

# parents' conceptions of giftedness

by  
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**g**iftedness is an elusive concept. Not only has it changed its meaning for society in different times and cultures, but it has also held a variety of meanings within a given culture and time period. Passow (1985) referred to 51 different terms in the education literature that characterize giftedness and concluded that there is 'no single uniform conception of giftedness' (p. 23). More recently, Passow (1993) stated that the population of gifted people is so heterogeneous that its multidimensionality 'may preclude a comprehensive theory' (p. 887). Yet, no matter how complex the construct, Passow (1985) insisted that conceptualizing giftedness is important because "all aspects of identification and development of giftedness depend on the underlying conception of the nature of giftedness" (p. 23).

How parents view their children's abilities and potential influences the way they guide them. Bloom (1985) and Feldman and Goldsmith (1986) looked at the role that parents play in developing the talents of promising children. Both studies concluded that parents are essential to the formula for success. "Without strong and proper guidance, nurturance, and support from parents, [their talents] won't bloom" (Bloom, p. 3). Feldman and Goldsmith concurred, "Parental devotion to the development of prodigious talent has been the strongest constant across the cases in my study" (p. 98). Feldman and Goldsmith also contended that before parents can nurture giftedness, they must recognize it for what it is.

Parents' conceptions about giftedness may affect their interpretations of their gifted children's characteristics and behaviors and, in turn, may influence their reaction to them. The bidirectional nature of parent-child relationships has become apparent in the last decade of child-development research. "Our children as much rear us as we do them. . . . How we behave toward our children depends quite a lot on how they have influenced us to behave" (Lerner, Castellino, Terry, Villarruel, & McKinley, 1995, p. 287).

There is circular feedback, "Children shape their parents . . . and in so doing, children help organize feedback to themselves, feedback that contributes further to their individuality and thus starts the circular function again" (Lerner et al., 1995, p. 290). Throughout the dynamic, parents filter their children's behavior through a framework of their own beliefs, sometimes changing those beliefs as a result of the feedback.

### **Alice: One Mother's Learning About Giftedness**

Several years ago, Alice<sup>1</sup>, the mother of a seven-year-old gifted child, attended

the first meetings of a parent-resource and support group that I had organized. After the initial sessions focusing on the characteristics of gifted children, Alice approached me with her changing perspective. She confided,

Why I came to this group was because my daughter was so argumentative. She questioned almost everything I did as a parent. I began to feel as if she were trying to undermine my authority. I got very defensive and upset in dealing with her. How can I be raising such a brat, I wondered. Now I've learned that my daughter's probing questions are characteristic of intellectually gifted children, and things have relaxed at home. My parenting style has changed. I don't feel so threatened anymore. I can disengage more easily and not get embroiled in heated arguments with her. I understand her differently now.

Alice was grateful. She regained her equanimity as a mother because she changed her framework of thinking about her daughter.

### **Why Study Parents' Conceptions of Giftedness?**

How parents raise their gifted children has a lot to do with how they perceive them. How parents perceive their gifted children rests on their underlying thinking about giftedness (Solow, 1999). When Alice first attended the parent group, she had no conscious framework of thinking about her child as gifted. She knew that her seven-year-old was bright and had been labeled "gifted" at school, but she did not really know what that meant. Alice showed up at the parent

meeting to get help in dealing with her problems at home. She was looking for strategies to deal effectively and lovingly with her daughter. Alice discovered that the first step was to understand who her daughter was.

This story illustrates one kind of parent and one type of learning situation. Alice was actively seeking advice about her gifted daughter. Alice's search resulted in her developing the backdrop of giftedness as a central, organizing concept for interpreting and responding to her daughter's behaviors. Some parents like Alice (before she attended the parent meetings) tend to "shoot from the hip" when reacting to their gifted children (Solow, 1995). With no conscious framework of giftedness, parents may have trouble making sense of some of their children's actions. They respond "in the moment," based on some generalized notions of how children should behave toward parents. Parents with a greater knowledge of gifted children's social and emotional characteristics have a more measured response to their children's behaviors.

