The Emotional Journey of the Gifted and Talented Adolescent Female

Suzanne Blakeley

Sarah rolled her eyes then laughed as half a dozen waiters gathered around the table to sing "Happy Birthday." Turning 16, our daughter recently celebrated a rite of passage that will soon bring car keys, added responsibilities, and long-awaited freedoms. It was a bittersweet moment for me: Sarah was still healing from an intense, yet brief depression, she battled during ninth grade.

At 14, our daughter lost a hard fought struggle. Her slow descent into depression began during fourth grade after our family's relocation to the East. Once self-confident and happy, she became filled with anxiety and frustration by the end of middle school. In ninth grade Sarah was haunted by rapid thoughts, and sleepless nights. Her tremendous mental energies eventually spiraled inward, settling into a looping, repetitive chant: I'm unacceptable. "What is happening? Why me?" she cried. Nearly three decades ago, I asked myself these same questions when I suffered from a similar depression. I had hoped my own experience would spare my child such pain. Devastated, I assured Sarah that in time she would discover the answers to her questions.

The One Who Seems to Need the Least, Often Needs the Most

We notified the high school of her emotional difficulties and her teachers were surprised: Sarah had always been gregarious and maintained high marks. At home, however, she shed the mask she wore each day to school. Exhausted, she hurled angry looks and disrespectful comments toward family members before withdrawing to her room.

Sarah's depression was quite a storm that affected the entire family: her older sister was worried, patient and understanding; her father, identified as gifted in the late 1950s, began to speak openly about his own feelings of being misunderstood and "differentness." I felt alone, unaware of the wealth of available support and resources. Sarah's difficulties brought for me a deeper understanding of why special assistance is so essential for the gifted to achieve intellectual potential and the acceptance each requires and deserves.

Thankfully, her recovery was amazingly swift. Therefore, I share Sarah's story and our parental successes, failings, and revelations in the spirit of helping others. Sometimes courageous young women attending traditional public and private schools today "fall through the cracks."

Factoring in Past Life Experiences

Upon relocating, Sarah's father and I were delighted to find a community in proximity to a major metropolitan area, a school district that followed a similar curriculum, and a home within a neighborhood setting. Sarah—an extrovert and risk-taker born with an easy temperament—accepted the move as another one of life's great adventures, since past moves had brought positive experiences.

Her formative years were spent in large, homogeneous suburban districts located in the Midwest. Coursework was differentiated within the classroom to provide challenge based upon her individual learning style, abilities, and interest (Schoolwide Enrichment Model). Sarah advanced as far as she was capable, while avoiding much of the "differentness" that pullout programs or tracking often create among peers.
Teaching complemented Sarah's visual, hands-on, inductive learning style; she accepted the repetition of skills required to master certain materials without hesitation. Interdisciplinary activities allowed Sarah to work with peers of varying ages; her older sister also increased her opportunities, allowing even greater autonomy at a young age.

The district was responsive and well-funded with a strong infrastructure. Academic assessment was ongoing, and curriculum and conduct policies were well-developed and consistently followed. "Character Counts" and "Kindness is Contagious" programs ensured respectful interactions among peers and staff.

At an early age, Sarah understood that her action, inaction, or reaction to presented experiences were under her control. She learned how her voice and personal choices impacted her and those around her, further reinforcing independent development of positive life strategies. She flourished academically and personally.

Our parenting style closely parallels this type of educational environment. My husband and I share a strong bond based upon common values and similar intellect, and we continue a family tradition of open expression and respect. Our approach is individualized and authoritative with "directives" seldom issued. With praise and physical affection, we acknowledge good personal choices that dwell within guidelines set by a blend of Christian and Classical Western philosophies. Independent thought is stressed along with the right to personal expression, as long as it does not harm others.

We facilitate the learning process. Sarah moves freely beneath our guidelines to make personal decisions based upon her abilities and past choices. She is allowed to experience the natural consequences for inappropriate actions, which is often the most difficult part of parenting. We step in only when a choice or action may cause irreparable harm.

