Brilliance — The Childhood Dilemma of Unusual Intellect

By William Dahlberg

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I am a child psychiatrist with a special interest in gifted children. Like so many others, I think of our children as one of our greatest assets and resources. I think that our most gifted children are in some ways the most important — and the most underserved segment of that population. They are vitally important since, hopefully at least, it is from their ranks that the leaders of the future will come. They are the least served for a variety of reasons including the incorrect notion that they don’t have any problems and that they can look after themselves.

Quite the contrary is true. These children cannot look after themselves. These children have the same sorts of problems that less gifted children have. Moreover, their intellectual gifts give them the capacity to deploy disturbed patterns of thought, feeling and action with great speed and in ways that typically bewilder the most attentive and well motivated parents and educators.

The basic problems inherent in being extremely gifted are quite straightforward. They revolve around the main issues of being “different” (statistically), and the reactions that others have to the child who is so unusual.

One of the most commonly used test instruments for measuring intelligence is the Stanford-Binet, L-M edition, set with a mean at 100 and a sigma (one standard deviation) of 16. Therefore, going to the right of the mean gives I.Q.s of 116, 132, 148, 164, 180, 196. From the point of view of percentiles, that part of the curve to the right of 148 contains .13% of the population. To the right of 164 lay less than .03%.

I consider trauma to be any event, or any set of events or circumstances, which is likely to interfere with optimal physical, emotional, or spiritual growth. Because brilliant children are so unique, they are likely to be traumatized. They become isolated by and from the major groups to which they would, under normal conditions, relate. These children tend to be rejected by family members who may not be able to understand them unless they also are quite gifted and/or are not intimidated by the child’s capabilities. I recall one child I treated some time ago who became fascinated with Descartes and his mathematics and philosophy until his older brother told him emphatically that he couldn’t possibly understand what he was talking about. Such things did not interest the older brother at all. Responses like that can quickly discourage anyone, let alone a child whose
self organization is still relatively embryonic. It is even more likely that they will be rejected by peers who treat them like freaks and are also envious of their extreme gifts.

Brilliant children’s psycho-social environments are seldom equipped to deal constructively with their situation. The usual response among their peers is to regard them as strange and to ostracize them. Forcing any child into a state of exile is bad enough. Extremely gifted children will begin immediately to do all sorts of things that make their exiled state more and more permanent, walling themselves off from any effort by others to be helpful. This response renders them less able or willing to make any effort for themselves.

Among the unhelpful responses of others are not believing, not understanding, and not accepting these children’s situation. Some envy their gifts. It is not unusual for teachers and coaches to attempt to “own” these children, taking advantage of them and their family. This, among many other things, gives rise to all sorts of entirely bogus “special schools,” many of which in the final analysis, collude with society’s rejecting attitude.

These highly gifted children regularly become reclusive and isolated. In part, because of the tendency towards primary process thinking, such things as magic, spirituality, and belief in the supernatural become easy escape routes for the extremely gifted child. If these children then resort to books or music, or other interests not commonly shared by peers, they find themselves in a spiral of increasing isolation, fascination with the bizarre, and ostracism, from which it becomes more difficult to escape. Furthermore, they will likely find their protective “cocoon” more to their liking, making any effort to rejoin the larger group less probable or appealing.

**Case Example**

Matthew was a 9-year-old boy. In the Spring of 1989, his father asked me to have lunch with him. The request took me a bit by surprise although I had known Mr. Q., pleasantly, for some while. He had rather half-heartedly asked to meet with me earlier, but had not followed through. His manner of asking, on this occasion, clearly suggested that whatever he had on his mind needed prompt attention.

It turned out that Mr. Q. wanted and needed to talk about his distress over his son, Matthew, who, several days earlier, had been again expelled from his classroom over some minor infraction. Mr. Q. described how a few hours later. Matthew had again begun to talk about death and suicide. Shortly thereafter, he tried to stab himself with a butter knife. When his father tried to wrest the knife away from the lad, Matthew attacked his father!

Matthew was described as a child who, even as an infant of 10 months, was already "sounding out" words. The precise details are fascinating. He had been sitting on his father’s legs while dad read a professional journal. Mr. Q. became aware that Matthew was beginning to read aloud the title of the journal. Within hours and days there was abundant, additional evidence, that the lad was very gifted. He was found copying pictures of atoms of which he had found diagrams in the encyclopedia. He seemed
particularly intrigued by the shape of various orbits and their relative distances from each other.

