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Resources & ideas for parents & educators of gifted children

Talent

Center for
Talent
DEVELOPMENT®

DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Helping Kids Cope

Going through childhood and adolescence naturally brings changes and stressors, but gifted children may be subject to additional pressures as a result of adults' high expectations and their own, self-imposed expectations for achievement.

We asked Marina Eovaldi, a licensed clinical psychologist and marriage and family therapist with The Family Institute at Northwestern University (NU) about the unique sources of pressure experienced by gifted children. In the article "Calm Under Pressure – Oxymoron?" she describes the warning signs of "Pressure Overload," and recommends strategies for helping students manage pressure effectively.

Parents and educators are often concerned that challenging programs like those at Center for Talent Development (CTD) can contribute to increased stress. That worry stems from misconceptions – e.g., that students spend all their time studying or that increased levels of academic challenge will cause anxiety. When a balance of study, recreation and enrichment is provided in an environment filled with supportive adults and peers, students can meet challenges easily and readily.

Members of the Family Institute, including Eovaldi, work with our Summer Program staff so they can provide balance and support. In the summer program environment, it's pretty hard to be stressed out about econometrics when you're racing around the grounds of NU playing Capture the Flag. Stephanie Smith, who has worked with CTD for the last three years, describes means summer staff use to provide support during the program.

For gifted children to grow and develop as individuals and in their talent area, they must reach slightly beyond their current grasp. Growth requires both challenge and support. At CTD, we structure programs to provide both challenge and support to our students.

Paula Abeyusuki-Kubilus



cerned that challenging programs like those at Center for Talent Development (CTD) can contribute to increased stress. That worry stems from misconceptions – e.g., that students spend

Calm Under Pressure — Oxymoron?

Pressure...that sense that someone is counting on you to succeed or excel. We've all experienced it at one time or another, and perhaps we've even placed pressure on ourselves. What happens, though, when you're gifted, and it seems that everyone has high expectations all the time? How do gifted students experience pressure, and how can parents help them manage it effectively so that it motivates, rather than debilitates?

To answer these questions, Center for Talent Development talked with Marina Eovaldi, licensed clinical psychologist and licensed marriage and family therapist with The Family Institute at Northwestern University.

What is pressure, and how is it different for gifted students?

Kids of all ages and abilities experience pressure, says Eovaldi, when they sense a gap between possibility and performance in a specific area. That gap, and therefore the sense of pressure, is typically bigger for the gifted student for a number of reasons.

First, gifted students have a heightened sense of their own potential. "In society, we applaud the people with one talent – the Tiger Woods, the Michael Jordans. Gifted kids can see themselves like those people, where the average person doesn't," says Eovaldi.

Additionally, once they see what is possible, whether it is a painting by Van Gogh, a brilliant scientific discovery or a beautifully written piece of prose, it stays with them. Eovaldi believes that gifted students battle an internal dynamic of thinking, 'nothing I do can ever be that good. It always falls



short because I can't get rid of the picture in my mind of perfection."

Well-intentioned parents can also be a source of pressure to gifted students. "For many of the parents I've worked with," says Eovaldi, "their sense is that they have this gift of a child that has unique talents, and their responsibility is to help the child develop these talents. They are unwittingly giving the child this message that it's only when you do terrifically am I happy, am I relaxed. Parents do relax and feel they've done their job if they've put them in touch with the right resources, but, for the child, it seems as though competency is identity. Very frequently, parents don't seem to get that when their children aren't the best, they need help dealing with their feelings.

"Some kids need help learning to read or learn math tables. Gifted kids need help learning that when they look at their possibility for perfection and see where they rank, that gap doesn't necessarily have to produce depression or a feeling of worthlessness."

How do you know when a child is under too much pressure?

Eovaldi says there are physical signs charac-
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WHO SAID THIS?

“You must learn day by day, year by year, to broaden your horizon. The more things you love, the more you are interested in, the more you enjoy, the more you are indignant about, the more you have left when anything happens.”

Answer at <http://www.ctd.northwestern.edu/resources/newslettersolutions>

Calm Under Pressure — Oxymoron?

