

Sensitivity: A double-edged sword for the pre-adolescent and adolescent gifted child

Alan L. Edmunds and Gail A. Edmunds

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This article addresses the often-observed sensitive nature displayed by gifted children and the effects this sensitivity can have on the child, particularly during the pre-adolescent and the adolescent periods. This issue is explored through an analysis of the works and life experiences of Geoffrey, aged 9, a prolific writer since the age of 5 years. His exceptional sensitivity is clearly evident through his writings, and the effects this awareness and emotionality have on his life are manifested in accounts of his home and school experiences. Implications for the education of individuals like Geoffrey are discussed, placing emphasis on support of the child's heightened sensitivity rather than on curricula learned or talents exhibited. Special consideration is given to the middle school years when pre-adolescent and adolescent behavior can significantly affect gifted individuals.

Alan L. Edmunds is Associate Professor of special education and educational psychology at the University of Western Ontario. His specific research interests include precocity in gifted children, programming for gifted children, and cognitive interventions for students with learning disabilities. E-mail: aedmunds@uwo.ca

Gail A. Edmunds is currently an education researcher in the Faculty of Education at the University of Western Ontario. Her research interests include children's writing development, children's mathematical development, and the development and evaluation of programs that encourage parents to become involved in their children's education. E-mail: gaedmunds@uwo.ca

The literature on giftedness is abundant with references to sensitivity. While the definition of giftedness is continually debated and modified due to the heterogeneity of the population (Mönks, Heller, & Passow, 2000), the existence of a sensitivity factor among individuals who are gifted appears to be widely accepted. Many compilations of giftedness characteristics, particularly those focusing on the affective domain, include phrases such as *morally sensitive, emotionally sensitive, personally sensitive, and/or extremely compassionate*. The dictionary defines "sensitive" as being "highly responsive or susceptible" and when referring to a sensitive person, being "delicately aware of the attitudes and feelings of others" and "being easily hurt emotionally" (Merriam-Webster, 2003). Shavinina (1999) included vulnerability, fragility, empathy and social responsiveness as manifestations of this sensitivity. In other words, heightened sensitivity enables gifted individuals to have the potential to contribute greatly to humanity but they are also vulnerable to the unavoidable insensitivities of society.

One would think that the sensitivity exhibited by many intellectually gifted children would result in an ability to fit in and get along with others. After all, if an individual were sensitive to others' feelings and perceptions, it would be reasonable to predict that he or she is quite socially competent. Porath (2000) suggested that this might not be the case. She proposed that when a gifted child exhibits a depth of understanding in the social domain, this might not transfer to actual behaviors. In her research, Porath found that a gifted child might experience great sensitivity towards others, yet receive low teacher ratings of social acceptance and behavioral conduct. Mendaglio (1995) presented a similar scenario when proposing a definition of sensitivity based on the gifted literature and his counseling experience. His definition, which includes the use of four psychological concepts – self-awareness, perspective taking, emotional experi-

ence and empathy – also emphasizes that "a person's experience of sensitivity is not necessarily expressed directly to others" (p. 171). This lack of expression obviously has implications for the social acceptance of the gifted individual.

Acceptance, however, does not always occur with overt expression of this sensitivity. As Silverman (1993) points out, we live in a culture that does not view heightened emotionality in a very positive way. Outward demonstrations of sensitivity are discouraged, especially in males. Perhaps the most critical period for this negative feedback is during preadolescence and adolescence. Being gifted already sets children of this age apart from their peers, but adding the sensitivity factor can make life very difficult or even unbearable. If these children are to benefit from their emotional intensity, which according to Dabrowski (1972) may be the very trait that acts as the catalyst for their intellectual/creative achievements, then researchers, educators, and parents should perhaps focus more attention on their "sensitivities" rather than on their "talents." It is worth exploring how this perspective may create a more positive learning and social environment for this population, particularly during the pre-adolescent and adolescent periods. As Dabrowski and Piechowski (1977) emphasized, there is a strong positive correlation between intellectual level and emotional intensity. Those who exhibit extreme giftedness, precocity or prodigiousness, then, are perhaps most at risk of being affected by this sensitivity factor.

This paper will examine these issues by analyzing the works and life experiences of a precocious child writer. The data, which comes from an ongoing longitudinal study, includes physical artifacts (over 8,000 pages of the child's writing), observations of the child at home and in school, and interviews with the child, his parents and his educators. Thus far, research data have been



gathered for 4 years, since the child was 5 years old. It was at this time that his parents approached the primary researcher for advice regarding schooling issues.

While the sensitivity factor has been alluded to in many books and articles about individuals who are gifted, it is not often that it is described in detail or through explicit example. The purpose of the current article is to provide a clearer, concrete depiction of how emotionality can have a profound effect on this population. The examination of the child's literary works, written over a period of four years, allows for invaluable insight into the sensitivities of a growing precocious child.

