



Where Have All the Girls Gone?

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RECLAIMING LOST GIFTEDNESS IN GIRLS

Linda Kreger Silverman, Ph.D.

Gifted girls are chameleons. From the time they enter preschool, they learn how to blend in with their peer group so that they are “just like” all the other girls. Their astonishing aptitude for social adaptation often prevents the detection of their giftedness, which, in turn, inhibits the development of their abilities. The adaptability of gifted girls has been noted as a barrier to their achievement (Kerr, 1985), but it has not been recognized as a special strength. However, when we compare the developmental patterns of gifted girls to those of gifted boys, we begin to wonder whether the boys in general are socially deficient or if the girls are socially talented.

Let me paint some typical scenarios...

Brian

It is the first day of preschool, and Brian, a developmentally advanced young man, bursts into the room ready to master this new frontier. He's been eagerly anticipating going to school. He is excited to share what he knows with all these new friends, and excited about all the new things he is going to learn. Brian is 4 going on 7, and he has already devoured a great deal of information about astronomy. So during recess he takes his new buddies on a space adventure, telling them all about planets, asteroids, meteorites, constellations, and mysterious black holes. One by one his little friends disappear, since obviously they don't know what he's talking about. Pretty soon, he's all alone—a leader without followers.

Undaunted, Brian returns to the classroom looking for an interesting person to talk to, and he finds her... his teacher. Preoccupied with his own thoughts, he completely monopolizes his teacher until she has to remind him that he isn't the only one in the room and she needs to pay attention to the others as well. So now Brian has to find something to do to keep his active mind occupied. He glances at the other children's activities and wonders why anyone would want to play such silly games. He remarks offhandedly, “That's stupid. What are you doing that for?” This doesn't win him too many close friends.

If the teacher pushes Brian into joining the other children in their activities, he is likely to engage in some acting out behavior. He will invent ingenious ways to annoy his classmates, and if he gets into enough trouble, eventually he may withdraw and play by himself. One kindergarten I worked with spent every recess playing by himself in the sandbox. The “readiness” examiner was quite concerned that the boy was displaying signs of “social immaturity” and recommended that he be held back in school. When his mother asked him why he was spending all his time in the sandbox, he replied, “Oh, I'm categorizing all the crystals. You should see them, Mom!”

Notice all of the ways Brian demonstrates his giftedness: on the playground he shows leadership, imagination and advanced knowledge; in the classroom, he selects the teacher as an intellectual companion,

invents ways to cause trouble, and independently entertains himself. You can't help but notice Brian and see how different he is from the other children. He just doesn't fit in. Brian and his giftedness are visible. Gifted girls usually display a completely opposite pattern—they become invisible.

Caitlin

Caitlin's age and IQ are the same as Brian's (chronologically 4 years, mentally 7 years). It's her first day of preschool. She is cautious about leaving her mother, and spends a great deal of time watching the other children before she begins to participate. Gradually she starts to imitate their behavior. She sees that Jennifer, the little girl next to her, is scribbling with an orange crayon in her left hand. “I can do that,” Caitlin tells herself confidently. She picks up an orange crayon in her left hand (Caitlin is right-handed), and copies Jennifer's scribble. With an anxious smile, she shows the scribble to her teacher and asks, “Is this good?” “That's wonderful, Caitlin!” responds the teacher warmly, and Caitlin happily repeats her performance.

And that is exactly what it is: a performance designed to win approval. Caitlin is a brilliant performer. At home her multimedia artwork decorates all the walls, and neighbors remark about her advanced understanding of color, form and texture. But, of course, her teacher knows nothing about this. All she sees is Caitlin's school act. Caitlin fits in very well with the other little girls. She plays all their games. She prac-

tices her colors, numbers and letters. She listens attentively and does exactly what is expected of her.

There is a marked discrepancy between Caitlin's behavior at home and at school. Caitlin knew all the primary colors at 20 months, recited the alphabet at 2 years, memorized several books and could count 20 objects by 2 1/2, wrote her first name at 3 years, and taught herself to read at 3 1/2. She watches National Geographic videos endlessly and knows a great deal about animals.

