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## Counseling the gifted adolescent

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## Counseling the gifted adolescent

### Abstract

Since the early 1930s counselors have been aware of the need for guidance for gifted adolescents (Milgram, 1991). However, it has not been until the past three decades that ample literature has been written to assist counselors in working with gifted adolescents (Ziv, 1977). In 1972 the United States Office of Education defined gifted and talented adolescents as those identified by professionally qualified person who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are individuals who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society (Betts, 1985, p.9). The counseling of gifted adolescents is included within the area designated as "services."

COUNSELING THE GIFTED ADOLESCENT

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by  
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Since the early 1930s counselors have been aware of the need for guidance for gifted adolescents (Milgram, 1991). However, it has not been until the past three decades that ample literature has been written to assist counselors in working with gifted adolescents ( Ziv, 1977).

In 1972 the United States Office of Education defined gifted and talented adolescents as those identified by professionally qualified person who, by virtue of outstanding abilities, are capable of high performance. These are individuals who require differentiated educational programs and services beyond those normally provided by the regular school program in order to realize their contribution to self and society (Betts, 1985, p.9). The counseling of gifted adolescents is included within the area designated as “services.”

The counselor's task is to assist gifted adolescents to clarify their interests, values, desires and preferences (Ziv, 1977). To help these students in their social and emotional development and to thrive academically, it is important that counseling techniques and interventions be made for the gifted adolescent. These techniques and interventions are necessary to meet the unique emotional needs of gifted adolescents which support their growth and, prevent social and emotional problems (Silverman, 1993).

Gifted adolescents have the same basic needs as other adolescents, and they require the same developmental guidance and counseling in order to fully realize their abilities. But as Delisle (1992) noted, oftentimes gifted adolescents' needs are overlooked because adults assume they learn the social rules of life as easily as they master academic activities. It is important, therefore, to identify some facts that demonstrate the need for counseling the gifted.

For gifted adolescents, expectations of school, society, family and themselves are often extremely high. Peak performance is the norm (Delisle, 1992). Excessive stress and anxiety can be the result of perfectionist tendencies. Although some gifted adolescents are very self-confident and secure, others lack self-esteem to the extent that underachievement patterns can develop (Van Tassel-Baska, 1990).

Gifted children form a valuable segment of our society. They need direction on which their intellect and imagination can feed. They need active encouragement and appropriately balanced outlets for their advanced ability to learn. Yet, they are still adolescents with all the basic developmental needs of other adolescents.

The purpose of this paper is to describe characteristics of the gifted, as well as to identify specific counseling strategies to

assist counselors when working with gifted adolescents. The advantages and disadvantages of each strategy are outlined. The goal is to identify specific strategies that counselors can use to help gifted adolescents realize their full potential and experience a sense of personal fulfillment and self-actualization.

#### Characteristics of the Gifted Adolescent

Webb (1994) identified many characteristics of gifted adolescents that must be considered when counseling them. Academically, these students are generally inquisitive, searching for significance in the information presented to them. They enjoy problem-solving and possess the ability to conceptualize, abstract, and synthesize. Gifted adolescents are constantly creating and inventing new ways of performing tasks. When new material is presented, gifted adolescents have the cognitive capabilities to quickly acquire and retain the information.

Socially, many gifted adolescents have an extremely keen sense of humor. This characteristic allows them to cope with the foolishness they see all around them (Colangelo & Peterson, 1993). They also have a high level of energy and are eager to participate in activities. They are very versatile and have diverse interests. Gifted adolescents form intense relationships

with others, and have high expectations of both themselves and others.

The combination of the preceding characteristics leads to the present issue: how to meet the counseling needs of gifted adolescents. There are many strategies that have been suggested in the literature. The three strategies which will be investigated in this paper, humor, metaphors and bibliotherapy, are closely related to the positive characteristics of the gifted adolescents previously mentioned.

#### Strategies to Use in Working With the Gifted

##### Humor

Writers throughout history have stressed the beneficial physiological and psychological effects of humor and laughter (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). Falk and Hill (1992) noted that during the therapeutic process strong laughter represented a shift in self-concept, energy, and awareness. Research has shown that the response of laughter to humorous stimuli increases creative thinking in adolescents. Properly used humor can unleash hidden potential in students. Gruner (1978) noted that humor could be an extremely effective device for improving the function of mental faculties because a person's mind works better due to the increase in energy brought about through laughter. Humor also provides an outlet to ease



problems and motivate adolescents (Falk & Hill, 1992). The result is much more positive than the repression of a problem. In fact, when humor is appreciated by others it can be an ego boost, thus assisting in the motivation of a gifted adolescent.

Gifted adolescents' cognitive capacities allow them to enjoy humor in a variety of ways, both verbal and nonverbal. Their ability to create and react to something as simple as a pun shows above-average intelligence and should be appreciated (Levine, 1979). In the counseling process, humor is widely acknowledged to be facilitative to the personal development of gifted adolescents (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). This paper will be focusing on three distinct forms of humor: nonverbal, exaggeration and simplification and, anecdotes.

