

AS THE TREE GROWS, SO GROWS THE CHILD

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In a previous article, Sloat (1990) discussed a multidimensional way of viewing the population identified as gifted by differentiating among those who were gifted (good at almost everything), talented (great at a few things), and creative (able to form new or unique products). It was suggested that in classifying these children, seven distinct groups should be identified:

1. Gifted
2. Creative
3. Talented
4. Gifted-Creative
5. Gifted-Talented
6. Creative-Talented
7. Gifted-Creative-Talented

The article dealt primarily with a model designed for viewing these distinct groups from an educator's point of view. This is not to suggest that the concept is of no interest to parents, however, for the first influence upon the child's development comes from the parents. From early on, the major contributing factor in a child's intellectual and emotional growth during the formative years is the collective influence of the parents, significant others, and society in general. Parents' nurturance and sustenance of the child during the early developmental period are most important ingredients in that child's experience.

Newland (1976) pointed out that "the interests of the gifted, their value systems and the nature of their educational and social motivation could be considerably influenced, or even heavily determined, by the nature of their socioeconomic backgrounds" (p. 82). Getzels and Jackson (1962) suggested that there existed a difference in family variables between high IQ and high creative children in terms of risk taking, values, openness, and independence in the creative family. Gallagher (1985) stated that "environmental factors are accepted as playing an important role in the



full development of giftedness" (p. 48).

In reviewing studies pertaining to the psychosocial development of the gifted, Janos and Robinson (1985) found that parents of high achievers are more positive, use more praise, and show more interest and understanding than parents of non-gifted. Further, gifted children identify more closely with their parents. Numerous other studies have demonstrated that self-esteem or self-concept is very important in learning at a higher level (Purkey, 1970). In fact, most educators agree that there is a direct relationship between low self-esteem and underachievement. Colangelo and Deitman (1984) stated that gifted children with high self-esteem come from positive, supportive environments; gifted underachievers experience more parental rejection or undue pressure to succeed. Studies of adopted children confirm that children raised in more privileged family environments score significantly higher on IQ tests (Scarrs & Weinberg, 1976).

In the present article, the authors have used the previously mentioned model to compare the influences on the physical growth and the intellectual and emotional development of the child to the growth of a tree (see Figure 1).

Just as a tree develops an underlying root structure which supports its growth through the seasons, the child must first establish a firm structure in order to support future growth and development.

The child's roots consist of five major pre- and post-natal strands. The configuration of these strands or roots may vary from child to child; however, all are essential for the child's development and must vigorously supply the child with the essential energy necessary for growth.

The first root is genetics, and includes those traits and characteristics which the child inherits from parents. Although this root is first, its importance may not be as great as those which come later, for it supplies only some factors which may be greatly altered by later influences.

The second root is bodily nourishment, which includes, but is not limited to, an appropriate balanced diet for physical and mental growth, proper pre- and post-natal care, life in a healthy environment, and quality medical, dental, and other appropriate physical

care.

The third, self-concept, is developed at an early age as a result of the child's dyadic relationships with parents and significant other caretakers. With the unfolding of mental images, the child's ego develops, and the child begins to identify feelings about himself or herself and others. Self-concept or self-esteem is related to the reinforcement and feedback about feelings that a child receives from significant caretakers, usually the parents.

The environmental root may be the strongest of all. The surroundings in which the child develops will either foster or hinder continued upward growth. Creativity can be facilitated or inhibited, depending upon environmental stimulation or deprivation. An intellect left to itself without stimulation will not grow, and a talent left untapped may never be discovered:

Full many a gem of purest ray serene
The dark unfathomed caves of ocean
bear:

Full many a flower is born to blush
unseen

And waste its sweetness on the
desert air.

Gray's *Elegy Written in a
Country Churchyard*

The last root in the system is acculturation. In this process, beginning in infancy, the child obtains the values, morals, and philosophy of life from the culture, sub-culture, and society in which he or she lives. Through the acculturation process, a child identifies and internalizes the moral and ethical structure which will govern his or her decision-making and problem-solving abilities.

These five roots form the child's bond from the past, through the present, to the future. It is through these five, nurturing the child in harmony, that the child develops into an individual capable of productive life.

The child grows and develops as does the tree, whose leaf-bearing branches parallel various human abilities. Every child has the capacity to branch into many areas, but only a few can evolve with enough special abilities to excel in all three areas and become gifted, creative, and talented in combination. Some trees will flourish with an abundance of leaves on each branch; some will live a full life with only a mini-

mum of leaves; for others, a paucity of leaves may create tremendous stress and anxiety.

Just as the tree's growth is contingent upon rain and sunlight, the branches and leaves of the child — that is, his or her gifts, creativity, and talents — are enhanced by input and reinforcement from teachers, peers, siblings, parents, mentors, and significant others throughout life. As the branches grow strong, so the child becomes capable of confronting everyday challenges and learning from them. These experiences, in turn, will help the child to understand his or her own values as they develop, even when they come into conflict with the values of the sub-culture, of others, or of society at large.