People hold varied beliefs about giftedness and have a range of awareness about their own thinking and assumptions. Some parents may understand their gifted children based upon an underlying conception that they do not explore consciously. The more that parents are cognizant of their belief systems, however, the more that they can make deliberate choices and take well-considered actions. Without an awareness of their thinking, parents may lack some critical clues that would help them guide their children more sagaciously.

Four in-depth case studies of parents with intellectually gifted children (Solow, 1999) revealed five categories of influence on parents' conceptions of giftedness. The parents' value systems, their roles as parents, their involvement with the school system, their families of

## Parents' Conceptions

origin, and their understanding of their own giftedness largely contributed to their conceptions of giftedness. This article will focus most comprehensively on one parent, Nora, to show the complexity and interdependence of the five influences on her thinking and behavior. One example from each of two other parents' lives will provide additional perspective in illustrating how the key influences shaped the parents' attitudes, responses and choices for their gifted children.

### Nora

#### *Brief Family Portrait*

Nora, a white, 40-year-old illustrator who worked at home, was married to Frank and was the mother of their three children, Judith, age 12; Dora, age 9; and Cal, age 5. Judith was Nora's gifted, dreamy child who thought so differently from the rest of the family that she seemed to live in a world of her own at times. Dora, who was most like her mother temperamentally, was practical and had good common sense. Cal, the youngest, was "very curious, all boy in all those typical senses—balls and trucks and all that kind of stuff" (Solow, 1999, p. 236). Nora was not sure, but she suspected that he might be gifted.

Judith was entering middle school (6th grade) when the interviews began. Nora saw Judith's giftedness as rooted in her insightful observations and understanding of people even though her elementary school had identified her as academically gifted. Nora was very much at odds with the way the local school identified gifted children and felt that Judith's teachers could not see the true aspects of giftedness in her child. She also felt that her daughter Dora was only above average in her academic abilities and did not really belong in the school's gifted program.

Nora felt that gifted children were

physically draining and noted that Cal exhausted her. Nora was very clear that she preferred having average children. "My bottom line is: I don't like having a gifted child. I don't want a gifted child" (Solow, 1999, p. 237). Nora described other parents who were eager to have their children identified as gifted as "crazy; it's a lot of work" (Solow, p. 237). Nora pointed out that most people thought that the connotation of "gifted" was good, but "I don't know that it's always been [good]. I'd rather have the Dora's" (Solow, p. 237).

#### *Five Categories of Influence*

*Families of Origin.* Growing up, Nora's ideas about giftedness were formed by having two brilliant older brothers, Paul and Stuart. "I thought they were brilliant. I idolized them" (Solow, 1999, p. 238), Nora recounted. However, giftedness made Stuart "different and [he was] treated differently. It ruined him" (Solow, p. 238). As a result, Stuart became poorly socialized, which had a telling impact on how Nora conceptualized giftedness. "I was raised with two gifted brothers, and one of them can't step outside a store. He can't get along in the real world" (Solow, p. 238), Nora explained. Intellectually, Stuart was "above them all," at the highest tier of giftedness, Nora stated. Stuart had a photographic memory, and his IQ was "off the charts [160+]" (Solow, p. 239), she said. "The way I interpret the word [giftedness] is that all of this [knowledge and understanding] is there. It's just given as a gift, and it's there" (Solow, p. 239). In contrast to his older brother, Paul [150 IQ], who was also extremely smart but who had to study and work to absorb information somewhat, Stuart seemed to have a profound, innate gift. Some of Stuart's gifted characteristics made life difficult for him, Nora said. For instance, Nora contended that his perceptiveness was part of his giftedness. Yet, he per-

ceived things differently from everyone else. Because he saw social situations so differently, Stuart "always felt like an outsider and remained an outsider his whole life" (Solow, p. 241). When Nora saw hints of Stuart's intellectual and personal characteristics in Judith, she reacted strongly. Judith had a much better sense of people, but her tendency to daydream and leave the "real world" concerned Nora. Because Nora did not want Judith to fall prey to the same kinds of severe problems that she associated with Stuart's giftedness, Nora minimized her daughter's intellectual gifts and emphasized her humanistic ones.