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teristic of all kids experiencing pressure overload (see box at right). There are, however, differences between the overburdened preschooler and the stressed-out teenager. “The younger they are,” says Eovaldi, “the less aware they are that other people are noticing what they are doing. When they get older, they tend to hide it. Instead of eating too much or too little, for instance, they become bulimic because they learn to hide the symptoms.” She adds, “If you take the area of sensorial input, either you’re depriving yourself or being excessive. You see that in different ways, too. You see older kids cut themselves, and you see younger kids pull their eyelashes out.”

Starting with junior high students, another warning sign is disinterest in school. “They don’t want to go to school because ‘school is boring,’ or ‘the assign-

ments are stupid;” says Eovaldi. “Perhaps they aren’t as good as the kids they’re riding the bus with when they’re in sixth grade and taking the advanced algebra class with high school students. They’re at home writing novels, but they aren’t with a group because they don’t feel connected to the group. They don’t fit in. They don’t know what to say or do. They don’t know who they are if they’re not excelling.”

What are some strategies for managing pressure effectively?

1. Build a multifaceted sense of identity.

Expanding one’s sense of self is important, Eovaldi says, because if a child’s identity is so connected to one particular trait – giftedness, for example – the fear of failure in that area can be a huge source of pressure. “Resiliency develops when you have experienced failure or loss, and then something else makes you feel good,” says Eovaldi.

Two simple steps families can take to help kids build a multifaceted identity:

• Discuss similarities and differences.

“Saying things like, ‘We are the same in this regard, you three children are the same in that regard, or you and dad share this trait,’ can be powerful,” says Eovaldi. “Families who focus on similarities and differences seem to be able to reflect back more than one aspect of a personality.”

• Talk about failure.

Eovaldi recommends learning how to talk to children about what you do when you fail. “Say, ‘You didn’t achieve your goal. How can you put that in perspective? What do you do when inside you’re feeling empty?’ I think the emptiness may happen more often to people who are gifted because they are contrasting the excitement of being the best with what it feels like when they aren’t,” Eovaldi says. “Looking at other people and connecting to their feelings is what people do when they’re feeling down. They read a book, they vicari-

ously connect to a heroine, they watch a movie, they listen to music and that pleases them or relaxes them. It takes their mind off of that emptiness.”

2. Get involved and feel connected to a group.

“We as parents encourage growth, progress and improvement,” says Eovaldi, and this can lead to a detrimental focus on oneself. “The other part of being human is feeling connected to someone else’s goals...spending time being interested in another person and feeling good when you help them feel good.” Again, families can help students establish a connection with others through a few easy actions.

• Require accountability.

“It is important to make children accountable to other people in the family and to learn they are part of a community and need to share responsibilities,” says Eovaldi.

• Do things as a family.

“Decide that there are things the family does as a group regardless of whether everybody is interested or even capable,” Eovaldi says. “Whether it is gardening, cleaning the house or taking a class, establish that you do some things together and no one gets out of it.”

• Encourage team and group activities.

Joining a club, playing in the orchestra or even participating in family dinners can help gifted students achieve balance. “It’s an internal sense that when I’m connected to other people and feel happy with other people and feel part of the group, I don’t have to feel guilty that I’m not moving ahead, trying to compete or grow in every area,” Eovaldi says.

Lastly, Eovaldi recommends participating in some groups specifically for gifted students. “Center for Talent Development programs are wonderful in that you can see yourself relative to a lot of people, not only over here while everyone else is over there,” Eovaldi says. “They also help students see that there is a range in ability and that even if you aren’t the best, you can still enjoy yourself.” ●

Pressure Overload:

Know the Warning Signs

1. Sleeping too much or too little (difficulty getting to sleep or frequent waking)
2. Eating too much or too little
3. Jittery behavior
4. Excessive nail-biting, hair pulling, or other sensory distractions
5. Too much time alone or in front of a computer



Book List

Apter, Terri. (2006). *The Confident Child: Raising Children to Believe in Themselves*. New York, NY. W. W. Norton & Company.

Elkind, David. (2001). *The Hurried Child: Growing Up Too Fast Too Soon*. New York, NY. Perseus Publishing.

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Faber, Adele & Mazlish, Elaine. (1999). *How to Talk So Kids Will Listen & Listen So Kids Will Talk*. New York, NY. Harper Paperbacks.

