

Parent and Gifted Child Personality Types and School Adjustment

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As I worked with the families of gifted children, I began to notice that of the 16 *MBTI*® (*Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*®) personality types, the children brought to me for help were overwhelmingly P-Perceivers, with a majority of those being F-Feelers. At the same time, their parents, also presumably gifted themselves, appeared to represent a more random sample of personality type preferences. It wasn't that certain types of parents were more likely to seek help from a professional, but perhaps certain profiles in gifted children raised concern among parents more often than other profiles did. Why?

This paper presents summary conclusions of more than 300 families' personalities whose members were typed on the four dichotomous factors of the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® or *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children*®. Major findings include: P-Perceiver gifted children are less likely than J-Judging to children to complete or turn in assignments. TP children (Thinker/Perceiver) often lose respect for and their cooperation decreases for those who give them foolish assignments. FP children (Feeler/Perceiver) are emotionally hurt when those in authority—teachers and parents—don't understand how inappropriate simplistic assignments are. These children are more likely to act out or become depressed.

Background

Personality typing has been utilized for years in various personal and career counseling situations because it helps people to understand their own motivations and needs compared to those of others with whom they live and work. An excellent paper by Piirto (1998) summarizes personality type studies of gifted children and teachers. She points out that various authors have discovered and interpreted school behavior differences that are correlated with personality type preferences (e.g., Jones and Sherman (1979); Murphy, 1992; Myers and McCaulley, 1985; Myers and Myers, 1980), as well as studies of teacher types and interests (Betskouski and Hoffman, 1981; Piirto, 1998). For example, we know that the majority classroom teacher type preference is ESFJ (Betskouski and Hoffman (1981), while that of talented students is ENFP with a higher than the population average being introverted among this group (Piirto, 1998).

Sak (2004) notes that although gifted adolescents demonstrate all personality types as measured by the MBTI, they tend to prefer certain types more than general high school students do. Researchers (Delbridge-Parker & Robinson, 1989; Gallagher, 1990; Hoehn & Bireley, 1988) reported that about 50% or more of the gifted population is introverted compared to the general population, whose preference for introversion is 25%.

The Meanings of the Letters

Basically, the sixteen type preferences revolve around four dichotomous factors of E/I (extroverted/introverted), S/N (sensing/intuition), F/T (feeling/thinking), and J/P (judging/perceiving). Examinees take a written assessment where they respond to items about which of two scenarios they would prefer. The *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® is for adults and the *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children*® is for school-aged youngsters. The results

are presented on a continuum for each dichotomy where it is possible to have a strong to slight preference for one quality or another.

Before we go any further with this discussion, it will help readers to have a little background on what each part of the personality type means. Here briefly is an informal summary of what each letter means:

Table 1

Preference	Characteristics	Additional Characteristics
E-Extroversion	Energized by being with people, interacting with others.	Does not mean talkative; an E can be quiet, even shy.
I-Introversion	Gains energy by being alone; down time generally means “alone time.”	Introverts can be talkative and good in groups, but they need “alone time” to recharge.
S-Sensing	Gather information through their five senses; detail-oriented; don’t like theories as much as facts.	Like lists, clear directions, time tables. Often very literal, miss nuance, have difficulty generalizing.
N-Intuition	Use intuition and hunches; analytical and theoretical; see the “big picture” and not as interested in the details.	Like to create their own plan after they understand a situation; bored by routine; comfortable with some uncertainty.
F-Feeling	Feelings matter, are important; like win-win solutions; generous with praise and affirmations.	Sometimes make less than ideal choices in order to please everyone; often hurt when not appreciated; can be quite sensitive to others.
T-Thinking	Practical, direct, expedient. Logic rather than emotion.	Other people’s feelings may be an afterthought; may seem insensitive.
J-Judging	Orderly, organized, predictable.	Feel best when work is done, things are as they should be.
P-Perceiving	Flexible, open-ended, somewhat spontaneous.	Fairly independent, make decisions based on mood, timing, what feels right to them.

Rationale for the Study

As a private consultant and specialist in high intelligence, with a primary interest in gifted children, I read in my early studies of gifted children that altruism and empathy were more prevalent and more developed in highly intelligent children. Many researchers wrote that some children, especially intellectually gifted children and adolescents, manifest sensitivity and concern for others quite early in their lives as compared to non-gifted peers.

Dabrowski suggests that a propensity for advanced moral development comes from a base of particular response patterns within the highly intelligent (1964). A significant aspect of my personal experience, i.e., rearing three highly gifted sons who did not show high degrees of empathy or sympathy toward global issues, led me to consider the possibility that some gifted children and adults are more predisposed to overt “caring” behaviors than others who are equally

intelligent. Perhaps high intellectual level is important, but other personal characteristics are necessary for a caring, altruistic, or empathic approach to the needs of others.

Additional experiences have contributed to my interest in the topic of personality types among the gifted. During my initial studies of high intelligence, I learned that many people in the field assumed that high intelligence and altruism go hand in hand, that it is part of the moral sensitivity that the gifted share (Dabrowski, 1964; Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Lind, 2000; Lovecky, 1997; Piechowski, 2006; Renzulli, 2002; Silverman, 1993; Terman, 1925; Webb, Meckstroth, & Tolan, 1982). O'Leary (2005) summarizes this viewpoint as follows:

Silverman (1993) suggests “the cognitive complexity and certain personality traits of the gifted create unique experiences and awareness that separate them from others. A central feature of the gifted experience is their moral sensitivity, which is essential to the welfare of the entire society.”

