Uncontrolled eating is another type of eating disorder. This person is comforted by food, the more the better. "Pigging out" can also be a socially acceptable form of rebellion. Like the anorexic, the overeater sees her world as out of control. Eating is one area that she feels she *can* control. (Nine out of ten of those who suffer from eating disorders are female.)

**6. Substance abuse.** Gifted kids are subjected to many pressures: to be accepted, to excel, to change the world. When the pressure becomes too great, it's natural to seek a release. Healthy releases include exercise, meditation, relaxation techniques, and so on. Unhealthy releases include the abuse of alcohol and other drugs.

Jerry was a good student, well-liked and talented in gymnastics. He worked hard to perfect his skills, spending all of his free time in the gym practicing routines. All was well until Jerry began junior high at a new, large school where he had few friends. Cliques formed and Jerry felt left out. A few kids urged him to try smoking. This appealed to him, since it made him feel important, even though it went against his training.

Gradually Jerry's new friends urged him to try some stronger stuff that would get him high. He wanted so badly to be accepted that he agreed to try what they offered him. The high he achieved resembled the high he worked so hard to get in gymnastics, only it came so easily. He became accustomed to this easy high, until eventually his parents noticed that something was wrong. Jerry's grades dropped drastically. He withdrew from family activities, preferring to spend long periods of time alone in his room. Then his parents discovered that he was skipping classes. They finally realized that Jerry was using drugs and sought outside help for him.

**7. Preoccupation with self.** Narcissism has existed through the ages. With the media and ads promoting physical beauty as the sure route to acceptance, love, and happiness, some youngsters overdo their concern about their appearance.

Of course kids should care about how they look, and plenty of youngsters spend hours in front of the mirror. However, if you suspect that your child is taking this too far, check with other parents. How much time do their kids spend primping in, front of the mirror and worrying about their clothing? Start considering it as a problem when the behavior interferes with normal functioning, or your child seems to be thinking *only* of himself.

**8. Withdrawal into a fantasy world.** When the real world feels too dangerous or threatening, the gifted child may withdraw into his own make-believe world.

Consider Alan. When he was an infant, his parents divorced and his mom left. He lived with his dad and fraternal grandparents. In preschool, he astounded teachers with his exceptional ability. Already he could read, tell time, and do advanced math computations. When his mother returned to town, she and his father fought over his custody. Alan was all too aware of the turmoil. He couldn't deal with the tension, so he withdrew into an imaginary world with imaginary friends. At least he could talk with these friends without fear of disapproval. His contacts with the real world became less and less frequent.

**9. Rigid, compulsive behavior.** Some gifted kids refuse to do anything but study. This compulsive behavior pattern often starts because they're having serious difficulties finding anyone they can relate to intellectually. Since highly gifted students think differently from most other kids in their neighborhood or school, and they sometimes lack social skills, they may have a hard time making friends. So they choose to withdraw to their books.

When Jill was a young child, it was obvious that she was very bright.

When she didn't get her way, she threw temper tantrums and cried easily. Because she was bossy and controlling, she was never able to develop friendships that lasted longer than a few days. In the classroom, she was the "know-it-all" who had a habit of tossing out trivia and useless information. Teachers and peers shunned her, and she was taunted on the playground. For comfort, she turned to her books, which became her only real friends. Counseling helped rescue Jill from this limiting behavior.

Another kind of rigid, compulsive behavior is almost the opposite of Jill's. Some gifted and talented children are super-achievers; over-scheduled kids who are busy, busy, busy. Parents may not catch on that something's amiss with these youngsters, because they seem to be able to do everything and keep it all in balance. They

get top grades, excel at sports, run their own small businesses, and still find time to win the lead in the school play! The trouble is, they may burn out early.

Excessive fatigue is a tell-tale sign that all is not well. If you've got a Superkid, you may need to limit the number or kinds of activities she participates in, for her own good.

**10. Preoccupation with death.** *Never* ignore this warning sign! The statistics about the rise in teen suicides and attempted suicides are shocking and tragic. It's estimated that 6,000 teens per year end their own lives, and ten times as many try. These numbers could be on the low side, since many families don't talk about it when their kids try to kill themselves.

People with above-average intelligence may be more prone to suicidal ideas and characteristics than others. Why? Perhaps it's because they have such high expectations of themselves and others, they're often perfectionists who perceive failure everywhere (which contributes to a feeling of powerlessness), and their relationships are often unusually intense.

If your child exhibits any of these signs of a teen in trouble, get help quickly:

- sudden changes in personality, behavior, eating, or sleeping habits;
- alcohol or other drug abuse;
- lack of interest in planned activities, withdrawal from family or friends, self-imposed isolation;
- severe depression that lasts a week or longer;
- concealed or direct suicide threats;
- talking about suicide, either jokingly or seriously;
- preoccupation with death and death-related themes;
- giving away prized possessions;
- feelings that life is meaningless.

