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“Play Partner” or “Sure Shelter”: What gifted children look for in friendship

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“When gifted children are asked what they most desire, the answer is often ‘a friend’. The children’s experience of school is completely colored by the presence or absence of relationships with peers.”

(Silverman, 1993, p. 72.)

The need for friendship and, even more, for emotional intimacy, is a driving force in both children and adults. This report of recent Australian research explores the nature of friendship as it is conceived by elementary and middle school students and how perceptions and expectations of friendship differ among children at different age levels, at different levels of intellectual ability, and between boys and girls.

A wealth of research studies over the last 70 years have shown us that when intellectually gifted children look for friends, they tend to gravitate towards other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children who may not be as bright as they are, but who are still of above average ability (Hollingworth, 1926; O’Shea, 1960; Gross, 1993). This fits comfortably with what we know about friendship choices in children generally; children tend to choose friends on the basis of similarities in mental age, rather than chronological age.

Previous international studies have found, not surprisingly, that children’s conceptions of friendship develop in stages and are hierarchical and age-related (see, for example, Bigelow and La Gaipa, 1975; Selman, 1981). Children in the early years of school tend to view friendship in a strongly egocentric or subjective light; the capacity to step outside one’s own needs and perceptions, and see one’s friend as an individual with her own needs and values, does not develop till around the age of 9. The perception of friendship as an intimate and mutually rewarding relationship which allows friends to draw strength from each other and contribute to each other’s emotional growth does not, in general, develop until around age 12.

However, these studies of children’s conceptions of friendship were conducted with unselected populations, comprising children of average intellectual ability. Until recently, no research has been undertaken to investigate whether intellectually gifted children pass through the stages of friendship conception at the same ages, or at the same speed, as children of average ability.

Similarly, research has established that boys and girls in the pre-adolescent years tend to have different expectations of friendship, with girls being more likely than boys to distinguish between “best friends” and “regular friends” (Gamer, 1978), and with girls reporting higher levels of intimacy, trust and loyalty than do boys in same-sex bestfriendships (Sharabany, Gershoni and Hoffman, 1981). However, once again, these friendship studies focused on students’ chronological age or grade placement; the children’s level of intellectual capacity or mental age were not taken into consideration.

However, through a recent empirical study undertaken with 700 children aged 5-12, I was able to investigate whether children’s conceptions of, and expectations of, friendship are determined by chronological age or by mental age. I was interested to explore whether intellectually gifted children have conceptions of friendship which are more mature than those held by their age-peers. I was also interested to investigate whether the gender differences observed in the general population translated into the gifted population.

The study surveyed, through a standardized questionnaire, conceptions of friendship held by three groups of children aged 6 through 12: children of average intellectual ability, moderately gifted children, and highly gifted children. The study confirmed that children's conceptions of friendship do indeed form a developmental hierarchy of age-related stages, with expectations of friendship, and beliefs about friendship, becoming more sophisticated and complex with age. The five stages appear in order as follows, from the lowest to the highest level in terms of age and conceptual complexity:

Stage 1: "Play Partner": In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on "play-partnership". A friend is seen as someone who engages the child in play and permits the child to use or borrow her playthings.

Stage 2: "People to chat to": The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between "friends" are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged.

Stage 3: "Help and encouragement": At this stage the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; the child does not yet see himself as having the obligation to provide help or support in return.

Stage 4: "Intimacy/empathy": The child now realises that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flows both ways and, indeed, the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage sees a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding.

Stage 5: "The sure shelter." The title comes from a passage in one of the apocryphal books of the Old Testament. "A faithful friend is a sure shelter; whoever finds one has found a rare treasure" (Ecclesiasticus, 6:14). At this stage friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity and unconditional acceptance. As a highly gifted 12 year old described it: "A real friend is a place you go when you need to take off the masks. You can say what you want to your friend because you know that your friend will really listen and even if he doesn't like what you say, he will still like you. You can take off your camouflage with a real friend and still feel safe."

The study found, however, that what children look for in friends is dictated not so much by chronological age but by mental age. A strong relationship was indeed found between children's levels of intellectual ability and their conceptions of friendship. In general, intellectually gifted children were found to be substantially further along the hierarchy of stages of friendship than were their age-peers of average ability. Gifted children were beginning to look for friends with whom they could develop close and trusting friendships, at ages when their age-peers of average ability were looking for play partners.

However, the differences between gifted children and their average ability age-peers were much larger in the primary and early years of elementary school than in the later years. In grades 3 and 4, even moderately gifted children have the conceptions of friendship which characterise average ability children at least two years older.

As mentioned at the start of this article, many years of research (as well as the observations of parents of gifted children, and perceptive teachers!) suggest that intellectually gifted children look for friends among other gifted children of approximately their own age, or older children of above average ability. This study suggests that they may not only be seeking the intellectual compatibility of mental age peers; they may also be looking for children whose conceptions and expectations of friendship are similar to their own.

More than 70 years ago the great psychologist Leta Stetter Hollingworth (1926) noted that the social isolation experienced by many highly gifted children was most acute between the ages of 4 and 9. The present study supports Hollingworth's findings. Exceptionally gifted children (children of IQ 160+) tend to begin the search for "the sure shelter" – friendships of complete trust and honesty – four or five years before their age-peers even enter this stage. Indeed, in this study, exceptionally gifted girls aged 6 and 7 already displayed conceptions of friendship which do not develop in children of average ability until age 11 or 12.

Substantial gender differences were noticed. At all levels of ability, and at all ages, girls presented as significantly higher on the developmental scale of friendship conceptions than boys. Exceptionally gifted boys who begin the search for intimacy at unusually early ages may be at even greater risk of social isolation than girls of similar ability.

Such are the differences in the friendship conceptions held by average and gifted students in the earlier years of primary school that it is at this level that gifted children are most likely to have difficulty in finding other children who have similar expectations of friendship.

The results of this study raise, once again, the question as to why schools in Australia and the United States so often reserve programs of ability grouping for students in the upper years of elementary school, and why teachers are so reluctant to allow young gifted children to accelerate. This study suggests that it is in the lower, rather than the upper, grades that placement with chronological peers, without regard to intellectual ability or emotional maturity, is more likely to result in the gifted child experiencing loneliness or social isolation.

Ability grouping and grade advancement can be of invaluable assistance in the early years of school to young gifted children whose accelerated conceptions of friendship are urging them to seek the sure shelter of a relationship of trust, fidelity and authenticity, at ages when their age-peers are seeking playmates or casual conversation. In the case of exceptionally and profoundly gifted children, it is difficult to justify, either educationally or socially, the inclusion of these children in classes comprised of age-peers whose conceptions of friendship are so radically different from theirs.

“A faithful friend is a sure shelter; whoever finds one has found a rare treasure.” The word “rare” has several meanings. The writer of the book of Ecclesiasticus used it in the sense of “exceptional” or “incomparable”.

However, “rare” also means “scarce”. Intellectually gifted children grouped by chronological age may find that the treasure of a sure shelter is rare indeed. In the case of highly and exceptionally gifted children, it is difficult to justify the inclusion of these children in classes comprised of age-peers whose expectations of friendship are so radically different from theirs.

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