At school, however, Caitlin never talks about animals and doesn't let anyone know she can read. She never complains about the work being too easy. She asks the teacher for help zipping her jacket, although she mastered this fine motor skill a year ago. She frequently lapses into "baby talk." On one occasion when she did this at home, her mother snapped at her, "Caitlin, act your age!" To which Caitlin responded, "But Mommy, I am acting my age. I'm acting just like all the other girls in my class."

Why is Caitlin playing this game? The answer is poignantly revealed by a 5-year-old girl whose mother wrote me this letter.

I have a daughter who is in public school in kindergarten... At the first parent/ teacher conference I was informed that she was working at or below grade level. She was in a low pre-reading group and a low math group. (She has been reading since three years old and has done basic addition and math since four.)

I urged them to please look more closely. At another conference at semester end the teacher informed me of something strange which she had discovered. When my daughter worked with her best friend she worked below grade level (as did

her friend— she is below grade level). In fact their work was almost identical. With more advanced children she worked at their level. The quality of her work seemed to depend almost entirely on her association.

When asked about this, she thought about it for awhile and then told me she wanted the other kids to like her. I am unable to convince her that she doesn't have to do this to be liked. To her, being friends is to be just like each other. She is extremely adaptable.

The school is becoming aware, but is not willing to help very much. They gave her a reading test two weeks ago and she reads fourth grade level. They are unprepared to do anything. She continues in a pre-reading group. (emphasis added)

SOCIAL ADAPTABILITY

Brian is in danger of being held back in kindergarten, punished for his inability to relate to children his own chronological age. Ironically, he is called "socially immature," whereas Caitlin, who is regressing to baby talk, is seen as "mature." It is easy to think of Caitlin as "normal," and Brian as a social clutz. But if we look at their coping strategies through another lens, Brian's behavior becomes much more understandable and Caitlin's almost miraculous.

Imagine what it would be like to be a fourth grader placed in a first grade class. How would you relate to the other children or to the curriculum? You could be a big sister or brother, or an assistant teacher, but you'd

have to live without any real friends— without anyone who understood you. You would have to figure out how to play with children whose games were not interesting and play by rules that seemed crude and unfair. You would have to learn how to explain your ideas in simpler terms that others could understand. You would have to wait patiently while others struggle with concepts you have known for some time. You would have to refrain from answering all the teacher's questions so that others can have an opportunity to participate. You'd have to be very careful not to reveal what you really know.

This is exactly the dilemma of the child who is developmentally advanced. A gifted child is mentally two or three years beyond his or her age mates. Almost everyone in our society expects young gifted children to fit in with others their own chronological age, regardless of the differences in their development. Yet, we have no appreciation of the complexity of that task. Read the last paragraph again and imagine trying to teach these skills. These

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are not age-appropriate skills or realistic expectations for any child. It is not easy to lop off two or three years of development to fit in with children less advanced, and it is a wonder that anyone manages

to achieve it. We never recognize the amazing social feat gifted girls perform daily.

We don't know what enables gifted girls to master these complex social skills so easily at such a tender age. It may be purely the result of environmental programming or maybe girls have an "adaptability gene" that boys don't have; it probably is some combination. We do know that gifted girls fit in by pretending to be

less capable than they really are, and that this habit pattern often becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy (Borland, 1986). If elementary school work is too easy, girls are unprepared to meet the challenges of advanced coursework

later on, avoid more difficult courses, which unnecessarily limits their career choices, and come to believe that they really aren't smart (Dweck, 1986).

Girls' social adaptability is perceived as a defect because it interferes with their motivation to excel. Gifted boys, on the other hand, are not skillful at hiding their abilities, and their inability to falsify themselves is viewed as a social defect. However, when we place gifted boys and girls in programs with others like themselves, the problems, perceptions, and maladaptive patterns magically disappear. Disruptive boys stop acting out when they find real friends and a stimulating curriculum. Girls stop hiding their abilities in an environment in which it is safe to be gifted. Their adaptive powers work for them instead of against them when they can emulate other girls as bright as themselves. This is why gifted education is so essential.

