Family Environments of Underachieving Gifted Students

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Abstract
A comparison of the family environments of a sample of 22 underachieving gifted students to those described in studies of eminent and gifted achievers provides some themes which can be helpful to the parents of gifted children. Family structure, climate, and values showed some similarities as well as some dramatic differences. The main themes applicable to parenting are: (a) extreme amounts of early attention may confer too early adult status and attention dependence, (b) consistency between parents is more critical than any particular style of parenting, (c) independence for homework completion is characteristic of achievers, (d) parent interest in and satisfaction with personal careers and intrinsic learning must be specifically communicated to children in order to provide appropriate achieving role models, and (e) reasonable standards of family organization appear important for achievement.

Introduction
Parents of gifted children want information to guide their children. There is much descriptive family information based on biographical, historical, and questionnaire data for gifted persons who have achieved eminence in their fields of expertise. There has been no similar in-depth research about families of gifted underachievers. This study compares family environments of a sample of gifted underachieving children to findings gathered from studies of the families of eminent achievers. For the purpose of this study, underachievement is defined as school performance below some index of a child's ability (Davis & Rimm, 1985; Rimm, 1986).

Method
Sample
Twenty-two students were selected for analyses based on the following criteria: therapy at the Family Achievement Clinic because of poor school performance during the preceding 12 months and WISC-R IQ verbal and/or performance test scores of 130 or above. Students in the study ranged between first and eleventh grades with half at sixth grade level or above. The 17 males represented a random sample, and the five females represented a total population for the year. The actual gender ratio in the Clinic is approximately 70 males to 30 females; however, many of the female clients of the sample year fell into

the 120-129 IQ range and thus did not meet the IQ criteria. A broader definition which included creativity would have identified more female clients.

It is interesting to note that the disproportion of male underachievers matches a similar or even more dramatic disproportion of males in studies of achievers. Most studies included all males (Walberg, Tasi, Weinstein, Gabriel, Rasher & Rosencrans, 1981; Helsen & Crutchfield, 1969; Albert, 1980); others included only a few females (Bloom, 1985).

Instruments
Data available in the Clinic files for most students included scores from the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children-Revised (WISC-R), Group Inventory for Finding Creative Talent (GIFT), Group Inventory for Finding Interests (GIFTI), creativity inventories, the Peabody Individual Achievement Test for Mathematics and Reading (PIAT), the Achievement Identification Measure (AIM), and structured parent and student interview forms. Since all cases were relatively recent and progress notes were also available, statistical information could be supplemented by other descriptive family information.

Mean Wechsler verbal, performance, and full scale IQ scores for the sample were 137, 130, and 137, respectively.

Putting the Research To Use
Comparisons of the parenting of gifted underachievers to biographical studies of eminence provides some important help for parents. The adultlike vocabulary and reasoning of gifted children often trap parents into the early empowering of these children. This may result in feelings of later depowerment, causing children to get into defensive dependency or dominant power struggles at home and at school. Consistency between parents has been shown to be very important to the development of achievers. Although the focus of this study has been parenting, gifted children often experience some good years and some bad years which appear to be mainly related to their school and teacher experiences. Parents of the gifted should plan carefully for the transfer of independence and self-control to their gifted children and not advance them too rapidly nor succumb to pressure from their gifted children. If independence and control are given too rapidly or in degrees beyond the child's ability to cope with them, parents may have serious problems regaining control and direction.
The mean achievement test score for math was 87 percentile and for reading comprehension it was 90 percentile. Twelve (71%) scored above 95 percentile in reading, and six (35%) scored above that percentile in math. Despite their very poor school performance, these students would not have been identified as underachievers if underachievement had been defined only as a discrepancy between IQ and achievement test scores.