This type of parenting and Sarah's differentiated schooling promoted her exceptional problem-solving abilities, which enhanced her independence and self-discipline. During adolescence, her past experiences and our philosophy also created the fertile ground for plenty of "intellectual debate" as it invites questioning.

The Extroverted Gifted and Talented Adolescent Is Often a Lonely Profile

Bright and creative, Sarah's grades have always been excellent in all disciplines. Her talents literally exploded during middle school. One year she focused on mathematics, then the next year it would be language arts and music. This pattern continues into high school. Our daughter possesses the well-documented gifted intellectual and personality characteristics. Among other traits, her sensitivity, empathy, and drive to understand were heightened at 8 years old.

Sarah "stuck out" during middle school, physically maturing at 11. She was socially more mature and a full head taller than the majority of her peers. She was smart and "different" during a period when peer pressure mounts, and academics often take a back seat to socialization. Highly articulate, she also resolved peer conflict in an adult manner.

Considering Sarah's capabilities and innate strong sense of self, I recognized long ago that we must avoid treading upon her emerging independence: we must provide assistance without overprotection. She lacked life experience and her emotional maturity was not yet fully synchronized with her advanced intellectual and social development. This created difficulties when parenting her in a diverse world filled with "Instant Messaging," peer violence, and mixed media messages.

Our child allowed me a peek into her thinking during various stages of growth; poignant statements popped out unexpectedly while she accompanied me on errands, when I washed dishes, or at her bedtime (see box below). During our mutual exploration of her thoughts, my
daughter's personal choices assured me she was developing strategies and choosing appropriate activities to positively channel and balance her strengths.

"The Art of Listening"

Sarah's short statements were often the most revealing of her inner turmoil and unmet needs. Self-discovery and growth are solitary and often painful processes, and they take great patience on the part of the parent. We allowed these statements and others to guide us in assisting her on her timetable, preserving her independence.

"Why do people speak to each other so harshly?"
"The teacher is always screaming."
"Can you give me extra spelling words?"
1994, 4th grade

"Mom, for some reason I don't seem to be connecting with the kids at school."
1996, 7th grade

"I often 'dip down' so I can have friends."
"I feel so controlled; this school feels like a prison."
"There is no respect for individuality."
1998, end of 8th grade

"I'm struggling. I feel like I'm suffocating."
"Grandpa, I think the high school will open up more opportunities for me."
Summer 1999, upon entrance to 9th grade

"How would you feel if all you did was deal with clueless kids all day long?"
"I think one way, but I feel another way."
"I surround myself with a bubble."
"I'm not making good choices for myself lately."
"My strengths are a curse."
1999, 9th grade

"This is the first year I have ever felt challenged at school."
"The kids don't have the same experiences that I have. Where are all the kids like me?"
"It's hard, I'm lonely, but it is better to be who I am."
"Thank you for sticking by me and helping me be the best I can be."
2000, 10th grade

Sarah voiced several concerns beginning in fourth grade: her dismay with an environment that lacked the opportunities she required for intellectual and personal growth; the uncivil and inconsistent behaviors of adults and peers; and the increasing lack of connection from peers.

**A Shattered Idealism: Things Are Not the Way They Ought to Be**

By the time Sarah entered middle school, district leadership was changing and the schools were in transition, struggling with increased State mandates, rising costs, and a lack of community funding. Sarah and we had minimal success with efforts to meet her needs. We were unable to move and Sarah chose not to go to a private school, due to the boarding requirement.
Sarah's friends began to choose different paths by the end of middle school. She tried to "blend in" by trying on different personas, and then she sought diversity on purpose in an attempt to bring attention to her right to individuality. Minimal extracurricular activities were available to promote new friendships and a sense of belonging within the school community. Our daughter had instinctively pulled away from us and grown closer to her sister—four and a half years older—with whom she shared family values, past experiences, and meaningful conversation. She found acceptance and safety within the relationship.