*Role as Parent.* Nora struggled tremendously between preserving Judith's humanistic giftedness and ensuring that she could function in the real world. Because of Judith's dreaminess, idealism, and difficulty in negotiating some day-to-day tasks, Nora worried a lot about her ability to function successfully in the world when she grew up. She saw herself as a mother trying to maintain her daughter's equilibrium on a tightrope, balanced between those two needs. Although Judith liked being around other people, Nora believed that Judith's tendency to think so differently and enter her private world where "everything is wonderful" (Solow, 1999, p. 249) made her quite impractical in day-to-day matters.

If we're in the grocery store, and I say, "Go get the cornflakes and dah-dah-dah," she'll come back 20 minutes later and say, "Well, I got to aisle 7, but what was it again you asked for?" 'cause her mind is so busy in different compartments. She's bright and she's sweet, but she can't bring me the cornflakes. (Solow, p. 249)

Nora was concerned that Judith would not be able to get onto the "fast lane"

(Solow, p. 249) of life; that it was too accelerated for her. Her role as a mother, therefore, was to keep Judith up to speed. Nora said that she tried not to push Judith too hard, but she did encourage Judith to grapple with pragmatic realities.

Nora agonized about an early warning she had gotten from Judith's Montessori-trained, first grade teacher. Nora had a baby and sometimes had to urge Judith to leave the classroom more quickly than Judith wanted. The teacher said, "Judith is so gentle and such a soft person. I think if you rush her in life, if you hurry her to keep up with the family, you'll break her" (Solow, 1999, p. 250).

That admonition, which echoed in Nora's heart, symbolized the internal battle she waged as a parent. On the one hand, she felt it imperative to help Judith "[get] her shoes on in the morning" (Solow, 1999, p. 250). On the other hand, she did not want to break her daughter's special spirit. Nora felt that Judith's strength was also her weakness. Nora needed to counterbalance that weakness because it might drive her daughter too far from reality to cope with life's challenges.

*Values Framework.* Nora's values formed an important framework for her thinking about giftedness. Not only did her values guide her behavior and decision making, but they also affected the parameters of her conception of giftedness. Nora always kept "the big picture" of fairness, diversity, tolerance, equality, and community in mind as she made decisions about where and how to live. She situated her family in diverse neighborhoods and public schools. She cared deeply about creating a cooperative society in which all people would feel valued. Nora's vision of what might contribute to a harmonious, productive society shaped her thinking. She was sincerely concerned about racial equity and a level playing field in school so that all

children might have equal opportunities to excel. Effective socialization would be critical to the members of such a society.

Nora's "big picture" formed the backdrop for her thinking about Judith's talents and qualities. Her conceptualization of Judith's giftedness rested more on her daughter's humanistic qualities than on her intellect. Even though others, especially teacher-friends, pointed to Judith's impressive academic and intellectual qualities, the Center for Talented Youth (CTY) program<sup>2</sup> selected Judith as part of its Talent Search, and her local school identified Judith as academically gifted. Nora thought that "Judith's giftedness is people and inclusive of people" (Solow, 1999, p. 245). Judith's intelligence was not what made her gifted, Nora maintained. "Her true goodness, I think, will make her gifted. Because she sees good in most things, I think . . . because of that, she will be gifted" (Solow, p. 245). The most important piece of Judith's giftedness, Nora felt, was the human piece. Since Judith had to study somewhat and because the schools had "dumbed down" the curriculum since Nora's time, "Judith was academically bright but not gifted," Nora said. Nora chose to focus on Judith's humanism, partly from her fears about Stuart and partly because her values emphasized the good of the greater community.