Mean creativity inventory scores based on GIFT and GIFFI were 78 percentile with one half of the students scoring above 90 percentile, supporting Rimm’s (1987) observations that a high proportion of underachieving children appeared to be highly creative. AIM, a parent report inventory used to describe characteristics of achievement, not surprisingly yielded a mean percentile score of 19 for this sample of underachieving students. Only two students scored above the 50 percentile and the highest score was 60 percentile.

Results

The family information for the underachieving gifted students was analyzed and compared to family data on eminent achievers using a framework presented by Olszewski, Kulieke & Buescher (1987). The main topics were (1) family structural characteristics, (2) family climate, and (3) values espoused and modeled by parents.

Family Structural Characteristics

Birth Order and Family Size. Fifty-nine percent (13) of the underachieving sample were oldest children, and this figure was similar to that found in much of the research on achievers. The average family size, 2.59 children, was also similar to the family size found in other studies (Groth, 1975). Twenty-seven percent (6) of the children were only children, and 23% (5) were either adopted children or siblings in a family with an adopted child. Adopted children were rarely mentioned in studies of achievers.

Specialness. The concept of “specialness” was discussed by Albert (1980) and Bloom (1985) in their analyses of achievers. In Albert’s study of leaders in politics and science, which included 39 presidents and vice-presidents, 48 prime ministers, and 39 Nobel Prize winners, he classified 90% of the political leaders and 74% of Nobel winners as “special children” either by birth position, death of a sibling, or death of a parent. Bloom (1985), in his studies of talent development, also described a “special” family position. Bloom’s subjects described themselves as having arrived at a sense of specialness over time based on effort and accomplishment in their talent areas. The specialness was never an explicit pronouncement but was built on what Bloom called a “long-term commitment to learning.”

The underachieving gifted sample can also be viewed from a “specialness” perspective. Their “specialness” was either attached to the parents’ early discovery of their gifted abilities or based on a long awaited birth or unusual circumstance. Later that “specialness” was withdrawn, and the “special” attribution was given to another family member. Sometimes the sense of specialness was lost as part of school adjustment. Clinical interviews indicated that all of our samples were given a great deal of early attention. More than half (54%) had that attention withdrawn dramatically by a second sibling, who then received the special designation, or by a parent’s remarriage to a stepparent. In 27% (6) of the cases “only” children adjusted poorly to sharing attention at school. In 18% (4) of the cases children never established a sense of specialness because another sibling was already designated as having that role.

Specific case examples provided insights into the trauma felt by children whose specialness was displaced:

Maureen, a gifted ninth grader, had been adopted. She was showered with extreme quantities of adult attention for the first six years of her life. Her younger sister was a “birth” child to her parents. Maureen was not only an underachiever throughout school, but shared with the therapist that she could remember always resenting her younger sister although she could not explain any reason for her feelings.

Sandy was born to a single mother who felt guilt about her out-of-wedlock pregnancy. Sandy’s mother centered most every waking moment on her child. When her mother married, Sandy felt depowered and angry at her stepfather with whom she was determined not to share mother’s attention.

When the “special” designation was withdrawn, the early dependence on extreme amounts of attention had the effect of causing the children to feel “attention neglected.” The search for a way to attract special attention again involved behaviors that parents and teachers often labeled as “spoiled” or “arrogant.” Efforts by teachers and parents to “put these children back in their places” only increased the children’s feelings of neglect and their defiant or nonproductive behaviors.

Other family structure characteristics of our gifted underachievers which appear similar to those found in earlier studies of gifted children include age of parents at birth of children and education of parents. At the time of birth, the mean age of the mothers of the children in this study was 30 and of their fathers, 32. Although having children late in life is fairly typical for the present generation, the fact that half of our sample was older than 12 suggests that these parents were older than typical for their cohort group. This is similar to findings by Terman (1925), Hollingworth (1942), and Albert (1980).