HOW CAN WE HELP GIFTED GIRLS?

Identify them early, before they have developed ingrained patterns of hiding. The best age for testing gifted girls is between 3 1/2 and 7. By the time gifted girls are 8 or 9, their favorite response to test items is "I don't know." They will not guess on items they aren't absolutely certain they will get right. This quickly depresses their IQ scores.

Find them gifted peers. These are children of similar mental abilities and similar interests. They may be female or male, older, younger or the same age. I've learned that age and sex aren't that important in gifted children's choice of friends. Parent

support groups provide good networks for locating other gifted children.

Place them in special programs. Help promote classes for gifted students which stimulate and challenge them. In talking with women who retained their view of themselves as gifted, many were in classes with extremely bright girls who worked hard and supported each other.

Consider early entrance. Gifted girls are often ready for school early and have an excellent track record of adjustment if they are placed right from the beginning with older peers (Daurio, 1979).

Don't let them drop out of math. Girls should be encouraged to take every math course possible, and as early as they can get into them. Math courses open doors to their future that are forever closed if they are allowed to quit after geometry.

Introduce them to role models. Enable them to meet women who have made different kinds of choices with their lives: top executives, homemakers, researchers, single women, women with no children, married career women with children. Expose them to many alternatives and discuss the possibilities. Have them read biographies of eminent women and lesser known heroines who have devoted themselves to their families and community service.

Involve Dad in their lives. Research indicates that fathers play a significant role in the aspirations of their daughters (Lemkau, 1983). If Daddy believes in her, she believes in herself.

Hold high expectations. Parental expectations and expectations of teachers strongly affect girls' expectations of themselves. If a girl is allowed to slide by just performing what she already knows, she gradually loses her belief in her ability to master the unknown. Early challenges build self-confidence. Provide assistance and encouragement with new tasks.

Avoid sex-role stereotyping. Who sets the table in your house? Who takes out the garbage? Pay attention to the tasks you assign, the games you purchase, and the subtle messages you convey about girls' activities and boys' activities. Typical girls' activities are limiting and teach passivity rather than independence. **Encourage independence and risk-taking.** Everyone in a gifted girl's life should help her to take chances, and support her independence. Over-protectiveness breeds fear.

Gifted girls don't have to become invisible. In the right environment, with the proper support of parents and teachers, they can shine throughout their school careers and become the gifted women they were meant to be.

(For more suggestions, please see "The Hidden Gifted Learner" in the last issue of *Understanding Our Gifted*, 2 (1), 3 and L. K. Silverman (1986), "What Happens to the Gifted Girl?")

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Personality Plus

Let's Ban "Bossy"

As part of our assessment process at the Gifted Child Development Center, we have constructed a very lengthy parent questionnaire which includes the question, "Does your child show any signs of leadership ability?" For the last 14 years, I have been struck with the differences in how parents respond to that question when they are describing their little boys or their little girls. Parents of three, four and five year olds will say about their sons: "He is a leader with his friends"; "He likes to be the boss"; "He's the director of activities—even with older children"; "He likes to suggest a game and then he assigns roles"; "He decides what game to play, who should be what character, what toys to use." But very frequently, they will describe their daughters as "bossy"! "She's so bossy I'm afraid she isn't going to have any friends." Preschool and primary teachers respond similarly, even asking for advice as to how to correct the "bossiness" they observe in gifted girls (Silverman, 1993, p. 301).

Maybe I'm missing something, but I find it hard to grasp how the leadership styles of four year olds could be so different that boys would be described as "the boss" and girls as "bossy." Do young boys really lead in a different manner from girls, or is it simply expected that boys will tell others what to do but unacceptable for girls to do the same? In almost every case in which the term "bossy" has been used to describe a child, that child has been female (Silverman, 1993, p. 302). It seems unlikely that this would occur by chance among 1,700 families. The term "bossy" shows up in the literature also—only in relation to girls (Lutfig & Nichols, 1990; Olszewski-Kubilius & Kulieke, 1989). Apparently the same quality is perceived positively and encouraged in young boys but frowned

upon and discouraged in young girls. The message conveyed is that it is inappropriate for a girl to be the boss; she should be a follower instead. The long range impact of having one's bossiness curbed early in life may be a tragic loss of initiative and confidence in one's ability to lead (Silverman, 1993, p. 302).

