



Lifted and Gay: When GT Meets LGBT

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What is giftedness?

- Giftedness is a neurological difference in which gifted students experience a different intellectual, academic, and social-emotional development than neurotypical peers. ¹
- Common characteristics:
 - Ability to comprehend material several grade levels above their same-age peers
 - Surprising emotional depth and sensitivity at a young age
 - Strong sense of curiosity
 - Enthusiasm about unique interests and topics
 - Quirky or mature sense of humor
 - Creative problem solving and imaginative expression of ideas
 - Self-aware, socially aware, and aware of global issues ¹
- PLEASE NOTE: Every gifted student is unique. They may present a mix of these traits, only a few very intensely, or perhaps none.



Asynchronous Development

- Asynchrony is closely linked to a gifted child's emotional development.
- Asynchronous development in gifted children means that their academic, emotional, physical, and social growth is uneven.
 - Gifted children have a tendency to develop different skills at different rates.³
- Examples:
 - A child may be intellectually operating at a 10th grade level at age 9 but has not mastered how to ride a bike.
 - A 5-year-old can compute high-level math but is still struggling with toilet training.
- This asynchrony can be frustrating:
 - Their intellect could be miles ahead of their physical abilities.
 - They may lack the emotional coping skills to process their big feelings and rich inner life.¹
- The higher a child's IQ, the greater the asynchrony.³



Intensities!

- Intensity is the way in which gifted individuals approach life.
- Positives: the passion that enables some people to achieve amazing things.
- Negatives: the turmoil that has the power to consume them as they learn how to manage their asynchrony, which can present as anxiety or tantrums.
- Intensities may manifest when the world fails to align with how the world ought to be in their eyes.
- Intensity examples:
 - Feeling troubled over ethical issues
 - Rigid rule-following at play time
 - Existential questioning at a young age



Overexcitabilities

- Overexcitability indicates a heightened sensitivity, awareness, and intensity in certain areas.
- It is a translation of a Polish word whose literal meaning is “super-stimulatability”
- Overexcitabilities are present at birth and allow people to see the world in a different way.
- Although not all gifted people have overexcitabilities, researchers have found all five overexcitabilities to be stronger in the gifted than among individuals of average intellect. ²



The Five Overexcitabilities ²

Psychomotor

- A heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system
- Being active and energetic
- A love of movement for its own sake
- Surplus energy demonstrated by rapid speech, enthusiasm, intense physical activity, drivenness, and a need for action
- Can often be misdiagnosed as ADHD

Sensual

- A heightened experience of input from the five senses.
- Often seek sensual experiences to alleviate tension, such as spending spree, overeating, or being the center of attention
- May withdraw from stimulation due to feeling overstimulated or uncomfortable with sensory input.

Intellectual

- A heightened need to seek understanding, truth, and knowledge.
- Different from intelligence
- Intense curiosity and keen observations
- A love for theory, thinking about thinking, and moral thinking

Imaginational

- Heightened imagination with rich association of images and impressions
- Frequent use of image and metaphor
- Strong in invention, fantasy, and elaborate dreams.
- Escape boredom by creating, indulging in fairy or magic tales, or living in a world of fantasy
- Intriguing ideas send them off on a tangent

Emotional

- Intense extremes of complex emotions
- Strong identification with others' feelings
- A remarkable capacity for deep relationships
- Strong emotional attachments to people, places, and things
- Acutely aware of how they are feeling
- Often practice self-judgment and carry on an inner dialogue



LGBIQ Statistics ⁵

- 98.1% LGBTQ students heard “gay” used in a negative way (e.g., “That’s so gay”) at school.
- 95.8% of LGBTQ students heard other types of homophobic remarks (e.g., “dyke” or “faggot”).
- 95.7% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough”).
- 85.7% of LGBTQ students heard negative remarks specifically about transgender people, (e.g., “tranny” or “he/she”).
- 56.2% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from teachers or other school staff.
- 63.5% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff.

