

SOCIAL ANIMALS

Gifted youth defy social stereotypes
by Lisa Van Gemert

Lewis Terman was a man on a mission. The tuberculosis that would eventually take his life led the psychologist to the campus of Stanford University, where in 1921 he began the largest and longest longitudinal study ever conducted on gifted youth. Eventually, just more than 1,500 children (called “Termites”) participated in the study, which continues today.

Terman’s agenda was broader than cognitive assessment because he strongly desired to demonstrate that the biases against highly intelligent people were false. Just because you were smart did not mean you were a pale, listless weakling destined to commit *faux pas* at cocktail parties and never attend prom.

In his study, Terman demonstrated that cognitive giftedness did not have an inverse relationship to social success. According to Terman, giftedness was almost a cognitive Lake Wobegon where all the women are strong, all the men are good looking and all the children are above average. His findings were met with skepticism, partly because his own eugenicist agenda was so glaringly obvious and partly because society’s biases ran so deeply. And while eugenics has fallen out of favor, the bias against the gifted has not changed much in nearly a century. Many stereotypes remain.

In search of more concrete insight into how gifted children socialize, we conducted a survey with parents of gifted children. While well designed, our survey was informal, so the process was not the same as that of a clinical study. Nevertheless, what we found refuted much of the conventional wisdom about the social lives of gifted kids. Indeed, under closer scrutiny, many of the stereotypes proved simply false, more myth than reality. Our evidence follows.

Myth: Gifted kids are introverted.

Introversion has a situational element to it. Although some studies have shown that the exceptionally bright tend toward introversion, our survey found that more than 80 percent of the youth were rated as somewhat or highly extroverted with friends and family. The only high levels of introversion reported were with strangers (51 percent were highly or somewhat introverted with strangers) and in

unfamiliar social situations (62 percent).

One parent said of her daughter, “She is one of the most extroverted people I know,” but added, “I believe this is atypical of gifted children.” It turns out that it is a lot harder to tell what is typical and what is not, in large part due to the dichotomy often presented to people when asked to self-identify as introverts or extroverts. Teasing apart the situations allows us to see that introversion and extroversion are a continuum, not a dichotomy, and that gifted youth slide back and forth along that continuum depending upon circumstances and environment.

Myth: Bright children struggle socially.

The research is conflicting, with dueling studies showing that gifted children are as socially successful as typical learners or are prone to emotional or social difficulties.

Our survey showed a tendency toward extroversion with friends (67 percent somewhat or highly extroverted), family (84 percent somewhat or highly extroverted) and in familiar social situations (70 percent somewhat or highly extroverted). Only with strangers and in unfamiliar social situations did the children tend toward introversion.

“Introversion and extroversion are a continuum, not a dichotomy, along which gifted youth slide back and forth depending upon circumstances and environment.”

Even in a more neutral context, with chronological age peers, they split fairly evenly between the two states of comfort (43 percent somewhat or highly introverted versus 42 percent somewhat or highly extroverted; 15 percent were neutral).

Psychologists unfamiliar with the gifted often appear surprised to find that even the profoundly gifted can be socially successful. One parent wrote, “My eldest son is so well-adjusted that our tester couldn’t believe his >99.9 percent results.”