Geoffrey: A Precocious Pre-Adolescent with Exceptional Sensitivities

Geoffrey (a pseudonym) is a 9-year-old fourth-grade student who currently attends a public school for children who are gifted. Edmunds and Noel (2003) described a child who began reading at age 3 and writing prolifically at age 5. Their analysis of his first written productions (age 5 to age 6) revealed

a young child who has the need and the ability to write about anything and everything he sets his mind to and in a very sophisticated manner. He has seriously violated the expected age norms for emergent writing and for writing mastery. The volume of work is staggering, its variation is immense, and its complexity belies the age of the writer. (p. 191)

Geoffrey continues to produce numerous literary works, all of which can be considered far more advanced than the writings of his 9-year-old gifted peers. His precocity is not limited to writing; he has advanced skills in science, reading, music, art, and some areas of mathematics. But perhaps most evident in this exceptional individual is an overarching sensitivity, an emotional intensity that pervades all aspects of his life. It is this gift that will be explored further in an effort to reveal how it affects, and can be affected by, his environment.

Geoffrey's Writing

Geoffrey's first foray into writing occurred during the Christmas holidays in 1999. He was 5 years old. The catalyst for the literary undertaking was Geoffrey's compassion for his sibling, George (a pseudonym). Geoffrey had received a *Pokemon* book for Christmas but his brother, who was three years younger, had not gotten any books. Geoffrey spent all his free time over the next 5 to 6 days writing a 30-page *Pokemon* book, entitled *Pikachu's & Jingle Bell Rocks Adventure*. He made it very clear that it was a book for George. Upon completion of the writing, he presented the book to his brother and

read it to him, explaining the storyline and each of the illustrations as he went along. Thus began the writings of this precocious child.

Year 1

Following the production of that first book, Geoffrey proceeded to write almost daily, spending a period of time each day handwriting his thoughts on loose-leaf paper. As he stated at the end of one of his early pieces, "[Geoffrey] HAS WRITTEN BOOKS NONSTOP FROM HIS FIFTH BIRTHDAY." This writing occurred most often at a desk in his bedroom, free from the distractions of everyday life. It is interesting to note that while he now writes some of his works at school, he still produces the majority of his works in the solitude of his bedroom. He also continues to hand write the majority of his productions but does use a computer for some school-based work. In the first year of this literary explosion, the initial

emphasis was on a series of *Pokemon* books. While the writing in this series had the typical adventure theme, there was already an indication of the author's sensitive nature. Many of Geoffrey's characters, who experienced potentially fatal attacks from *FIRE*, *LIGHTNING BOLTS* and *POISON*, simply *FAINTED* rather than suffer a tragic end. At the conclusion of one book, in a chapter entitled "PIKACHU'S OPPONENTS DEAD," Geoffrey wrote:

PIKACHU'S OPPONENTS WERE PRIMAPE AND MANKEY. SOME BIG POWERFUL POKEMON, WHO WERE VERY RARE. PICKACHU HAD ALWAYS TRIED TO FIGHT THEM BUT THEY WERE TO FAST. ABRA CAME AND FAINTED IT. KADABRA CAME AND HURT IT AGAIN. PIKACHU WAS SAD. HE ONLY WANTED TO FAINT IT! NOT KILL IT!

(Geoffrey, age 5)

As a 5-year-old, Geoffrey showed a keen understanding of the feelings of many of his characters, an understanding not often exhibited by typical ego-centered 5-year-olds, especially in their writings. Instances of this insight are further exemplified by the following excerpts:

FATHER POKEMON! TICKBOY CALLED. I NEED TO TELL YOU HOW GOOD YOU AR...WHEN FATHER POKEMON HEARD THAT TICKBOY SAID THAT HE WAS VERY HAPPY.

ANNTRIPOD SAW A POOPSDAY. SHE WAS SO SCARED THAT SOME OF HER HAIRS CAME OFF.

"SPOT THE HERO!" THEY ALL CRIED. THEY ALL HAD THEIR POKEMON BACK. THE RESCUE WAS OVER. THEY WERE HAPPY. THE HUGGING GAVE HAPPINESS TO EACH OTHER.



AGAIN HE TURNED TO ROWENA. YOU CANNOT
BUG ZANTOR, BECAUSE ZANTOR'S MY FRIEND.
AND FRIENDS ARE NOT ON SALE.

During this first year of writing, Geoffrey also showed a heightened sense of compassion in other writing styles that he employed. When writing advertising for his "BONGO'S MALL," he wrote:

WHY DO WE SELL ON LOWER PRICES WITH OUR:
WE SELL FOR LESS? BECAUS MANY PEOPLE ARE
NOT TOO RICH, AND DON'T WANT TO BUY
THINGS THAT ARE TOO LARGE PRICES. THAT'S
WHY.