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Gottman, John. (1997). *The Heart of Parenting: Raising an Emotionally Intelligent Child*. New York, NY. Simon & Schuster.

Greene, Ross. (2010). *The Explosive Child: A New Approach for Understanding and Parenting Easily Frustrated, Chronically Inflexible Children*. New York, NY. Harper Paperbacks.

Guthrie, Elizabeth & Mathews, Kathy. (2002). *The Trouble with Perfect: How Parents Can Avoid the Overachievement Trap and Still Raise Successful Children*. New York, NY. Broadway.

Kranowitz, Carol Stock & Silver, Larry B. (1998). *The Out-of-Sync Child: Recognizing and Coping with Sensory Integration Dysfunction*. New York, NY. Perigee Trade.

Satter, Ellyn. (1987). *How to Get Your Kid to Eat: But Not Too Much*. Boulder, CO. Bull Publishing.

Siegel, Daniel. (2004). *Parenting From the Inside Out*. New York, NY. Tarcher.

Taffel, Ron & Blau, Melinda. (2002). *Parenting by Heart: To Stay Connected to Your Child in a Disconnected World*. New York, NY. DeCapo Press.

Beach Balls & Books:

How Residential Staff Create Balance in Academic Summer Programs

Stephanie Smith is a senior at the University of Michigan, graduating in 2010 with Bachelor of Arts degrees in history and Spanish from the College of Literature, Science, and the Arts. She is also enrolled in the School of Education and will graduate with an endorsement to teach social studies and Spanish. Smith worked as a Residential Teaching Assistant (RTA) with the CTD Summer Program for two years and as a Residential Assistant (RA) for one year before that. RTAs have a dual role as they both assist the instructors for the Equinox Program (students in grades 9 through 12) in the classroom and then, since students in specific Equinox classes live in the same area in a residence hall, live in that section of the residence hall, helping students with their academic work at night as well as providing an engaging residential experience. (RAs, in contrast, work exclusively in the residence halls.)

"I have many wonderful memories from last summer," she says, "but perhaps my favorite was organizing an all-camp event called, *Make Your RTA Laugh*. Students put on skits for a panel of RTAs and got points based on how many of us they could make laugh."

Since individuals like Smith are such a critical component of the Summer Program experience, we asked her the questions to which we thought you would like answers about academic and residential life at CTD's Summer Program.



dents every day. I tried to inform them when activities were happening and encouraged them to participate in big camp activities that would get them away from the residence hall. In the past, my students have done a really great job forming close friendships with

others in our group. I try really hard to create a good environment on the first day so that they feel comfortable with each other. Due to the amount of time spent together both in and out of class, most RTA groups are very close. Also, RTAs will often pair up and do combined group activities that bring different RTA groups in contact with each other. In the past, this has been a very effective way for encouraging students to branch out and enjoy the social experience of the Summer Program.

CTD: What changes do you witness in students over the course of a session?

Smith: The Summer Program provides a really great opportunity for students to be challenged both academically and socially. They have a chance to interact with peers who share their passions and interests, and their mentors are college students who have experienced a great amount of academic success and who truly care about their development both in and out of the classroom. From what I have consistently seen, students walk away from this experience with a better sense of self and greater confidence in their ability to face new challenges with success.

CTD: What do students say about the program? From your perspective, what is the program's overall value?

Smith: Every summer, I hear students say that the program was more fun than they ever thought it would be. They sincerely enjoy the academic challenge as well as the many opportunities to excel outside of the classroom. The Summer Program encourages students to take on challenges and embrace new experiences which lead to growth and greater knowledge of their subject area, themselves and others. More often than not, I see students return summer after summer, rekindling old friendships and forming new ones. The Summer Program provides a safe and supportive environment for students to experience just how fun and exciting learning can be. ●

CTD: What do you most enjoy about summers as an RTA in the Summer Program?

Smith: Working as an RTA is a truly wonderful experience, one that keeps me coming back summer after summer. I get to work with people who are smart, passionate and genuinely care about adolescent development. We all work very hard to create a positive experience for our students. As someone who is pursuing a career in education, working as an RTA has allowed me to gain valuable experience working with gifted and talented youth, which will certainly make me a better, more well-rounded educator in the future.