What is Q?¹

- Many LGBTQs see the “Q” as an umbrella term for all sexualities and genders, especially those not included within traditional LGBT terms:
 - Intersex (those born with a combination of male and female biological characteristics)
 - Asexual (those who are not sexually attracted to any gender)
 - Pansexual (attraction without regard to gender)
 - Questioning (those keeping their options open as they question and discover their genders and sexual identities)
 - Allies (those who support members of the LGBTQ community)

Dearth of Information

- The Internet contains loads of information about gifted kids, and loads of information on LGBTQ kids.
 - Unfortunately, there is very little information available for young people who are both.³
- Researchers found only two studies in the 90s that focused on gifted and LGBTQ students:
 - One was about suicidal ideation and depression of gifted gay and lesbian students.
 - The other discussed the educational needs of gifted gay and bisexual males.
- Three other studies came out in the early 2000s:
 - One mentioned homosexuality and sexual identity issues as risk factors for adolescent suicide.
 - Another described how the burden of being twice different related to depression and feelings of isolation.
 - A third focused on depressive disorders in highly gifted students.²





The Intersection of Gifted and Gay⁴

- Being either gifted or a sexual minority creates a set of social and emotional issues that the general population of children and adolescents do not generally confront.
- When one is both gifted and LGBTQ, these issues combine to create new experiences with needs and problems that both groups face.
- The sense of differentness that comes with being gifted or LGBTQ "likely intensifies" when both occur together.

Lifted and Gay by the Numbers⁴

- Depending on the definition, approximately 3% of students are gifted.
 - Though estimates vary, 3-10% of students are a sexual minority.
 - Based on those percentages, the chances of being both gifted and a sexual minority should be 1 - 3 in 1000.
- Despite that, a study of 53 LGBTQ youth in urban support groups found that more than a third had been in specialized gifted programs at their schools.
 - Although this is a small sample, the unexpectedly high percentage of overlap between giftedness and sexual minority status makes it clear that gifted/LGBTQ students deserve attention.



Why is there such an overlap? ⁷

- Gifted students are more likely to identify as LGBTQ due to their questioning, exploratory nature.
- They are less likely to conform to social norms and more likely to accept ambiguity and diversity than their peers.
- The number of students who consider themselves Questioning has grown into a phenomenon that has been embraced by preteens across the country (called the Q Movement).
 - It is possibly a way to ease an orientation a student has always felt but isn't ready to fully embrace.
 - It could be a temporary rebellion against the dangers of societal labeling.
 - Perhaps adults' views on binary gender are wrong.
- Because of the Internet, youth have a world of information at their fingertips.
 - They are understandably better informed and educated on the nuances of gender and sexuality than generations past.

Androgyny

- Many highly gifted and creative children tend to be more androgynous.
 - Gifted boys may display sensitivity and empathy commonly viewed as feminine.
 - Girls may demonstrate independence and aggressiveness associated with masculinity.
- Few gifted people conform to gender role stereotypes and tend to reject strict gender identities.
 - As children, gifted girls and gifted boys are more similar to each other than they each are to their nongifted, same gender peers.²
 - During adolescence, this androgyny can cause confusion about gender identity.
 - They may become exaggeratedly feminine or intensely macho, trying to establish themselves firmly in their biological gender.
 - They may go to the other extreme and take on external traits of the opposite gender.⁶

Gifted Disadvantages⁴

- Social isolation
- Bullying/teasing
- Difficulty relating to peers
- Boredom/frustration in school

LGBTQ Disadvantages⁴

- Social isolation
- Bullying/teasing
- Fear of harassment
- Fear of coming out

What happens when you are both?⁴

- Students consider themselves “doubly disadvantaged” or in “social-emotional double jeopardy.”
- Difficulties are magnified and feelings of differentness intensify.
- They are more vulnerable to verbal and physical abuse at school.
- The reality of being gifted and gay leads to stronger feelings of external and internal marginalization.
- A unique difficulty was the tendency to overthink and overachieve as a result of being gifted/LGBTQ.



+s and -s of Overthinking?

- Gifted gay children often feel like they must choose between academic success and social acceptance.
- Some students cope by:
 - Overachieving academically or athletically
 - Becoming perfectionists
 - Becoming overinvolved in extracurricular activities
- Others attempt to cope through more self-destructive behaviors, such as:
 - Dropping out of school
 - Running away
 - Abusing drugs and/or alcohol
 - Attempting or completing suicide
- Very few seek help from adults, possibly due to lack of a suitable model/mentor and a lack of helpful resources.

Which is worse?

- When asked whether gifted/LGBTQ students had more or fewer difficulties than gifted heterosexual students and non-gifted LGBTQ students, 86% of participants felt that being gifted and gay led to more difficulties.
 - These students also said the LGBTQ side of a dual gifted/LGBTQ identity led to more problems than the gifted side, citing:
 - Lack of support
 - The “taboo” nature of being LGBTQ
 - They felt gifted students had more support available to them.
 - Although they may be teased by peers for being smart, they were looked upon highly by adults (but they did not feel the same could be said of being LGBTQ).



