

# *Chapter 6*

## *Counseling Gifted and Talented Girls*

Those who work with gifted girls are often frustrated by their failure to live up to the expectations of their youth. Guidance counselors often observe that gifted young women seem gradually to disengage themselves from goal setting throughout adolescence. Girls who at the beginning of junior high have ambitious dreams often have forgotten those dreams by the end of junior high and seem to have only the most stereotypic notions of what they want to do with the rest of their lives (Kerr, 1985).

It is often difficult for counselors to pinpoint exactly what seems to be holding bright girls back. What are the barriers to gifted girls' achievement? How do we overcome those barriers? It is clear that the problem of finding the reason that gifted girls don't live up to their potential is not a straightforward task at all. This is because, as we have seen in chapter I on identification, our ideas about what constitutes intelligence are changing; our values as a society about the role of women are changing; and finally, every year gifted girls themselves undergo a flux in their attitudes and values.

New concepts of intelligence such as Sternberg's information processing approach (Sternberg & Davidson, 1986) and Gardner's (1983) theory of multiple intelligences are challenging the notion of the unitary IQ as the only way of measuring intellectual performance. However, most of the newer theories of intelligence do not speak to the problem of female giftedness. These theories have little or nothing to say about gender. Therefore, we again have the problem that we have had with more traditional theories of intelligence: We don't understand how these theories apply to gifted girls. Nevertheless, counselors need to make decisions based on the best available information, and with an eye to broadening the concept of intelligence.

Our society is also changing its attitudes toward gifted girls. Value conflicts today pervade society, education, and research. Although the majority of American women now work outside the home, our society has a deep ambivalence about this change. Stories about the dangers of becoming superwomen, criticisms about the effects of child care rather than mother care, and a great deal of interest in sex differences and abilities seem to be the symptoms of this ambivalence. Counselors cannot avoid the discussion of values; they must understand clearly their own values and respect those held by the gifted girls they counsel.

There are also value conflicts within the professions of psychology and education about women's roles. Many researchers cannot agree on how to study women's abilities, and many feminist researchers claim that women's achievement should not be measured by the same scales as male achievement. Gilligan's (1982) proposal that women experience a different process of moral development than do men has provided a base for these ideas. Although counselors may find themselves caught in value conflicts in the profession, they still must find practical solutions to help gifted girls make the choices that will most likely lead to the fulfillment of their potential.

Finally, gifted girls themselves are changing. In the last 10 years extraordinary changes have occurred in gifted girls' career aspirations and academic achievement. Where studies in the early 1980s showed that gifted young women often had lower aspirations than gifted young men (Kerr, 1983), currently young women are choosing some professional careers in almost equal proportions as are young men (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988).

Parents' attitudes toward their gifted daughters are also changing. Many parents are determined that their daughters will succeed in achieving their dreams and goals. A study by Jacobs and Eccles (1985) found that fathers' attitudes toward their daughters' mathematical abilities actually improved after reading media reports about studies of gender differences favoring boys in mathematics. Changes that are occurring in the attitudes of gifted girls and in the attitudes of their parents mean that special guidance strategies for gifted girls and young women will be particularly

needed and appreciated. The next sections will review what is known about gifted girls and gifted female adolescents and present suggestions for guidance and counseling.

### **Gifted Girls**

Girls often show their giftedness at an earlier age than boys (Silverman, 1986). In addition, high-IQ girls tend to be taller, stronger, and healthier than girls of average IQ. In the moderately gifted range, gifted girls tend to be very well adjusted, whether this social adjustment is measured in terms of social knowledge (Terman & Oden, 1935), perceived self-confidence (Chan, 1988), or absence of behavioral impairments on behavior rating scales (Ludwig & Cullinan, 1984). Gifted girls seem to be very free of childhood adjustment disorders. However, highly gifted girls may experience more adjustment problems (Kerr, 1985). In general, the highest-IQ children suffer more adjustment problems, simply as a result of being so very deviant from the norm. Gifted girls seem to experience this deviance even more profoundly.

Throughout childhood gifted girls are more similar to gifted boys than they are to average girls in their interests, attitudes, and aspirations. Gifted girls like many of the same play activities that gifted boys enjoy, such as outdoor activities, adventures, sports, and problem solving. However, they may also have feminine interests. They may enjoy dolls and girls' magazines; but they may play with girls' toys in more creative or exploratory ways. It is also common for gifted girls to spend a great deal of time alone and to enjoy this alone time (Kerr, 1985).