It seems to me that we need to ban the term "bossy," and encourage leadership potential in young gifted girls rather than stifling it. Maybe our bossy little girls could grow up to be Chief Executive Officers instead of great administrative assistants. It also seems that we need more research to determine if there is a systematic destruction of leadership potential in gifted girls through this deeply ingrained practice of telling girls not to be so bossy. Are gifted young girls only bossy around children of lesser ability? Is there more give and take when they are placed with other gifted girls? Perhaps the solution to "bossiness" is an appropriate peer group!

However, it is perfectly appropriate to give young girls guidance in how to lead effectively, how to honor the feelings and desires of others, and how to build self-esteem in their playmates. Boys as well as girls with leadership ability may need help at times leading in the best interests of all.

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Helping Gifted Girls Reach Their Potential*

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This article briefly addresses the essential ingredients which facilitate the development of girls' potential. Eight areas are covered: parent education, early identification, gifted peers, early entrance, teacher inservice, special programs, career counseling, and conferences for gifted girls. Specific suggestions are listed for each area.

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1. Parent Education

Parent advocacy groups and school districts should sponsor courses for parents and prospective parents focusing on nonsexist childrearing practices. These classes would enhance development of both males and females, and are applicable to the general population. Some of the topics that could be addressed include:

- a) holding high expectations for daughters as well as sons
- b) not purchasing sex-typed toys
- c) encouraging high levels of activity, exploration, and risk-taking in both sexes
- d) avoiding overprotectiveness; allowing girls to get dirty
- e) encouraging boys to participate in childcare, cooking, and housekeeping activities
- f) allowing girls to become "tomboys" and play "boys' games"
- g) fostering interests in mathematics and science
- h) having daughters spend alone-time with Dad in "masculine" activities

- i) assigning chores to siblings on a nonsexist basis
- j) discouraging the use of sexist language or teasing
- k) monitoring television programs for sexist stereotyping
- l) becoming role models for shared household and childcare responsibilities
- m) discussing with the family the effects of sex-role stereotyping in society
- n) Dad realizing the important role he plays in affecting his daughter's aspirations
- o) Mom acknowledging and nurturing her own abilities

2. Early Identification

It is essential for gifted girls to be identified in the preschool or primary years (3 1/2 to 7 years), before they have been socialized into hiding their abilities. When they are assessed at 8 or 9, they tend to answer only those questions that they are absolutely certain they know perfectly. This tendency lowers their IQ scores and makes their detection more difficult. Individual intelligence scales enable gifted girls to demonstrate their developmental advancement and are less sex-biased than methods of identification based upon achievement and performance.

3. Gifted Peers

Since gifted girls excel at imitation and adaptation, they often *blend* into the group rather than demonstrating their unusual abilities. They need the safety of other gifted girls in order to value their talents. Preschool environments should be selected to ensure that other bright girls or older girls are available to emulate and that the program is intellectually challenging. Gifted peers can also be located through enrichment classes and parent support networks. "Socialization"

with same-aged peers of lesser ability is counterproductive to the development of talent. Gifted girls are overly socialized to fit in at the expense of their giftedness.

4. Early Entrance

Gifted girls are quite often ready for Kindergarten earlier than their age peers. In their neighborhoods, they tend to play with girls who are older than themselves and to learn at the same rate. Early entrance into Kindergarten is the most advantageous form of acceleration and enjoys an excellent track record--particularly for gifted girls. Whereas boys can be accelerated at any point in their school career with few adverse effects (providing they *choose* to be accelerated), girls may need to be accelerated before third grade or after ninth grade for optimal social adjustment.