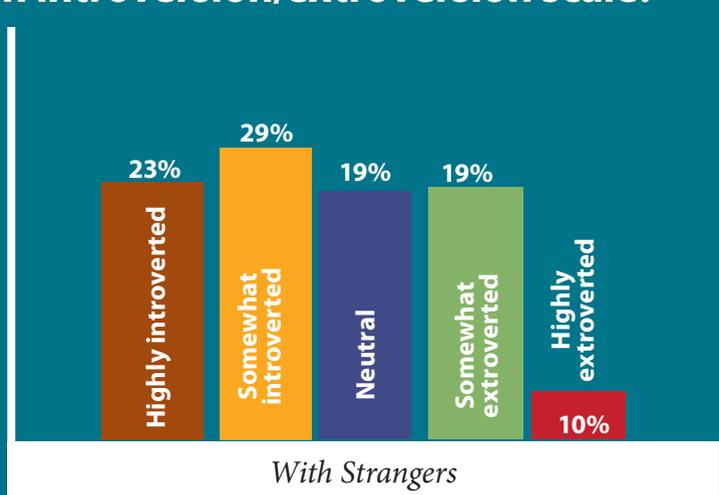
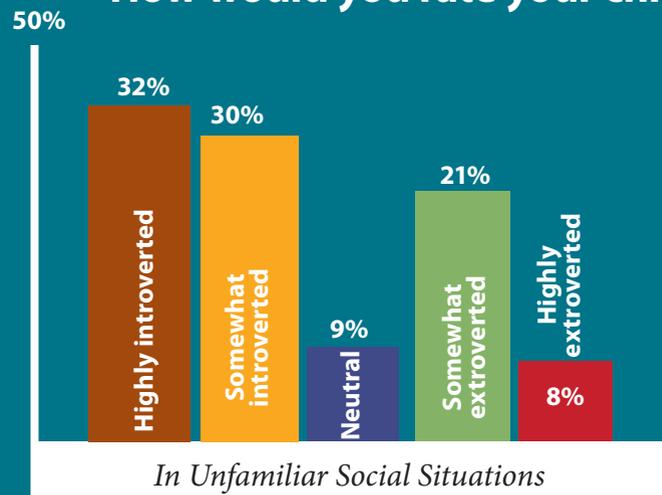
This can result in highly gifted children being misdiagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder and mood disorders. This phenomenon means that what can look like pathology is actually high ability.

“My child was referred for Asperger’s evaluations by his elementary school because of his meltdowns and his shyness among his peers,” a survey respondent wrote.

“We don’t have any problems with him at home and had no reason to suspect he would have such a diagnosis, but the ‘symptoms’ of giftedness are often similar to [Autism spectrum disorder] markers (social challenges, delayed motor skills, etc.) and become more obvious once these kids start school.”

Dr. Dan Peters is Executive Director of the Summit Center in Walnut Creek, Calif., which specializes in the identification and psychological well-being of the gifted.

How would you rate your child on an introversion/extroversion scale?



He agrees that some practitioners may be biased in their assessments because, by definition, people coming to see them are seeking assistance and are struggling in some way. “You find what you’re looking for, so if we identify a disorder, we’ll start to identify it more and more,” he said. This can lead professionals to believe that the entire gifted population is struggling when, in fact, it’s only a segment of the population.

Adults think she’s just a miniature grown-up and then seem surprised when she acts her real age.

–Parent of Gifted Youth

Myth: Gifted children do not get along well with their peer group.

In this context, it’s relevant to define “peers.” The Association of Educators of Gifted, Talented and Creative Children in British Columbia aptly raises the peer question in its pamphlet “Myths of Giftedness,” which states, “Myth: Gifted children must learn to get along with their peers. Reality: A great goal – but which peers? Social peers? Chronological peers? Economic peers? Intellectual peers?”

Inherently, the query suggests an ability amongst the gifted to get along better with some groups than others. Peters has observed just that. “Gifted children get along better than their chronological age peers with the elderly, younger children, the disabled and adults,” he said. “In fact, the only people they don’t get along with not only as well but better than their peers is their chronological age peers themselves.”

Our survey respondents agreed. More than 50 percent reported that their children got along somewhat or

significantly better than their chronological age peers with younger children (54 percent), older children (65 percent), adults (77 percent), the disabled (48 percent) and outcasts/loners/the downtrodden (54 percent). The parents agreed with Dr. Peters that their children often struggled with same-age peers (52 percent) and strangers (41 percent).

One parent described her son’s issues with children his age. She wrote, “He didn’t enjoy the loudness or the roughhousing, what he perceived as ‘inappropriate behavior’ or immaturity. The same-age peers didn’t get his interests in paleontology or biology or ichthyology. They also didn’t understand his humor because his jokes were beyond their comprehension.”