Although most girls have fairly stereotyped career interests by second grade, gifted girls may have career interests more like those of gifted boys. Young gifted girls often have adventurous aspirations. They want to be great writers, paleontologists, astronauts, or diplomats. Gifted girls are also similar to gifted boys in their academic interests; however, they tend to outperform gifted boys throughout school, attaining higher grades in most school subjects. Gifted girls also outperform gifted boys on achievement tests throughout elementary school.

### **Adolescent Gifted Girls**

With adolescence come major changes in gifted girls' attitudes toward their career goals, in their intellectual and social interests, and in their actual achievement. Whereas once these changes were dramatic, in the last 10 years they have become more subtle. Adolescent gifted girls seem to be aware that they are expected to maintain high career aspirations and high academic achievement. Nevertheless, there is often a marked decline in their involvement with their former academic goals or an indifference to their own stated career goals.

### **Declining Academic Achievement in Adolescence**

Several studies show that at the highest level of achievement on college admissions tests, gifted girls score lower than gifted boys. On ACT exams, taken during the senior year of high school, 61 % of students scoring above the 95th percentile on the composite score are male, and 72% of students scoring in the 99th percentile on the composite score are also male (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988). Men also outperform women on three of the four subtests at the highest levels. Three times as many men achieve perfect scores in math as do women; five times as many men get perfect natural sciences scores as do women; and two and one half times as many men achieve perfect social studies scores as do women. Only on the English subtests do women outperform men (Colangelo & Kerr, 1990).

A study by Laing, Engen, and Maxey (1987) shows that much of the variance in ACT scores can be accounted for by course taking. It seems likely that the lower scores for women on the ACT are strongly related to course taking. Gifted adolescent girls apparently take fewer and less challenging math and science courses than do boys. In addition, they take less challenging social studies courses. As a result, gifted adolescent girls are less prepared than are gifted boys for the more rigorous colleges.

### **Sex Differences in Mathematics**

Sex differences in mathematical ability have also been found in a more select group of gifted boys and girls who participated in the Talent Search

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program (Benbow & Stanley, 1984). These extreme sex differences favoring boys were puzzling in that the seventh graders had taken very similar courses. This study continues to be a source of controversy. Many scholars emphasize that girls and boys within the same classroom may be receiving differential treatment (Sadker & Sadker, 1984); other scholars suggest that the boys' higher scores on the SAT mathematical exam represent higher levels of inherent mathematical reasoning ability (Benbow & Stanley, 1984).

Whatever the actual source of sex differences in math achievement, counselors should keep in mind several facts when guiding gifted girls. First of all, math differences that have been observed in junior high students have been observed only at the very highest level of ability. Therefore, at moderately high levels of ability boys and girls perform similarly. Counselors should also remember that the highest level of mathematical ability required by even the most rigorous, math-related professions is well within the reach of gifted girls. Finally, it is likely that the differences in math ability observed by teachers and counselors are due to factors within our control. Equitable teaching in the classrooms, high expectations of girls, and guidance into appropriate course taking can go a long way toward ensuring that gifted girls will be high math achievers (Sadker & Sadker, 1985).

### **Aspirations of the Gifted Adolescent Girl**

Until recently counselors have observed that gifted girls tended to lower their career aspirations between junior high and the beginning of college. At one time, only highly gifted girls such as the top 1 % of National Merit Scholars usually maintained high career aspirations throughout adolescence (Kaufmann, 1981). Now, however, most gifted adolescent girls are naming college majors that are nontraditional for women. Among girls scoring in the 95th percentile and above on ACT, about as many girls as boys choose majors in pre-medicine, pre-law, and even mathematics (Kerr & Colangelo, 1988).

Most recent studies do show that gifted adolescent girls are now aiming high when they are asked to name their career goals. However, few studies of gifted adolescent girls go beyond eliciting career choice. Many counselors have observed at the Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development at The University of Iowa that beyond being able to name a

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career goal, many bright young women seem to be uncertain and confused about how to reach that goal or what the goal means. Apparently, gifted adolescent girls have learned to name ambitious career goals but have not considered what these goals mean to their lives.

