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CONTENT LINK



GET GIFTED STUDENTS TALKING

Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

76 Ready-to-Use Group
Discussions About
Identity, Stress, Relationships,
and More **Grades 6–12**

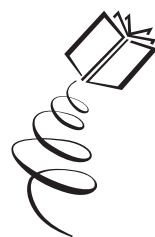


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Jean Sunde Peterson, Ph.D.

free spirit
PUBLISHING®



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DEDICATION

to Reuben



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Immediate and extended family, new and longtime friends, colleagues, and many, many students and clients have taught me about development—and about giftedness. I cannot recall a time when I was not around bright people who were growing and changing. That process continues to fascinate me. I have appreciated and been influenced by these stimulating, highly idiosyncratic individuals.

I am especially indebted to my husband, Reuben, who is highly committed to his own work as an educator, for his unwavering support of my teaching, writing, and other interests. We have grown and changed together. I also want to thank my children, Sonia and Nathan, for being patient with me when they were young, sharing me with my teaching career and waiting for summer, when our lives would change dramatically for three months.

Since the first *Talk with Teens* books appeared in the 1990s, counselors, counselors-in-training, and classroom and gifted education teachers have given me feedback and ideas for future revisions. Their adaptations, struggles with unclear directions, and excitement over successes have all informed me. I have especially appreciated the feedback and suggestions of Terry Bradley, in Boulder, Colorado, over several years and have included three of her many creative ideas in this book—the paired activity in “Self in Perspective,” the stress-ball activity in “Sorting Out Stress,” and the books activity in “Angry!”

I am relieved that the field of gifted education has embraced the idea that paying attention to the social and emotional development of gifted kids is important. I am grateful to pioneers in this area for thinking, exploring, studying, writing, presenting, consulting, organizing, counseling, leading, and publishing helpful resources, among them Nick Colangelo, Barbara Kerr, James Webb, George Betts, Michael Piechowski, Linda Silverman, Joanne Whitmore, Tom Hébert, Sal Mendaglio, Tracy Cross, Lawrence Coleman, Jane Piiro, Donna Ford, Sylvia Rimm, Ed Amend, Andrew Mahoney, Susan Jackson, Helen Nevitt, Tom Greenspon, and Judy Galbraith. Through personal contact and through their writing, I recognized them as kindred spirits during my initial years in the National Association for Gifted Children.

I want to acknowledge Penny Oldfather for supporting the discussion groups I organized when I coordinated a program for gifted students in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, for five years. Group work was a fairly new idea in the field at that time, and her approval, as director of the Unique Learning Experiences program, was crucial to the viability of the group component. Principal Fred Stephens, a former school counselor, supported this strand in the program, and I want to acknowledge him as well. My friend Norma Haan, a former college roommate of mine and a longtime therapist, was a ready consultant.

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PREFACE

Get Gifted Students Talking is a book that has come full circle in many ways. It was my work with gifted students that inspired an approach to group work that was outlined in two books published several years ago: *Talk with Teens About Self and Stress* and *Talk with Teens About Feelings, Family, Relationships, and the Future*. The original books were written for the general population, since the preventive, development-oriented discussion group format is potentially beneficial for all teens. Since that time, however, social and emotional development has received increasing attention in the field of gifted education. Though we understand that gifted teens face the same basic developmental tasks as the rest of the school population, *how* they experience development is probably unique. Their own and others' expectations about their development are also likely to differ from what other teens experience. Therefore, this book reflects my assumption that highly capable teens can benefit from opportunities to talk about developmental hurdles in a group comprised of only gifted teens.

When it was time to revise the books, my publisher and I agreed that two volumes were still needed but with distinct foci: one for the general population—called *The Essential Guide to Talking with Teens*—and one for gifted teens—*The Essential Guide for Talking with Gifted Teens*. This book is a retitled update of the latter. The former book has also been updated, with the title *How (and Why) to Get Students Talking*.

Get Gifted Students Talking incorporates the best elements of the earlier editions—in the sessions selected and in the detailed guidelines for group work, including the emphasis on skills related to discussing social and emotional concerns. I believe these skills are important to future relationships and often are not given adequate attention in schools. Most significant, however, are new topics, such as the realities of living online today and the importance of resilience, that reflect issues especially important to gifted teens. Information about the social and emotional development of gifted kids, based on current clinical perspectives, research, and literature, is included throughout the book. The background information for many sessions has been updated. Suggestions and sample questions have been improved and extended.

I encourage you to let me know about your group work with gifted teens, how specific session topics and suggestions work for you, and what new activities or ideas you have used to adapt the sessions to your context.

You can email me at help4kids@freespirit.com or send me a letter in care of:

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used a *quantitative* approach to explore areas such as motivation, self-regulation, cognition, problem-solving ability, higher-order thinking, the process of learning, and differentiated curriculum. Others have studied gifted students' subjective experience of social development *qualitatively* (such as through interviews, open-ended questionnaires, and student papers), discovering and pursuing new research directions as a result. The session topics in this book were chosen on the basis of research, clinical literature, and clinical experience.

For the sake of brevity and reading ease, *gifted teens* will be the phrase used to identify the target population here. A more current and more appropriate phrase would be *teens who are gifted*. The term *gifted* will be used throughout the book as a descriptor (not as a noun), rather than the phrase *gifted and talented*, in line with the national organization's name (National Association for Gifted Children) and most pertinent scholarly literature. In this book, *giftedness* will refer to exceptional ability that represents top percentages on a bell curve of one or several domains.

Genesis

For twenty-five years, I was a teacher in public schools. For nineteen of those years, I taught mostly English literature, language, and writing to students in junior high school (ages twelve to fourteen) and senior high school (ages fifteen to eighteen). My years in the classroom tuned me in to the social and emotional world of teens, and I observed and interacted with many who were gifted. When they wrote essays, interacted with me during yearbook meetings, worked with me in foreign-language club activities, or lingered after class, they taught me about adolescent development—and about sensitivities and intensities. Of those who were intellectually gifted (demonstrated largely through writing insights and skills), some were high achievers and some were underachievers.

