

Gifted and misunderstood: Mothers' narratives of their gifted children's socio-emotional adjustment and educational challenge

Mimi Wellisch, Jac Brown & Ros Knight
Macquarie University

Abstract

Eleven mothers of gifted children were interviewed, with questions focused around maternal problems as they related to children's attachment, socio-emotional adjustment, and perhaps even their IQs. The interviews were transcribed and NVivo 9 qualitative software was used to help manage the data and coding process. Findings indicate that children were more likely to have clinical or borderline internalising problems if their mothers had been depressed, and if the children had been serially misunderstood in a variety of primary social contexts – at home, by peers, and in those educational settings that failed to provide appropriately for their advanced and different educational needs. A model is included of the primary social contexts and causes involved in misunderstanding gifted children. The article concludes with recommendations for successful preventative strategies based on information gained from the narratives of participating mothers.

Introduction

Being loved and accepted by others are primary human needs (Maslow, 1943), and start very early in life through babies' complete reliance on others for their survival. The way children learn to value others begins with attachment, best characterised by the child-mother relationship (Fonagy, Steele, & Steele, 1991; Perry, 2002; Sutton, 2005). Attachment was first noted by Bowlby (1969), who observed that babies and young children sought out their mothers when they felt threatened or uncomfortable. The term 'attachment' refers to the special reciprocal relationship between baby and mother (Prior & Glaser, 2006). Attachment can be viewed as a form of communication (Pearson & Jeffrey, 2007), and advanced language development has been found to be associated with babies' secure attachment (Prior & Glaser, 2006; Van IJzendoorn, Dijkstra, & Bus, 1995).

Maternal depression at a key time in the baby's development, however, has been linked to disorders in attachment and less than optimal cognitive development (Cicchetti, Rogosch, & Toth, 1998). Predictors of child vocabulary, for example, have been associated with the mother's vocabulary (Snow, 1998), and children's vocabulary may well be affected when mothers are withdrawn. Additionally, post-natal depression has a negative effect on caregiving, which can then affect children's language (Stein, Malmberg, Sylva, Barnes, & Leach, 2008). Although not all gifted children have advanced language skills, and although there are insecurely attached gifted children (Karrass &

Braungart-Rieker, 2004), secure attachment can be seen as a natural precursor for giftedness as it promotes language and other aspects of development. Additionally, excellent verbal ability has been associated with gifted children (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Liu, Hui, Lien, Kafka, & Stein, 2005; Rogers & Silverman, 1997), higher IQ has been associated with secure attachment (Van IJzendoorn & Van Vliet-Visser, 1988), and giftedness itself could well be a protective factor against insecure attachment (Wellisch, et al., 2011a). However, gifted children's characteristics are often misunderstood and, thus, mislabelled or misdiagnosed (Amend & Beljan, 2009). This paper will examine how being misunderstood can affect giftedness and gifted children's socio-emotional adjustment, and present the findings of a qualitative study conducted with 11 mothers of gifted children. The mothers were recruited from a larger quantitative study on IQ and attachment involving 80 children and both their parents (Wellisch, et al., 2011a), however as only 54 fathers completed questionnaires, as attachment is best characterised by the child-mother relationship, and as we wanted to explore how maternal depression may affect gifted children's socio-emotional adjustment, only data from the mothers was used, and therefore only mothers were interviewed.

Feeling misunderstood

Condon (2008) used a dictionary to define 'misunderstood' as "misinterpreted, misjudged, misconstrued, misheard, taken the wrong way, mistaken, miscalculated, unacknowledged, and

unvalued” (p. 179). Condon analysed the concept, and concluded that there were three defining attributes of feeling misunderstood: unease, or anxiety; failure of empathy; or mismatch of perceptions. Being misunderstood also heightened emotions such as “sadness, depression, dissatisfaction, abandonment, loneliness, irritability, insecurity, confusion, and annoyance, along with feelings of being attacked, pressured, devalued, and unappreciated” (pp. 181-182).

Although there is no specific literature on gifted children being misunderstood, it is implied in a number of ways. For example, the literature includes sensitive gifted children experiencing emotions reminiscent of those associated with being misunderstood (Peterson & Ray, 2006). Amend and Beljan (2009) thought that bullying, and “even the slightest negative comments, let alone chronic maltreatment, can affect a gifted child deeply and may contribute to their sense of difference and not fitting in with peers. Depression may be the consequence of such chronic feelings” (p. 139). Gross (1993) reported that some exceptionally gifted children had to resort to deliberately masking their abilities in order to be accepted by age-peers. Additionally, gifted students with learning disabilities could be misunderstood, according to Reis and Renzulli (2004), “because their giftedness can mask their disabilities and their disabilities can camouflage their talents” (p. 123).

Giftedness

The concept of giftedness has been difficult to define despite much effort (Mayer, 2005). In broad terms giftedness is defined as a genetically inherited potential, or the ability to reach high levels of achievement in a variety of pursuits, preceded by early characteristic signs (Howe, Davidson, & Sloboda, 1998). These characteristics have been variously described, depending on the stance of the writer, and factors such as socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as well as those associated with particular gifts (Frasier & Passow, 1994; Rogers & Silverman, 1997).