O'Leary concludes, “Moral reasoning as an indicator of giftedness and the advanced moral reasoning noted by researchers in the field of gifted education (Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1942; Kohlberg, 1984; Silverman, 1993a; Southern, 1993) suggest that those students who demonstrate advanced levels need a curriculum and counseling which also address this area of development. Gifted programs and those working with gifted students must be aware of the affective traits and needs associated with these children and be aware of the necessity for counseling” (2005, p. 52).

I became concerned that some parents and teachers might actually conclude that advanced moral reasoning as described in some of the gifted literature was an essential concurrent factor within those people who were identified as gifted. The most commonly mentioned personality type found among the gifted was INFP. My own subject pool was self-selected by parents, and I began to suspect that there is probably something about the INFP gifted students that leads parents to take their children to specialists like me. We also know that just as certain personality type preferences are drawn to specific careers, different summer and academic programs for the gifted simply attract some types more than others and would lead to over-concentrations of these types in some studies.

Beginning in the year 2000, I started to administer *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® to all parent clients and *Murphy-Meisgeier Type Indicator for Children*® to all children six and older. I continued my practice of having parents complete my own form called *Developmental Milestones*, a form which included their description of early milestones, reasons they were seeking my help, how others were reacting to their child, and their goals for their child.

Results and Interpretation

Patterns slowly emerged and by the year 2007 I had data from more than 300 families with gifted children. My public speaking started to include what I was learning from personality typing, which then led to a different pattern of people seeking my help. By 2004, the overwhelming majority of children brought to me for evaluation were P-perceiving: 92%. P-Perceiving children are less likely to finish their work or stay on task when they find the work to be tedious or uninteresting than are J-Judging students. To me, this suggested that within the student population, there were many gifted children whose personalities allowed them to

cooperate in school even when it contributed to their own underachievement. This meant that parents and teachers were pleased with their behavior and cooperation and such children were seldom brought to specialists for help or guidance or further evaluation because they were “doing fine” in school. After I started speaking and writing about how P-perceiving behavior in gifted children was worrisome to many parents and teachers, and that there are probably many cooperative but under-identified gifted students out there not having their needs met, more smart children who are cooperative in school started finding their ways to my doorstep for evaluation. Now I see a slightly higher percentage of J-Judgers than I used to see.

Many parents wonder if their children’s type preference can change over time. It is generally believed that the S/N types are inborn and highly resistant to change (Piirto, 1998), but the other three dichotomies can change with effort, experience, or current conditions. This would be especially true in children, which is why some people think there is no point in assessing children for type. I find that knowing a child’s current type preference makes it easier to help the child make changes or helps teachers and parents know what approaches are likely to be most effective with children. If their preferences change later, fine; but knowing their current values and viewpoints helps us interpret and deal with current issues now.

Table 2 shows some ways the different preferences contribute to fairly predictable attitudes and behaviors of gifted students, and the reactions of adults in their lives. All of this is especially true for those who are in same-aged, mixed ability classrooms where their academic and intellectual peer relationship needs are not being met.

Parent personality type has a great deal to do with gifted child adjustment regardless of the child’s type preference. For example, a laid-back, idealistic INFP who has a similarly typed parent is much less likely to end up feeling like a failure than the child whose parent is an SJ type. Sensors are generally rule-and-procedure followers. They can’t easily relate to someone who chooses not to do something because it isn’t “right” for him. A Sensor parent is uncomfortable with a child who ignores what is normal and accepted behavior, and for such a parent, school performance is the first measure of self worth. FP children seem to wear their hearts on their sleeves, and a parent whose type ends in TJ might see the FP child as weak, stubborn or irrational. If you tell the parents of an uncooperative, unhappy, underperforming, disorganized gifted child that their child has “executive function” disorder, as an example, they find it much easier to deal with a labeled learning disability—than with a child who simply doesn’t do what she is supposed to do. In reality, it is almost always the school setting that brings out the worst in gifted children, and changing the setting can clear up the “bad” behaviors.

Why, then, do gifted specialists see so many more P-Perceivers and especially FPs? These are the most likely gifted children to find regular school—classrooms that group students by age rather than readiness to learn or intellectual ability—boring, painful, and a waste of time. I ask parents if they’ve ever used this statement with their child: “In the amount of time you’ve argued with me about this, you could have finished it.” Such a child is almost always a Feeler-Perceiver. A Thinker-Perceiver is more likely to do a shoddy job but at least get it done. FPs, though, need their parents and teachers to understand them, so they need to have the argument. Thinkers simply dismiss the adults who made the foolish requirements and don’t care as much if the adults know why or understand them.

Parents only have so many options available to them when the majority of schools group children by age—not ability—in mixed ability classrooms. When parents know how classrooms are set up and how their own children are likely to react to those circumstances and requirements, they can effectively intervene and give the correct support to their children. If parents know ahead of time how their own children will react to different options and adjustments, an IEP (Individual Education Plan), subject level acceleration, or online learning, for example, then they can select options that might work with their child.

When we know parent and child personality types, the benefits go in both directions. For the child, it is possible to help the less flexible parent types to understand their child better and to help them change the child's environment instead of trying to get the child to conform and comply with an inappropriate school situation. Any parent who suffered during the school years wants to see his or her children do better. For these parents, understanding how the schools are set up and how their type affected their own experience can be a very real relief. And most importantly, when the use of personality typing helps parents and educators to understand better that the behavior of many gifted children in school is a response of their personality type within the specific educational environment, more structural and programming changes to support these children may become available.

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