*School Influences.* Nora relished the opportunity for her children to meet children of racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds. "I'm in public education for the big picture. I like that my children know all kinds of kids" (Solow, 1999, p. 270). She mentioned that the county adjacent to the city had a separate, public, gifted school. Nora did not want her children there. "And in the gifted school, it's all white. It's all white and [it has] clamoring parents like stage moms. And I would not like that" (Solow, p. 270). Nora barely spoke about academics when she described her children's elementary-

school experience. Instead, she focused on the political ramifications of the school's gifted programming, that is, how it affected "the big picture." Nora's commitment to public school diversity ran deep. As a young girl, she watched her parents endure the crucible of school integration in the South. She admired the choices that her parents made. While many of the more affluent, local families pulled out of the public schools, Nora's parents were unwilling to ignore the needs of the poorer people's children. They looked at the "big picture" of public schooling and stuck with it. Their courage empowered Nora to do the same as a parent when she had to endure her own, racial-schooling crisis.

Nora said that her childhood experience left her with "a chip on my shoulder about affluent, private schools" (Solow, 1999, p. 272). She admitted that during the racial crisis she experienced as a parent, however, she did go to investigate the local private school, Perrington.

I could picture Judith in many of the situations, and I thought for sure she could be a leader there in a group of just girls. I thought [that] would be healthy for her. But there was so much affluence that I knew it would pain her—that that isn't the real world. (Solow, 1999, p. 272)

Nora wanted Judith to experience a wider world than Perrington could provide. "I'm not [putting her in Perrington] because I really think she needs to see the real world, and she needs to be able to function in it" (Solow, 1999, p. 272).

Nora realized that enrolling Judith in Perrington would more than likely enhance her intellectual gifts, but she felt that the price Judith would have to pay by living in a diminished world was too great. The economic inequities that Judith would observe between the Perrington world and that of her other friends would wound her, Nora con-

## Parents' Conceptions

tended. Thus, when it came to a choice between enhancing Judith's intellect at a private school and reinforcing Judith's humanism in a public school, Nora opted for the place where Judith could learn more lessons about getting along in a diverse society. Nora's choice was consistent with her conceptualization of giftedness and her related perception of Judith as humanistically, rather than academically, gifted.

*Parents' Understanding of Their Own Giftedness.* Nora did not speak of her own giftedness, whether from modesty or from her high standards of giftedness. She alluded to her own, high IQ and her encompassing academic aptitude in high school, but she did not call herself gifted. Nora seemed to move away intentionally from that categorization in her teenage and early adult years.

Nora chose a life for herself where her abilities were subdued enough to allow her to blend in harmoniously with others, an important value of hers. Nora attributed her ability to get along with a great variety of people to her public schooling experience. "I see myself as more well-rounded because of it" (Solow, 1999, p. 272). She wanted to ensure that Judith would feel as at ease with others as she did.

And, I saw . . . all my friends who went to private school, and I saw me compared to them. I have gotten along in the real world. I can talk to anybody, and a lot of them can't. A lot of them are still in trouble with their lives. It's wrong to place the blame all on the school, but that's my background that makes me not put her in Perrington's. (Solow, p. 272)

Nora's considerable artistic talent was channeled into illustrating—a career that did not make her seem so different from others as to be threatening. She did

not portray herself as gifted and downplayed that characterization in all of her children. Even though Nora acknowledged Judith's humanistic giftedness privately in interviews, she was reluctant to make that public knowledge. By quietly using her talents and embracing social qualities in herself and her children, Nora avoided the potentially noxious circumstance of being more gifted than anyone else was.

## Tony

### *Brief Family Portrait*

Tony was a soft-spoken, 35-year-old father of three, who attributed some of his characteristics to his Italian heritage. Working full-time as an historian while completing his Ph.D., he was married to Lavinia, who stayed at home full-time with their children. Recognizing that Lavinia could readily have obtained a good job as a chemist, Tony explained that both he and his wife felt that one of them should be home with the children. As a Mormon, Tony saw home childcare as central to the family's well-being. Tony and Lavinia's children were Giovanni, age 8; Phoebe, age 5; and Daphne, age 3.