Identification of giftedness has been the cause of much debate and controversy. During the 1990s the construct of asynchrony was conceived in response to a general shift away from the concept of giftedness to the more achievement oriented and supposedly equitable development of ‘talent’ (Morelock, 1992). Asynchrony, according to Silverman (1997), described gifted children who often had a poor social fit due to a less mature but highly sensitive emotional system. She saw gifted children as cognitively

complex and emotionally intense, functioning at various developmental ages – for example, with the mental age of a 14-year old, and a chronological age of an 8-year old. The most asynchronous of all gifted children, according to Silverman (1998; 2009), are gifted children with learning disabilities. These children are often referred to as *twice exceptional*, or as *gifted and disabled*, and can be thus identified if “ability [is]...substantially above average and ...his or her achievement is substantially below average when compared to peers of the same age” (Lovett & Lewandowski, 2006, p. 524).

As mentioned, the participating mothers in the current study were recruited from a larger study with 80 participant families, where one criterion for participation was that children’s IQ scores were made available to the researchers. For that study we had set the gifted score at \geq IQ120 of any index or full scale score, although giftedness and inclusion in a gifted program is generally set at two standard deviations from the norm (=FSIQ130) (Lohman, Gambrell, & Lakin, 2008; Winner, 2000). This decision to ensure that children with some high scores and large discrepancies between index scores were included amongst the gifted children was based on a number of considerations. Gagné, for example, suggested that mild giftedness starts at a full scale score of 120 IQ (Gagné, 2007). However, changes to the revised WISC-IV as well as downward adjustments made due to the Flynn effect, a substantial international increase in average scores on intelligence tests, appear to have reduced WISC-IV’s Full Scale IQ in gifted children from a mean of 128.7 for the WISC-III validity study to IQ123.5 for the WISC-IV gifted sample (Flanagan & Kaufman, 2004). Additionally, calculation of a full scale score is not recommended when large discrepancies are obtained between index scores, as the full scale score would not adequately represent the children’s abilities. Gifted children with large score discrepancies are often thought to have a learning disability (Silverman, 1997). In such cases, Morrison and Rizza (2007) suggested the strategy of analysing “individual subtest patterns rather than looking at fullscale scores” (p. 60). We wanted to ensure that these children were included amongst the gifted, and for all the above reasons it was decided that in this study, any \geq 120 score would be counted as a gifted score.

Giftedness and socio-emotional adjustment

The literature on gifted children generally explains socio-emotional problems and uneven development as a natural by-product of giftedness (Silverman, 1997; Winner, 2000).

However, Wellisch (2010) argued that problems may be preceded by maternal depression and attachment problems. Maternal depression affects one in five women, especially during the child-bearing years (Johnson & Flake, 2007). One study found that 74% of chronically depressed mothers had insecurely attached babies (McMahon, Barnett, Kowalenko, & Tennant, 2006). There may, therefore, be a subgroup of gifted children whose socio-emotional problems stem from their mothers' depression. Children's negative traits (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006) may also stem from maternal depression, and insecure attachment (McMahon, et al., 2006).

Secure attachment has been linked with the mother's ability to correctly interpret her baby's communication, and her sensitive responsiveness (Prior & Glaser, 2006). Insecure attachment in children is the frequent outcome of inconsistent, angry or dismissive care-giving, misinterpretations, and miscommunications – behaviours that are also linked to neglect and abuse (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Prior & Glaser, 2006). Securely attached children would therefore be expected to have mothers who were responsive and understood their needs.

We could expect to see more securely attached children in a gifted population than in a general sample, as has been the case in the earlier findings already mentioned. However, the nature of brain development during the first 12 months of a child's life is such that early trauma and neglect can have long term consequences in some or all areas of development (Joseph, 1999). Children who have had adverse experiences and neglect in the first twelve months may, therefore, continue to exhibit internalising, externalising, or learning problems often associated with insecure attachment. This qualitative study set out to explore the relationship between mothers and their gifted children through interviews with mothers. The aim of the study was to examine the socio-emotional adjustment of a small gifted sample and to determine whether and how maternal problems were related to gifted children's own adjustment.

Method

Earlier questionnaires included questions about maternal depression, and child participants were only eligible if they completed an IQ assessment within the previous 18 months. Interview participants who lived in Sydney, and who indicated on that they would be interested in a later interview, were contacted if their children were 'gifted', for example, if they had a minimum of one score of at least 120.

Twenty-one mothers indicated an interest in participating again, however, only eleven mothers were eligible for a variety of reasons. These included mothers of children who did not meet the WISC-IV assessment requirement, or families who moved away prior to being re-contacted. The mean child age at the time of IQ assessments was 8 years (see Table 1).

Interviews were voice-recorded in participants' homes. The length of recordings varied from 35 minutes for the shortest to 60 minutes for the longest interview. Rapport was established, and questions were formulated to capture the experience of parenting a gifted child, with questions evolving during the first few interviews as further questions arose. Mothers responded to the following questions: When you look back over the history of your experience with this child, what stands out for you? What is it like having a child at his (her) intellectual level? How has it been for you getting services you wanted for your child? How did this child compare to the other children in the family (if more than one child)?

If open questions did not elicit sufficient information, more specific questions were also asked: What was your experience with pregnancy like? How did things change after the birth? Where do you see your child 10 years from now? What do you wish would be different about your child's childhood (any regrets)? Participants were encouraged to talk about these issues, and prompts, such as "Can you tell me more about that?" were used. As can be seen from the varying lengths of the interviews, some mothers were more open to the interview situation and more informative than others.