In general, students across a range of ability levels readily accepted my invitation to respond in writing to the literature we were reading. In fact, we did not discuss literature much orally; instead, they wrote in their journals about what they were reading, and I responded in the margins. There was no “correct” interpretation. They were encouraged to immerse themselves, think about the characters, apply perspectives related to other subjects and to their own world, gain insights, and learn through the process. We used class time for providing background material to help them understand book contexts. We sometimes discussed what they were reading, but students seemed to appreciate their autonomy for drawing conclusions themselves. In their journals, they asked questions about what they did not understand. I like to think that all those students benefited from this approach, but the

gifted ones seemed particularly to thrive. The process was open-ended, with no limits on insight, creativity, or depth. Because the students were thoughtfully responding to literature, my initial concerns about appearing to be invasive or voyeuristic in reading their journal entries soon dissipated.

Some of the many reasons for using this teaching approach relate to the discussion groups I later developed. Namely, students need information, and they need to develop skills. In the English classroom, I wanted students to learn to express themselves on paper and to become self-reflective, independent thinkers. I also wanted to hear from everyone, not just from highly verbal and assertive students. I employed an interactive, constructivist approach to immerse them in learning, with hands-on classroom activities, media and community resources, vocabulary-in-context exercises, classroom dialogue, and reading. We learned together, and the students became more and more comfortable with complexity and ambiguity. The open-endedness, “soft” direction, independent learning, and communication with the teacher did not reflect top-down learning. All students in the writing and literature classes I taught at that school seemed to take the journals seriously. They learned not to just summarize the plot. I learned that adolescents will invest, be discreet, ask important questions of each other, behave well, and gain wisdom when they feel respected and when the teacher is an appropriately unobtrusive guide. I applied this perspective to the development-oriented discussion groups described in this book.

I believe that gifted teens, like other teens, are hungry for acknowledgment and nonjudgmental listening. I soon saw that the gifted students in the classroom wanted to *be known*—to be recognized for individual worth and uniqueness, not just for intellect or talent. Some stayed after class to talk about difficult personal matters. I learned that there were many important things they did not discuss with peers, and some of these teens did not have a comfortable enough relationship with a parent to ask tough questions or express concerns.

I was certainly reminded that gifted students are not exempt from troubling life events, difficult family situations, and challenges related to social and emotional development. The parents of some were divorced, unemployed, addicted, ill, absent, neglectful, preoccupied, or abusive. In contrast, some had parents who hovered protectively. Most important, all of these bright students were experiencing universal developmental challenges, although perhaps qualitatively differently from others their age. They fought with siblings, had “crushes” and breakups, and were anxious about the future. Some struggled with the hypocrisy of the adults around them and the sad state of the world as they saw it, and they responded to these

and other issues with sadness, frustration, irritability, lack of motivation for schoolwork, and sometimes problematic behavior and depression. They had difficulty managing their complex, fragmented lives. Sometimes they felt like exploding from tension. They needed someone to talk with. They needed affirmation for their humanness. They needed to have feelings and experiences validated.

Eventually, in another school, I made small-group discussion a component of a multi-option program I created for gifted students, an approach that had not been tried previously at that school. I had seen the need for support and attentive listening in the gifted teens in my former classes. This group experience would be focused on social and emotional development—“growing up.”

The groups did not catch on immediately, but by second semester, after a carefully crafted invitation focused on stress and high expectations, there were three groups, with eight to ten students each. The next year there were six groups, and then ten, with two hour-long groups per day, coordinated with the two-hour lunch schedule. In addition, for one day, usually annually, I invited an administrator, a counselor, or a student teacher to join a group—with no group experiencing a guest more than once, and always with only one guest—so that those adults could learn about proactive small-group work (in this case, with gifted teens) and perhaps develop a more holistic view of gifted students. Group members were eager to demonstrate their group. I was careful to choose a topic for those sessions that would not require a great level of trust (for example, “What do you wish teachers understood about teens like you?”). The guests invariably said later that they had never thought that gifted students might feel misunderstood and narrowly viewed.

The students faithfully attended group meetings even though attendance was voluntary. Some came to school when they were not feeling well because they “didn’t want to miss group.” Most attended the weekly group meetings for three years, with different development-related topics to talk about each week. We hardly ever discussed academics, *per se*, but we did address the stress related to the classroom and competitive activities. Group members became close through steady, undramatic weekly contact, and when a personal or institutional crisis arose, the groups were a readily available support system. The students taught me, they taught each other, and they learned about themselves. The topics were not particularly heavy, but they resonated. The students relaxed and “just talked.” Some students indicated, in written feedback at the end of each year, that their group had helped them survive a difficult year. Almost all mentioned that it was important to hear that other gifted teens had concerns. The most shy members said they had gained from

hearing others talk about growing up. Even normally gregarious group members wrote that they realized they were not alone in dealing with personal challenges. The first *Talk with Teens* books grew out of the manuals I eventually created for the groups.

In other locations, I continued to form middle and high school groups with various populations. Concurrently, I finished doctoral studies in counselor education, began university teaching and research, and became a licensed mental health counselor, working for several years in schools, churches, alternative teen facilities, and substance abuse treatment programs. I often worked with highly able children, teens, and families, continuing to learn about the social and emotional development of gifted individuals. Until I retired, I made sure the future school counselors in the university program I directed were prepared to counsel gifted children and teens. Previous editions of this book became the ongoing social and emotional curriculum for summer programs for gifted students at the university. From the highly capable graduate students in the selective school counseling program, I learned how giftedness is experienced after high school. I continue to write, speak, facilitate small-group discussion, and counsel gifted teens.

Purpose

The purpose of these guided discussions is to support the social and emotional development of gifted teens. Whether through small- or large-group discussion, they become increasingly self-aware, and that in turn helps them make better decisions, resolve problems, and experience healthier relationships. They learn to embrace their complexity and make sense of their emotions and behavior. They feel more in control of their lives.

