

# Duke Gifted Letter

For Parents of Gifted Children  
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## *The Emotional Edge*

### Listening For What Gifted Children Don't Say

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Gifted children often talk a lot. Their early vocabulary astounds their audiences and attracts amazed praise. The frequent and extraordinary approval reinforces their verbal skills and, by classical conditioning, causes them to feel intelligent while they're talking. It's no wonder they're often so willing to share their knowledge—sometimes nonstop—with parents, classmates, teachers, and almost anyone who is willing to listen. The confident verbosity of gifted children convinces parents that their children will speak up and ask for guidance when they need it, but too often that is not the case. Sometimes gifted children think they know what their parents do and do not want to hear; therefore, these children will tell parents only certain information and avoid telling them other things, such as their fears.

Gifted children may not always understand themselves as much as their advanced vocabulary suggests. Furthermore, when the pressures of adolescence begin, they may hold back secrets that could astound parents. Because characteristic behaviors of adolescence begin much earlier in our society today, parents may not be prepared and may parent differently than they should. They could assume their children are open with them, when in fact dividing walls are already being erected between children and their parents.

As a psychologist who specializes in the social and emotional needs of gifted children, I often have to listen to what gifted children "are not" saying, so I can determine what they are feeling and how to guide them. As parents, you, too, can tune in to what your gifted children's words aren't telling you, if you listen frequently and carefully. The examples below from research and clinical work will sensitize you to what your children aren't saying directly but may be feeling.

#### Insecurity

Television news anchor, Donna Draves\*, remembers telling her mother she wanted to quit dance lessons because they were becoming boring. She revealed to the research interviewer that she had never before shared with anyone that her reason for quitting was actually that she was no longer the best dancer in the class.

#### Loss and boy-girl interactions

Sixth grader, Anna Marie\*, had recently stopped doing her daily assignments. She told her parents she couldn't concentrate since her grandfather had died. Her work habits had degenerated at about that time. In counseling, Anna Marie blamed her grandfather's death for missing work, and she had genuine tears in her eyes as she described her feelings. However, she also repeatedly talked about her first boyfriend and the e-mail he sent indicating that he wasn't ready for a girlfriend yet. She insisted that the boyfriend episode no longer bothered her, but the frequency of her insistence that she no longer felt rejected told the true story.

#### By the Author

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## Parent Pointers

1. Sit and listen to your children, daily if possible. A glass of milk can loosen adolescent tongues. Pre-bedtime chats are effective for children who wish to stay awake as late as possible.
2. Really listen. If parents talk too much, children stop talking.
3. Continued negative criticism paralyzes communication. Reserve evaluations for your most important messages.
4. When children describe their friends' thoughts or feelings, they're often testing their parents response to their own acts or worries. Answer with caution.
5. Small tears tell you there's more to what they've said than what they're sharing.
6. When children don't make eye contact, they may be lying.
7. When children protest that something doesn't bother them, it could be the thing that is hurting them; for example, what others think, lower than typical grades, not winning a competition, or not being selected for a team or activity.
8. When children refer to something or someone frequently, that something or someone is more important than they're letting on.
9. When children say they don't know why they've done something, they really might not know or prefer not to tell you.
10. The word "boring" can be a descriptor of a variety of problems, including lack of challenge, fear of challenge, insecurity that others are doing better, thoughts that their teacher doesn't likes them, or half a dozen other problems.

Children continuously compare themselves to other children in their families, schools, and neighborhoods. They also compare their present feelings about achievements to their past experiences. When they feel more or at least equally successful in their comparisons, they're likely to feel good about themselves and share their feelings with parents. If they fear being less successful, they may or may not report their worries. Instead, they may use defense mechanisms and bend the truth to protect their fragile self-concepts. In order for gifted children to build the resilience required for leading fulfilling adult lives, they will have to learn to cope with some less successful experiences. Because they have often been extraordinarily successful, coping will not always be easy for them. Parents and teachers who listen to what children say, as well as to what they give clues about but avoid saying, are better able to guide and support them as they develop confidence and resilience.

—Sylvia Rimm, PhD

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