Interviews were transcribed, and as we wanted to explore whether and how the problems of mothers may affect gifted children, a grounded theory approach was used to analyse these (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This approach was used in accordance with the recommendations of Marshall and Rossman (1995) for cases where either the process is not yet identified or where a theory is not yet formulated. The NVivo 9 qualitative software helped manage the analysis and coding process. Core categories were identified from the interviews and searched for emerging themes, and axial coding then provided broad categories. Memos and notes were then further scrutinised, and a common theme emerged for all child participants with specific dimensions that showed each child and mother participant's experiences.

Table 1. Summary of participant data and elements in primary social contexts

“Names” ¹	Child’s age ²	FSIQ	≥120 Scores ³	Mother Depressed ⁴	Child Misunderstood Home Peers School	Child’s CBCL ⁵
Nancy/Alex	6.6	116	1	N/A	✓	✓
Alice/Mark	6.4	120	2	Not Diagnosed		✓
Helen/Tom	10.4	119	2	Not Diagnosed	✓	✓
Mary/Steven	8.11	120	3	N/A	✓	✓
Josie/Kate	9.9	149	4	Not Diagnosed	✓	✓
Christine/Jack	6.1	144	5	N/A	✓	
Sharon/Robert	9.0	128	3	N/A		✓
Sue/Aaron	8.2	124	3	Diagnosed	✓	✓
Annie/Peter	8.1	134	3	Diagnosed	✓	✓
Tina/Natalie	7.10	120	2	Not Diagnosed		✓
Andrea/Skye	6.9	114	2	Not Diagnosed	✓	✓

¹Real names have not been used.

²Child’s age during WISC-IV assessment.

³Note: There are 5 possible WISC-IV scores above 120IQ: 4 subtest scores and a FSIQ score.

⁴Not Diagnosed = participants who described symptoms indicating depression, and who did not seek help and were not formally diagnosed.

⁵Internalizing or externalizing in borderline or clinical range on the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) obtained during earlier study and within 18 months of WISC-IV assessment.

Adverse formative social contexts for participants with borderline or clinical internalizing or externalizing CBCL scores.

Results

The major common theme that emerged was that gifted children differed from the norm to the degree that they were misunderstood in a variety of contexts, including by their own mothers. The causes of misunderstandings varied with contexts, and expectations within specific contexts. Three major formative contexts stood out: home, preschool, and school. The issues within these can be seen in Figure 1 below.

Two themes emerged for misunderstandings at home. General misunderstandings were attributed to the mother’s problems, a theme we named *precursors to social problems*, with further sub-themes of *poor relationship with own mother*, *relationship breakdown*, *maternal depression*, *mother’s own social problems*, *difficulty in relating to own child*, and *misinterpretation of children’s social problems*. The second major theme was attributed to the child’s differentness due to giftedness. The sub-themes were *misunderstanding sensitivities*, *precocious development*, and *misunderstanding the difficult child*.

Two themes also emerged under the *misunderstandings by peers* theme, a common theme for both the preschool and school contexts. The first was the difference in the gifted child in comparison with others, with the sub-themes *strong sense of justice* and *atypical gender behaviour patterns*. The second sub-theme was the outcome of the difference seen in their rejection by same-aged peers with the sub-themes of *bullying*, *social problems for boys who are not sporty*, and *non-conformist within the peer group*.

Misunderstandings at school included the mismatch between the child’s abilities and the educational provisions received under the heading of *educational dissonance*, and the impact of lack of acknowledgement and of being ignored as a result of the child’s superior knowledge under the sub-theme *invalidation or neglect related to giftedness*. These themes and sub-themes are explored below, however, readers should exercise caution in generalising these findings due to the low number of participants.