Support comes naturally in an environment where group members can express themselves. All teens need practice putting concerns and feelings into words. As verbal and social as many gifted teens are, they may not be skilled at communicating feelings and concerns clearly, genuinely, and effectively. Learning to talk about what is important to them and to listen attentively to others will probably enhance their present and future relationships. Adolescence is a good time to learn these skills. Small groups, in particular, offer two opportunities that may be lacking elsewhere:

- a noncompetitive environment where no grades are given and everyone is relatively equal
- a safe place to talk about the journey of adolescence with others on the same road

Gifted teens gain social skills through interacting with each other in the presence of a nonjudgmental

adult. Social hierarchies, and even arrogance, tend to disappear when the focus is on social and emotional development. Everyone has complex feelings, frustrations, and anxieties. In this setting, teens discover what they and others have in common; gain experience in initiating, listening, and responding during conversations; and become aware of how they are seen by others. All these gains can enhance social ease and self-esteem, both of which can help make school a more pleasant, more comfortable place. In the current era of school accountability, small-group work may also be viewed as a strategy for improving attitudes and test performance of gifted underachievers.

The format of *Get Gifted Students Talking* is not designed specifically to teach group skills or to acquaint teens with the vocabulary of group work. However, many such skills and some aspects of group dynamics will likely become familiar. The extensive introductory material here actually offers a solid overview of techniques related to group facilitation. With guided group discussion, process is more important than product, and one goal is to enhance the skill of articulating social and emotional concerns. The focus, objectives, and suggestions for content and closure contained in each session provide a framework for solid, substantive, invigorating group experiences.

It is important to understand that the purpose of these group discussions is not to “fix” group members. Even though the questions are designed to provoke reflection and introspection, the emphasis is always on articulating feelings and thoughts in the presence of others who listen and care. These groups are not meant to be therapy groups. Yes, group work in any form has potential therapeutic value, and some noticeable changes in attitude and behavior often occur in the kind of groups promoted here. However, even when it appears that these changes have occurred because of the response and support of a group, other factors, such as changes at home, the healing effect of time, or developmental leaps, may also have contributed. Nevertheless, being involved in a group might help, and even be crucial, in times of personal crisis, regardless of whether others in the group are aware of the distress. It is important to note here that mental health professionals can use many of these sessions with individuals or in group and family counseling to foster communication skills and personal growth. Though few in number, providers who specialize in working with gifted clients do exist, and some do group work.

As is the case whenever adults stand firmly and supportively beside teens, establish trust, and participate in their complex lives, you will serve your group best by listening actively, with the focus fully on them, and offering your nonjudgmental presence as they find their own direction.

Meeting ASCA Standards

The national standards for school counseling programs, developed by the American School Counselor Association, focus on academic, career, and personal/social development of students. The focused discussions outlined in this book address standards in each of these areas, with giftedness in mind.

In regard to academic development, various sessions can help gifted students develop positive attitudes toward school, toward teachers and administrators, and toward learning. Group members become more aware of their learning preferences. Topics related to post-secondary options and transitions help students anticipate the future.

Related to career development, almost all discussion topics are intended to enhance self-awareness of personal strengths and interests. Such awareness is important for finding career direction, particularly when gifted teens struggle with *multipotentiality* (many strong interests and talents and potential career paths). A basic premise of this book is that bringing gifted teens together in small groups helps them make comfortable interpersonal connections—through listening and responding, supporting and being supported, and appropriately expressing feelings and opinions. They break down cultural and socioeconomic stereotypes and learn about the perspectives of others. Interpersonal skills and sensitivity to others will help in future employment. Group members reflect on the work attitudes of significant adults in their lives and imagine themselves in future work contexts. They also learn about post-secondary educational settings and are able to ask questions and receive important information about post-secondary social, emotional, and academic transitions. Group facilitators are provided suggestions for organizing career-oriented experiences outside of school as well.

Most important, this book focuses on personal development—on simply growing up. Session topics encourage self-reflection about identity, feelings, and peer, family, and community relationships, not only in terms of universal developmental tasks, but also acknowledging that giftedness has potential impact on these areas. Members develop skills in a group, a social microcosm, potentially enhancing their lives in the present and after the school years. In addition, group members learn about emotional and physical vulnerabilities related to technology, high-risk social situations, relationships, and stress, and they consider ways to be social without putting themselves at risk.

Assumptions

The format and content of *Get Gifted Students Talking* reflect the following assumptions, which you may want to keep in mind as you lead your group.

1. Gifted teens have a desire to be heard, listened to, taken seriously, and respected. They want to be seen complexly—more than simply performers or nonperformers.
2. Because of their place on a bell curve of ability, they have a sense of differentness.
3. Some who are quiet, shy, intimidated, or untrusting do not spontaneously offer comments, but they, too, want to be recognized and understood as unique, complex individuals.
4. All gifted teens need and appreciate support, no matter how strong and successful they seem to others. All have doubts about themselves at times. All feel socially inept and uncomfortable at times.
5. All feel stressed at times. Some feel stressed most of the time. Many feel stressed because of overcommitment, overscheduling, or overinvolvement. All are concerned about the future.
6. Whether or not it is demonstrated outwardly, all have a high level of sensitivity to themselves and their contexts.
7. All are sensitive to family tension. Some are trying hard to keep families afloat or intact, and they may be given heavy responsibilities because of their abilities.
8. All probably have some sort of image to protect.
9. All feel angry at times.
10. All gifted teens, no matter how smooth and self-confident they appear, need practice talking honestly about feelings.

The Nuts and Bolts of Group Work

Group Settings

The session structure is appropriate for both small-group and large-group discussion, although most topics work better with small groups because trust is established more quickly in them. Sessions are arranged in a purposeful progression for a long-term series but may certainly be selected and rearranged to create a short-term program or focus. Materials should be selected to fit context, purpose, and need. Here are some settings in which the sessions might be used:

- school-counseling and advisory groups for students of high ability
- summer enrichment programs for gifted teens
- residential schools for gifted teens
- leadership retreats, programs (those attending are likely to have demonstrated, or have the potential for, capable leadership)
- music, athletics, academic clubs, or other organizational retreats for group-building
- at-home family discussions

Length of Meetings

Ideal meeting length varies, depending on the age of participants. Thirty or forty minutes is usually adequate for students in grades six and seven—a bit longer, if hands-on activities are included. Eighth graders and high school students usually appreciate a fifty-minute session (or other class-period length)—after they settle in and gain trust. I recommend that groups meeting over lunch be allowed to leave a few minutes early from their preceding classes so that they can get their food before all classes are dismissed to maximize the time available for discussion.