After Giovanni attended kindergarten in public school, Tony and Lavinia decided to homeschool him. Although he had been identified as gifted by the gifted resource teacher on the second day of kindergarten, both parents felt that the school could not provide adequate stimulation to keep Giovanni challenged. He loved his once-a-week, half-hour gifted class session, but there was too much "down time" in the regular classroom, leaving Giovanni bored and restless. At the time of the interviews, Giovanni was in second grade.

Phoebe was just beginning kindergarten during the research study. Tony did not consider her to be intellectually gifted. Daphne, the youngest child, seemed most

like her older brother and showed similar signs of intellectual precocity. She was an early learner and shared a number of characteristics that led Tony to consider that she might be gifted. Since she was so young, he was waiting to watch her further development.

### *One Category of Influence*

*Role as Parent.* Tony's role as a parent had a major impact on how he defined giftedness. At first, Tony did not see an indication of intellectual giftedness in Phoebe, his second child. "We haven't seen the same evidence in her to show that she's gifted that we've seen in Giovanni. But nevertheless, we're trying to make her feel gifted or special, I guess. I guess 'special' and 'gifted' are almost interchangeable" (Solow, 1999, p. 205). Tony wanted all his children to feel equally valued, loved, and capable. To achieve this equity, Tony recognized another kind of giftedness in Phoebe.

Well, we don't want her to feel any less capable than Giovanni. She is a very loving and affectionate individual, and I think that's a gift, but that's not something she'll be in the gifted program for. I guess . . . it's not intellectually gifted, but I think the world needs a lot more people like that than the other gifted. (Solow, p. 205)

In Tony's parental lexicon, "gifted" and "special" became synonymous, and he perceived different types of giftedness. Although he did not classify her as intellectually gifted initially, he did see Phoebe as gifted in her interpersonal qualities.

## Tony and Nora: Roles as Parents

Tony and Nora's roles as parents influenced their conceptions of gifted-

ness. When Tony was younger, he thought that “gifted” referred to people with more highly developed intellects than their peers. As a father, his definition shifted to become more inclusive of all his children’s gifts so that each child could feel special. Nora perceived Judith’s dreaminess as part of a netherworld where all was harmonious, consistent with her humanistic giftedness. She did not associate that characteristic with the school’s identification of her daughter as intellectually gifted.

## Tina

### *Brief Family Portrait*

Tina was an ebullient 31-year-old, divorced, African American mother who had a community-college degree and worked as an aide in a facility for handicapped adults. Tina dropped out of a four-year college after one semester to support her daughter, Patty, age 11, and son, Timmy, age 8. Quite skeptical when the elementary school labeled her children “gifted,” Tina investigated its meaning on her own terms. Eschewing the regularly scheduled gifted introductory sessions, Tina opted to make surprise visits to the school to see the gifted program in action. Once she became convinced that “giftedness” was not simply a new educational fad, Tina accepted the label for school purposes and allowed her children to participate in the program. Tina did not use the term “gifted” at home because she feared its use would make her children arrogant.

### *One Category of Influence*

*School Influences.* Tina spent a lot of time talking about the impact of education on her life and on that of her children. She highly valued education, especially opportunities for higher education. Tina’s valuing of education

stemmed from the way she was raised, she explained. Her role models included her mother, father, and brother. Her mother earned a two-year degree, “and she graduated magna cum laude. For our family at that time, that was an achievement” (Solow, 1999, p. 77). Tina’s father had a high-school education, and her disabled brother had a year of college. The message Tina got from her family helped to make her want to educate herself as fully as possible.

One of the things I was taught was that education is something no one can ever take away from you. And so, while you have the opportunity to seize those moments, seize them because everything else, just like you get it, you can lose it. With the kids, I stress the same things. (Solow, p. 77)

Tina demonstrated her commitment to education by working hard at a full-time job and grappling with many difficulties as a single mother, while still pursuing her education.