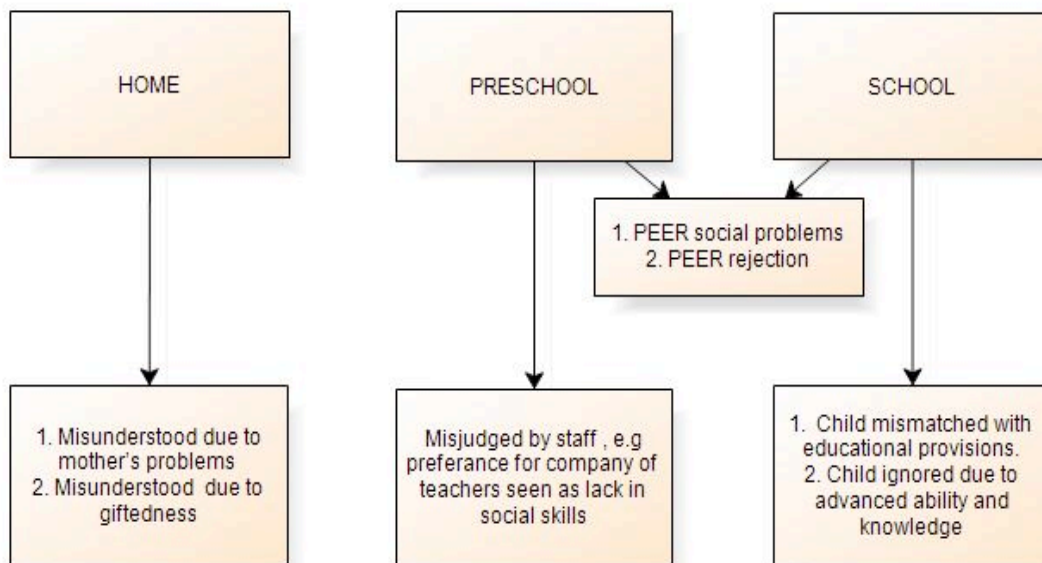


Figure 1. Primary social contexts in being gifted and misunderstood model

Formative social contexts

Our quest to explore unique issues in raising gifted children led us to gather information about pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding, availability of family or other support, type of childcare for mothers returning to work from maternity leave, preschool, and experiences during the first few years as mothers. There was a focus on any stressors that may have impacted on the developing child during these times, particularly as maternal depression may have been present, but not diagnosed. Data available from the earlier study showed that only two of the participating mothers had reported diagnosed postnatal depression. Other information, such as the children’s current social and emotional adjustment and educational issues, was gleaned from the narratives, with additional data available from the Child Behavior Checklists (CBCL) (Achenbach & Rescorla, 2001) collected during the first part of the study and documented in separate papers (Wellisch, Brown, Taylor, Knight, & Berresford, 2011b; Wellisch, et al., 2011a). As was the case for the IQ data, the CBCL checklists had to be completed within 18 months of the study.

An additive pattern of adverse primary social contexts emerged from the data with the exception of one participant (Table 1). These

social contexts were seen as formative due to their early impact on children’s social development, as well as due to the influential nature of relationships with mothers and peers, and with teachers who provided the educational experiences. We argue that each of these social contexts is instrumental in the establishment of either good or adverse social adjustment for gifted children. Additionally, we posit that they are additive, and may possibly also have a multiplier effect, with each additional context contributing to the chronicity of problems as evidenced by internalising, externalising, and poor socio-emotional adjustment.

Child participants in this sample whose mothers had experienced depression were marginally less likely to be misunderstood at home, however, they were much more prone to being misunderstood by peers, and much more likely to be adversely affected in the school setting (see Figure 2).

While we wanted to focus on unique issues that may arise in raising gifted children, the theme of children being misunderstood presented itself in the narratives of the mothers in reference to a variety of social contexts. In some children’s lives there were socio-emotional problem indicators from the very beginning.

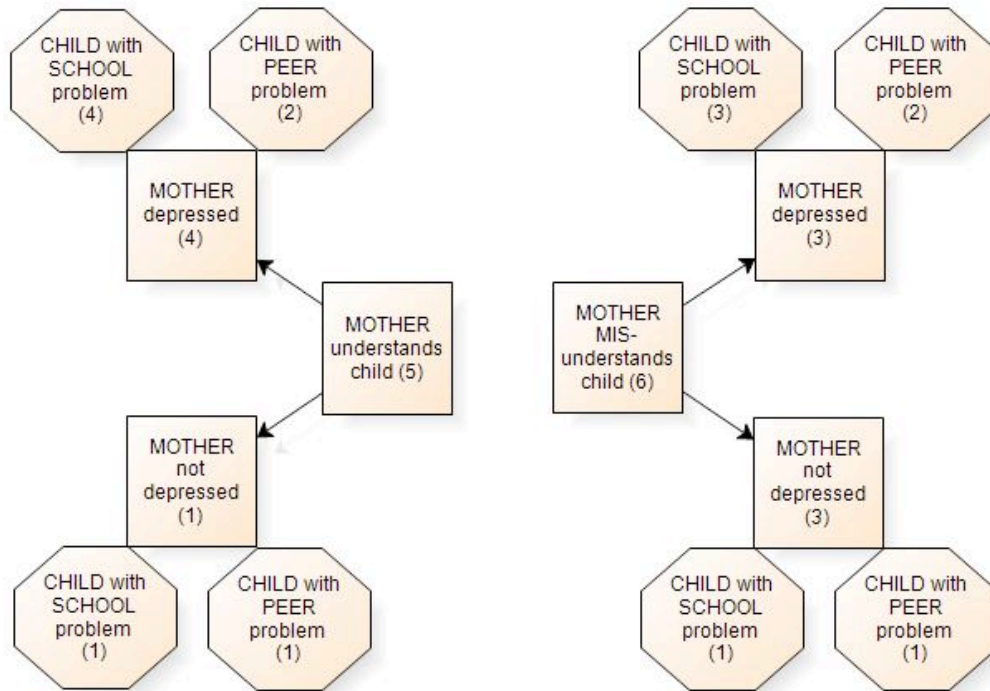


Figure 2. Misunderstood at Home - Role of Maternal Depression in Gifted Children's Problems with Peers and at School. NOTE: The numbers in each cell represent total number of child or mother participants in the labelled cell-situations as extracted from mothers' narratives.