Counselors at the Counseling Laboratory have also observed that gifted girls now seem to be reluctant to discuss conflicts they feel between career and family. Perhaps this is because it is simply assumed that women will both work and have a family. Gifted girls also may want to avoid discussing such an anxiety-laden topic. Nevertheless, it is clear that these conflicts do exist and that bright young women need an opportunity to discuss their fears or concerns openly.

### **Psychological Adjustment of Gifted Girls**

Most gifted girls, like gifted boys, are well adjusted. Most moderately gifted girls receive high scores on personality inventories in psychological characteristics associated with good mental health and adjustment. However, there do seem to be some critical periods during the development of a gifted adolescent girl when increases in social anxiety may occur. In one study, Groth (1969) showed an abrupt psychological shift at age 14 from wishes and needs related to achievement to wishes related to love and belonging. The girls in this study had apparently dropped their dreams of success in favor of dreams of popularity. Current studies have also shown increases in social anxiety during

adolescence. For instance, Kelly and Colangelo (1984) found that gifted girls were not superior to average girls in academic and social self-concept although gifted boys were superior to average boys in these characteristics. Similarly, Kerr, Colangelo, and Gaeth (1988) found that gifted girls were very concerned about the impact of their giftedness on the attitudes of others. Although gifted boys were likely to see some social advantages to being gifted, gifted girls saw fewer advantages.

Constance Hollinger and Elise Fleming have done some of the most important work in the area of gifted girls' self-esteem and adjustment. These researchers believe that social self-esteem (Hollinger, 1983) is critical to the realization of potential in gifted girls. Girls with high social self-esteem will show high "instrumentality" and high "expressiveness." Instrumentality is the ability to act effectively and make decisions independently. Expressiveness is the ability to be responsive and caring. Instrumentality seems to be more important to high self-esteem than expressiveness, although expressiveness is also important. Social self-esteem seems to help girls overcome fears of social rejection and helps to build self-confidence. Hollinger and Fleming (1984) found that gifted girls' self-perceptions of instrumentality were strongly related to the occupational confidence and the satisfaction with life that they felt 3 1/2 years after graduation. Counselors need to discover ways to develop instrumentality in gifted girls and also to maintain the expressive characteristics that are a part of most gifted girls' personality.

Counselors also need to be aware that too much emphasis may be placed on gifted girls' good social adjustment. In fact, good social adjustment is not necessarily a predictor of eminence. Kaufmann (1981) found that among Presidential Scholars many girls were perceived as loners; yet these young women went on to accomplishments at least equal to those of their male peers. Kerr (1985) found that although eminent women often had unhappy adolescences, they were able to overcome feelings of rejection and were able to develop independence. Therefore, although it is important that counselors nurture instrumentality and expressiveness in order to build self-esteem and confidence, it is not necessary for counselors to be overly concerned about a gifted girl's lack of popularity or desire for solitude.

### **How Counselors Can Help Gifted Girls**

Counselors can assist in the personal and career development of gifted girls beginning in elementary school and continuing throughout adulthood. They can help both as consultants to teachers and parents and as direct counselors and advisors to gifted girls. Several ways in which counselors can serve as consultants include assisting in identification of the gifted and talented; helping teachers achieve equity in the classroom; and serving as career education consultants. Ways in which counselors can have individual impact on gifted girls include advisement for challenging course taking; building social self-esteem; helping girls overcome perceived barriers; and assisting in the process of falling in love with an idea.

### **Identification**

Counselors may serve as assistants in the identification process of the gifted and talented as was described in chapter 1 on identification. It is important during this process that counselors help identification teams to become aware of special issues affecting the identification of giftedness in girls. Because gifted girls are more likely to show developmental advancement than gifted boys and are more likely to be ready for kindergarten earlier than gifted boys, identification procedures for giftedness should begin early with gifted girls (Silverman, 1986; Callahan, 1979). Although intelligence tests such as the Stanford-Binet, the WISC-R, and the Kaufman ABC have been used with very young children, they are not often reliable measures of giftedness before 9 years of age. Therefore, in order to ensure the appropriate placement of very young gifted girls, it is often necessary to combine evidence from intelligence tests with signs of school readiness, such as advanced vocabulary, precocious reading, precocious math skills, and an eagerness for school social activities. Particularly in school districts where "proof" of giftedness is required, it may be necessary to test girls with one of these three identification instruments and to prepare detailed behavior descriptions.