By the time Matthew was 18 months old he was reading simple stories to the delight of his parents. His mother, an elementary school teacher, provided him with learning materials for early first grade. Matthew quickly mastered them and was eager for more. Shortly after his third birthday, while visiting an aunt who had a Ph.D. in mathematics, Matthew demonstrated an astonishing comprehension of calculus.

Mr. and Mrs. Q. started Matthew out in the local public school, where he soon became bored. Matthew’s kindergarten teacher put forth the greatest effort. Gifted herself, she supplied him with a lot of stimulating material. However, by the end of the first year, it was clear that other arrangements had to be made. During his second year, Matthew went to a special school for the gifted but wasn’t really happy. Nor were his parents. By that time, it had become clear that his sister Anne, two years his junior, was definitely in his league intellectually — maybe even brighter, but “better adjusted.”

A year before my first meeting with the family, Matthew had expressed an interest in playing classical music which he heard at home all the time. When his expressed interest had some determination, his father arranged lessons with a noted professional. Within six months, Matthew was playing several of Bach’s “Two And Three Part Inventions” very well and entirely from memory.

Everyone was impressed — except for Matthew, who seemed slightly incredulous that there should be such a commotion over playing music that made such sense. Still, it was an accomplishment by ordinary standards. His teacher, an experienced church organist and music director, wondered what to do next. Matthew supplied the answer: “I want to play the pipe organ!” A few weeks before I first met with him, Matthew had begun to work on Bach’s Tocatta and Fugue in A.

Matthew knew how to read at an advanced level before he began school. He could spell words that other children his age had never heard, much less used. Electron, ellipse, asymptote, and allegory were standard fare for him. He could define these words as well, because he had spent countless hours poring over the family encyclopedia and dictionary. In view of the complexity and urgency of the situation, I decided that it would be best to meet with both the child’s parents first to get more information, and to establish a working relationship. In a contiguous hour, if possible, I would meet with Matthew.

The lad’s parents were both very bright and well educated. As an elementary school teacher, Mary’s education had included a considerable amount of formal psychological training and had participated in many group exercises of various sorts. She had thought of psychotherapy for herself, but had not actually ever talked to any mental health professional in that context.

John came from an extended family which has included several world-class thinkers. A grandparent was the inventor of an electrical device used the world over, which had he held the patent, would have made the entire family very wealthy. Other ancestors had distinguished themselves as world-class scientists and statesmen.

Both parents were unhappy with themselves, their marriage, and their careers. They were devoted to each other and to their children. Both were alarmed about Matthew. Both were at wit’s end. Their home was in constant turmoil owing to their own busy professional schedules and the demands of the children’s educations.
My first meeting alone with Matthew was fascinating. He entered my office with complete composure, sat down, crossed his legs like an adult, and was ready.

Matthew was a delightfully attractive child, very slightly small for his age. He had an engaging, contagious smile and wonderful, quick changes of expression. He possessed a marvelous capacity to make a great assortment of sounds, such as the crack of a baseball bat, a head of lettuce being ripped apart for a salad, and fluids being poured from pitchers. These sounds, and many others, were used from time to time to add color to whatever he was saying. His body movements, while initially restrained, were wonderfully graceful, almost as though he had taken advantage of professional training.

Despite all his poise and grace, Matthew was painfully sad. Tears were close at hand. We sat together for a few minutes, and he began to cry softly. I offered him a tissue. He dried his tears, blew his nose, regathered his composure, readjusted his posture and looked at me.

Deciding that I should take a more active role, I offered him some specific avenues of exploration. I commented that in addition to the problems about which I already knew. I thought it likely that there were some stresses at home between his parents, and also between himself and them, as well as between himself and Anne.

“Right you are, I’ll give you an example. I assume that you know that some people like little crackers on top of their chili, and others prefer grated cheese. Well, my mother likes crackers and my father prefers cheese. And usually, they argue about that! Isn’t that absurd?”

We both laughed. The child spoke with flawless diction and enunciation. He give the impression of speaking from a prepared text, which of course he was, in a sense. I had rarely heard any child speak so well.