These sessions are also useful for extended sessions with gifted teens. I have used them for twice-weekly ninety-minute sessions with groups of fifteen high school juniors at a summer Governor’s School, as well as for four-session-total, ninety-minute series with profoundly gifted pre-teens outside of school. In general, alternating sessions that include activities with sessions focused mostly on discussion is helpful. Maintaining stable group membership is important for trust.

Large Groups

Get Gifted Students Talking can be useful in a self-contained classroom for gifted students or classrooms at residential or other schools for gifted students. Ongoing weekly discussions, or a week of daily sessions on coping with stress, for example, can be part of the classroom curriculum. Homeroom, administration periods, or “community time” can use an activity or discussion catalysts effectively if the time allowed is adequate (at least twenty minutes). In a general-population school, sometimes gifted students are placed in the same homeroom so that large-group discussion geared to social and emotional development is possible.

Small Groups

GROUP SIZE

For small-group work, ideal group size varies according to age level. For younger gifted teens, a group of five to seven seems to work best. Regardless of age, however, I do not recommend more than eight because each group member needs time to talk, and trust and a sense

of connection may be difficult to achieve in a larger group. These are general guidelines. I have facilitated successful small-group discussion with as few as three students, who bonded well and continued to develop trust after other members moved away.

Group dynamics differ depending on the size of a class or group, but the focus and most of the strategies here work with both small and large groups. Since a discussion of an activity sheet can easily take an hour with a group of eight verbal students, adjustments must be made when those sheets are used with larger groups. For example, full-size classes can be divided into small groups (three to five members) for sharing, with guidelines for discussion.

MEETING LOCATION

For small-group work, I recommend a small room. Such a space is more likely than a classroom to be private and uninterrupted, to have fewer visual distractions, and to be conducive to a sense of intimacy. I also prefer to sit around a table—not only for comfort, but also because sessions may involve activities such as brief writing, manipulating clay or other media, or drawing. Moving student desks into a circle also usually works well. Lying or sitting on the floor for an entire session is actually less comfortable than sitting in a chair for some.

Forming a Group and Selecting Topics

Most of the guided discussion sessions in *Get Gifted Students Talking* are appropriate for gifted adolescents at any age, as well as young adults. However, with so many session topics to choose from, I encourage you to choose carefully those most appropriate for the youngest of your students, keeping in mind that their social and emotional development probably does not match their level of cognitive precocity (referred to as *asynchronous development* in the field). Gifted children may indeed experience depression and thoughts of suicide, disordered eating, sexual and other relational aggression, and self-harming behaviors, but those topics can wait. Be aware that the language in this book intentionally accommodates older teens, who might be particularly sensitive to “being talked down to.” The suggested questions for each session are generally appropriate across several ages, but they can certainly be adjusted for the ages you work with.

Ideally, groups are “closed,” with membership not changing. Each time someone is added or someone leaves, it is again a “new” group, with group dynamics changed and a need to reestablish trust. However, short-term absence usually has only a short-term effect. Regardless of group membership, attendance is usually not a problem after trust has been established.

I have found that the best groups are often those whose members do not know each other well outside of

the group. They seem to feel free to share, and they do not have to preface all comments with “Well, someone in here has heard me say this before, but . . .” It should not be assumed that gifted students are well acquainted with each other. Gifted teens who are involved in some activities may not be acquainted with gifted teens in other activities, even when both activities are under the athletic or music umbrella, for instance. And gifted teens with heavy home responsibilities or after-school jobs may not be involved in activities at all. I hasten to note, however, that I have had well-functioning groups in which most members knew each other well. The groups helped them know each other better. Even best friends may not typically discuss topics like those in this volume.

However, depending on the size of the student population you draw from, you may not have a choice. If some members of your group know each other, it is important to move the group beyond the natural division of friends and nonfriends. Having a focus, with specific activities and written exercises, helps ensure that students who are friends do not dominate or irritate the others with “inside humor.” Encouraging students to change seating each time can also be helpful, although it is important to make that a group norm at the outset, since groups—especially middle school groups—may be resistant to doing that later.

I like to promote the idea of using the groups to break down social barriers. In general, I prefer a membership balance between achievers and underachievers, high-risk and low-risk individuals, students highly involved in school activities and not so involved, and representatives of various ethnic and socioeconomic groups. The mix helps members break down stereotypes and discover common ground through talking about development.

If several groups are being formed at one time, distribution can be accomplished by initially compiling a list of all students who accept the invitation to participate and then sorting the list. Of course, recruitment must target those least likely to feel welcome. In some cases, the highest-functioning students may be the most reluctant to join, fearing that the groups are geared only to “problems” and “counseling” and that participation will somehow stigmatize them. These students might also feel anxious about the focus on nonacademic areas. Underachieving students and those with other risk factors may think that they will be the only ones in the group with stress, vulnerabilities, fears, and problematic performance or attitudes. The latter can benefit from realizing that everyone has developmental concerns. That reality should be included in any recruitment material. For example, stress from high expectations can be mentioned as a common denominator among most gifted teens.

All social, cultural, and socioeconomic groups have a great deal to learn from each other, and a group setting can be an ideal learning environment. Gifted teens may not feel comfortable talking about developmental concerns in intellectually diverse groups, but they are apt to be open when a group is composed entirely of gifted teens, including those with various levels of *achievement*. In fact, such group composition can foster highly productive discussions. Often, underachievers are amazed that achievers have social and emotional problems; some achievers are equally amazed that underachievers can be highly intelligent and extremely articulate. Discovering common ground is a worthy goal. Gifted students with behavior problems, difficulty with authority, or poor social skills are usually well served when group membership is mixed, with at least half of the group's members having good interpersonal skills, behavior, and achievement.

If mixing is not possible in your setting, or if your group has been brought together because members share a common concern or have a specific purpose and agenda, you can still use these guided discussions with confidence, since they deal with common developmental issues. In fact, I often recommended to school counseling graduate students that talking about developmental challenges can help even the most angry or disruptive students. In other words, the topic does not have to be anger or behavior, *per se*, even though it might be helpful to brainstorm strategies for improving behavior at some point. Simply having a chance to connect with others, express concerns, and feel more comfortable in school can help reduce problematic behaviors. Feeling heard may help students view school as an accommodating, comfortable place.

