



Introversion: The often forgotten factor impacting the gifted

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You know at least one or perhaps are one: the child who immediately, when he comes home from school, escapes to the privacy of his room for time alone; the speaker who presents beautifully in front of 1200 people but who leaves a few minutes into the social hour because he says he can't deal with large groups of people; the quiet student who always has a book in hand, commonly plays alone, and whose favorite place is the reading corner; the adult who is vocal and social in a small group of people but who becomes silent and withdrawn if she is made to work in a larger one; the adolescent with only one best friend who lives in another city or state and who is content with that situation; or the individual who when attending a conference or convention can only take so much socializing and hustle and has to retreat to the privacy of her hotel room to 're-center' herself.

These are just some examples of introverted individuals. These aren't simply shy people, although certainly many are shy. They also are not simply depressed individuals, although introverts just as extraverts can be depressed. And they aren't all social outcasts, although it may appear this way to the extraverts who need that ongoing social contact to be healthy and happy. Introversion is not a pathological condition; it is not an abnormal response to the world. It is simply a personality trait found in a small percentage of the total population. Introverts are different from extraverts and this difference is very difficult for the extravert to understand because they do not operate in that fashion. And because they do not understand it, many continually try to help the introvert become more social, more gregarious, more outgoing, and have more fun from the extravert perspective. Such is the situation of the introvert, a minority in the regular population but a majority in the gifted population (Gallagher, 1990; Hoehn & Birely, 1988). And that difference from the 'norm' is the reason this factor needs to be considered when developing educational programs and parenting strategies for gifted students.

What is introversion? And how does it differ from extraversion?

Jung (1923) was one of the early leaders in the exploration of personality and is credited with developing the constructs of extraversion and introversion. He saw human behavior or habits as patterns and attempted to understand and explain differences in personality according to those unique and variable patterns. Although he focused primarily on sensing, intuition, thinking, and feeling; introversion and extraversion were important components of his mental or psychological traits theory. Most people utilize elements of both introversion and extraversion in their daily lives; however there generally is a dominant personality trait that reflects best how the individual prefers to work or deal with the environment, especially in times of stress. The introvert's main focus is within his/her head, in the internal world of ideas and concepts; the extravert's primary focus is on the external world of people and activities (Myers & Myers, 1980). Such preferences or personality traits impact many other elements such as perception, learning style, judgement, and sociological preferences (Meisgeier, Murphy & Meisgeier, 1989; Dunn & Dunn, 1978). Myers reminds us however that introverts typically hide their inner worlds and rarely let others into them, which may lead people to make erroneous decisions about them and their needs. Introverts get their energy from themselves and are drained by people; extraverts get their energy from other people and are drained by being alone.

Henjum (1982) sees introverts as belonging to two distinct groups:

Group A: Self-sufficient, confident, hardworking, with firm goals, self-actualizing, reserved, preferring activities that involve inner experience and introspection; and

Group B: Shy, timid, withdrawn with low self-concept, lacking in communication skills, demonstrating fear of people, dread of doing things in front of others, who prefer being left alone.

One can only conjecture whether or not some of the elements in Group B are a result of being constantly criticized for not being more social or more outgoing. Since most individuals belong to the extravert category (3 to 1), being introverted commonly means being misunderstood, just like giftedness!

This is not to say however that introversion cannot be a problem. It is similar to perfectionism in that a little is beneficial and too much is harmful. Some things to look for:

- When the individual has no friends and spends all their time alone...but not by choice.
- When the individual is depressed about having no friends.
- When the individual refuses to work with others for any reason.
- When the individual demonstrates marked behavior changes (marked weight loss or gain, sleeps much more or less, physical distress, withdrawal, etc.)

All of these warrant immediate attention by a psychologist, counselor, or another appropriate caregiver. Commonly it is not the introversion that causes these but it may be a general inability to make and keep friends that does it. Social skills can be learned and such training is appropriate even for gifted individuals.