Sarah was still optimistic the high school would open up opportunities. She practiced the entire summer for team try-outs since sports historically provided well-organized activities for friendships in the district. A few months into her freshman year, she found courses unchallenging and her peers now adjusting to newly acquired freedoms. She was constantly hazed and humiliated by older team players, and her involvement in a church group and a school club proved "pointless" as both were disorganized with no apparent goals. Sarah's sister also had left home to start her first year in college.

The impact of her repeated effort to reach out resulted in negative, not rewarding experiences. Sarah fought fiercely for a sense of belonging, and without the daily support of her sister, her anxiety and frustration increased. She became increasingly withdrawn and we sought help; I felt the potential for suicide was real and that she should be professionally monitored. I deliberately chose a woman therapist who was soft-spoken and gentle, since Sarah did not respond well to abrupt adults. I shared my despair with a good friend of mine; I had a good cry. "I feel like a fly on the wall," Sarah stated. Restricted thinking, an unresponsive environment, and social isolation had taken its toll. Under the circumstances, I believed depression was inevitable.

**A Word on Professional Assistance**

At the time Sarah entered therapy she still respectfully vocalized the inconsistencies she observed: among family members, our parenting versus the parenting of her friends, peer interactions, as well as teachers' methods of instruction.

The therapist felt strongly that due to Sarah's expressiveness and maturity, though only 14, she should be seen alone without a parent present. Communication regarding our daughter's progress and the manner in which issues were addressed was spotty at best. Before long, our daughter became increasingly inexpressive and hostile at home. She scrutinized and criticized family members and loudly resisted authority. Her frustration and impulsivity increased when there was conflict with peers at school or she did not get her way at home.

The headway we made at home appeared undone after each visit with the therapist. I finally realized that reflective, talk therapy served to only further increase our daughter's anxiety and frustration. We ended sessions after Sarah made a series of poor personal choices within one week and had little idea why. Upon parting, the therapist said she had empowered Sarah too much. We believe she had unintentionally enabled Sarah's negative behaviors, diminishing our authority and her emotional bond with family members. Much later I asked my daughter if the therapy had helped her and she replied "No."

I prefer an educational approach; Sarah was seeking solutions. We stepped up our efforts, continuing to draw upon her amazing problem-solving abilities. Pleasant past experiences and a close family provided her with resiliency, which was key to her recovery.

My greatest fear was that resulting negative behaviors might be carried into adulthood: namely, resistance to authority, conflict avoidance, a lack of awareness of her impact on others, and withdrawal under stress. She had built a "bubble" around herself—insulating her expressiveness,
sensitivity, and warmth—as protection against the teasing, rejection, and overall unresponsiveness of the environment.

**Growth Takes Great Patience**

Sarah's depression, like mine, occurred when she was in a situation beyond her control where there was no apparent solution or escape. She and I both share a strong sense of self, an easy temperament, and are capable of handling many tasks at one time. Our "go with the flow" temperament along with great empathy made each of us susceptible to depression. The warning signals that indicate when well-being is threatened are often ignored or suppressed.

I personally avoided a depression by transferring to a private high school that met my needs; however, the "inevitable" arrived with a brief depressive episode in my early twenties, never to be repeated. Sarah was aware of this. "I might as well learn now," she stated.

To begin, we assisted our daughter with recognizing signals and discovering positive ways to temper her sensitivity so she did not have to surround herself with a "bubble." Her initial efforts were rewarding, opening the door once more for independent development of additional positive strategies. We assisted her with identification of gifts and balancing her strengths so they did not become weaknesses. Current district leadership has also permitted flexibility in her coursework to ensure intellectual stimulation, and implemented initiatives within the school to promote a respectful learning environment. I feel confident future depression for Sarah is highly unlikely.