Counselors need to serve as consultants for identification programs at all levels to ensure equity in selection procedures. For instance, counselors can ensure that tests used for admission to gifted education programs have minimal sex bias. Tests that emphasize content more familiar to boys than girls are biased tests. Items clearly biased toward boys may be items concerning mechanics, sports, careers, and other extraneous content that has been traditionally masculine. Even items that feature more diagrams may be biased in favor of boys (Doolittle & Cleary, 1987). These items reflect boys' reading and daily experiences rather than the experiences of girls in our society. Achievement tests with a heavier weighting of math and science items than language-related items will also be biased against girls, especially in the higher grades. Intelligence tests that emphasize spatial-visual activities may also select fewer girls, possibly because girls receive much less practice than boys at spatialvisual tasks such as assembly and building of toys.

In junior high it may become important to use differential cutoffs when identification strategies clearly yield more boys than girls. This has been a common practice in Talent Search programs where the SAT-M identifies more boys than girls for accelerated math programs. This does not mean that accelerated math classes will be harder for girls with lower scores. It is very likely that a girl scoring 510 on SAT-M will perform as well in an accelerated mathematics class as a boy scoring 530. Because the tests predict differently for boys and girls, lower scores for girls may predict the same degree of success. A multidimensional approach to identification may also ensure that girls with potential for high academic achievement are identified (Fleming & Hollinger, 1979). Multidimensional approaches take into account such characteristics as creativity and leadership. This technique is particularly useful for selecting minority girls who have been brought up in a traditional fashion or rural girls who may not have been exposed to many opportunities for girls and women. It is likely that girls who have not had challenging coursework will be identified through creativity and leadership techniques. Counselors should bear in mind that no objective measures have actually been shown to be associated with accomplishment of gifted women as adults. Tests of intellectual aptitude and achievement can only be used to predict academic performance. But the counselor must understand that many powerful nonacademic factors may determine the progress a gifted girl makes toward achieving her goals.

### **Assisting Teachers in Achieving Equity in the Classroom**

There is undeniable evidence that boys receive more attention from teachers and higher quality instruction than do girls throughout their education (Sadker & Sadker, 1985). Teachers respond more often to boys than to girls in class and boys are more frequently rewarded for calling out answers, whereas girls are rewarded for being quiet and cooperative. Boys also receive more informative responses from teachers; teachers are more likely to give girls bland responses, whereas boys are given praise and criticism. Boys are given much more detailed instructions on how to approach tasks and solve problems, whereas girls are often simply given the right answer. None of this behavior seems to be conscious on the teachers' part because even teachers who strongly support girls' rights to self-development find themselves responding more to boys than to girls. Apparently there is an interaction between the boys' more lively assertion and the teachers' "programming" in differential responding to boys and girls.

On an optimistic note, however, Sadker and Sadker (1985) also found that teachers can learn fairly quickly to overcome sex-biased teaching. Through a series of workshops that involve videotaping their instruction.

evaluating their responses to boys and girls, and relearning responding techniques, teachers are able to achieve more equitable teaching in the classroom. Counselors can help teachers to achieve equitable teaching by using Sadker and Sadker's (1985) methods and by suggesting ways in which teachers can call on girls in equal proportions and challenge girls to solve problems for themselves.

Some evidence shows that teachers' attitudes toward gifted girls may be more negative than their attitudes toward girls in general (Solano, 1977). Other studies have shown that female teachers may sometimes be more discouraging of gifted girls' aspirations than are male teachers and that occasionally gifted girls have been discouraged from taking advanced math courses, entering gifted education, and participating in summer opportunities. When counselors discover that girls have been discouraged in any of these ways, it is important that they intervene not only with the girls but also with the teachers.

First, it will often be necessary for the counselor to challenge stereotypes that students and teachers may have of appropriate courses and career goals for girls. Second, it is important that counselors provide positive strategies and suggestions for teachers in creating more equitable classrooms. Third, at all times counselors must provide a model of nonsexist behavior. This means attending to girls as often as boys; being sure that girls have as many opportunities for scholarships and college information as boys; giving girls full informative, challenging responses; rewarding girls' assertiveness; and resisting overhelping girls by solving all their personal, career, or social development problems for them.