Now overlay the characteristics of giftedness and note the many similarities with our general gifted population. The intellectual elements, the organizational and operational style elements, and the environmental preference elements are very similar. Adding the intensity and sensitivity of the gifted to the needs of the introvert makes this a situation that needs to be actively addressed by educators and parents.

Some Characteristics of Introverts:

- Are territorial - desire private space and time
- Are happy to be alone - they can be lonely in a crowd
- Become drained around large groups of people; dislike attending parties
- Need time alone to recharge
- Prefer to work on own rather than do group work
- Act cautiously in meeting people
- Are reserved, quiet and deliberate
- Do not enjoy being the center of attention
- Do not share private thoughts with just anyone
- Form a few deep attachments
- Think carefully before speaking (practice in my head before I speak)
- See reflection as very important
- Concentrate well and deeply
- Become absorbed in thoughts and ideas
- Limit their interests but explore deeply
- Communicate best one-on-one
- Get agitated and irritated without enough time alone or undisturbed
- Select activities carefully and thoughtfully

Some Characteristics of Extraverts

- Are social - they need other people
- Demonstrate high energy and noise
- Communicate with excitement and enthusiasm with almost anyone in the vicinity
- Draw energy from people; love parties
- Are lonely and restless when not with people
- Establish multiple fluid relationships
- Engage in lots of activities and have many interest areas
- Have many best friends and talk to them for long periods of time
- Are interested in external events not internal ones
- Prefer face-to-face verbal communication rather than written communication
- Share personal information easily
- Respond quickly

(It must be remembered that, just as for giftedness, no one list adequately captures the uniqueness of any individual but serves as a beginning guide to recognizing and understanding behaviors.)

(Characteristics synthesized from: Hirsh & Kummerow, 1989; Keirsey & Bates, 1984; Lawrence, 1985; Myers & Myers, 1980.)

School and the Introvert

Given the above characteristics it is not surprising that school is not a positive experience for many gifted introverts. It can be loud, crowded, superficial, boring, overstimulating, and focused on action, not reflection. Think about the school environment for a moment. Where can a student be alone or at least with only a few others sometime during the regular day? Why is the request to work alone commonly denied? How much of a day do you believe is dedicated to private reflection or enforced quiet? Modern schools seem to be designed for extraverts. From the beginning of the day (especially if they have to ride the bus),

the day is full of large groups and large areas, large classes, lunch in a common area, physical education in a large group and in a large gym, locker rooms, assemblies, homeroom, etc. All of these are ideal for the student who likes to be with others, who talks easily and loudly to anyone who will listen, who tolerates crowds and noise, who gets restless without involvement with other people, and who prefers to focus towards activity and action. The culture and environment benefit the extraverts because they match their needs and learning differences. Lunchtime in a school cafeteria is an excellent example of what can be overwhelming to an introvert. And it is not just students who are impacted by this design. Introverted teachers and administrators, if they are to survive, have to develop coping strategies so they, too, can maintain their equilibrium. They have to learn to deal with classrooms full of extraverts, noise, organized chaos, and crowds, just like the students.

Many teachers report being extraverts. It is very difficult for an extravert to understand an introvert. Therefore the teacher may see the introverted student as someone with a problem, not as simply someone with a different personality type. This may lead to attempts to get them to be 'friendlier,' to work in larger groups, to talk more often and more spontaneously, and to be more outgoing and interactive. There is nothing wrong with being an introvert. It does not need to be cured. It simply needs to be understood and accepted. Of course teachers need to be able to tell when the introversion (or extraversion) is dysfunctional, but introverted students don't need to be changed to match other students. If social skills are lacking, teach them.

Instruction for the introvert should differ from that provided for the extravert. Methods should utilize that internal reflective focus and honor the need for structure, quiet, and small groups. Such strategies include: independent studies, small group instruction, collaborative learning activities, tiered instruction, debate, dramatics or role-playing, journaling, quiet time, and book clubs, to name a few. Many of these students like lectures and expository and deductive modes of instruction. Most introverts need wait time, warning about what they are expected to do, activities with minimal noise and stimulation, down time built into the schedule, and moderate amounts of small group work.