When forming a group, consider mixing gender identities. With gifted teens in high school, I prefer mixed groups regarding gender. It is important for teens at that age to learn about each other in a safe and nonjudgmental place, outside of the regular classroom and apart from usual social settings. It is also important for all students to learn how to communicate with, and in the presence of, people with gender identities different from their own. Especially for gifted teens who are shy or who lack social contact, a discussion group may be a chance to have contact with people who do not share the same gender identity. Even for the highly social, a group can raise awareness of gender and gender-identity issues and enhance ability to function effectively in relationships now and in the future, including in marriage and other partnerships, in employment, in positions of leadership, and in parenting.

On the other hand, same-gender grouping also has advantages and is particularly appropriate when the issues are gender-specific, especially troublesome and gender-related, or perceived by students to be unsafe for discussion with more than one gender identity

represented in the group. Same-gender groups can sometimes empower members in ways that mixed groups cannot. Gender homogeneity may be desirable in an addiction-recovery or sexual-trauma-recovery group in a treatment center, for example. Obviously, decisions about grouping depend on the goal and purpose of the group, as well as the age of students. In middle schools, sometimes groups comprised of students who gender-identify similarly work best, with members appreciating the safety of talking about certain topics with others assumed to be experiencing the same physiological and emotional changes. That homogeneity is usually less a concern in high school. I once studied the implementation of a small-group social and emotional curriculum at a middle school for gifted students and found that students appreciated that the weekly meetings were not mixed once a month, when special topics were being covered. The other three meetings per month were successful as mixed.

When students understand the purpose of the groups, and after they move beyond initial discomfort with the nonacademic emphasis, they can relax, invest, and appreciate the opportunity to talk with others at their intellectual level about growing up. For many gifted teens, one key ingredient in trust and feeling understood seems to be a similar ability level.

Similarity of age is another key ingredient. Because the sessions are geared to social and emotional development, not to cognitive and academic concerns, it is best to form age-based groups—especially when gifted students have skipped grades and are in a grade with older students. A twelve-year-old in eighth grade is developmentally different and has differing concerns from eighth graders who are fourteen, for instance, and even thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds can have difficulty connecting with each other about social and emotional concerns. Gifted seniors are likely looking ahead in ways that even juniors are not, so seniors of any age might have common career-development and college concerns. However, *socially and emotionally*, a thirteen-year-old senior probably would connect better with gifted age peers. Relationship issues differ along the age continuum, and it is best when students can communicate with others in their own age group about these concerns. Intellectually, and in regard to interests, even very young gifted children might feel most comfortable talking with gifted teens or adults. But socially and emotionally their developmental needs and challenges are likely to be similar to those of age-mates.

Inviting Students to Join a Group

In a school, the best way to encourage students to join your group, if membership is voluntary, is to invite them personally. In any event, I recommend that you not call it a *counseling* group when describing it to

prospective group members, even if you are a counselor, but certainly if you are not, because of liability concerns. Some students are automatically turned off and turned away by the *counseling* label. Later, if someone asks if it is a counseling group, explain that counseling is basically talking and listening with someone trained in that process, and the group is similar in that aspect. If you are a trained counselor, your group could be called a counseling group, but the caveat about perception still applies. *Support group* is appropriate when there is a common, specific agenda, or a shared problem area. However, if the group is largely preventive, with self-awareness and personal growth as goals, then *support* probably is too problem-oriented for many students. *Discussion group is always my preference in school settings.*

In schools, I have contacted students individually to explain a proposed group, and I have also brought prospective full-size discussion groups together to hear the plan. In either case, I recommend assuring students that joining the group is not a high-risk thing to do. That message is important for gifted teens, especially those who are not used to venturing into the unknown. They may not be confident that they can adapt to whatever transpires. The advantage of calling in a whole group is that the students can see who else will be attending. On the other hand, some might decide against joining for that very reason, hanging on to stereotypes without giving unfamiliar or unknown gifted peers a chance. When meeting with students individually, you might give them the names of a few prospective members—but *only if they ask*, and only if it is possible to share names in advance. If a student wants to ensure that friends will be in a group, I prefer to say, simply, “I encourage you to come and be surprised. It’s good to get to know new people, and sometimes it’s good *not* to know anyone else well at the outset. If you decide later that you are not comfortable with the group, you have the option of not continuing.” *If you decide to meet with all prospective members together, be prepared to do at least a typical, brief activity to demonstrate what the group will be like.*

Be sure to emphasize both the social and the emotional purposes of the group. Gifted kids may be surprised and intrigued by that information, especially if academics and talent are emphasized elsewhere in their lives. Tell them it is a rare opportunity to connect with gifted peers about nonacademic life—even those they interact with regularly otherwise. I routinely mention stress and stereotypes as sample topics for discussion, and these seem to resonate. Explain that, beyond pursuing general goals, the group will determine its own unique atmosphere. That much of an explanation usually suffices. If students want to know more, show them the contents of this book. The session titles are varied, and students usually find them interesting—and unexpected.

If you use this book with gifted high school students, it helps to tell them, in addition to other potential benefits, that when you know them better through the group experience, you will be able to write more complete job, college, or scholarship recommendations for them. Explain that you will also be a better and more informed advocate for them if they ever need assistance.

Students Who Have Significant Risk Factors

If, as a professional counselor, you want to form groups for gifted teens around a major concern, a variety of developmental topics in this volume are appropriate for generating discussion. Any of the following can be a common concern related specifically to giftedness:

- lack of family acceptance of, comfort with, or affirmation of high ability
- anxiety
- perfectionism
- preoccupation with being in control
- preoccupation with performance
- profound giftedness
- twice-exceptionality (one or more learning disabilities and giftedness)
- being someone who bullies or being the target of bullying—or being both

Other life events and circumstances are also possible concerns:

- major change or disruption in the family
- misuse of substances by a parent, a guardian, another family member, peers, or self
- physical or sexual abuse
- family tragedy
- lack of family support for school attendance or achievement
- seriously considering dropping out of school
- terminal illness in a family member
- frequent family relocation
- poverty
- death of someone close
- feelings of loss when something has changed
- parental military deployment
- a school crisis

- pregnancy
- being new in school

For several of the previous concerns, faithfully applying the guidelines of this book and focusing on development can provide support and generate helpful interaction. However, unless you have counselor training, facilitating school groups focused on other issues (for example, abuse, tragedy, and bereavement), or forming groups composed solely of individuals who struggle with depression, hyperactivity, drug use, or behavioral or emotional disability is unwise, unethical, and potentially unproductive or even harmful. There are also significant privacy issues related to grouping kids together with a stated concern. Even for trained professionals, such grouping often is not recommended. One common guideline is not to have the same pathology in all group members. In this regard, however, underachievement should not be seen as pathology; grouping gifted underachievers together for discussion of developmental topics can indeed be productive.