Precursors to social problems

Mother's poor relationship with own mother
 It has been found that attachment patterns are highly transferable from mother to child (Fonagy, et al., 1991), and this was reflected in one mother's story:

I'm an only child and I have NOT a very close relationship with my mother, and I didn't have any experience of children and what they needed. I was giving, I thought I was giving, I WAS giving the best that I could give...But it was not what anyone needed. No-one needed... anything that was happening. (Helen, mother of Tom, 10.4 years)

Relationship breakdown

This same mother went through a relationship breakdown shortly after her child was born, had financial problems, and little or no support. Her child attended long days at childcare from the age of 8 months:

... So by...about 8 months...his father and I had separated, and we were still trying to run a business together. Which was amicable...except, because my focus

was off the business...divided with being a mum and trying to be creative and trying to run a business, nothing was working successfully. So, that was a very hard time. And in the end, you know...(child's) father left the business and I was running the business on my own, and it was very, very stressful. And lonely, long and lonely. That was a really awful time. (Helen, mother of Tom, 10.4 years)

Undiagnosed maternal depression

Seven mothers talked about a period with depression, although only two reported a diagnosed depression prior to the interview. Helen, for example, described symptoms of fatigue, feelings of worthlessness, and inappropriate guilt, consistent with the DSM-IV-TR criteria, and Andrea talked about long-term symptoms of depressed mood after the birth of her daughter:

...don't know maybe because I was expecting to be euphoric but I wasn't and...I think I probably had post natal depression but I didn't get...assessed or anything, but it took me a long time to...to bond with

*her...I reckon...probably a few years.
(Andrea, mother of Skye, 6.9 years)*

Five mothers did not report any depression. These mothers actively enjoyed parenthood:

*...the first thing that stands out is that I had a really good pregnancy...very easy birth...I remember thinking maybe I'm meant to do this... when he was growing up as a toddler I remember it was very, very good, I remember him being, just, beautiful baby, 'cause he was very gentle and interested in everything and didn't have tantrums, you know, you hear about the supermarket tantrums, I was all ready for them, that didn't happen.
(Sharon, mother of Robert, 9.0)*

Mother's own social problems

Two mothers empathised with their children's social problems, as they themselves either used to have, or continued to have, similar problems:

...and I've never really been very good at having a lot of friends for him to come over and him have a broad social network...because my nature is to have very close friends and he's had that world, too, so there's only one or two people that he's constantly played with. (Helen, mother of Tom, 10.4 years)

For seven other mothers, however, making friends was effortless and came naturally.

My friends seem to be all over the place... I've got four female friends from before I had children and then I have a few...probably four or five again female friends...that I've picked up post children. (Mary, mother of Steven, 8.11 years)

Difficulty in relating to own child

Helen, who appeared to have been depressed, and had admitted that making friends did not come to her easily, was candid about her difficulty in relating to her son and her inability to provide a nurturing social environment:

Having the space to want to play with him and sit down and be open enough to sit...to play...I didn't have that time. So there was guilt associated with that. And then also being aware that, I was watching other kids have these sleep-overs

and go places and I...didn't have the strength to make that happen.

Misinterpretation of children's social problems

Helen and Sue both had social problems and their children had difficulty with peer relationships. They both misinterpreted social problems as a sign of their children's fierce independence:

He quite enjoys independence, he's very, he is an independent person from the day he was born, he was an independent soul (laughs). What we have to try and do is teach him group and social skills, group skills, social skills ... that's actually what's difficult, because that's not where I fall naturally, either ... I don't fall naturally...into the social, it's something I had to learn. (Sue, mother of Aaron, 8.2 years)

To sum up, precursors to some children's problems in this sample included mothers' own problems with their family of origin, relationship breakdown, maternal depression, mothers' own social issues, and mothers' problems relating to their own children.

Misunderstanding child at home

Although some mothers understood their children instinctively, others either misunderstood their precocious development, interpreting gifted characteristics as deliberate difficult behaviours, or over- or under-estimated their intellectual ability, including one mother who expected her child to have a learning disability, but found out instead that he was gifted. The following misunderstandings arose.

Misunderstanding sensitivities

With Helen's beginning difficulties – an only child with a poor relationship with her own mother, a relationship breakdown with her son's father, and the consequent financial difficulties, and loneliness – it was not surprising that she misunderstood his hypersensitivity, a characteristic frequently reported in relation to gifted children, as evidence of his difficult behaviour, something she reflected on later when she found out he was gifted:

...he's so picky, he's so fussy, and I recently have read...since we had him tested and then I went and had a look at the web for gifted children - hypersensitivity was one of the things that I noted and it's so true...he'll eat chicken if it's a particular way...I can only put it down to texture. But I didn't know

that. So he's been this fussy eater...all his life, and I thought it was his way of controlling, cause he's got two homes...but actually it's not, he doesn't like the sea because he doesn't like sand. So he'll kick up a big fuss about going to the beach, whereas I think, I've scheduled in some time out so we can have this time together, and he won't want to do it. So I've misinterpreted, all this time where he's coming from. I think.