5. Teacher Inservice

Educators at all grade levels need to be informed of the vulnerability of gifted girls and given specific guidance in how to detect and nurture high abilities in girls. Topics that could be covered in inservice sessions include:

- a) becoming familiar with the characteristics of giftedness
- b) asking parents for information about a child's developmental advancement prior to school age
- c) understanding why girls tend to hide their abilities
- d) knowing when to refer children for diagnostic testing
- e) learning the research on early entrance and acceleration
- f) exposing students to advanced learning opportunities
- g) enabling students to progress academically at their own rate and learn with other gifted peers

- h) encouraging independence and risk-taking in girls
- i) monitoring sexist classroom materials
- j) requiring nonsexist language in students' writing
- k) discouraging sexist remarks and attitudes among students
- l) alerting students to the negative effects of sex-role stereotyping
- m) discussing sexism in the media
- n) encouraging girls to contribute in class
- o) having girls read biographies of eminent women
- p) exposing students to role models of women in various careers
- q) encouraging girls to take as many mathematic courses as possible and to accelerate in math and science
- r) teaching students how to make educated guesses on tests
- s) cluster grouping or cluster scheduling gifted students so that they can maintain a strong support network
- t) forming support groups for girls with similar interests
- u) believing in gifted girls' abilities; being an advocate

6. Special Programs

Special provisions for gifted students are especially needed to preserve giftedness in girls. In these classes, girls learn to display their abilities rather than disguising them to fit in socially with less developed peers. They take on real challenges in learning rather than performing perfectly what they already know. They come to value themselves and develop higher aspirations. Gifted girls' academic, social, emotional and ethical development are fostered in gifted/talented programs.

7. Career Counseling

In junior and senior high school, special attention should be given to career counseling for highly capable girls. During these critical years, girls are at risk for denying their talents, particularly if they are in an environment in which it is not popular to be smart. Some career development classes should be co-educational and others should be for females only, providing opportunities for girls to discuss concerns they might not feel free to express in front of boys. Some of the following activities could be included in the counseling curriculum:

- a) teaching males and females about career potentialities for women
- b) exposing students to role models of professional women with different lifestyles: professional homemakers, single career women, career women with no children, women combining careers with childrearing, etc.
- c) discussing alternative, equitable solutions that would enable women to combine a career and a family (e.g. role reversals, shared positions, live-in childcare)
- d) discussing nontraditional careers for women, including salaries for men and women and schooling requirements
- e) analyzing the implications for males in dual-career families
- f) discussing underachievement among gifted females and asking how they can combat it in themselves and others
- g) arranging opportunities for girls to *shadow* a woman professional to see what her work entails
- h) helping girls set long-term goals
- i) analyzing career paths that are autonomous (planned to actualize one's career potential versus those which are contingent upon a man's career)

- j) discouraging girls from limiting their career options by dropping out of mathematics
- k) actively recruiting girls for Advanced Placement courses and early college entrance opportunities
- l) providing comparative information about college programs and assistance in applying for scholarships; encouraging students of both sexes to attend excellent colleges
- m) actively seeking scholarships for gifted females
- n) helping females understand the career implications of preserving their maiden names
- o) discussing the dilemma of devoting oneself to a career versus devoting oneself to parenting gifted children

8. Conferences for Gifted Girls

Special conferences for gifted girls have been organized in many states to enable junior and senior high school students to meet nationally recognized professional women, and to attend workshops dealing with various aspects of career development for women. Many times these conferences emphasize women in math and science, and some involve mothers and daughters. Films and videotapes are often a part of these conferences, and excellent media resources are available.

* References to support the statements in this section can be found in Silverman, L. K. (1986). What happens to the gifted girl? In C. J. Maker (Ed.), *Critical issues in gifted education*, Volume 1: Defensible programs for the gifted (pp. 43-89). Austin, TX: Pro-Ed.

PERSONALITY PLUS

On Overachievement

Overachiever" is a term bandied about as frequently as "underachiever," but, frankly, I have always had difficulty comprehending what it means. Typical definitions of underachievement involve a discrepancy between some estimate of an individual's capabilities and a measure of his or her performance. It makes sense to me that you can be more competent than you demonstrate at any particular time. For example, you can study for a test and then get asked questions unrelated to the material you studied. Under these circumstances, your performance would be considerably lower than your competence, no matter how well you knew the material. IQ tests are another good example. You are always smarter than your test score, because there is no IQ test that can measure your full capacity.