Some students may not be eager to join a group. If attendance is voluntary, perhaps meet first with these students individually. Explain that you will be leading a discussion group for gifted students, and you are inviting them to participate. If the student has difficulty with authority, is an underachieving student, or is known as a joker or a rebel, for example, state that you are looking for interesting, complex students who can help make a “good group.” Say that you are looking specifically for students who express their abilities in unusual ways because you do not want a group that is afraid to challenge each other and think, and you do not want only students who do what is expected. Reframing characteristics usually considered troublesome in this positive way often takes students by surprise and encourages them to participate.

However, regardless of a student’s behavior, always present the group’s purpose genuinely: to give gifted students a chance to talk about issues that are important to teens with high ability. Be sincere, accepting, and supportive in your invitation. With students in distress, as with all prospective group members, take care not to frighten them away by sounding invasive or therapy oriented. Give them time to warm up to the idea of interacting with others about growing up.

Primary and Secondary Prevention

Get Gifted Students Talking is appropriate for primary prevention in the form of focused, development-oriented discussion meant to prevent problems and proactively nurture development. It is also appropriate for secondary prevention—that is, as early intervention to restore balance quickly after a personal crisis has occurred. For these purposes, the sessions can benefit

groups composed of diverse gifted students, including those who struggle—whether silently or dramatically. All can benefit from attention to social and emotional development. Giftedness might even put them at unique risk for poor emotional and/or educational outcomes. Circumstances can also put them at risk.

Teens experiencing family transitions can benefit from the sessions in the Stress section. They might also feel affirmed and be able to express uncomfortable feelings in some of the sessions in the Identity section. Some of the family-oriented sessions in the Relationships section might also be helpful during transitions, as well as some sessions in the Feelings and Family sections.

Gifted teens at risk for poor personal or educational outcomes might benefit from these:

- “Façade, Image, and Stereotype”
- “More Than Test Scores and Grades?”
- “Learning Preferences”
- “Intensity, Compulsivity, and Control”
- “Influencers”
- “Authority”
- “Getting What We Need”

Group members who are feeling sad or depressed often find some of the sessions on stress to be helpful. In addition, the following can be valuable:

- “Self in Perspective”
- “Intensity, Compulsivity, and Control”
- “Playing”
- “Lonely at the Top”
- “Feeling Stuck”
- “Resilience”
- “Getting What We Need”

Gifted students returning from, or currently in, treatment for substance abuse or disordered eating might also find these sessions helpful, including when they are quietly integrated or reintegrated into a “regular group” (that is, without a common concern). The prevention- and development-oriented sessions specifically focused on drug use or disordered eating are not necessarily appropriate for these students. But *basic developmental topics are appropriate regardless of situation*. Gifted teens who use substances and/or are involved with potentially life-threatening behaviors do not fit the positive stereotype of “gifted kids,” but they do certainly exist, regardless of whether they have been identified for special programs.

Leading the Sessions

Facilitators

These sessions are designed to be used with gifted teens in a variety of settings by group facilitators who may have one or more of the following roles:

- school counselors
- counselors and advisors at residential or other programs/schools for gifted teens
- teachers in school programs for gifted students
- counselors and social workers in community agencies, treatment centers, or private practice
- wellness advocates and group builders at retreats for gifted youth
- parents or primary caregivers (in informal one-on-one or family interaction)

Are You Ready to Lead a Discussion Group?

Especially if you are not used to dealing with large or small groups in informal discussion, you may find the following suggestions and observations helpful:

- Discussion related to social and emotional areas involves more personal risk and is much less “controllable” than discussion in the intellectual arena. Such loss of control can feel frightening for facilitators or group members accustomed to using cognitive and verbal strengths to control situations.
- It is important to recognize that some group members may be more intellectually nimble than you are (a common admonition when preparing teachers to work with gifted kids). A group member may, literally, be 1 in 100,000 or 1 in 1,000,000 in terms of intellectual ability. Do your best to make this a nonissue, regardless of how you perceive your own ability. Acknowledging it overtly calls attention to something that can, at times, keep gifted teens at a distance, feeling that no one can connect to them and being afraid to show vulnerability in discussions. Instead, *keep the attention on emotional, not cognitive, development*. Group members all are developing socially and emotionally, probably not easily. If you use the questions provided, their attention will not be on you, but instead on what those questions generate. Then you can mostly observe as they interact with each other.
- If you are careful to keep the focus on social and emotional issues, there will be little opportunity for group members to play competitive, “one-up” games with you or with each other.

- Significant adults in gifted teens’ lives might have focused more on behavior than on feelings, more on academic performance than on social and emotional needs, or more on performance than on personal development. Some teens will be eager and immediately grateful for the emphasis on social and emotional development, but some might be uncomfortable or even frightened by it initially, especially those whose families guard privacy at extreme levels and view emotional expression as problematic. Regardless, your concentrated attention to expressive language and social and emotional concerns will probably be a new experience for them. Their discomfort may even elicit problematic behavior at first. Social and emotional concerns are not likely to be debatable, but, because of anxiety, some “debaters” might want to deflect attention onto political or other issues initially—until they begin to trust the process or until you rein them in. Be patient. Rely on the suggestions for the session. Ask the questions and wait, looking open, inviting, and optimistic.