There are those children whose abilities grow in abundance in one, two or even in all three major areas, just as some trees put out magnificent spreading canopies of branches. The child whose development is remarkable in all three areas is not a better person than one with fewer capacities, but is simply different, as an oak differs from a cypress tree. The extra growth, however, must be perceived as a gift, to be nurtured and developed. Not every child receives this extra growth in all three branches and the myriad of smaller twigs which emanate from them.

The child whose major growth stems from the gifted branch is one who has high mental processing ability in a varied number of academic and related areas. This child generally shows high achievement in school, has an inquiring mind, learns and processes information rapidly, has a mature vocabulary, and is an analytical and logical thinker. He or she has a wide range of interests and is intrinsically motivated. Although an abstract thinker, the gifted child has a need for order and consistency in his or her world, and may often find it necessary to cut back in one or more areas in order to maintain time for more equal development, just as a tree overgrowing in one direction may require judicious trimming to provide balanced growth. Parents must understand that the gifted child, with his or her various interests, large vocabulary, and diverse skills, has many choices to make, and striving for consistency is the child's way of seeking the balance among these choices during the period of intellectual growth.

The child whose major strengths lie along the creative branch develops in different ways. Creativity grows in all children; however, in only a few does it produce the development needed for truly remarkable products of creativity, which may be seen as analogous to the winged seeds of the maple tree, each unique unto itself. The seeds of the maple tree swirl into the wind, the new breeze; and each may take root elsewhere as original, unique new seedlings; so too do the ideas of the creative child fly into the breeze, looking for fertile ground in which to take root. The product of the creative branch comes in many forms: art, music, invention, theory, dance, philosophy, mime, business, and perhaps even magic. One form may or may not complement another; one may not necessarily lead to another.

Creativity is expressed in many, many forms, but the profusion of forms of creativity appears to originate from a group of similar characteristics. Not all creative children have the same set of characteristics, but most have a constellation of characteristics from the following:

- Sensitivity to others and to emotion-laden situations,
- Curiosity, with constant questions and "nosiness,"
- Risk-taking, both behaviorally and with unconventional ideas, which may not please teachers or others,
- Fluency, or having many ideas on any topic,
- Flexibility, or the ability to change directions or subjects easily,
- Elaboration, or the ability to add much detail to ideas,
- Originality,
- Openness to new ideas,
- Persistence,
- High energy level,
- Divergent thinking, or the ability to take many different directions when dealing with an issue,
- Active imagination,
- Independence,
- Tolerance for disorder,
- Behavioral impulsivity,
- Capacity for maintaining several projects at one time or a driven approach in which the student neglects everything in a frenzy of attention to the project of the moment, and
- A tendency to an intuitive-feeling ap-

proach rather than a logical-thinking approach.

The form of some trees, like the pine, is to grow tall with a single upward thrust to the sky, with only smaller side branches and narrow leaves which may provide little shade to the ground below. Like the pine tree, talent is a branch with a single thrust; with all of its energy in one strong direction. A talented child is more than either good or excellent. He or she is superior in a focused area, or perhaps one or two areas. These specific abilities may be in the academic realm; in math, science, communication (written or oral), or in graphic art, music, leadership, psychomotor skills, or in performing arts. One might say that a talented child has massive ability (or potential ability), but only in a few special areas.

This child is quite involved in that area of interest, and is often absorbed for hours, losing all concept of time and place. The child may have high expectations of self, and is a self-starter, with an unusual intensity and persistence to excel in that specific area. Where the creative child is primarily product-oriented and secondarily process-oriented, and the gifted child is primarily process-oriented and secondarily product-oriented, the talented child is almost exclusively performance-oriented. He or she will do exceptionally well on tests in an area of expertise, but may score as average — and be unconcerned about — areas outside of that special expertise.

Sometimes children show unusual growth in more than one of their primary abilities. These children may be gifted-creative, or gifted-talented, or creative-talented. A rare child may be that most unusual gifted-creative-talented child, with high ability in all areas.

Parents and educators alike must be aware that all children who are identified as gifted may not be equally capable in all areas; rather, a child identified for special programming in the school is far more likely to excel in one of the three areas, and possibly, in two of the three. The parent or teacher who expects — or demands — high performance in all three areas may serve only to destroy the flowering of the child's one or two special gifts.

For example, a gifted child may appear to flit aimlessly from one new inter-

est to another, rarely finishing a product. If the parent or teacher has a preconceived notion that the child's goal is to produce a product in each new interest, it would appear that the child is not following through. Frequently, however, such a child has achieved his or her desired goal — this process-oriented child's goal from the beginning may have been to learn how that work was done, not to produce an object. Once the process has been mastered, the child is ready to move on.

It is often advisable for parents or teachers to rent or borrow necessary equipment for such new interests, rather than to purchase it. Many children's growing abilities have been stunted when a parent's financial investment in a child's project outweighs the child's readiness to explore new processes.

The destruction of a child's gifts, creativity, or talent is analogous to cutting down the sapling before it is able to blossom: We will never know the new life of that child's special abilities. Asking one child to fit our preconceived model of another is unfair to the child, the parents, the sub-culture, and society. Teachers and parents must work together to help all these types of children develop fully as they face everyday challenges and meet them in their own unique ways. We must work together to nourish the child; to help him or her excel in areas of strength; to ensure that he or she will be able, with our help, to withstand the power of axes made of words which can cut down saplings with one strong blow.

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