Other studies of gifted children also found parents to be highly educated (Barbe, 1981; Benbow & Stanley, 1980; Groth, 1975; Roe, 1953; Van Tassel-Baska, 1983). The average number of years of school for our sample was 15.7 for mothers and 17.9 for fathers. Only five mothers and two fathers did not have college degrees. Three mothers and eleven fathers had earned graduate degrees, most frequently at the doctoral level.
Family Climate

Descriptions of family climate are usually highly subjective. Terms like authoritarian, liberal, child centered, parent identification, or dominance are difficult to measure and define. Despite inexactness, family climate has such a crucial influence on achievement that the families of the sample of underachieving children will be described based on impressions from structured parent interviews and clinical notes.

Attitude Toward Children. A very welcome, even “over-welcome” child would best describe the attitude of almost all parents in our sample. The one exception was in the out-of-wedlock situation. All of the children were given a great deal of early attention and frequent praise. In these child centered homes there were sometimes additional adults, e.g., nearby grandparents, aunts and uncles, etc. who also lavished praise. For a few, early childhood involved only a very intense relationship with mother while father was heavily involved in his career or schooling. In no families could both parents be described as authoritarian initially. In 73% of the homes, both parents described their parenting style as liberal initially. The children thrived in these attention centered environments with 82% (18) showing early speech and vocabulary and 63% (14) reading prior to first grade. One child spoke distinct words by three months and read by two years. Despite their early vocabulary, two of the children had extreme difficulty reading in school; the remainder learned to read in first grade. Only 41% showed unusually early physical development.

Parental Philosophies About Child Rearing. Although most children spent their early childhood with parents who considered their parenting quite liberal, only one couple maintained that parenting philosophy consistently. By school age, extreme differences in parenting styles emerged. In 95% of the families, one parent played the role of the parent that challenges and disciplines, and the other took the role of protector. There was increasing opposition between parents as the challenger became more authoritarian and the rescuer became increasingly protective. For 54% (12) of the families, the father took on the role of disciplinarian; for 41% (9) mother played the authoritarian role.

When children were asked which of their parents was easier, only five children (23%) indicated that their parents were similar in expectations. Twenty-five percent of the boys thought their father was easier, and 50% chose their mother. Three of the girls (60%) chose their father as easier. Only one girl said her mother was easier.

Family Relationships. Relationships between family members further established some clastic problems. Although husband/wife relationships other than parenting were relatively good for 68% of the families, that relationship was viewed as poor by 32% of the families. Forty-one percent of the children indicated that they had a good relationship with their mother; 59% of the children had argumentative relationships. The father/child relationship was only slightly worse with 36% reporting a good relationship and 63% indicating an oppositional one. Sibling rivalry was negative and hostile for 45% (10) of the children. Twenty-seven percent (6) of the children indicated reasonably good sibling relationships. Six children had no siblings. Seventy-three percent of the children indicated at least one shared interest with both parents, but the remaining six children were so oppositional that they indicated no common interests at all.

Structuring of Family Life. A theme of family organization and consistent and predictable expectations for conduct seems to run through studies of giftedness and eminence (Bloom, 1985; MacKinnon, 1965; Walberg et al., 1981). This theme was noticeably absent in the homes of our underachieving children. Differences between parents in the standards, limits, and expectations provided unclear guidelines. Ninety-five percent of the students (all but one) indicated that they could manipulate one or both parents much of the time, and the parents of these children confirmed their children’s observations. The absence of consistent leadership among these parents was remarkable.

Values Espoused and Enacted by Parents

Achievement Orientation. Parents of gifted underachievers were similar in many ways to parents in the families of the eminent. That is, they consistently told their children that they expected achievement, and for the most part they were hard-working, achievement-oriented adults. Students in our sample indicated personal perceptions of their parents as good students (82% for mothers and 77% for fathers). They also reported clear and reasonable grade expectations by their parents with mothers expecting a mean grade point average of 3.2, and fathers, a mean of 3.3. The expectations were somewhat low considering their abilities and should not have represented pressures to these children. These parents, like the parents in most studies of eminence, provided their children with early enrichment (100%), and 91% of the children were involved in lessons of one kind or another. Twenty-seven percent of the children were described as socially well-adjusted; 73% believed that they were not well-accepted by peers. In Bloom’s (1985) study, research neurologists tended to be more social; mathematicians tended to be less so. To this point, there are mainly similarities between our sample and studies of eminence. Differences follow.