You might also want to consider your motives for establishing groups for gifted teens, as well as your sense of security around them. When I train counselors and teachers to work with gifted individuals, I advise them to ask themselves these questions:

- Can I avoid feeling competitive with gifted teens, or needing to assert control over them?
- Can I be confident around them, not threatened by their abilities?
- Can I stay composed and focused on the social and emotional, no matter what comes up?
- Can I deal with gifted students simply as human beings with frailties, insecurities, sensitivities, and vulnerabilities, regardless of their school performance and/or behavior?
- Can I avoid needing to “put them in their place”?
- Can I accept their defenses, including arrogance and bravado, and give them time to let themselves be socially and emotionally vulnerable?
- Can I recognize that they may not be accomplished risk-takers socially, academically, and/or emotionally, and that they might need to be encouraged to take appropriate risks?
- Can I look critically at common stereotypes of gifted kids and my own negative feelings about gifted kids that might affect my work with them, and can I put these aside during the group experience?
- Can I let group members teach me about themselves without judging them?

- Can I avoid voyeurism (being titillated by ferreting out details about families and kids' personal lives)? *That is not what these groups are about.*
- Can I resist the urge to psychoanalyze and interpret? Again, *that is not what these groups are about.* More important, if you are not a trained counselor or psychotherapist, but are presenting yourself as one, or behaving like one, liability is a concern.
- As a teacher, can I move from an evaluative to a supportive posture?
- Can I leave an adult-expert position and accept that teens know themselves and their world better than I do—and that I need to learn from them?
- Can I enter their world respectfully?
- Can I keep in mind that gifted teens may have no other place to talk that is noncompetitive, nonjudgmental, nonevaluative, nonperformance-oriented, and nonacademic—so that I don't slip into an inappropriate mode?

If you answered yes to all or most of these questions, you're likely ready to take on a small group or roomful of gifted teens. If your answers were mostly negative or unsure, perhaps you should consider other ways to work with gifted teens or should (if you are not a counselor) consider co-facilitating a group with a counselor at least initially. Such co-facilitation may help you develop listening and responding skills and move toward an objective, nonjudgmental posture.

General Guidelines

The following general guidelines can help you lead successful, meaningful discussions with gifted teens. You may want to review these guidelines from time to time.

1. The function of the group leader is to facilitate discussion. The best posture is "learner," not "teacher," with the group members doing the teaching—about themselves. Adolescents talk when adults step back and apply active-listening skills.
2. Be prepared to learn how to lead a group by doing it. Let the group know that this is your attitude. If you are a trained counselor, you may need to become comfortable with *focused* discussion. In addition, even if you lead groups regularly, reviewing basic tenets of group process might be beneficial. If you are not a trained counselor and are not able to co-facilitate a group with a counselor, as mentioned above, ask a counselor for information on group process and listening and responding, but recognize that this kind of group is different from therapy groups, which are usually the type graduate students experience during training. Their reading this introductory material might help them consider a new way to "do groups," applicable to all counseling settings.
3. Don't think you have to be an expert on every session topic. Tell the group at the outset that you want to learn with them and from them, and you want them to learn from each other as well. It is better to be "one-down" (unknowing) than "one-up" (expert) in your relationship with gifted teens. That is an appropriate place to start, and they will respond. *For most sessions, having information is not the key to success.* Trust your adult wisdom, which is something you have that your group members do not. But, again, recognize that *your job is largely to facilitate discussion, not to teach.*
4. Monitor group interaction and work toward contribution from everyone without making that an issue. Remember that shy students can gain a great deal just by listening and observing. You can encourage everyone to participate, yet not insist on that.
5. Keep the session focus in mind, but be flexible about direction. Your group may lead you in new directions that are as worthwhile as the stated focus and suggestions. However, *if they veer too far off track, with only one or two students dominating, use the focus as an excuse to rein in the group.*
6. It is probably best to go into each session with two related session ideas in mind, since the one you have planned might not generate as much response as expected. You can always unobtrusively guide the group into a new direction. Try several approaches to a topic before dropping it, however. It might simply require some "baking time." *If you are afraid they won't talk, they may not. Believing in the topics and the questions is important. Choose them accordingly.*
7. Be willing to model how to do an activity, even though it is usually not necessary. The activity sheets are fairly self-explanatory, but, on occasion, you may need to demonstrate a response. If you are not willing to share your thoughts and feelings, your group may wonder why they should be expected to do so. However, even a small disclosure early in the life of a group might indicate that you will always be a "peer participant," an inappropriate role. Modeling should be rare and done only to facilitate student responses. Too much can actually inhibit responses because the open-ended questions are meant to elicit diverse perspectives, you are modeling only one kind, and the group will likely follow your lead. *In addition, attention should be focused on group members, not on you. You want them to learn about each other.*

8. After the group has established a rhythm (perhaps after five or six meetings), ask how group members are feeling about the group. Is there anything they would like to change? Are they comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings? What has been helpful? Are there problems that need addressing, such as discussions being dominated by a few, a personality conflict within the group, or too much leader direction? (When posing this last question, do not include the specific examples of problems. If students have concerns about the group, let them bring them up, without suggestions from you.) Processing group dynamics (*process* is an important verb in the counseling profession) is an opportunity for members to practice tact in addressing group issues (see also #11), if there are any.
9. Incorporate student suggestions (from #10, below) that fit the overall purpose of the group. If you do not yet feel comfortable as a facilitator, and if students are being negatively critical, tell them that you are still learning about groups, as are they. Be aware that some may press for “no focus” for a long time. *You should review the rationale for focus outlined on page 16 prior to your first request for feedback. Depending on group composition, you may choose to delay questions about format until the benefits have become clear.* Or simply be prepared to explain the purpose of the semi-structured-but-flexible format. Support the group and give guidance as they make progress in overcoming group challenges. Explain that this kind of group discussion takes practice, but the rewards can be great. Above all, try to be secure about using a focus. If you seem unsure and ask too frequently about the format, you may experience “mutiny,” especially if there has not been sufficient time for the group to bond and appreciate the benefits of some structure. I often ask for feedback midway and also late in the life of a group, otherwise relying on members’ level of cooperation to tell me how the group is functioning. If lack of cooperation is a problem, I process that (see #11).
10. If group energy consistently or increasingly lags, discuss that in the group. Let members help you figure out how to energize discussions or deal with group inhibitions. However, *do not readily reject the idea of maintaining a focus for each session.* Perhaps you could, instead, alter your questioning style (see page 19), or more deftly follow some strands that come up spontaneously. Or perhaps you might want to be more selective when choosing topics. The written exercises and activity sheets often help to encourage sharing. Thoughtfully creating your own activities related to the focus, or incorporating various media into the meetings, can also energize a group.