## HOW TO GET HELP

AT SOME POINT in your child's school career, she may benefit from a few sessions with a school counselor. Studies have found that gifted kids may need more than the usual amount of guidance to achieve and maintain good mental health. A competent counselor can help your child understand and value those differences that set her apart from her peers.

Don't wait until there's a crisis, since "preventive" counseling often helps students *stay* mentally healthy and productive. It takes much less time and energy to resolve a problem before it gets out of hand. If your child is having difficulties in school with peers, or with unusual stress, a counselor can help bring the problem into awareness and focus. That is half the battle.

If your child is exhibiting any of the warning signs described earlier in this chapter, the time to get help is now. But where can you go to find it? Although counselors should be available as early as elementary school, they seldom are. Check into your child's school to learn what resources are available. If it doesn't provide counseling services, or if counseling time is so limited that help is minimal, you may need to seek outside assistance.

Unfortunately, some people still feel there's a stigma attached to seeing a counselor-or a "shrink." If your Child had a reading problem, would you hesitate to see a reading specialist? A counselor, like a reading specialist, is someone who can genuinely help your child. A trained outsider can see problems you may not be able to see

because you're too close to them. A counselor can also provide you with reassurance that you're doing okay as a parent. And your child will come away with tools she can use to recognize and solve problems, make better choices, raise her self-esteem, and feel more confident about herself and her place in the world.

You can get counseling from a *psychiatrist*, a *psychologist*, a *psychiatric social worker* or a *family therapist*. All have different degrees and different types of training and experience. In shopping for a counselor, start by asking friends or school officials for suggestions. The school psychologist or gifted program coordinator may have some resources to share. Your family doctor or pediatrician may be able to recommend someone. You can also contact your local county department of mental health and your local chapter of Mental Health Association for referrals.

Be sure to check your insurance ahead of time, especially if you can't afford to pay for counseling yourself. Be prepared, however: few policies cover more than a portion of mental health services. And some insurers may insist that you use only the counselors on their approved list.

Before you make the first appointment, it's wise to find out how the counselor feels about issues that are critical to you. What are his or her views on giftedness? Does he or she have experience working with gifted and talented kids? Look for someone who seems relaxed, confident, knowledgeable, and supportive. If you feel comfortable with this person, chances are your child will, too.

Some professionals may suggest that the entire family come in for counseling. Keep an open mind: this can't hurt, and if almost certainly can help. Some children may feel better about counseling if other family members are present. On the other hand, teens are often *less* communicative when their parents are around, so therapists will usually see a teen alone first for a few sessions to build trust, then invite the family in when everyone agrees.

What's most important is to choose someone with whom your child feels safe. When this is the case, real helping can happen, and it won't be long before everyone feels the effects.

## READ MORE ABOUT IT

To find out more about the ideas in this chapter, read:

*Directory of American Youth Organizations: A Guide to Over 400 Clubs, Groups, Troops, Teams, Societies, Lodges, and More for Young People* by Judith B. Erickson, Ph.D. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1990; updated every other year). Lots of information about all kinds of clubs for young people—and possible contacts for gifted kids looking for others who share their interests.

*Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens* by Earl Hipp (Free Spirit Publishing, 1985). Specific stressmanagement and life-management skills for young people.

*A Parent's Guide to Eating Disorders* by Brett Valette (Avon, 1988). Vital information for concerned parents. Or write:  
The National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders, Inc., Box 271, Highland Park, IL 60035.

*Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good?* by Miriam Adderholdt-Elliott, Ph.D. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1987). Written for young people, this book can also teach adults a great deal about this common problem.

*The Power of the Family* by Michael P. Nichols (Fireside, 1988). A novel-like depiction of a troubled family and how therapy helps them.

*Stick Up For Yourself! Every Kid's Guide to Personal Power and, Positive Self-Esteem* by Gershen Kaufman, Ph.D., and Lev Raphael, Ph.D. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1990). Encouraging how-to advice on being assertive, building relationships, and becoming responsible. For ages 8 and up.

The Survival Guides for Adolescence series by Gail C. Roberts, B.Ed., M.A. and Lorraine Guttormson, M.A. (Free Spirit Publishing, 1990). This personal growth series includes *You and Your Family*, *You and School*, and *You and Stress*, hands-on workbooks that help kids identify, address, and solve problems. A *Leader's Guide* gives suggestions for introducing, discussing, and enriching the activities.

*Teaching Children Self-Discipline at Home and at School* by Thomas Gordon, Ph.D. (Times Books/Random House, 1989). An excellent discussion of why traditional rewards, punishment, and praise do more harm than good, plus noncontrolling methods to get kids to change their behavior.