**Parental Involvement: Assisting Sarah in Discovering "Why"**

**Reducing anxiety and stress:**

- A required 2-week period of reflection to diminish the bombardment of incoming information and inconsistencies. This brought the structure and quiet needed to rejuvenate and clarify thinking. Reintroduction of stimuli was gradual in order for Sarah to learn how to compartmentalize information. Academics were a lifeline and "de-schooling" would have been detrimental. She attended school, but we limited peer contact to 30 minutes on the phone, and no Internet except for school projects. Interestingly, she did not use the phone nor did she use the computer.
- During anxious and inexpressive periods, I maintained contact through physical touch—backrubs, hugs, etc.—allowing my daughter to initiate any conversation. Sometimes it became hard for me not to initiate conversation, but I did my best.
- Once de-stressed, she was asked to think about those things in all areas of her life that did not appear to be working for her.

**Recognizing signals for emotional self-regulation:**

- Sarah admitted she often ignored her intuition. We worked on listening to "gut feel" as it is an early warning sign of possible "flooding" as well as those situations academically or emotionally that could potentially create frustration or anxiety. Warning signs are indications that well-being could potentially be threatened.
- The "red flag alert." When Sarah appeared disorganized or emotional, I pointed this out as a warning sign that required an "attitude adjustment" (self-adjustment to her reaction) or that she needed to kick in her problem-solving abilities to create options. Verbal expression and sharing a concern was encouraged, but to preserve her independence Sarah had the freedom to privately weigh possible factors and make that decision for
herself. She now calls her own "red flag alert" and asks for our assistance only when she is unsuccessful in resolving something on her own.

- Right to privacy was maintained.
- We promoted sensible exercise and healthy eating habits.
- I suggested ways to alleviate stress, but allowed Sarah to discover the methods that worked best for her: favorites included quiet time or a nap, music, reading, a warm bath, backrubs. She requires solitude each day.

Finding a passion:

- As she had withdrawn from activities, we required that Sarah choose one activity of interest to pursue. Her first activity was rather solitary: music lessons. After a few months she switched to horseback riding, and has since found camaraderie with others who share her love of the sport.
- Sarah expressed mathematics was important to her, so we located a mentor—a successful gifted woman—who takes her beyond classroom work. They have a healthy bond that is rewarding for each.

Identifying gifts:

- Intellectual and personality characteristics are called "strengths," not gifts. Her strengths were often misunderstood and perceived as weaknesses by educators less secure in their teaching or staff lacking knowledge of GT characteristics. Also, those outside the family were often too demanding and very hard on our daughter due to her advanced abilities. I asked my daughter for an assessment and politely reminded instructors of her age if she felt they were too demanding.
- I used expressions from literature that indicated what Sarah experienced was not uncommon for creative, bright individuals. One of my favorite expressions is Goethe's "Everything in moderation," and several passages found in Letters to a Young Poet by Rainer Maria Rilke, which I read to her.
- Sarah reads books focused on the motivation behind an individual's behavior.
- We respectfully pointed out those individuals, family members and extended family who appeared to manage their strengths successfully and unsuccessfully to assist with self-identification and balance.
- We share with Sarah the difficulties our strengths created for us growing up and the resulting behavior patterns we struggle with as adults.

Learning to grab the riches and manage conflict:

- We used daily experiences, positive and negative, to brainstorm and practice problem-solving. We suggested the selective use of humor on occasion to defuse a tense situation.
- Sarah began to feel less restricted by looking at various options, regaining a sense of control over her life. Finding options in a restrictive environment is challenging, but can be done with parental assistance.
- Discussions surrounding her choices that might be considered "bad judgment" focused instead on "good choices based upon fulfilling those needs she deemed important."
• It has been a tremendous help that new district leadership is validating and systematically addressing many of the concerns Sarah voiced over the years. We openly discuss the limitations of the school and the community, but focus on the positive improvements we each observe.

• Sarah is accepting and working within limitations, and has become involved in a task force created to promote respect, and recognize student and staff achievements within her school. She is positively channeling her strengths, particularly her great empathy for others, through volunteerism.

Accepting strengths:

• Self-acceptance is evident when laughter and well-being returns.

References

Author's Note
I would like to thank Gail Larsen for her support and compassion as we talked about talents and gifts of our daughters.