11. Anything can be processed in the group—crying, interrupting, disclosing something unexpected, being rude, being sad, belching, challenging the facilitator, group negativity. That is, group members can discuss what just happened—in the present. A facilitator can say, “What was it like for you to challenge me just now?” or “How did the rest of you feel when she challenged me?” or “How are you feeling right now, after she disclosed that?” or “That comment was a surprise. How is it affecting us?” Processing what happens in a group gives members a chance to reflect on their own feelings and on the group’s interaction and to learn skills in articulating emotions. It also keeps the focus on them, not on you.

Choosing and Adapting Session Topics

Group facilitators are often reluctant to adapt the format and topics with group uniqueness in mind. At the very least, time constraints may mean that you need to shorten some written exercises. Depending on the age level or language ability of your group, you might choose to alter some vocabulary. In addition, some session suggestions might not fit your setting. In that case, ignore them or devise your own unique approach to the focus. Examine the sessions to determine which ones might be most helpful, enjoyable, and appropriate for your group. Finally, when selecting topics, be aware that intellectually precocious teens may be only average, or even *below* average, in social and emotional development. Too often, adults forget that gifted kids are “just kids.” However, beware of underestimating group members’ awareness of the world or need for information just because they are chronologically young.

Two cautions are in order. First, be aware of, and respect, community sensitivities. For example, parents and other members of the community might object to discussions related to sexual orientation, sexual identity, sexuality and sexual behavior, gender identity, gender roles, and family roles. Even discussions about depression might not be deemed appropriate. If you’re considering addressing a certain topic that might raise alarm, consider first asking parents or guardians (or other caregivers) for permission through a written explanation of the subject matter. Second, select topics, from the many available, according to age level. If a parent/guardian asks to “sit in on” a session, you should say that privacy (of all group members) is the main reason having a guest is not advisable. In addition, the purpose of the group is to help members interact in a safe and respectful way with each other about the challenges of growing up. An observing adult would likely limit members’ willingness to practice expressive language as they do that. You might keep a list of typical topics available and explain the focused-but-flexible format to anyone with questions about the discussion groups.

Ethical Behavior: Confidentiality

Counseling codes of ethics provide behavioral guidelines for counselors in order to protect those who are counseled. Your behaving ethically as a group leader is crucial to the success of your group work. For instance, sharing group comments in the teachers' workroom or lunch area at school, with parents, or in the community may ultimately destroy the possibility of small-group activity in your school. When trust is lost, it may be impossible to reestablish.

If you plan to conduct groups in a school setting but are not a counselor and are unfamiliar with ethical guidelines for counselors (including those specifically related to group work), get a copy of them from a school counselor and read them carefully. *Be especially aware of your responsibilities regarding confidentiality.* These include familiarizing yourself with situations in which confidentiality must be breached, such as when abuse is suspected, when someone is in danger or may be a danger to others, or when someone is planning to disrupt or damage school mission, personnel, or structure (the last item is in the school counseling code). The "informed consent" aspect of group work can be addressed by discussing format, content, confidentiality, limits of confidentiality, and purpose at the first meeting.

Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in a group. Explain what actions you will take to protect confidentiality, but emphasize that *you can guarantee the behavior of only yourself, not of group members.* However, since trust is so essential for comfortable group discussion, strongly encourage group members not to share what is said in the group outside the group. Tell them that not keeping comments "inside the group" can destroy the group and even prevent *any* groups from existing in the school or organization in the future because of lack of trust. However, facilitators should not use the word *secrets*, because these groups are not about secrets, the word may raise unwarranted concerns, and it may be frightening to students whose families direct them not to share personal information. Discussion about confidentiality should be quietly matter of fact, not threatening or overblown.

You may wish to address these issues in a letter to parents asking their permission for their children to attend the group. For a sample letter, see page 22. Please note that this letter is appropriate for groups not designed to address specific problem areas. Feel free to adapt it.

Group Members Who Betray Trust

If you or a group member learns that confidentiality has been breached, processing the experience will be crucial. Barring the betrayer(s) of trust from continuing in the group is not the only appropriate response and may not be appropriate at all. Since these groups are focused on development, the situation is an opportunity to discuss trust ("What are your thoughts about the trust

level of the group?"), feelings in the group ("What are you feeling right now?"), prospects for regaining trust ("What would we need to do to regain trust?" "How long do you think it might take?"), what the breacher(s) can/will do in the future ("What would _____ need to do to regain your trust?"). Maintaining poise and objectivity as you conduct the discussion actually models that difficult feelings and situations can be discussed, that shame and guilt can be "worked through," and that repair of trust is possible, though not likely to be quick. These are important revelations to teens, who otherwise may not know that such a discussion and such outcomes are possible. Teens can be empowered by the discussion, take ownership of their future, and decide what to do about the situation. Betrayal of trust, in itself, is not a crime and does not automatically warrant expulsion from the group, but the ripple effect can be significant.

Group Members Who Are Quiet or Shy

Groups can actually help affirm quiet personal styles by overtly recognizing quiet members' listening and observation skills, which gregarious members may not have. However, although listening can be as valuable as speaking in finding commonalities and gaining self-awareness, it is important for reticent individuals to be heard by their peers, even if only at modest levels. Earnest efforts to ask students who are quiet or shy for at least one or two comments each meeting can help them feel included and gradually increase their courage and willingness to share. The written exercises and activity sheets can provide them with a comfortable opportunity to share. Even uttering a simple phrase from a sheet can feel huge for a shy teen and may represent significant risk-taking. Small talk between a leader and a shy student while everyone is getting settled may also contribute to comfort and ease, which eventually might generate spontaneous comments. However, the value of communication with peers, in contrast to communication with the group facilitator, should not be underestimated. Gifted students with little social contact or verbal interaction with peers may feel poorly informed. Post-group feedback about group work has suggested to me that quiet group members gain as much or more than assertive members from the group experience.

Group Members Who Dominate

One strategy for dealing with verbal dominators is to revisit the group guidelines (page 23) as a group, with no one identified as the target. Processing group discussion, after the fact, can also be used to raise awareness (for example, "How does it feel to be in the group at this point? How are we doing in making sure that everyone gets a chance to talk and that no one