(Geoffrey, age 5)

In a scientific work entitled, "UNIFIED REULITY and GENERAL ABSOLUTITY," Geoffrey alludes to the notion of curing disease through discussion of the irreversibility of time. He wrote:

[George] solved one large irreversibility problem with a theory called Mary Poppins Time. It was a theory of quantum gravity. It stated that whenever tesserarts have their antian-tiquarks joined, they merge to form a giant antitesserart (we will discuss antitesserarts in the part The particles of time) called a Megairreversitron, which makes time irreversible. And this is happening everywhere in the universe. Why did he call it Mary Poppins Time? Because he was imaginative. He knew that it was made of sugar, those Megairreversitrons. And he imagined that they were irreversible medicine to cure the universe's reversibility disease. And if you make the sentence "Sugar helping medicine" into a bigger sentence, you end up with "Just a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down."

(Geoffrey, age 5)

While it is apparent that Geoffrey's writing was quickly becoming more complex in its topic, its style and its use of the English language, his sensitive nature is never far from view. A final piece from the end of his first year of writing reveals a 5-year-old author who has a real need to express his emotions to others.

IT'S FALL. IT IS NOT THE FLOWER SEASON. I WANT
TO TELL YOU A STORY, A SAD STORY.

THERE WAS A COLONY OF BLUE JAYS THAT I
KNOW THAT WERE MIGRATING SOUTH. THEN,
THE NEXT DAY, A HUGE STORM BLEW UP, A NO-
VEMBER STORM. I WAS OBSERVING THE SKY FOR
LIGHTNING BUT WHEN I SAW THE LIGHTNING, IT
HAD SOME BLUE AT THE BOTTOM OF IT. IT WAS
A BLUE JAY. A NEWBORN FROM THE BLUE JAY
COLONY GETTING STRUCK BY LIGHTNING! AF-

TER THAT HAPPENED, IT WAS DEAD.

I WAS SAD. AND I WANTED TO TELL YOU.

(Geoffrey, age 5)

Year 2

Geoffrey's second year of writing was focused almost entirely on science topics. His productions are full of references to great scientists as well as writings about his own thoughts on scientific phenomena. Many pages are devoted to equations and mathematical calculations. During this time, Geoffrey (age 6) was reading many advanced books on similar topics. Shavinina (1999) referred to this type of intense focus as a cognitively sensitive period. She stated that "prodigies are almost always in sensitive periods that actualize their cognitive potential and accelerate their mental development" (p. 34). Given Geoffrey's immersion in this "science" period, the majority of his writings during Year 2 were produced in a factual style that did not lend itself to displays of emotionality. However, there were pieces of Geoffrey's writing that did reveal sensitivity to his environment. In fact, this was the transitional period when Geoffrey's sensitivity began to be more apparent through descriptions of his own life experiences rather than through the lives of his fictional characters.

School was particularly difficult for Geoffrey during this time. The curricula were not appropriate and the atmosphere was less than ideal. When asked in school to write about what he would do if he were in charge of the school, he started by saying, "I don't know" and then proceeded to repeatedly write the word "don't" for a page and a half. This was apparently a direct response to being directed by his teacher to copy lines and letters as punishment. He ended the piece by emphasizing again that he did not know and advised the reader to "ask the future or my angel." In a postscript he stated:

I know one thing I would love everyone, be friendly to everyone, not allow punishments bigger than timeouts. I would be nicer to the kids. And I would let them have daily desserts, have a stand for free sweets, only payed for in play money. I would teach them all subjects required.

(Geoffrey, age 6)

This was undoubtedly an expression of both his own reaction to his school environment and his understanding of the needs of his peers.

Geoffrey's writings also reveal a child who is sensitive to environments far beyond his own. At the end of his second year of writing, he wrote the following thoughtful piece:



More terrorists, new government, more attacks, holiday worries, etc. I accept the idea to put a new government in afghanastan, but there is one problem. That means the religious government may become self-supporting terrorists, along with Bin Laden and his gang, which must undergo the same supporting change to keep terrorizing. But if this happens, the war will become longer and more difficult, even with a new government. I wonder if we can send in better peacekeeping forces in Afghanastan and U.S.A? This also may affect holiday season since the terrorists might not even want worldwide Christmas, which is a totally different religion. Who knows? They may even kill Santa. People could maybe use grinch protection.

(Geoffrey, age 6)

This writing demonstrates so clearly the juxtaposition between Geoffrey's chronological age and both his advanced intellectual development and heightened emotional sensitivity. The illustration Geoffrey included with this piece was titled *Getting ready for holiday time?* and included drawings of Christmas toys.