High energy and achievement orientation were characteristic of all parents in the Bloom (1985) studies. The Goertzel & Goertzel (1962) study emphasized this dramatically by indicating that all parents but one of the 400 eminent persons whose lives they examined exhibited very high energy. At first glance, these characteristics appeared to be true of our sample as well. All of the fathers were employed, most in professional and high status careers. Five were medical doctors, four were attorneys, one was a psychologist, and one was an engineer. Most of the others were involved in a variety of successful businesses, and several were college educators. One was a police officer, and only one was employed in a blue-collar occupation. Despite the high level of these persons’ careers and their commitment to them, there was
a dramatic failure to communicate the value of those careers to their children. Three of the five doctors were not happy with their career choice. They considered themselves effective and good doctors, but complained openly and frequently to their children about the time constraints and the frustrations of medicine. Although two doctors were happy with their choice, their wives complained frequently in front of the children about the lack of time for family life. A teenage son of a very successful engineer indicated that he did not know what his father did and that he thought his father was less intelligent than he was. There was a general lack of understanding of and a disinterest in their fathers’ work.

When the underachievers were asked which parent “they were most the same as,” only 25% of the boys chose their father while 50% (3) of the girls did. In contrast, studies of eminence found that parents (Bloom, 1985; Albert, 1980; MacKinnon, 1965) often encouraged their children in their own talent areas. Furthermore, fathers were typically devoted to their own work and were models for persistence and intrinsic interest.

In our study, mothers were typically full-time homemakers, even those with a professional education. Only four were employed outside the home. Although most were involved in some volunteer activities, much of their time was spent on child centered activities. These mothers usually expressed frustration with their inability to pursue their profession. Only one underachieving girl identified with her mother while 56% of the boys saw themselves as most similar to her.

Although most mothers in the family studies of eminence were also full-time homemakers and involved in volunteer activities, there was little evidence that they viewed their role negatively. This change may be related to the changing roles of females in our society.

None of the parents in our sample involved their children in their career interests. There was little time for the fun and game playing that were described among Bloom’s (1985) mathematicians in childhood or the shared interest in an art form as among pianists and sculptors. Encouragement of independent science projects and educational discussions found among the research neurologists was also lacking in our sample. Although these children had had early enrichment, work for the joy of work or learning for the love of learning were not obviously modeled in later childhood or adolescence as they were in 90% of 400 families described by Goertzel & Goertzel (1962). Although families were busy and active, they typically found it difficult to manage their frenetic scheduling. Despite reasonable financial resources, parents tended to feel disorganized and pressured. They often acknowledged feeling out of control of their children. Parents and their children often voiced a similar “dislike of work.”

Thus, although the parents of underachieving gifted children espoused the values of achievement, their own lives modeled more of the frustrations than the satisfactions of that value.

School-Home Relationships. Attitude toward school was another key issue in the values expressed by parents. Earlier studies of eminence (Goertzel & Goertzel, 1962) showed some parent and student discontent with education. A small percentage of those achieving adults had received private tutoring and some home schooling. Nelson and Crutchfield (1969) described their 60 mathematicians as good students who mainly respected their parents and “were not difficult to raise.” Walberg et al. (1981) found less than 20% of his sample of 221 eminent men to have school problems. In Bloom’s (1985) study parents were supportive of education, and there was a general expectation that children would be successful by school standards. Although neurologists and mathematicians did not attribute their success to schooling, and musicians and sculptors minimized their scholarly efforts in favor of their arts, none of these students performed below average in school. For the most part, they were very successful students. There was no mention of serious behavior problems.