There were a lot of times [when] I lost sleep, and I stayed up late, or I got up early. I don’t have a computer, so I had to hand-write all my papers and get someone to type them for me. [I feel good] that [despite] the time, the sacrifices that I put in, [I] still gave [the children] time, [so] they were not neglected. (Solow, 1999, p. 78)

Despite all her sacrifices of time and money, Tina wanted her children to realize that her efforts would benefit all of them in the long run. She hoped they understood that she persevered because “I want them to see that an education, a good education, is worth

the work you put into it” (Solow, 1999, p. 78). Tina also mentioned that educational attainment would be necessary for her children to get good jobs in the future.

Tina’s conception of giftedness evolved over time. Before her children were identified by their elementary school, Tina had never heard of the term. Gifted programs did not exist in her schools when she was growing up, so she did not know what to expect. When Tina first heard about the gifted program, she was skeptical due to her negative views of the school system.

Tina’s initial distrust of the giftedness concept originated partly from her own, poor educational experience in the same school system as her children. Having always been in the top groups and having always achieved high grades in elementary school, Tina found herself slipping badly in middle school, especially due to her weakness in math. In secondary school, Tina did not get the support she needed to remain a top student. In contrast, she was pleased to see the current school system allowing bright students to have weaknesses, as well as strengths, and still be offered advanced-learning opportunities. “Rather than take a child and say, ‘Because this child’s not good in math, she’s not gifted,’ they will go, ‘Okay, but this child is good in everything else. So don’t kick this child to the bottom of the pile just because she’s weak in math’” (Solow, 1999, p. 103).

Originally, Tina said, “I was one of those parents that thought that ‘gifted’ meant brainy. ‘Gifted’ meant smart. ‘Gifted’ didn’t really mean nerdy but different. And it took the investigation [of the gifted program] and watching my daughter start out [in the program] and finding out that it’s more than just books” (Solow, 1999, p. 86). Tina said that it took her a school year to recog-

## Parents' Conceptions

nize some of the changes that were happening to Patty. "I saw how her interests increased and how she came home and said, 'Mom, guess what the gifted program is doing? We're having Shakespeare . . . and I really want to get involved. Please sign the paper!'" (Solow, p. 86).

Giftedness, then, meant the excitement, interest, and desire Patty showed in doing the work the program offered, not just her ability to read and think well. From listening to Patty's conversations with her friends and from talking to other parents, Tina concluded that gifted children are different in "their willingness to go beyond, to do more" (Solow, 1999, p. 87). Once the children were selected for the gifted program, Tina began to analyze her children more carefully at home.

Tina's skepticism was also due to her belief that gifted children should be as good at completing home chores as school assignments. Before the children were identified, "I noticed the knack that they had for little things, but I never really [attributed] it to being gifted" (Solow, 1999, p. 90). Tina admired how Patty could "sit down and have these nifty little ideas on how to . . . write a story" (Solow, p. 91), but was perturbed because Patty could not keep her room clean. Even worse, Patty did not realize that it was not clean. Timmy made the same kind of mess in his room, but somehow both he and his sister could keep their school notebooks perfectly well-organized. At first, Tina did not readily see why her children could not apply those same organizational skills at home. Thus, she felt that she did not see evidence of real giftedness.

In the course of her learning about giftedness, however, Tina's perception gradually changed. She began to reframe the children's behaviors, putting them in a gifted context. For instance, she reinterpreted the room cleanliness issue. "I

take it as . . . OK, apparently the academics or intellectual stuff appears to be more important, more interesting, than cleaning a room" (Solow, 1999, p. 91). Tina came to see that her children did, in fact, know where everything was in their rooms, and the chaos had meaning for them. As a result of her new focus, Tina did not worry about the messiness as much anymore, although she did still keep after the children to do their chores.

Part of Tina's learning process was due to her involvement with the gifted program committee for the school. As a member, she learned about the identification and selection processes in detail and helped to modify them. Between her work on the committee and her observations of her children at home, the more Tina's conception of giftedness developed. Yet, the basis of her thinking was rooted in her own experiences in education and her ideas about the way the educational system changed in her lifetime. "I think my idea . . . of giftedness is something that's been like a predefinition from where I've been in high school . . . to where my kids are now" (Solow, 1999, p. 89). Giftedness came into Tina's life when the educational system introduced it. Before then, it had very little, if any, practical or theoretical meaning for her.