Year 3

In Year 3, Geoffrey's sensitivity continued to be most evident in writings about his life experiences. While the fictional books were still being produced at a high rate, Geoffrey (age 7) began to consider the more philosophical aspects of life. Religion became a familiar topic, and death and the purpose of life were explored, perhaps in response to the 9/11 tragedies as well as his grandfather's life threatening illness. Geoffrey wrote about terrorism in his school journal. He was clearly sensitive to current world affairs.

I hate war. Like the one in toonicland. It is a war against terrorism. Many people are dying. I don't like terrorism but i don't like wars against it. I love people. War is terrible. I wish we could stop it.

(Geoffrey, age 7)

Around this same time, Geoffrey was obviously extremely saddened by his grandfather's illness. He wrote a book entitled, "POETRY OF THE HEART." It included poems about love and death. Again, his grandfather was in his thoughts.

GRANDPA, I AM SAD
Grandpa, I am sad
that you will soon
be dying
Ever and in heaven
give me love
and i love you.

(Geoffrey, age 7)

Geoffrey was obviously very moved by his life experiences, whether they were experiences of a very personal nature or experiences that revolved around the lives of others. It appears that a "philosophical" period evolved out of this sensitivity. Geoffrey began to read voraciously about different religions and consequently developed his own religion called "Hennicity" which according to him incorporated the best parts of the current world religions. He told one of the researchers that Hennicity would be a "nonproselytizing" religion because he did not believe in actively seeking individuals to become members; they must recognize the integrity of the religion on their own. According to Geoffrey, Hennicity all began with "Cosmihennu." He describes the beginning of creation as follows:

Cosmihennu's Melodies Legend of Cosmihennu

The Creation

In the beginning, there was no anything: no something, yet no nothing either. Even the term "in the beginning" is not accurate, as there was no time then. But then, accuracy and inaccuracy didn't exist either – although nor did existence or nonexistence.

Then, for no reason, since reason didn't exist then, there appeared a tiny, living speck of pure somethingness. This something wanted more something. So it grew into a mother hen and laid the cosmic egg. But instead of letting the egg hatch by itself, a speck, living, of nothingness. the evil Mÿriøwyncaa made the egg explode. If the egg had hatched normally, the world would have been a paradise. But since the egg had exploded by the hand of Mÿriøwyncaa, there was evil and suffering in the world.

The world then was a sort of hell. Cosmihennu* had compassion. She made cures for illnesses and taught love and compassion. So although there was still evil, there was also good.

Mostly, the hymns thank Cosmihennu, the cosmic hen, for that.



The First People

After all the animals had been created, Cosmihennu still felt something missing. She had had a dream of a race that would be seated high on the pyramid of nature. So she made the first man and the first woman: Shkaialjyk and Njylja. ...

* That something, after being the chicken, became Cosmihennu.

(Geoffrey, age 7)

Geoffrey described additional characters of "Hennic" in his book entitled *HENNIC HEROES & HEROINES*. The following excerpts highlight Geoffrey's emphasis on good and mercy:

SHKYALUK...As a reward was allowed to pick grass from the meadow of plenty, which he made a tunic from. But he was not allowed to use it again. But just before the lightning strike of Hiter, he used the grass to build a shelter for his wife. Seeing it was because of love, however, Cosmihennu had mercy upon him. When he died, he became MacDonalld the Elder, god of agriculture.

BAYAGINI...During the Invasion of Dimoniiku, she created and led an army for revenge against the law that was newly set and which said women should not have many rights.

AMBARIMANIC...One day Cosmichennu said Ambarimanic must defeat the ravaging, unbeatable monster Taeroc in the hottest part of the middlesouthern lands. But also, once the monster was stopped, he must have mercy. So he cut off the monster's leg, so it could not walk out and eat men, but would not necessarily die.

JAMA...Jama, or mercy, was a warrior who did half the work of driving off the wild eastern barbarians. But he had mercy on all his enemies.

(Geoffrey, age 7)

This "philosophical" period continued well into Year 3 resulting in "Questionis Philosophicus," Geoffrey's attempt to answer the most basic queries about the meaning of life (note that this piece includes references to his religion, Hennicity).

QUESTIONIS PHILOSOPHICUS

How can we tell right from wrong?

Can religions tell us right from wrong?

If you believe in that certain religion, it can for you. But they do not necessarily vet the basic

human moral code. Then what is, or tells us, the basic moral code? I can only tell you the moral code that I believe should be the basic human moral code. I believe humans should not kill, steal, or hate and they should help, care for, and love each other.

What am I?

What's so philosophical about this question? It's really more about the meaning of life, and how you think about yourself, and how other people think about you and how they blend.

So what is the meaning of life?

Now that's a tricky one. It's one of the great philosophical questions of all time. Let's start with animals. Okay. Some people in the old days thought that pigs only lived so that they could be sacrificed. But I think that one isn't true. Wait a minute. I have an idea. Let's skip a bit. What's your idea? Maybe people live so that they can make their unique contribution to the world. What about people who don't? O, Quit simplifying around! Everyone makes contributions to the world.