The underachievement in this study varied. Some were getting Bs and Cs instead of As while quite a few were receiving Ds or failing in school. Some had serious behavior problems at home and school. Bloom (1985) and Goertzel & Goertzel (1962) found a noticeable lack of rebelliousness in their family studies of achievement while some in our sample were extremely rebellious as early as sixth grade. The seriousness of the problems for most children in our sample suggested directions that would have closed doors on formal higher educational opportunities in the future.

In our sample of underachievers, parents were involved in some opposition to the school for 90% of the children. Although in some cases the problems seemed more related to the parents, in other cases there were major inappropriate classroom arrangements for children, and parent opposition appeared to be justified. Examples include a first grader reading at eighth grade level reading alone in class without teacher or group stimulation, and a fifth grader recommended for retention because of “immaturity” despite her 137 IQ test score and achievement test scores in the 90 percentiles. Some teachers denied children’s giftedness because of their poor school performance or problem behaviors. Clinic personnel usually found support from schools in making changes for these children.

Independence. Homework effort and independence are other areas which separated our underachievers from achievers. Unfinished and incomplete work were characteristic of most of the underachievers. Only 27% of the sample spent an hour or more a day on schoolwork. More than half (59%) of our sample were dependent on their parents for all or much of their homework. The degree of student dependence on parents for school tasks is in dramatic contrast to that found in the childhoods of eminent persons. As children, achievers not only handled their own homework independently but typically learned beyond school requirements.
Discussion

This study attempts to point out similarities and differences between the early family environments of achieving adults and those of a sample of gifted underachieving children. Although this is not a controlled study, comparisons are sufficiently dramatic to be instructive. Table 1 summarizes these comparisons.

The family structural characteristics of underachieving gifted children appear to be similar, for the most part, to the early studies of family characteristics of other gifted achieving populations. A higher percentage of children who were either adopted or had an adopted sibling had not been identified in earlier studies. The concept of "specialness" is meaningful.

Table 1
Comparison of Family Environments of Eminence to those of Gifted Underachievers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Eminence and giftedness</th>
<th>Underachieving gifted</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family structures</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size of family</td>
<td>Small</td>
<td>Small</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth order</td>
<td>More than half oldest</td>
<td>More than half oldest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopted children in family</td>
<td>Not reported</td>
<td>Quite a few*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male/female ratio</td>
<td>More males</td>
<td>More males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialness</td>
<td>Earned specialness</td>
<td>Specialness displaced for most</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age of parents</td>
<td>Older parents</td>
<td>A few never earned specialness**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education of parents</td>
<td>Highly educated</td>
<td>Older parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent loss</td>
<td>Low parent divorce, some parent loss</td>
<td>Highly educated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family climate</td>
<td>Child centered. High adult personal...</td>
<td>Child centered early*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child centeredness</td>
<td>Mixed findings. Artists, authors more...</td>
<td>Considerable discord**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discord and trauma vs. secure supportive families</td>
<td>Mixed, but nonauthoritarian and consistent</td>
<td>Early liberal, then inconsistent**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parenting style</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Family relationships</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Father/mother</td>
<td>Usually very good</td>
<td>Some good, some bad*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/mother</td>
<td>Usually good</td>
<td>More bad**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/father</td>
<td>Usually good</td>
<td>More bad**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child/siblings</td>
<td>Usually good</td>
<td>Mixed**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure and organization</td>
<td>Consistent and predictable</td>
<td>Inconsistent. Most indicated...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Values espoused and modeled by parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Achievement orientation expressed</td>
<td>Valued work and achievement</td>
<td>Valued work and achievement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade expectations</td>
<td>Reasonable and unpressured</td>
<td>Reasonable and unpressured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early enrichment and activities</td>
<td>Provided</td>
<td>Provided</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social adjustment of children</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Many not accepted by peers*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High energy of parents</td>
<td>Dramatically consistent</td>
<td>Mainly true*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father's career</td>
<td>Mainly committed, positive and sharing interests</td>
<td>Considerable frustration with career or if positive, not sharing interests **</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother's career</td>
<td>Mainly homemakers, volunteers, busy and happy</td>
<td>Mainly homemakers, volunteers, busy but not satisfied**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identification with same sexed parent</td>
<td>Mixed research on identification, mainly positive for achievement with boys and girls with fathers</td>
<td>Few males identified with father; few females identified with mother**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/home relationship</td>
<td>Mainly good and supportive. Reasonable school adjustment</td>
<td>Many problems with school environments**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homework independence</td>
<td>Independence plus additional learning projects; some parent monitoring</td>
<td>Homework dependent: absence of independent learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intrinsic learning</td>
<td>Frequently modeled by parents</td>
<td>Rarely modeled by parents**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Indicate minor differences between biographies of eminence and families of gifted underachievers
** Indicate great differences
although it is a difficult one to quantify. Eighty-two percent of our underachievers were described as "special" in terms of birth order and adult attention. One father described it aptly — "An emperor and a Renaissance man at age four—dethroned by age six, and a behavior problem and underachiever thereafter." "Adultizing" of the preschool child was common. The adjustment to dealing with sibling, adult, or peer competition after "attention addiction" or the early exercise of adultlike power is perhaps the most pertinent, although subtle, structural difference.