Matthew and I then began to talk about the various things that troubled him: school and his classmates in particular, except for those with whom he played baseball. He liked his teachers but they didn’t quite seem to “get it.” At school, his teacher was clearly trying to be helpful, but Matthew soon became bored because he already knew the material, or mastered it so quickly that further instruction was unnecessary or superfluous. All of his classmates were nice enough, but they always got angry with him because he got all the answers right. His principal music teacher was another problem. He was a very nice man and a wonderful musician (nationally famous, in fact) but he really didn’t seem to quite ”get it” either. Matthew commented ruefully, “Oh sure, Bach’s Two and Three Part Inventions are O.K. But they aren’t all that hard to play.”

By our fifth meeting things at school and at home had settled down considerably. After the sixth meeting, as I went with Matthew back to my waiting room, his father asked him if he had told me what he had done the evening before. Matthew looked a little uncomfortable.

I asked, “Matthew, would you like to tell me what you did last night?”

He shook his head and seemed a bit embarrassed. “Dad, you tell Dr. Dahlberg.”

His father, who by then was enormously relieved and very proud of his son said, “Last night, Matthew felt so much better that he decided to write a cantata.”

I was stunned. “Matthew, you wrote a cantata? That is wonderful! Did you write the whole thing out?”

Matthew looked only a trifle disappointed. ”No. I didn’t write it all out. We ran out of paper. But the rest of it is in my mind!”
The next time he came in he brought the first part of the score for me to see. It was like looking at a piece of original Bach or Mozart — there was a staff for the soprano voice, followed by a staff for the tenor voice, followed by a staff for the bass voice, followed by a staff for the highest solo instrument and so on. In the left upper corner of the first page was the registration for the pipe organ — indicating the initial deployment of all the various stops.

The Dilemma

Matthew exemplifies most of the findings of major importance typical of a troubled child with gifts of this magnitude. He is so bright that he picks up all sorts of details which a less gifted child would overlook. Also, because of his very high intelligence he interprets things in highly idiosyncratic ways, which are not in line with the facts. To a major extent he misinterprets what he perceives, but he is convinced that he is correct. He mistrusts others who offer him different versions of reality. He has learned to distrust others because they so regularly disregard him, and/or reject him and, perhaps, are often unable to appreciate the complexities that he does. Because of his young age he does not have the sufficient experience to have much confidence in himself. In fact, it is just the opposite. He has begun to fault himself for all that is going wrong.

At home and at school, others tend to shun him and to treat him as weird. At school, he has no friends. Both at home and at school adults regard him with disbelief! How could he possibly get all the answers correct? His performance regularly intimidates others who also resent him. He reacts to this constant rejection with depression. He has decided after bitter experience that the world is an unfriendly place and he has begun to retreat from it into a universe of his own making. The universe which he creates for himself is idiosyncratic, which prompts him to exclude others. Adults in his environment begin to shun him and regard him as strange. In his distress and loneliness, he contemplates suicide and acts upon his thoughts.

His parents have been aware of his unusual gifts and his unhappiness for a long time. Even though they themselves are gifted, they did not understand him and tended to minimize or deny what was going on. Although his father knew me casually, he was reluctant to approach me for help or even for a friendly discussion. Parental denial is quite typical in parents of highly gifted children. Even after he initiated contact with me, he did not follow through until his hand was forced by Matthew’s suicidal gesture, which finally broke through parental denial and/or inertia.

I want to add a painful observation here. My experience with similar cases has been that, when these children do become suicidal, they frequently choose methods which are very dangerous. They turn their intellect upon themselves. Also, their forms of acting out are frequently such that they do not disturb others. One highly gifted child played quietly with an elaborate chemistry set that her parents gave her for a birthday. She was able to make a terribly lethal compound and tested it on squirrels that she caged. Satisfied that it would release her from her misery, she ingested a fatal does. Her conduct is common of these children’s behavior which is much less intrusive than that of many of their less gifted peers.
As matters unfolded, this lad became increasingly isolated and avoidant, using ingenious defenses which society frequently regards as productive. His family and society encouraged him to take refuge in complex cerebration: classical music and similar matters. Since he could not win friends or praise in the ways that were typical of the school and social circle which he inhabited, he sought to find them in the unusual, the esoteric and even in what some would consider the bizarre. Isaac Newton was a perfect example of the latter. Albert Einstein was another.