Misunderstanding due to precocious development

Other mothers also misunderstood their children's advanced developmental needs, expecting age-appropriate behaviours:

I didn't understand it, like she didn't always act like a baby should act what they say in the books, so I misjudged her, like sleeping, so she stopped sleeping through the day when she was like not even three, and I sort of tried to force her to sleep when she didn't need it, but I thought she needed it cause that's what babies, good little children need. (Josie, mother of Kate, 9.9 years)

...And reinterpreting the child once giftedness was confirmed. ...but then after I realised what she is, then it was fine, cause then sort of your whole mind change (sic)...when we found that she is more advanced...or gifted. (Josie, mother of Kate, 9.9 years)

Misunderstanding the difficult child

One mother found one of her children a challenge compared to her other two, and had not contemplated that he may be gifted. She only had him tested because the school suggested it:

Ummm, to be very honest, we were very surprised, we didn't suspect he had any sort of particular talent or gifts or anything...so we were absolutely gob-smacked when we got the results back...he certainly hadn't shown any signs of being exceptional in any way and you think, oh, maybe we should be approaching his behaviours in a different...he was always the one to push the limits and push the boundaries and question things. So I

suppose when you look back, a lot of the behaviours of gifted children, you can see some of them mirrored in what he did, but at the time we just thought he was a naughty little boy. (Christine, mother of Jack, 6.1 years)

First social context outside home: Misunderstood by peers

The transition from home to the first independent social context can be a testing time, especially if a child is different from the norm, as the first signs of social problems may now be identified. The preschool or the child care centre is often the first setting where the child socialises without the presence and close support of a parent.

Strong sense of justice

Well, I've said to my husband that my kids have always been very happy and self-confident until they went to preschool (laughs) and then it all goes downhill...he still remembers when...the little boy that he THOUGHT was his friend was pretending to be an alligator and he pretended a bit too much and actually bit (child) on the arm and, and it went through and I understand, they were both 3, right, but the one 3 year old wasn't at the same level as the other 3 year old... how could he do that to me, he was my friend, he's not supposed to bite me... (Annie, mother of Peter, 8.1 years)

Atypical gender behaviour patterns

Five of the eleven mothers spoke about their children being different in terms of what is typically expected of children of their particular gender at a particular age. Atypical gender behavior was evident as early as at preschool. These differences had an impact on social acceptance.

Misunderstood and rejected by peers

Being misunderstood was traumatic, as gifted children did not understand the reason they were not being understood:

...she keeps telling me she feels different all the time to the other children, they don't understand her, things she wants to do, games she wants to play. (Andrea, mother of Skye, 6.9 years)

Bullying

Bullying goes on in all schools and preschools, and involves an imbalance of power that can be expressed directly through verbal or physical attacks or indirectly such as excluding someone (Rigby, 2003). Mothers reported that bullying was frequently experienced by their children as peer rejection, starting before school for three children, and for two of these children it continued at school:

...he's a soft, gentle boy, he saw the louder boys at preschool, he called them scary boys, he didn't want to have a bar of them, and they'd just say something like, you aren't allowed to play in the sandpit and he'd go away and he would almost hide from them. (Sharon, mother of Robert, 9.0 years)

There were three other Kindy girls (in composite class) but they were all nearly a year older than her...I don't know whether I would call it bullying, but they were manipulating her the whole time and making her life hell. She'd cry all the time in the morning and they'd laugh at her while she was crying... she would burst into tears at things that would happen in class and they would continually laugh at her...by the end of the year she was just a nervous wreck...came out covered in eczema... (Andrea, mother of Skye, 6.9 years)

Social problems for boys who were not sporty
Five boys in the sample were not sporty. A lack of interest or ability in sport, particularly team sport, appeared to be an atypical social indicator for their peers:

He didn't get the birthday invitations. He used to say to me he would just walk around the school and he'd go to the library and he'd do things...you know (pause). There were a couple of people that I knew around here whose kids I knew and we tried to make, let them socialise, we tried to ease him into it, but that wasn't successful, though, [child] is not very sporty...And all the other boys are. So it was only I think when he got to about year 2 he made some friends and one of them was a girl and the other boys were sort of a bit more theatrical and sensitive that he started to get a bit of a foot in with people. But he's never had lots and

lots of friends. Never. (Helen, mother of Tom, 10.4 years)

Non-conformist within the peer group

Whereas Jack and Tom preferred a few close friends, Robert, Natalie and Skye were 'floaters', moving between friendship groups. Gifted children can resist peer pressure in preference to their own chosen activities and ideas, and this can have negative social consequences:

They've got to the stage where they are very much into cliques, and because she doesn't want to play with just one person, she's always been... a floater, it makes it very difficult for her...one of them would start a club and you can't be in my club unless you do this and she's not prepared to do whatever, and there's a couple of children that are very bossy and dominant and she just hates all that. (Andrea, mother of Skye, 6.9 years)

Impact of 'being different'

Robert, 9.0 years, started to experience serious anxiety, exhibited obsessive compulsive behaviours (OCD), and had panic attacks, including fainting, in Year 1. There was a marked improvement following counselling and cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) intervention. His mother was asked whether she had any theories about the reason for the problems:

I'm feeling that he it wasn't his happiest year, I think that he was starting to stand out, maybe he was being one of the ones that can do more of the work or...I don't know what it was, cause he's actually quite a popular kid at school...I feel during some of that year he was observing and working out social norms, making sense of the social world, not sure of where he fitted in or how well he was liked by the class as a whole. (Sharon, mother of Robert, 9.0 years)

Socially well-adjusted gifted children

Children without reported social problems ranged in their social needs. As we saw, Jack needed only a few close friends, whereas Natalie was more gregarious, according to her mother:

I'm an introvert and so is my husband, but [Natalie]'s made us make a lot of friends at parks, and the neighbours. She came here and she rounded up the whole

neighbourhood...a very people person. Needs a lot of people around her to get her energy. (Tina, mother of Natalie, 7.10 years)

Educational needs misunderstood at school

Educational dissonance

Nine of the eleven participating mothers related instances of their child's giftedness being neglected or misunderstood at school.