But how is it possible for your performance to outdistance your competence?? The chances of your "guessing correctly" on a test when you have absolutely no idea what you are doing are infinitesimal. It is ludicrous to convince yourself, "I'm not really smart...I'm just a good test taker." There are bad test-takers, just like there are underachievers. But no one is just a "good test taker."

The concept of "overachievement" needs to be examined more carefully to see what it really implies. Over the years, I have asked many groups of people if they consider themselves "achievers," "underachievers," or "overachievers," and why they identify with the label they select. Those

who identify themselves as "overachievers" usually say things like: "I work too hard," "I do more than is necessary," "I'm driven," etc.. I often reply, "Then you think of Marie Curie and Sergei Rachmaninoff as overachievers too? Those phrases certainly apply to them as well!"

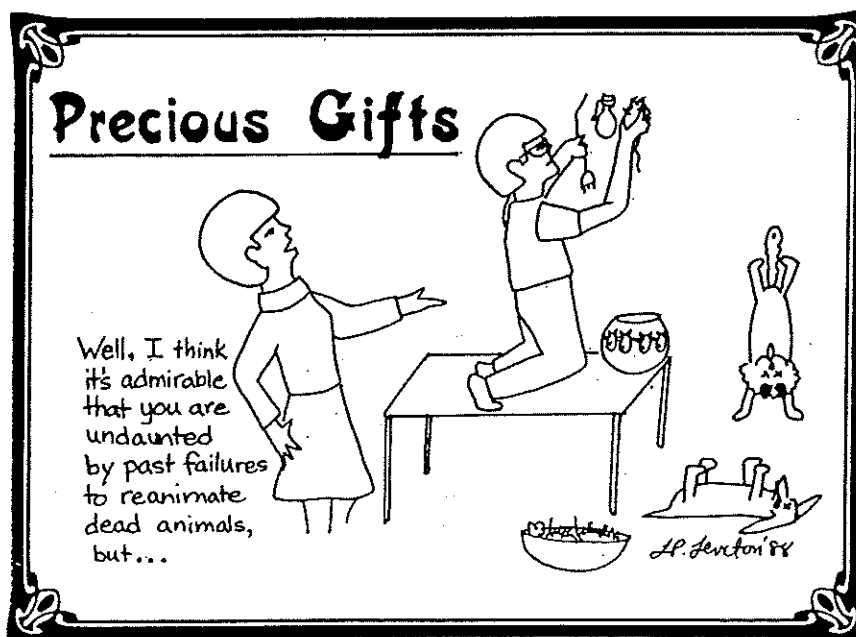
I find it fascinating that the majority of men in these groups see themselves as "underachievers," while the majority of women see themselves as "overachievers." I ask groups to think about the students they label in their minds as "underachievers" and "overachievers." Again, a sex bias reveals itself on a regular basis. Boys underachieve, whereas girls overachieve. Boys are capable of much better work, but girls compensate for their lack of talent by turning in extra-credit projects and by studying harder.

To some extent, we are all underachievers, because there isn't enough time or energy to accomplish all that

we are capable of doing. But I would like to propose that we ban the term "overachiever" as a nonsensical, non-word that has no legitimate meaning. It is another pejorative — another put down, like "overly sensitive," "too intense," and "too perfectionistic" — that is used against the gifted, and, in addition, it is sex-biased.

There should be a club, like "Overachievers Anonymous," that women can contact whenever we begin to think of ourselves as "overachievers" instead of as truly talented. And we need to bite our tongues before we apply that term to one more young girl, giving her the impression that she only got that A because she "works hard," not because she is really intelligent. We don't want to give children the impression that anyone who is really gifted shouldn't have to work hard — that only "overachievers" work hard. Yet, perhaps that is exactly what we convey by continuing to use that term. Hard work leads to achievement, not to "overachievement." ■

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