Just as my students leave after each summer with new experiences and lasting friendships, I too have made truly wonderful friends. The staff members quickly become very close, and I have maintained many of these connections and friendships long after my summer experience has come to a close.

CTD: What does an RTA exactly do?

Smith: The RTA position is unique in that it combines both academic and residential aspects of the Summer Program. As an RTA, I lived in the residence hall with the students, supervised after-class activities and worked with the rest of the residential staff to create a community for Summer Program students. I also worked closely with the academic staff and teachers, acting as a liaison between the academic and residential components of the program and helping to create a productive and enjoyable learning environment for the students under my care.

CTD: Summer Program courses are known to be intense academic

experiences. How do students balance rigorous coursework with the desire and need to have fun?

Smith: The staff members are well-trained on how to help students manage the intensity of both academics and residential life. We spend time talking to students about time management and doing everything in moderation. By communicating regularly, the academic and residential staffs work together to create a balance between academics and extracurricular activities, both of which are important aspects of the Summer Program experience.

Last summer, for example, many of my students would leave studying until the last minute and stay up very late to complete assignments or study for their quizzes and exams. In order to help with this problem, I scheduled daily study sessions with my residential students and facilitated discussion and test preparation. The students actively participated and started to request scheduled group time to work on assignments. I found that everyone benefitted from talking things out as a group, and it gave them a reasonable time and place to study and prepare for the following day.

CTD: How do the social aspects of the program help students manage the pressure of wanting to excel?

Smith: The academic and residential staffs work hard to provide opportunities for students to take part in field trips, extracurricular activities, sports, music and cultural experiences throughout the summer. While academics are certainly important, we encourage students to be well-rounded and to try new things outside of the classroom.

As an RTA, I checked in with my stu-

NEWS, DATES & OTHER IMPORTANT CTD INFORMATION

Have fun this summer! Learn a lot, too.

Three-week **Summer Program** Session 1 starts on June 27, 2010. Session 2 begins on July 18, 2010. One-week sessions for younger students also available. Course descriptions, dates for all Summer Programs and online registration available on the CTD web site. **New This Year!** Students completing PreK through grade 3 can attend Leapfrog in Chicago proper at The Frances Xavier Warde School, and our North Shore site has moved to Solomon Schechter School in Skokie. Apogee (completing grades 4 through 6) and Spectrum (completing grades 7 and 8) have two-week enrichment courses available on the Evanston campus.

Civic Leadership Institute, a three-week service-learning program, is being offered this summer in Baltimore, Chicago and San Francisco. Dates are on the CTD web site.

Other Great CTD Programs
Gifted LearningLinks nine-week enrichment courses for students in grades 3

through 8 start again on June 15, 2010. AP® and honors classes start on the 15th of every month.

Sign up for **Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search (NUMATS)**, an above-grade-level testing program that offers the EXPLORE, ACT and SAT to students in grades 3 through 9 several years ahead of schedule. Online registration available for ACT and SAT until April 27, 2010.

Other State Activities & Events for Gifted Students & Their Families

April 8–10, Cincinnati, Ohio. Midwest Homeschool Convention, Duke Energy Convention Center. More information at www.cincinnatihomeschoolconvention.com

For more information on all these programs and offerings, go to the CTD web site, www.ctd.northwestern.edu, write us an e-mail at ctd@northwestern.edu or call us at 847/491-3782. ●

Center for Talent Development (CTD) at Northwestern University is an accredited learning center and research facility serving precollegiate students. Since its inception in 1982, CTD has assisted more than 500,000 families through Northwestern University's Midwest Academic Talent Search and other programs. Offering a variety of learning alternatives for the gifted student, CTD provides school-year programs such as Saturday Enrichment Program, Gifted LearningLinks online learning, Civic Education Project, Project EXCITE and Project BLAST, as well as summer academic programs (Leapfrog, Spark, Apogee, Spectrum and Equinox), informational conferences for families and educators, scholarships and graduate courses on gifted education. Led by nationally recognized scholar Paula Olszewski-Kubilius, PhD, CTD also conducts and publishes academic research on gifted students, particularly in the areas of accelerated learning and special populations of gifted learners. Center for Talent Development has been accredited as a nonpublic supplementary school by the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) since April 1, 1994. NCA CASI is recognized by the US Department of Education and has more than 100 years of experience in improving educational quality.