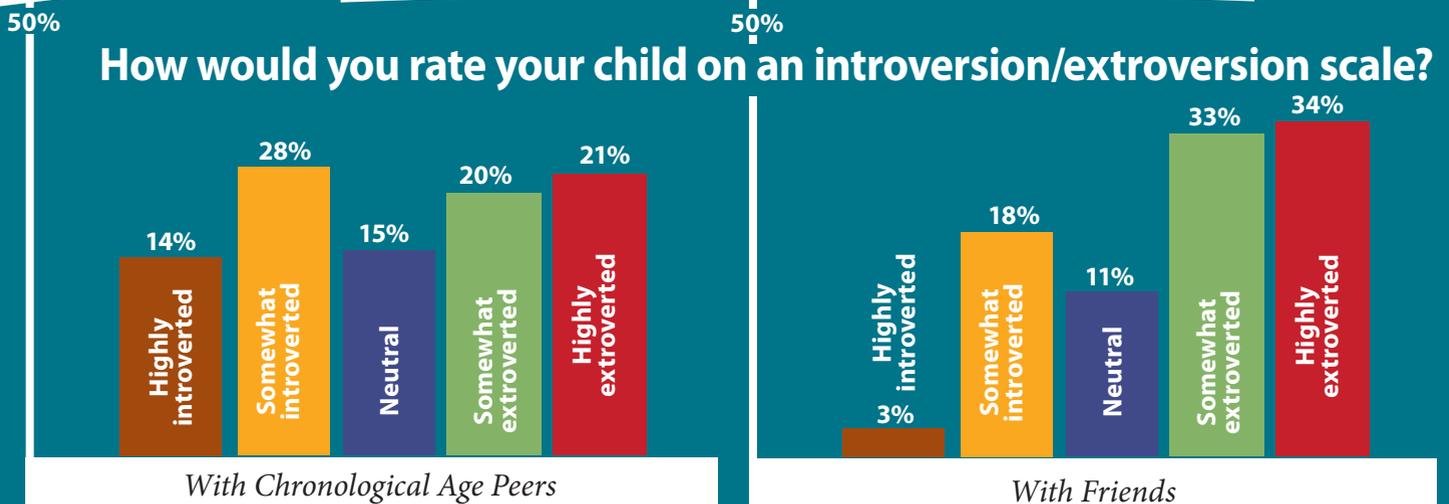
For this boy, the situation improved after he was placed in a gifted school environment. “Once he was with his intellectual peers, he blossomed ... he found friends who shared their passions and interests (astronomy and physics) with him and they listened to him about his interests. They got his jokes!”

Myth: Gifted kids lack social skills others have.

Early and strong verbal skills often lead to the misperception that gifted children are older than they are, which can lead to unreasonable expectations of behavior. When those expectations aren’t met, the child is criticized.

One surveyed mom explained, “Adults think she’s just a miniature grown-up and then seem surprised when she acts her real age. Smart does not equal mature, and I think there’s a disconnect for people who don’t have any experience with gifted kids. I know it took me awhile, even as her parent, to realize that just because she was advanced in so many other ways, she was still just a little kid and some behaviors are age dependent, not intelligence dependent.”

Another parent echoed these sentiments: “I find that because my son is highly intelligent, has a strong vocabulary,



and presents himself well, people sometimes forget he's just an 8-year-old kid who still likes to do kid things, act goofy, and makes mistakes. When a child is so intellectually advanced, I think we expect them to be that advanced in all areas of their life."

Ed Amend, a psychologist in practice in Lexington, Ky., who specializes in serving the gifted population, explains that one social skill, humor, is present in the gifted in an unusual way. "Unfortunately, this unusual sense of humor can alienate children at young ages when their peers do not understand it," Amend said. "At older ages, the humor can be somewhat cynical in nature, and this cynicism and sarcasm can create rifts between peers when it is misunderstood."

What these deconstructed myths reveal is that giftedness in the social arena is complex, and while cognitive giftedness does not guarantee social success, it does not necessarily mean social failure, either. Managing expectations, exposing gifted youth to interest-based peers, avoiding the trap of seeing age-group peers as the only friend pool and being specific about what we mean when we describe children's preferences and tendencies will help avoid the perpetuation of the myth of the socially maladjusted geniuses.

Terman may have made a lot of mistakes in his study, and some of his ideas are abhorrent to us now, but he was absolutely right about this: "gifted" is an adjective. Gifted children are children first, with all the variety that entails. Some struggle with twice exceptionalities such as ADHD or dyslexia. Some find that they feel lonely in school with no true peers their age. Some find solace in books or in adult company. Some are super social. And some would be surprised to find that their preference for solitary time was considered problematic. They are, in the end, simply children.



Gifted Land is not Lake Wobegon, but it's not Dysfunction Junction, either. 🙌