What happens after death?

What do religions say about what happens after death? They have many ideas. Here they are.

- Buddhists say you are reincarnated into different people until perfected.
- Greeks say you go to the underworld, which is not the nicest place.
- Egyptians say only nobles have an afterlife, in which they become gods.
- Christians say if you're good you go to heaven and if you're bad you go to hell.
- The Inuit say you first stay in the female spirit's special place, then you reincarnate into animal.
- Hennicity says you go to a land of light and love in another dimension. Only if you are a murderer or worse do you go to hell (not counting soldiers.)
- Hinduism says you are reincarnated, and that your behavior in this life affects your next life.



What about spiritualists? They have very different ideas these are some of them.

- Some think you rejoin a universal spirit.
- Many others argue that what happens after death is not understandable.

What do you think? I believe in what Hennis says about it.

What did you feel like when you first realized that you had to die?

I was not extremely sad or angry. But I was when i realized my grandparents had to die, i was. I wanted keep on talking with and visiting them, once in a while for my entire life and also i just loved them.

Would you rather live this life forever or go to heaven when you die?

I would rather go to heaven when i die. (Anyway, this life has all it's pros and cons – it is'nt perfect.)

(Geoffrey, age 7)

A WONDER

On Easter morn
 I saw the dawn
 And all was reborn
 Outside our lawn;
 From the ground
 A rabbit poked his head
 The green goddess of the spring
 Had risen from the dead;
 Red-winged blackbirds chirped
 Sunbeams tore the air asunder
 And the newly woken bears exclaimed
 "Spring's the name of this wonder!"

(Geoffrey, age 8)

ROBIN

Chirp! Chirp!
 I hear
 A robin;
 Sweet bird; Celebrating Spring
 With her music!

I see –
Chirp!

- the red breast of the robin
- colour of love
- of new life

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Year 4

A review of the writings Geoffrey (aged 8) produced during Year 4 revealed a mix of styles and topics. Perhaps most evident, however, during this fourth year of his writing was an emphasis on nature. His sensitivity towards animals, and nature in general, is apparent primarily through poetry. The following untitled poem was written early in the year and seems to set the stage for what is to follow:

I wish I was more
 like an eagle,
 free and with a more
 than mental bond to nature.
 I wish I was more like an eagle,
 and my imagination could fly like an eagle
 with my mind as open as the sky
 because of the vast expanse of nature.

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Easter brought poems that celebrated spring and re-birth. Geoffrey included a number of these poems in an anthology titled, *AN EGG FOR SPRING: THE WRITTEN WORD FOR EASTER*. The following two poems are taken from this work:

Nature is obviously a focus of Geoffrey's thoughts during this period. His sensitivity for life in the natural world is readily apparent. As always, despite the topic or style, Geoffrey's delicate awareness of love and harmony is truly remarkable. His continued production of poetry speaks for itself.

THE HARMONY OF THE SPHERES

Stars, galaxies, trees, spirits
 swaying, dancing, always dancing
 with infinity, eternity
 binding, joining, swirling and dancing
 singing, all in many voices
 rotating, spinning, dancing rapidly
 singing, dancing, joining
 Infinity

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Note that the following poem, Ripples, is an acrostic poem where the first letter of each first line of the stanza forms the word "Ripples."



Ripples

VERSE I

Ripples

Dancing outward

Passive reflections

Of space-time flows

Flowing

Stretched out on silver water.

VERSE II

In the Rideau

Trees welcome them

Forming forms of their

Original forms

They circle roun' the elder-branch.

VERSE III

Please, O ripples of water, turn to wave

Carry my boat

Along

A river of blueness.

VERSE IV

Please, O ripples of sky

Carry aloft the wings

Of the hawk;

He is I.

VERSE V

Let the ripples dance on

Beyond rulership of any

Except wind and water

Ever dance wind and water

Ever dance ripples

VERSE VI

Ever dance

Ever dance

Ever dance,

Ever dance

Ever dance

Ever dance.

VERSE VII

So let the wind be wind

And let the water be water

And let the ripples be twofold

And wild.

Dance on.

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Later in Year 4, Geoffrey entered into a fascination with wolves. As he described in *Grey Wolf*, he perceives the wolf to be a misunderstood creature.

...Then, the shepherd knew how foolish it was to trust a wolf. Once a wolf, always a wolf. Now that last line which i suppose was the moral, is certainly true. There is no way to truly stop

a wolf from being wild, to take the wilderness out of it's howl, even if you keep one as a pet. The plot is also truthful. If a shepherd left a flock of sheep with a wolf, the wolf would eat them. The problem it's being misinterpreted. People take the story to mean the wolf is evil, it is merely, however, a predator. The difference: In evil there is hate, in predator there is only hunger...