As these events developed he wondered about the causes of his unhappiness. As is so typical for children, his estimation of his own power and influence in the world was great. He faulted himself. That self-blame lead to another round of difficulties since it forced him into a state of lonely exile.

Then another sinister chain of events began. His loneliness led to depression to which his peers responded with another round and another type of rejection. Thus, in addition to being rejected for how he thought, he was rejected for what he felt. Soon he was also rejected for what he did. Again from the point of view of this child, the entire thing was his fault. There was no way out.

At this point his parents began to despair. Their child had become so bizarre that he was a disappointment and an embarrassment to them — which refueled their ability to deny him the professional intervention he so desperately needed.

**Intervention**

Treating these children and their families is not difficult. In fact, as in treating children and families in general, it is an easy and frequently delightful undertaking if the necessary alliances can be established. Once that has been accomplished, individual and family work proceed in the usual ways except for the speed with which matters can be resolved. Once extremely gifted children and families turn their attention towards mental health, things really fly. The same gifts which lead to such trouble can lead to prompt resolution. It should be noted, however, that the needs of the family and child for occasional consultation may remain for a prolonged period, even if such contacts are very infrequent. I have continued to talk with Matthew and his parents and sister from time to time since Matthew and I stopped meeting two year ago.

A detail that is central to a proper working out of this sort of dilemma is this: the most crucial overall goal for the child is that he or she be helped into leading a life that is balanced in healthy ways. For example, Matthew must learn to do a great many age-appropriate social things even though they take him away from the specific exercise of his unique talents. He has got to learn to play at a variety of sports and games. This may worry the child, his parents, and the clinician. The thought of Matthew standing at homeplate while some other child threw a baseball at him was worrisome to me. The very idea of a child with gifts such as his, using shop tools bothered me. What if something should happen to his priceless hands? But in a larger sense, are his hands really of greater intrinsic value than those of any other child?

Fortunately, in this case, the various problems which might have arisen had not developed to an unmanageable extent. Matthew came to me already enjoying baseball. In
fact, it was one of the several areas of interest which he shared with less uniquely bright play-mates. It was also fortunate that his relationship with his sister, Anne, was very sound. He and Anne supported each other in really wonderful ways when they were not engaged in the usual sorts of squabbles that are typical of siblings.

The ways in which our mutual efforts worked out was quite gratifying. Initially, I met twice weekly with Matthew and once weekly with both parents. In order to respond to Anne’s desire to have her own individual say, I met alone with her a few times. This helped fill in some valuable data, and relieved her of the burden of responsibility which she felt. As Matthew’s depression had deepened. Anne tried to treat him but was really not able to do all that was needed. She had become frightened as her efforts in his behalf seemed to fail. They had both tried to treat their parents! One of the most fascinating and amusing moments was when I met with Anne and Matthew together without their parents. Anne, a beautiful and outstanding miniature gymnast of seven, explained, “You see, Dr. Dahlberg, Matthew does his best to keep Mom calmed down and I look after Dad. But things are really out of hand. We need some help!”

Once the crisis had passed I met weekly with Matthew and also weekly with each parent. Each Friday, for about two months, the whole family came in, which allowed us all to assess the headway being made.

I referred Matthew to my own former piano teacher. He is a uniquely talented professor with a special interest in young children. After several meetings with Matthew I spoke with him to get his impressions. The professor was as impressed as I. “Matthew moves around the keyboard as though he were 25 and had been playing most of that time. His innate understanding of musical structure surpasses any student I have ever taught or heard about.”

Since both parents brought their own unresolved pathologies to the family problem, I met with them individually and as a couple.

After Matthew spent a month away from home at a choir camp, it seemed reasonable to consider finding placement in a conservatory in which all the students live in a full-time boarding arrangement. That was worked out with a lot of input from the children. At my insistence, the final responsibility resided squarely on the shoulders of the parents.

Shortly before Matthew left for his conservatory, he asked if I would go to a cathedral to hear him play the Bach Tocatta & Fugue which he had nearly mastered. It was astonishing to see a 40-inch tall boy contending so ably with the manuals, pedal and ranks of stops of a huge cathedral pipe organ. Across the back of his bright red polo-shirt were the words “Born To Be Bad.”