She'd learnt whole word recognition, then she went to Kindy, they started doing phonetics, and she stopped, even the words she knew she started not even attempt them cause ...she was getting into trouble all the time for not sounding out words...so by the end of the Kindergarten she is actually reading at a lower level than before she started. (Andrea, mother of Skye, 6.9 years)

No educational problems

Christine's and Nancy's interviews were the exceptions, as they did not mention the lack of appropriate educational provisions as had other mothers. In fact, it was the school that had alerted Christine to her child's giftedness, had suggested that she get him tested, and advised her to let the school accelerate him. Only one other mother, Alice, was also alerted to her son Mark's giftedness by the school. Soon after, however, she was told that the school was unable to provide any support, so she had to seek out intellectual challenges for him outside school. Eight other mothers also either had to cater for their children's needs outside school, or had to advocate tirelessly on their behalf. Some mothers had to transfer their children to other schools where they were more likely to be acknowledged and supported in their educational needs in order to avert the escalation of problems.

Nancy, who did not mention school experiences, seemed oblivious to her child's intellectual ability. Her interview had been brief and had lacked rich content, as she chose not to elaborate, however, she did talk about his frequent feelings of frustration, a characteristic he shared with four other child participants. In Alex's case it related to his homework:

He gets frustrated quite quickly, I think he gets frustrated with himself a lot when he can't work things out...doing the homework he gets really frustrated if he just doesn't

get it. (Nancy, mother of Alex, 6.6 years)

The mismatch of advanced ability with the lack of challenging educational opportunity and indifferent interactions with teachers at school had consequences on children's self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Invalidation or educational neglect related to giftedness

Mothers talked about their children losing interest in school due to being ignored in the classroom:

... even in year 1 [child] would come home... "the teacher never let me answer any questions today, I had my hand up all the time"...I asked (the teacher)...and she said ... "first of all he always knows the answer, I need to give the other children the chance, and he puts in so much detail that the other kids aren't interested". But that's completely invalidating for the child so he'll come home just going "ughhh", you know, "they don't care, they don't listen to me". (Annie, mother of Peter, 8.1 years)

[at school] he read under the table for a whole year. (Mary, mother of Steven, 8.11 years)

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that as a group gifted children may indeed be at risk of being misunderstood by others including their own mothers. This was especially the case where mothers reported personal problems. Mothers' depression and/or social problems had an adverse impact on four of the seven children's socio-emotional adjustment, with CBCL showing borderline or clinical levels of internalising and in the case of one child, also externalising (Table 1). This finding is consistent with other studies in relation to maternal depression and later depression and other problems found in their children (Johnson & Flake, 2007). However, mothers' problems were not the only factors that contributed to children's serious socio-emotional issues. Serial experiences of being misunderstood in a variety of contexts appeared to have an additive effect, and perhaps even a multiplier effect, as mentioned earlier. Each additional context of being misunderstood appears to have further inflated problems, resulting in borderline or clinical internalising and poor socio-emotional adjustment in five of the child participants.

Elements of being gifted and misunderstood

Misunderstanding child at home

Maternal depression as reported in interviews and questionnaires did seem to affect children's behaviour and socio-emotional adjustment outside the home in all cases, with the exception of Nancy's son, as is consistent with previous findings (Johnson & Flake, 2007). Two mothers (Sue and Annie) had been diagnosed and had received medication for depression. During interviews other mothers also described symptoms of depression, and although they were not diagnosed, some mothers described major depressive episodes, including problems with bonding for up to "a few years" (Andrea), or feeling unhappy for "2 years" (Helen). Maternal social problems also appear to have transferred to their children who also experienced frequent problematic social interactions. This finding is consistent with Bowlby's (1969) theory that children construct internal working models or cognitive maps based on their experience with attachment figures. Internal working models are then used to make predictions about self and others and create expectations of responses from others. We suggest that Swann's (1990) circular self-verification appears to have applied in the case of child participants with social problems, through their negative interpretations of interactions and consequent expectations of unfriendly responses.

Precociousness or the unusual behaviour of a gifted child such as the sensitivities of Tom, the early cessation of Kate's daytime naps, and the demanding and difficult behaviour of Jack, appeared to confuse some mothers. Most mothers worked hard to understand their children by reading about gifted children or talking with other mothers, and managed to repair the misunderstandings once they understood their child (often only after IQ assessments). However, for some children, their mothers' understanding of their different-ness came too late. For example, Helen was asked what she would have done differently, knowing what she knows now, and responded, "I get to do [it] with baby number two...it's little things, it's really little things. Like, I bought him a... wading pool. So he sits outside and plays in the pool." Helen had also decided to find an alternative solution to day care when she was working. Morawska and Sanders (2009) note that while gifted children do not necessarily experience more problems than other children, parenting gifted children does present additional parenting challenges compared to parenting a typically developing child, including dealing with their children's stress as a result of their impatience with tasks, and their frustration caused by not being understood by others.

Peer misunderstandings in the preschool and school environments

Bullying and rejection by peers at preschool or school are serious socio-emotional traumas with long term effects. In cases where these issues were tackled successfully, they required enduring advocacy, teacher intervention, or failing these, removal from the toxic environment.