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Geoffrey's compassion for the wolf is further evident in the following poem:

WOLVES' LAMENT

Once we ruled the land

Great grey wolves running wild and free,

Great howling in the forest

In the woodlands by the sea.

Now we lie on the edge

On the edge of the plane of life,

But still we hope to be

Great grey wolves running wild and free.

Then they started to hunt us

Great grey wolves running wild and free,

Away from their sheepfolds, away

From the woodlands by the sea.

Now we lie on the edge,

On the edge of the plane of life,

But still we maybe can be

Great grey wolves running wild and free.

(Geoffrey, age 8)

While these writings clearly display a deep sensitivity on the part of Geoffrey, his sensitivity is not always exposed to subjects quite as calm and awe-inspiring as nature. As highlighted in Years 2 and 3, his sensitivity influences his experience of all that is happening around him. This includes the more negative aspects of human behavior such as terrorism and war. Nearing the end of Year 4, Geoffrey wrote a commentary on a newspaper article written by David Warren.

David Warren shows his foolishness once more I was shocked by Warren's most recent article. It speaks of Bush's attempt to create mideastern peace. For one thing, it contradicts itself. At the beginning, it says how Bush is fighting "The most powerful threat to western civilization – to the free and democratic and constitutional states" and goes on to envisage America – or "civilization" – as like the heavenly kingdom of light, and Iraq like the Satanic, barbarian league of darkness. Then he says "The arabs and muslims are not the enemy, per se." It only takes a person mod-



erately good at deciphering descriptions to see he has contradicted himself. Yet there is more. I am perfectly aware of the recent terror threats – and I too, wish “God save America” – but he exaggerates the few slight threats to mean that Bush is in a chase to avert the possibility of a chain of attacks that could only be mirrored by September 11th. Most of all, at the end of the article, he envisages Bush in a deadly struggle with only a few chances to avert darkness conquering light. At the very end of the article he says that “He [Bush] will be sniped at from all angles in all dimensions. I wish him well.” In truth, Bush is involved in an unjust war with an extremely vague reason against Iraq, which is weaponless against the USA, the world's leading country. Long live peace, and understanding of what is really going on in Iraq.

(Geoffrey, age 8)

Year 5

Geoffrey is now into his fifth year of writing. The following poem, which was written recently, is an indication that his heightened sensitivity remains a catalyst for his prolific output of writing.

SPRING

I

Spring opens its eyes
A lonely white crocus
A snowdrop for Blodeuwedd
Across her sea
A young green goddess
Crowned in blue sky
Beats a rhythm on the snowclouds.
He, the crocus
Has known the meltwater
Below the snow.
Where she, spring, is, we know
There soon shall be more green
And soon shall be more snow.
There I sing of spring
Beneath an invisible pussywillow.

II

The pussywillow has flowered
Beneath the willow
Where wanders pussy
In a home of spring
It's something near 10°,
An early, pussywillow-mattressed
Spring?

She, young green spring,
Adorns the wood with pussywillow buds,
Detesting the stubborn snow-clouds,
Preferring the young pussy.
(Mated animals
Have their young.)

Showers fall, hope of bright colours
(Blue and then green).
There is an egg, lying in a green
Grass patch, painted.
A single rabbit hops through
The last patch of dirty snow.
The ducks wander from the pond
(Gloria!)
A perfect Easter overcast
Ducks in the rain.

He, the crocus, in summer-like bloom,
She, spring, calls for the spring-cleaning
broom,
Little pussywillow, their young.

III

Now summer starts,
Or so the old folks say,
For now 'tis May Day.
The forest now is art,
April showers have what they must.
The pussywillow now crowns
The willow in her season,
The flower-crowned, May queen,
Spring goddess of the green.

(Geoffrey, age 9)

The Home Environment

As Edmunds and Noel (2003) have noted, Geoffrey has thrived without early exposure/practice/repetition and without any urging or pushing from parents. His parents have taken a gentler approach; they continue to show a keen interest in his work but they do not force him in any one direction. Perhaps more importantly, they celebrate his remarkable sense of compassion and they support the emotions that his heightened sensitivities evoke. This is not always an easy task as Geoffrey's exceptional sensitivity is not always easily predicted nor understood. However, as Geoffrey's mother noted, “His sensitivity has always been apparent and we have been aware for some time that we need to manage stimuli for him more than you would for other children,” When asked to describe her son's sensitivity, she responded as follows:

When he was very young, around age 2, I can remember certain parts of stories really upsetting him, as well as loud noises, or Halloween



costumes. Even now he is very sensitive to scary videos, television shows and cartoons. At age 5, I remember him having to leave the room when a character fell in the river. It is the same with books, but it became more apparent when he moved out of physics and into fiction at about age 7. He becomes faint and nauseated at any description of graphic violence or injury, even in children's literature.