#### Nonverbal Humor

Nearly everyone has laughed at one time or another at a funny face, a bizarre look, or an action by another person. These are all forms of nonverbal humor. Counselors may use a nonverbal form of humor such as a puzzled look, a look of exasperation or a simple roll of the eyes to provoke laughter, thus enhancing communication (Gruner, 1978).

Gifted adolescents also have a high sense of arousal, curiosity and exploratory behavior (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). If the counselor reacts nonverbally to an adolescent's

statement, the adolescent is likely to engage in verbal interaction with the counselor to discover the counselor's insight towards a statement, thus enhancing the counselor/student relationship. Once communication barriers are removed the counselor can use nonverbal forms of humor to aid in the establishment of a non-threatening environment (Levine, 1978), increase the spontaneity of expression (Adams, 1974), and reduce students' overserious views of themselves (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979).

#### Exaggeration and Oversimplification

We have all been asked the age-old question, "Well, if he/she jumped off a bridge would you?" As ridiculous as this question might seem, questions or statements much like this have value to a counselor when working with the gifted because they help them gain social skills, release anxiety, increase motivation, and gain insight to seemingly unsolvable life situations (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). For example, Ellis (1973) helped a student overcome her fear of dogs by showing her humorous pictures in which adults were shown to be frightened by a tiny puppy. This use of exaggeration helps students laugh at someone else's fears and assists in the development of the student's ability to perceive the inappropriateness of his or her own fears.

Gifted students often feel overwhelmed by their problems, especially anxiety related to test-taking or completing school-related tasks. Exaggeration and oversimplification of these issues can loosen student's attachment to single-reality views of situations. Even when dealing with painful topics, appropriate jokes and exaggeration can be used to facilitate student explorations and make counselor/student confrontations less threatening (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979).

#### Anecdote

Webster's Intermediate Dictionary (1986) defines an anecdote as a brief account of some interesting event or funny story in a person's life (p. 28). Short stories, parables, fairy tales and fables are examples of anecdotes which convey a message. In an anecdote someone or something is confronted with a problem which he or she overcomes or succumbs to in some way (Gordon, 1978). The manner in which the person resolves the problem can provide a possible solution for others in similar situations. The significance of the story increases with the student's relevance to his or her situation. Many times anecdotes are humorous and light-hearted, increasing the receptiveness of the student. For example, the old anecdote of the hare and the tortoise has been useful for gifted students to

relate to because a common problem for gifted students is impatience with others (Webb, 1994). Anecdotes can be used by counselors to highlight the universality of human experience and assist in students' understanding of situations.

Most counselors agree that humor has potential for negative as well as positive results (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979). Kubie (1970) cautioned counselors to a) be especially careful when using humor in early stages of counseling, b) be sure the student does not use humor to escape from anxiety or avoidance of uncomfortable thoughts, c) avoid sarcasm or ridicule, d) observe the timing of humor and individual personality variables.

Despite these factors outlined by Kubie (1970), humor has merit as a strategy in counseling the gifted for several reasons. It can be used to provoke a positive attitude within the adolescent, to facilitate the release of anxiety, to increase motivation and insight to life situations, and to facilitate self-actualization.

### Metaphors

Kopp (1971) defined a metaphor as "a way of speaking in which one thing is expressed in terms of another, whereby this bringing together throws new light on the character of what is being described" (p. 17). Metaphors can be used as mechanisms

for teaching, changing ideas, and effecting behavior (Gordon, 1978). They have the ability to convey messages, assist in transitions for talking about experiences, and help reframe experiences so an individual can see the experiences as valuable and potentially useful.

Gifted adolescents often use metaphors and analogies to describe situations (McCumsey, 1985). Many gifted adolescents are inquisitive, searching for significance within situations presented to them (Webb, 1994). This characteristic allows an adolescent to develop understanding within a metaphor and personalize it. As noted problem-solvers and creators, gifted adolescents explore metaphors, seeking meaning and truth within them. Understanding metaphors allows gifted adolescents to utilize their intellect to enhance their emotional well-being.

Milton Erickson (Wynne, 1987), a noted psychiatrist, often created metaphors for adolescents in an effort to allow them to explore the metaphor's meaning, thus utilizing the adolescents' positive characteristics. He created a two-level communication to the conscious and unconscious mind simultaneously through metaphors. While the conscious mind was busy listening to the metaphor, therapeutic messages were communicated to the unconscious mind (Crowley and Mills,

1986).

Metaphors via myths, fairy tales and fables have a direct relationship to unconscious psychic processes (Wynne, 1987). The use of figurative language helps gifted adolescents recall important events and develop a greater understanding of a particular situation (Cummings, Hallberg and Martin, 1992).

Metaphors can be used in a variety of ways to describe a gifted adolescents' life events (Mango, 1992). For example, asking a gifted adolescent to describe himself or herself in relationship to an egg or a bird could represent a symbol of new life and hope. Mango added the example of constructing the scenario of an individual as a palm in the middle of three trees may represent time.

The following story could be used with a student looking for direction from others.