These approaches, however, have to be combined with ones appropriate for the extravert who needs high stimulation, movement and activity throughout the classroom, lots of contact with others, and open spaces for working. Most extraverted students like open discussions and discovery activities. When different students need different methods and environments for optimal performance, the teacher must differentiate more than just the content of the lesson.

Much of the curriculum currently in use seems to have been written for the 'typical' student. This means that many of the needs of introverted students are missed unless the teacher specifically modifies the curriculum for them. In some classrooms this is relatively easy because of a focus on different learning styles and ability levels. In other classrooms very little is made available to that learner except constant advice on becoming more social and gregarious, "like the rest of the students." We talk frequently about differentiating the curriculum for multiple diverse learners especially the gifted; differentiating for the gifted introvert must also be advocated. This means that things such as assignments, grouping patterns, activity levels, assessment options, wait time, and expectations all need to be modified for this special group of students as well as for the gifted extraverts. I am not advocating separate classes for this group but an awareness of and willingness to work with their different needs.

Home and the Introvert

Just as at school, the home can be a place of refuge or attack. Typically students see their bedroom as their haven, however it may not be that way depending upon the rest of the family and the general order in the household. Which personality type is more prevalent in the family and is the student of the same or different type? What are the siblings, same or different? Are both types accepted, supported, and protected? Is the home set up to serve both types of personalities?

The following are some suggestions to parents and siblings for supporting and protecting introverts:

- Provide private space: A private bedroom is nice, but if not possible, at least a private area in the house that can serve that purpose. Rooming with an extraverted brother or sister is commonly not a pleasant experience for an introvert.
- Guarantee quiet time: A child who needs to recharge his batteries cannot do it in a loud crazy house. Negotiate a way to provide that needed quiet time for this individual.
- Model "alone" not "lonely" talk: This can be difficult unless you are an introvert. If the child continually hears that being away from people makes one lonely, it sends a very strong message to them about what they should feel. Most introverts are not lonely when alone and that message needs to be verbally shared and modeled.
- Protect their right to say "enough": This statement of 'enough' refers to people, activities, and noise. If they are not 'party animals,' they should be able to put in a certain amount of time at a family gathering and then be able to beg off. We don't want them to associate such get-togethers with distress and unhappiness.



- Provide small group activities: Make certain that some of the activities they are involved in are small groups or individually oriented. This goes for after-school activities and sports as well. This does not mean that all things must be small group but definitely all things should not be large group.
- Provide coping strategies for those times when they have to act extraverted: If some member of the family is also introverted, sharing secrets or tips to tide them through those large group, in front of others, high noise times is very useful. If the family is extraverted, help may need to come from outside the family.
- Talk about your own personality needs: If you are an introvert, talk about how you deal with it. If you are an extravert, talk about your needs as your introverted child may not understand the difference.
- Discuss books that feature introverts: Bibliotherapy is an appropriate strategy for home as well as school. Discuss the actions of the characters and their consequences, discuss alternative actions, discuss feelings of the characters and those around them, and talk about how you see such events or situations in the real world. It is always so much easier to talk about a character in a book than about oneself, especially for introverts who are even less likely to share such private thoughts and feeling.

Developing Coping Introverts

Please remember that many introverts can learn to appear to be extraverted for those times when the need arises. This is critical especially for the gifted as they are often called on to perform in front of others or with large groups. This training should be a part of the educational program for all gifted introverts as it provides them with a useful mask to put on when necessary. Such training comes through instruction and practice in public speaking, debate, drama, music, social skills, dance, and mentoring.

Awareness and support are half the battle in protecting gifted introverts. Finding a sense of understanding and empathy in one's family and friends, developing useful strategies and suggestions for making it through a school or work day, and gaining knowledge of why others do what they do helps make the world a more comfortable place for the introvert. We need to start however with awareness because, just like giftedness, being an introvert is commonly seen as negative, as anti-social, and as weird by much of the world. And we know that all it is ... is different.

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