He is overly sensitive to anger or scolding as well. This can manifest physically in a worsening of his Inflammatory Bowel Disease. He has trouble sleeping if he is anxious. He is also very sensitive to the distress of others. He worries or gets upset if George [his brother] is angry at him, or if George is worried or has been scolded. He worries about things that might scare or bother George. He has never belittled his brother in the way other kids behave towards their siblings. There have never been any physical confrontations with his brother either. I have never heard him tell George that he is stupid and he never presents himself as superior in any way. In fact, when George does a good drawing or writes something, Geoffrey is genuinely enthusiastic and encouraging.

His sensitivity was very noticeable when his grandfather died. Some weeks before anyone even knew about the cancer, he began to experience and express anxiety about his grandparents dying. When we eventually told him about his grandfather's illness, he was concerned for his grandmother and feared that she might "die of sorrow." He was physically ill with IBD throughout this whole time and it worsened around the time of his grandfather's death.

Of course there is a great sensitivity to beauty as well. He likes walks in nature, likes to look at and do paintings, enjoys watching the beauty in sports, and his love of language is remarkable. There is also a strange, sometimes amazing sensitivity around certain holidays. He gets very excited before the event and a great deal of effort is put into writing stories that relate to the holidays, planning activities and making decorations. For our wedding anniversary, he concocted an elaborate ceremony called the "glorification of the heart," complete with handmade confetti, a confetti dispenser and a ritual circle dance during which he improvised a song and orchestrated what we would do. At Christmas, he planned the Christmas morning festivities

himself, sneaking his violin into his room and leading a musical procession with his brother into our bedroom to wake us up. Along with this celebration of the holidays, comes a great sadness when the day is actually over. He wrote the following poem expressing his feelings about holidays.

SNOW FALLS OUT OF THE GREY CLOUDS

Snow falls out of the grey clouds

I know that someone's there

Who whispers in my ear

As the winter wind

A bird sings and trees sigh

Its joy long passed away

The children shout

A plane roars by

The holidays have faded here

But still the mystic winter wind

Sings his song unto the end

When one rides by who is not here.

Tears are probably more frequent than in other kids, not tantrums or manipulative tears but genuine sadness at things that probably do not upset most other children. He frequently says that he just cannot help it.

Aggressive and competitive boy talk seems completely foreign to him. His sensitivity is noticed by other kids – his literary, artistic, musical, nonathletic and nonaggressive demeanor as well as his physical appearance (small in stature) result in him being called "gay" by many of the boys at school. He also has trouble with any kind of physically rough play. My husband tries to rough-house with him but he is very physically timid. He also gets worried that someone may get hurt.

I think Geoffrey's sensitivity presents more of a challenge at school than at home. There is no doubt that it is more difficult to manage at school although this year his teachers are doing a great job, mostly by just acknowledging it and giving him time to decompress if he needs to and not making a big deal of it. This is unlike a previous school year that was devastating for Geoffrey. Since he picks up nonverbal signals very well, he knew that his teacher did not like him and thought he was weird. He internalized this and spent the next two years talking about how he was weird. None of this negative self-talk is evident this year. His current teachers seem to strike a good balance between praise and criticism.

The School Experience

As Geoffrey's mother remarked, school has not always been a happy place for Geoffrey. In his first years of school, his experiences were, unfortunately, not unlike the experiences of many other gifted children. There were educators who did not fully understand his gifts and others who did not appreciate his tremendous abilities. There were classrooms that failed to provide an emotionally supportive environment, and he experienced curricula that were inappropriate for his level of intellectual development. In an effort to find the most caring and stimulating learning environment for Geoffrey, his parents tried several schools, both public and private. His present situation is the most successful, a public school for gifted children. The setting is intellectually stimulating, but perhaps most critical to Geoffrey's well being, his teachers provide a very emotionally supportive environment. They recognize Geoffrey's heightened sensitivity as a positive trait rather than a negative one. One of his teachers told the researcher about a recent incident in the classroom that exemplifies Geoffrey's compassion for others. A fellow student often exhibits negative behaviors, and consequently, his peers do not accept him. When the teacher asked for the students to work in groups of two on a particular project, no one would work with this boy. Geoffrey spoke in confidence with the teacher acknowledging the boy's behavior and the fact that other students would not work with him. Geoffrey then told the teacher that he would be willing to have the boy as his partner. The teacher recognized and celebrated this kind gesture.