## Tina and Nora: School Influences

Whereas Nora did not accept the label of Judith as intellectually gifted because the school division had lowered the curriculum levels and expectations since her youth, Tina felt that her schools had improved the definition of giftedness because it now allowed for strengths and weaknesses in students. Nora resisted the notion of her daughter's intellectual giftedness because her

conception was so heavily influenced by factors that undermined the school's identification. Tina learned to accept her children's giftedness largely because her conception was formed in the context of the school's better attitude toward very bright, if somewhat unevenly talented, children.

## Conclusions

The case study of Nora and the two brief examples from Tony and Tina's lives provide a glimpse of the dynamic between the parents' conceptions and perceptions of giftedness. In Tina's case, learning about giftedness from the school influenced her personal conception, which affected her interpretation and response to Patty and Timmy's messy room, as well as many other things, not included here. She modified her reaction and blamed them less as she grew to understand their perspective more.

Tony realigned his perception of his daughter, Phoebe, as humanistically gifted when he reconfigured his earlier conception from a purely intellectual one. Not only did this help him explore ways to support Phoebe's particular strengths, but it also helped him later to further revise his conception of intellectual giftedness so that it did not match just his older son's mental and emotional characteristics. When Phoebe's school eventually identified her as intellectually gifted, Tony was not as surprised as he might have been earlier because his thinking had evolved to understand giftedness in new ways.

Although Nora recognized Judith's intellectual talents, she gave far greater emphasis and made more decisions based upon her perception of Judith's humanistic giftedness. Nora's conception of intellectual giftedness rested on the notion of a pure gift, which she felt that Judith did not possess. Nora did

provide Judith with educational enrichment, but when making major life decisions, Nora used Judith's "people" qualities as her guide.

## Parental Applications

All of the parents in this research study stated that they had not consciously or coherently thought about their conceptions of giftedness prior to the interviews. Once they articulated their conceptions and reflected on their development, however, the parents began to see which aspects of their lives had influenced their thinking. For some, this meant a reworking of their ideas and attitudes, which were still in flux. For others, it meant a further clarification of their values, outlooks, attitudes, and behaviors.

To become cognizant of your parental behavior, attitudes, and decisions, reflect upon these questions and guidelines as you consider each of the key influences on your conception of giftedness.

### Values

*How much does your personal value system influence your perception of your child's intellectual, social, emotional, spiritual, or artistic characteristics?*

Your values may cause you to emphasize one set of characteristics in your children over others. When making school decisions, some parents place socialization before academics. What parents sometimes fail to realize is that if their children's academic needs are not met adequately, their social and emotional needs may suffer, too. When intellectually advanced children work infrequently with their intellectual peers, they may feel misunderstood or misused as tutors. On the other hand, parents who place too great a focus on academic achievement may unwittingly undermine their chil-

dren's sense of emotional security. If their parents' approval rests too greatly on achievement, then they may become reluctant to take any intellectual or social risks in life. Their sense of well-being needs to come from other aspects of their selves besides just the intellectual.

### Role as Parents

*What are the forces that contribute to the "push-pull of parenting" in your life?*

Creating balance in one child's life while balancing the conflicting needs of the entire family can be a harrowing task. First, take a moment to examine what the competing forces in your gifted child's life are. At this stage of the child's development, which aspect needs greater attention? Will limiting some of the child's activities give him or her "downtime" that is so important to creative and emotional well-being? How can you help your child learn how to balance his or her own activities so he or she will not feel burned out? If your child feels "different" from others, to what extent must your child be like others to "fit in"? How important is "fitting in" to your child? Look for peer groups that have more in common with your son or daughter, thus making "fitting-in" less of a compromise to their true sense of self.