The family climate of underachievers was very different from the biographical information on eminence. Although early child centeredness and liberal parenting encouraged independence and often too much power, later parenting became inconsistent. One parent became the "mean" parent while the other parent took the role of "protector." Expectations, organization, and structure became inconsistent. Husband/wife relations relative to parenting were strained. Parent/child relations with at least one parent, and sometimes both parents, became oppositional. Sibling rivalry for almost half the children appeared more extreme than usual, and general interrelationships in the home were much more negative than those described in the biographies of achievers. In some cases, one sibling allied himself or herself with the mother while the other sibling formed an alliance with the father. In other cases, all the children in the family united with one parent against the other. In an effort to be reasonable and flexible, parents were often viewed by children as inconsistent, weak, and manipulatable.

Although all parents showed concern about achievement for their children, the modeling of intrinsic and independent learning, positive commitment to career, and respect for school were remarkably, although unintentionally, absent. The enrichment and fun of early childhood were often replaced by a plethora of activities and lessons which were so time consuming that they left little energy for continued intrinsic home learning, independent projects, or family game playing. Management by parents of students' homework resulted in dependent patterns and parent/child arguments.

Many parents openly opposed teachers and school policies. Parents rarely shared their career interests with their children. They often felt quite negative about their own work although they had invested many years in preparation for their careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Many parents openly opposed teachers and school policies. Parents rarely shared their career interests with their children. They often felt quite negative about their own work although they had invested many years in preparation for their careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Many parents openly opposed teachers and school policies. Parents rarely shared their career interests with their children. They often felt quite negative about their own work although they had invested many years in preparation for their careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers. Many parents openly opposed teachers and school policies. Parents rarely shared their career interests with their children. They often felt quite negative about their own work although they had invested many years in preparation for their careers. Well-educated mothers who centered their lives on careers.

Ramiications for Parenting
General recommendations for parenting gifted children emerge from this comparison of gifted underachievers with achievers. Detailed suggestions go beyond the scope of this research article.

References

CORRECTION

In the Spring issue of Gifted Child Quarterly (Volume 32, Number 2) three lines from the first paragraph on p. 278 of the article entitled, “Comparison of gifted children and their parents’ perception of the home environment,” by Frances A. Karnes and Victor R. D’Illo were omitted. The paragraph should begin as follows:

The 90-item true/false Family Environment Scale (FES) was standardized on a sample of 1125 families characterized as being normal and 500 families described as distressed. Data on the validity and reliability can be found in the FES manual.