Needs of the Gifted and Gay⁸

- Students became aware of their giftedness on average at age seven in 1st grade.
- They began to question their sexual orientation at age 13 (median 7th grade), and were certain of their sexual orientation by age 16 (median 11th grade).
- Gifted LGBTQ youth have unique needs related to their strengths and social challenges.
- Diverse sexual orientation and gender identity complexly affect the experience of social and emotional development.
- We must examine the difference between tolerance (which implies enduring the differences of others) and integration (which supports integrating in the strengths of all students).



What can parents do?

- Avoid reinforcing stereotypical behaviors.
- Support your child's own gender-role and androgyny.
 - A child's interests are natural and should not be discouraged or criticized, but instead should be respected, valued and nurtured, just as you would any other giftedness trait.⁹
- However challenging this may be for you, it is ten times more challenging for your child.
 - Fears of parental abandonment, peer ostracism and violence can contribute to depression, suicidal thoughts, and hiding distress from parents and teachers.⁷
- Advocate at school for the changes on the following slides.



What can schools do?⁸

- Because current school environments may not adequately support these students, all school staff should receive training related to creating and sustaining safe and productive environments for gifted LGBTQ youth.
- Ensure that curriculum, including curriculum for gifted youth, includes positive examples of individuals with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Include positive role models in gifted education programming who have diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.
- Work toward safe schools/safe zones to protect and nurture the unique sensitivities of LGBTQ gifted youth.
- Use inclusive language in school correspondence and documentation that respects diverse sexual orientations and gender identities of parents/guardians, educators, and students.



At the Elementary level

- Increase the level of acknowledgement of sexual minority people and lifestyles, possibly through inclusive curriculum that includes different types of families and people.
- Provide tolerance/sensitivity lessons to students.
- Ask teachers to call out students for using inappropriate language such as "That's so gay!" and explain why it is wrong.
- Celebrate Family Day instead of Mother's or Father's Day.
- Read The Family Book by Tom Parror other books that show LGBTQ families with children at a similar age of the students.



At the Middle School level

- Include general LGBTQ knowledge in health classes.
- Create a Gay Straight Alliance or other support group.
- Have panels or speakers visit to expose students to sexual minority individuals.
- Emphasize appropriate language and tolerance (a carry-over from elementary), as middle school is a time when students can be particularly cruel to those deemed different.
- Present story problems or assignments in which characters perform activities that are stereotypically performed by the opposite gender (i.e. Tom makes cookies).



At the High School level

- Provide GSAs and other support groups on campus, with an added emphasis on school-wide advocacy.
- Provide assignments that ask students to consider sexuality. (e.g., Discuss the ways in which Walt Whitman's homosexuality may have influenced his poetry).
- Provide school-wide tolerance activities.
- Create small groups in which students can discuss LGBTQ issues.
- Teach lessons about inappropriate language and its power to hurt others, even unintentionally.
- Adopt anti-discrimination policies and include sexual minority students as a protected group.
- Refrain from using an "out" gifted LGBTQ student to act as a spokesperson for gay-rights issues in the classroom,
 - Though they may be well-informed on the topic, they might not be comfortable being the voice for LGBTQ students.



In Conclusion

- Students who identify as both gifted and LGBTQ have some advantages:
 - a unique perspective on the world
 - a strong sense of self
 - the deep thinking to help them problem-solve
- We need to nurture their special strengths, healthy social and emotional development, and self-advocacy skills for both in and out of school.
- We need to act as allies.
 - Visible support and small acts of kindness can do a lot to help these students feel safer, less lonely, and worthy of respect and kindness.



Resources

- 1: <https://www.davidsongifted.org/prospective-families/gifted-traits-and-characteristics/>
- 2: <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ751001.pdf>
- 3: <https://www.nagc.org/get-involved/nagenetworks-and-special-interest-groups/special-interest-group-glbtc/glbtc-sig>
- 4: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1476&context=etd>
- 5: <https://www.glsen.org/research/2015-national-school-climate-survey>
- 6: http://www.stephanietolan.com/hg_adolescent.htm
- 7: <https://thegraysonschool.org/gifted-child-questioning-sexual-gender-identity/>
- 8: [https://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Position%20Statement/GLBTQ%20\(sept%202015\).pdf](https://www.nagc.org/sites/default/files/Position%20Statement/GLBTQ%20(sept%202015).pdf)
- 9: <https://www.sengifted.org/post/androgyny-and-gifted-youth-1>