One day a student was returning from school and saw a runaway horse in a farmer's yard drinking water. The farmer did not know whose horse it was so the student decided to return it. The student jumped on the horse's back and yelled "Giddy-up" and off they went. The horse started galloping along the highway. Now and then the horse would veer off into a field and the student would pull on the bit a little to call the horse's attention to the

highway. About four miles down the road the horse turned into a farmer's yard. The farmer asked the student how he knew it was his horse. "I didn't, he replied, "the horse knew. All I did was keep his attention on the road" (Gordon, 1978, p. 205).

While there are many positive uses of metaphors with gifted adolescents, it is important to exercise caution in using them. Gordon (1978) noted that often the use of a metaphor requires an adolescent to create a scenario within his or her mind and to transcend that scenario to a personal level. If the adolescent has difficulty creating the image or personalizing the metaphor, he or she can experience frustration. The system of communication within a metaphor (i.e. story, fairy tale, fable) may lead to miscommunication and confusion. Therefore it is imperative to create a metaphor that parallels a situation but is not identical to an actual experience of a gifted adolescent. Although metaphors can convey messages, it is necessary to make sure the counselor does not send mixed messages.

Metaphors, when used appropriately, have the potential to incorporate many positive attributes of the gifted adolescent. Keying in on the inquisitive nature of gifted adolescents, their ability to create and invent, and their keen sense of problem-

solving will definitely make the use of metaphors a positive strategy.

### Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a widely accepted counseling strategy to use with gifted adolescents (Kenny, 1989; Moses & Zaccaria, 1968; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1984). Most gifted students are verbally proficient and do a great deal of reading (Kenny, 1989). Bibliotherapy is most effective when the adolescent has identified with a character, experienced an emotional release, and gained insights to the presenting problems (Kenny, 1989; Gladding, 1985). Through bibliotherapy, academic and intellectual insights can be related to personal and psychological insights (Moses & Zaccaria, 1968).

For the counselor, the strategy of bibliotherapy begins with the introduction of the book through a variety of means. The counselor can discuss the book with the adolescent, have the book on display, or directly suggest that the adolescent read the book (Kenny, 1989; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1984). A positive attitude on the part of the counselor is important.

After the adolescent has agreed to read the book, the actual reading takes place. After the book has been read, the adolescent needs time to mentally and emotionally process the book. This process is called incubation (Kenny, 1989) or



catharsis (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1984). During the incubation or catharsis period the adolescent will have gained insights through reading and crystallized these insights through creative, critical, affective and cognitive thinking (Kenny, 1989).

During the incubation period the gifted adolescent may have identified with a character(s). For example, if The Lord of the Flies was the prescribed reading for an adolescent struggling with his or her identity, he or she may have identified with Piggy, the scapegoat, or Ralph, the positive leader who was frustrated with his inability to gain support. Following identification, the final stage of follow-up is essential. During follow-up the counselor guides the gifted adolescent towards higher levels of thinking through questioning. The counselor may begin with recall or knowledge questions such as, "What was the book about," but lead to questions that challenge the student's thinking, such as analysis and evaluation (Kenny, 1989). Questions such as, "If you could say anything to one character in the story, what would you say and to whom?" or "What did this story mean to you?" Kenny (1989) noted the importance of structuring questions in a way that the follow-up resembles a discussion rather than a question-answer session. This final stage of follow-up should

be conducted in an accepting and understanding manner. The outcome of bibliotherapy is self-evaluation and proposal for change (Kenny, 1989; Pardeck & Pardeck, 1984).

There are, however, limitations to bibliotherapy. Pardeck & Pardeck (1984) noted that if the gifted adolescent is not an avid reader and the selected reading does not interest the adolescent, he or she may be frustrated. Kenny identified alternatives such as audio-visual materials, short stories, or articles from a variety of sources. Pardeck & Pardeck (1984) also suggested not using bibliotherapy as a single approach to counseling. They believed that it is most effective when used with other strategies.

While bibliotherapy has its limitations, they are outweighed by the advantages of this strategy. Bibliotherapy is effective in modifying attitudes (Gladding, 1985), promoting behavior change (Gladding, 1985; Kenny, 1989), fostering self-development (Gladding, 1985; Moses & Zaccaria, 1968), gaining insight to critical issues (Pardeck & Pardeck, 1985) and providing closure in the counseling process (Gladding, 1985; Kenny, 1989). These positive attributes will help gifted adolescents develop better self-awareness and a healthy outlook on life.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the literature to identify strategies that counselors can use when working with gifted adolescents. The relationship between the strategies and specific characteristics of gifted adolescents was used as a basis for choosing the identified strategies.

Throughout the literature it was apparent that educators and counselors have identified strategies that parallel the needs of gifted adolescents.

The use of humor, metaphors and bibliotherapy as counseling strategies with gifted adolescents allows counselors to utilize the inquisitive, problem-solving and creative nature of gifted adolescents' intellects and engage the energy and versatility of gifted adolescents' social dimension. While these strategies have limitations, they also have many advantages that make them effective counseling strategies with gifted adolescents. These strategies, along with others, help develop gifted adolescents' potential so they can experience personal fulfillment and self-actualization.

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