*In your effort to make each child feel special, do all of your children get the kind of enrichment and opportunity needed to develop their talents to the best of their abilities?*

Tony seems typical of most parents who wish to acknowledge all of their children's gifts and make each child feel special. Sometimes, a parent feels that a child is so gifted in an area of art, music, drama, or intellectual thought that a disproportionate amount of time must be spent catering to the development of those abilities. Contributing to the time/energy problem, parents may also

have spouses and always have themselves to consider in the "needs" mix. Parents must preserve their own sense of well-being in order to help their children. Although researchers have attested to the extraordinary amount of support that gifted and talented children need to nurture their gifts to the maximum, a thoughtful look at the entire family dynamic is still crucial. Cornell and Grossberg (1989) identified that a child's giftedness can lead to adjustment trouble when there is too great a family focus on a child's giftedness at the expense of others.

### School Influences

*Are you in agreement with your school division's definition of giftedness?*

Research your school's definition. If you disagree with it, then clarify your own conception when speaking with regular classroom or gifted research teachers, gifted coordinators, guidance counselors, and administrators. You can improve your communication with educators and create meaningful plans by elucidating your conception of giftedness and how it affects your understanding and goals for your child *vis-à-vis* those of the school. If you can, volunteer to serve on a gifted advisory council or some other body that shapes the school division's conception (and philosophy) of giftedness. New conceptions can lead to innovative, gifted programming. As you seek to influence conceptions and programming, educate yourself about the distinctions among the educational, theoretical, and lay definitions of giftedness.

### Families of Origin

*How much have you considered both the positive and negative qualities that you attribute to giftedness, based on your family history?*

Think about your family as you grew up. Were your parents or any sib-



## Parents' Conceptions

lings considered gifted? In what ways? Did your parents' experience with dealing with one or more gifted children leave a negative impression on you? You may have witnessed the struggle of parents who never felt they had fulfilled their potential. Or perhaps your parents favored one of the gifted children in your family, ignoring your needs and talents? Perhaps giftedness was treated positively without diminishing the feelings of others. As you reflect about your early family years, you may wish to become more conscious of this influence on your thinking and feeling to handle your own children's needs effectively. You may need to seek out new information that contradicts your early life experience so that you do not fall prey to making decisions based almost solely on old prejudices. Some parents avoid the issue of giftedness altogether in their children because they have such a negative conception, based on their own, early childhood. Some parents are unconsciously driven to embrace giftedness at all costs because of positive associations. Active reflection may help you sort out your motives and attitudes toward giftedness.

### *Understanding of Your Own Giftedness*

*To what extent has your experience of being identified or not identified as gifted influenced your perception of your child as gifted?*

Perhaps you are overly skeptical about the concept of giftedness because you were never identified yourself. Conversely, you may be delighted with giftedness as a perceived status symbol because you were identified and received special treatment in school. Do you unconsciously push your children beyond reason because you did not receive the kind of support or encouragement that you needed when you were young? Be careful to check your behaviors to ensure that they are directed at

the well-being of your child and not the fulfillment of your own, unresolved dreams.

Be fair to your children. You may overly downplay your children's giftedness because you have not come to terms with the meaning of giftedness in your own life. However, it may also be that you do not believe in such a thing as a "gifted child" at all, in which case you may seek to undo some of the damage that the label has caused you growing up. If this is how you feel, then you should speak with school personnel to determine whether the current educational conceptions of giftedness have anything in common with your thinking or not.

Sometimes, parents agree to accept gifted services even while they do not accept the school's definition because they wish to avail their children of the best educational opportunities that will challenge their children. Those parents may be surprised to discover that their aims are identical to those of the gifted program and their underlying conceptions may not be as out-of-sync as they anticipated.

These questions and guidelines form a simple beginning to your self-exploration of your conception of giftedness. After you have contemplated these influences, analyze the ways that these factors have directed your perceptions about giftedness in your own children. You may discover some revealing connections between your conception of giftedness and how it affects your perceptions and responses to your children.

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## Author Notes

Pseudonyms used. Paraphrasing of our conversation.

2. The Center for Talented Youth (CTY) is now part of the Institute for the Academic Advancement of Youth (IAAY) at Johns Hopkins University.