While Geoffrey's teachers are aware of his sensitive, caring nature, they still expect Geoffrey to "follow the rules" and conform to the behavioral expectations of the classroom. For example, during a researcher's observational session, Geoffrey was seen leaving the classroom without asking permission. When the teacher realized he was missing, she went to find him. He was found walking in the hall upon his return from the washroom. The teacher expressed, in a calm and sincere manner, her concern regarding his absence and the fact that he had not asked for permission to leave the room. Geoffrey asked why this was important. Rather than simply saying it was a classroom rule, she carefully explained why it was necessary to notify her of his needs and his whereabouts. She gave him an explanation that respected his sensitive nature and his desire to know and understand her reasoning behind the classroom rule.

Despite this positive classroom environment, Geoffrey faces the reality of being an almost 10-year-old boy who is different from many of his schoolmates, even though they too have been identified as gifted. Geoffrey's pre-

adolescence includes an intellectual level and an emotional intensity that surpasses many of his peers. His pre-adolescent schoolmates are not always tolerant of his abilities and they are especially not always tolerant of his sensitivities. It is undoubtedly difficult for them to understand some of Geoffrey's behaviors. For example, Geoffrey cried when a shortened school day (due to weather) necessitated the elimination of a DEARS (Drop Everything and Read Silently) period. Geoffrey was using this period to create a written production for his brother, George. It was to be a Valentine's Day gift. He was writing about Kadiddy "because that is [George's] favorite character." It was extremely upsetting to Geoffrey to miss this opportunity to write and to work on the gift. To someone observing him from afar, this touching event may have appeared to be simply a 9-year-old boy crying needlessly when the schedule for the day was changed.

Not surprisingly, Valentine's Day, a day to acknowledge and celebrate those who are important in your life, has created other emotional situations for Geoffrey. These situations exemplify both his sensitivity, and the joy and disappointment his exceptionally caring nature can evoke. The first instance did not occur at school but it does provide the background for Geoffrey's obvious delight in the traditions of Valentine's Day. When Geoffrey was 6 years of age, he was fascinated by the study of the universe, particularly the concept of black holes. It led him to read about Steven Hawking. He was drawn to this famous scientist and, on his own accord, sent Professor Hawking a Valentine's Day card. It was with great delight Geoffrey received a letter from the scientist, thanking him for the first Valentine he had been given in many years.

This year, Valentine's Day proved to be more difficult for Geoffrey. As usual, Geoffrey looked forward to this special occasion, an opportunity to let those you care for know that they are loved. Geoffrey wanted to send cards to all the girls and boys in his class. However, at this pre-adolescent stage of development, it was not a behavior the other boys would appreciate. Unfortunately, this type of behavior on Geoffrey's part, a genuine caring for others and an outward expression of sensitivity, has already resulted in some school children calling him names that suggest he is effeminate.

It is not hard to extrapolate to the school years ahead. As Geoffrey progresses through the upper elementary and junior high grades, his differences will likely be noticed even more by his peers. It is perhaps his sensitive nature that will set him apart the most. It would be a travesty if this gift of caring and compassion were stifled in an effort to be accepted. Not only would his emotional well-being be in jeopardy, but also it may dampen the



outpouring of his highly creative and thoughtful prose and reduce his insatiable appetite for knowledge. As Edmunds (1999) remarked, there are nonintellective factors that affect the behavior of the gifted. Silverman (1993) concurred, stating that the motivation to learn is emotional, not intellectual. And as Dabrowski (1972) concluded, this "emotional overexcitability" displayed by gifted individuals creates the opportunity for higher development.

Implications for Schooling

Parents and educators put great effort into providing an intellectually stimulating environment for the gifted child. Fostering intellectual growth is a key component of gifted education. However, it cannot be the only component. As Geoffrey's writing and behaviors have so aptly revealed, this intellectual development does not occur without the influence of emotionality. Folsom (1997) pointed out:

Complex intellectual learning includes a desire to ask questions, challenge existing ideas, gather information, derive meaning by making connections, be creative, and display initiative by independently planning and making decisions. Adding the ethical concerns of caring, fairness, and emotions to the considerable intellectual complexities challenges not only the teacher, but the learner as well. (p. 269)

It is readily apparent that the emotionality of the gifted student cannot be ignored.

Dalzell (1997), who examined developmental influences on giftedness, remarked that it is key that the home and school environments provide high expectations and stimulation within a caring and supportive milieu. She noted that looking at giftedness within a developmental framework could ultimately help children deal more effectively with psychosocial issues and concerns. Given the emotional challenges of the adolescent period, perhaps, then, the focus for the education of the pre-adolescent and adolescent gifted child should be on recognizing and supporting the child's heightened sensitivity, or emotionality, rather than merely focusing on curricula learned or talents exhibited. Helping gifted children to face the pressures of conforming to societal expectations, including conforming to sex-role stereotypes, may be the ultimate education for the sensitive child. As Roeper (1995) emphasized, gifted and talented children should be educated for life rather than educated for success. In other words, growth of the self and mastery of the environment are more important than the attainment and exhibition of a particular set of skills.

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