Lack of recognition of ability, and mismatch between ability and education

Educational problems encountered at school due to inadequate teacher understanding may well have contributed to the chronicity of some gifted children's peer problems. A more positive attitude of teachers, for example, through public recognition of ability as well as appropriate educational provisions, may well have prevented or changed negative participant and peer behaviours and perceptions. Difficulty in recognising gifted students even in the case of experienced teachers, has long been seen as a problem for gifted children due to lack of teacher training (Speirs Neumeister, Adams, Pierce, Cassady, & Dixon, 2007). However, teacher training in giftedness has been found to increase responsive and appropriate educational provisions (Bangel, Moon, & Capobianco, 2010). The dissonance between children's abilities and lack of responsive, supportive educational challenges or recognition proved to be the final tipping point for four of these children. In the earlier study, five of the participating children were scored in the borderline or clinical internalising range, with one child also scored in the borderline or clinical range for externalising problems. Three of their mothers expressed regret that they had not acted sooner, or had not been more determined in their advocacy. An additional mother with such regrets was Josie, whose child Kate did not have internalising or externalising problems, but was one of two children classified in the earlier study as insecurely attached. Four of these five children had experienced being misunderstood in four social contexts (see Table 2).

Prevention

As Figure 2 demonstrates, gifted children were misunderstood at home, however, depression reported by seven mothers appeared to be the most influential factor in their children's later problems with peers and at school. Early diagnosis and treatment of maternal depression is an important strategy in attempting to ensure good child adjustment. For example, treatment of mothers with medication has shown positive effects on child psychopathology (Weissman, et al., 2006).

Robert's mother attributed her child's brush with anxiety disorder and OCD to his realisation that he was different. This difference showed itself in his sensitive nature in comparison with other boys, his pursuit of creative activities rather than wanting to participate in sport, his ability to learn quickly and do better than his peers, and so on. It is argued that, taken together, Robert's sensitivities and insightful thinking style are gifted characteristics (Glenison, 2003) and these characteristics, his realisation that he was different, and his reactions are typical of many gifted children. Robert's problems were successfully addressed through CBT and relaxation therapy, and he did not have enduring borderline or clinical symptoms, despite quite severe earlier problems. Prompt intervention appears to have been helpful for him in preventing chronic internalising problems. Counselling the gifted in order to address their feelings of being different is also suggested by Freeman (2008), who encourages providing opportunities for children to spend time with and befriend similar others.

Mary, Josie and Sue had their children assessed, but their advocacy had little impact on the school system. Mary and Josie took steps to have their children transferred to schools where their children's abilities were recognised and better addressed. However, Sue compromised, and moved Aaron to a school that catered for his brother's additional needs, and the bullying problem experienced in previous school has continued for him. It therefore appears that parental actions in prompt screening, assessment, counselling, as well as educational advocacy and intervention are important elements in preventing the chronicity of socio-emotional problems. Compulsory teacher training in gifted education would have also clearly helped prevent many of the problems experienced by the participants in this study, and possibly also other gifted children within the school system.

Limitation of study

Participants were essentially drawn from a clinical population, as they had all been recruited after children had seen a psychologist for assessment. A different population, for example children who have not been previously assessed, may have produced a different outcome, and such research is therefore needed.

The low number of participants does limit the interpretation of the findings, and points to the need for additional in-depth studies of gifted children's socio-emotional adjustment. As fathers were not interviewed, it would be

advantageous to also include fathers' perception and the level of their influence on the adjustment of gifted children.

Conclusion

The aim of the study was to examine any effect of maternal depression and attachment problems on gifted children's socio-emotional adjustment. The results for this sample indicate that mothers' depression and poor social adjustment were significant factors in these outcomes, as was children's giftedness. However, these factors did not individually cause serious adjustment problems, and children who experienced isolated contexts of being misunderstood did not have adverse outcomes. There appeared to be an additive pattern of being misunderstood at home, rejected and bullied by peers of a different maturity and ability, and ongoing educational indifference and neglect that together contributed to some children's chronic internalising and externalising problems.

The contribution of this study is to highlight that gifted children may be regularly misunderstood in a variety of primary social contexts; the consequences of being misunderstood, including anxiety, depression, and feeling undervalued; and the identification of successful preventative interventions, including therapy, relaxation, educational advocacy, and transfer to schools more sympathetic to the provision of an appropriate education for gifted children. Although care should be taken in generalising this study as already mentioned, successful actions taken by some participating mothers demonstrate that helpful strategies can prevent and resolve gifted children's problems.

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Contact details

Mimi Wellisch and Dr Jac Brown
Psychology Department
Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia.
Email: mimiwellisch@bigpond.com.

Biographical details

Mimi Wellisch has a Master in Early Childhood majoring in gifted children, and is a registered psychologist. Mimi is the author of a number of books and numerous articles, has held a number of executive committee positions on the NSW Association for Gifted and Talented Children, and is director of a gifted consultancy. Mimi is

currently concluding PhD studies on the topic of attachment and giftedness.

Dr Jac Brown is a senior lecturer teaching in the area of clinical psychology at Macquarie University, Australia.

Ros Knight is the director of the Rod Power Psychology Clinic, Macquarie University.