### Career Education

Counselors can also serve as career education consultants to the classroom teacher. Most packaged career education approaches are not appropriate for gifted students in general, as explained in chapter 5 on career counseling. This is also true for career education approaches for girls. Many career education approaches designed for average girls, although focusing on nontraditional careers, may overemphasize lower-level careers. Therefore career education for gifted girls must be patterned after career education for gifted students in general.

Career education for gifted girls should incorporate as its primary reading material the biographies of eminent women (Kerr, 1985). Gifted girls will often see themselves in the stories of the lives of eminent women. Biographies provide not only a narrative of the events of the lives of talented women but also show the necessary steps to achieve success in many professional fields. A bibliography for gifted girls appears in the Resources section of this book.

Another important element of career education is the use of models. Role models have been given a great deal of emphasis in career workshops with girls. It can be useful for gifted girls to meet and to discuss careers with women who are successful in science, math, politics, engineering, and other fields where women are rare. However, it is important to be aware of the principles of effective modeling when choosing people who are to speak to or interact with gifted girls. For role modeling to be effective, it is necessary that the girls observe the models being reinforced for their career behavior. Professional women who complain about being overburdened or who stress the difficulties they encountered achieving their goal may have a negative effect on gifted girls.

Gifted girls, hearing of the great struggles that model women have encountered may decide that it is just not worth it to try to attain high goals. Therefore, models should be women who are highly accomplished in their careers, and women who are happy and satisfied with their lives. It is important that role models provide examples of how women can combine career and family successfully. They should clearly come across as lively, capable, and happy with the reward they are receiving for their work and their life-style.

Job shadowing and job tryout also provide an opportunity for gifted girls to experience what particular careers would be like. Job shadowing is spending a day or more working alongside an adult in her or his normal working routines. Again, it is the choice of the mentor with whom the student will gain the work experience that is critical to the success of the program. Gifted girls should be placed for shadowing experiences only with women who can show clearly not only what they do on the job, but what they have done to get there. Like model women, mentors

should be contented with their work and life-style and should be able to express that to the girls who are working with them.

Finally, counselors can initiate special programs that may involve teachers, students, and community women. Examples of workshops for gifted girls include career education opportunities in informal and entertaining ways. One of these is the Career Education Workshop developed in Louisville, Kentucky, by Bonnie Roth of the Creative Learning Institute. These career workshops bring together teachers, members of the local Junior League, and gifted girls to provide a day-long series of activities focusing on gifted girls' future roles. The day's activities include keynote speeches by experts on career development of gifted girls; group activities and discussions focusing on helping girls identify barriers to their goals and ways of overcoming those barriers; and panels of distinguished and accomplished Kentucky women to serve as models.

Another example of a successful career education program is the "Going for your Goals" Conference provided by the Iowa City Community Schools Foundation. This workshop, which was created by a planning committee made up of teachers, community women, and University of Iowa faculty, was also a day-long series of activities. Activities included a perfect future day fantasy, group discussions of roles, and most important, practice in setting specific goals and predicting the steps necessary to attain those goals. Throughout the day girls interacted in small groups led by a model woman.

Finally, one of the most creative examples of career education for gifted girls is the Math/Science Sleepover, which was developed by gifted education coordinator Dexter Schraer and teachers of the gifted in Columbia, Missouri, public schools. The Math/Science Sleepover is an allnight pajama party for gifted girls, teachers, and women mathematicians and scientists. Activities include movies about the lives of well-known women scientists, a pizza party with university women faculty in science and math, group discussions about girls' personal career goals, and a scavenger hunt involving math and science riddles.

Programs like these can serve several functions in that they include information, mentoring, modeling, and problem solving. They can make a great difference in the lives of gifted girls. However, to be most effective, career education for gifted girls should not be based on a oneshot activity. An event such as a workshop or an overnight should be followed by other activities designed to maintain the learning and the commitments that are made.

### **Advising Gifted Girls**

Although many counselors regret that so much of their time is spent in registration and advisement rather than in personal counseling, it is in the area of advisement that counselors may be able to have the greatest impact on the lives of gifted girls. Gifted girls' course-taking decisions not only affect their junior and high school academic life; they also affect the scores they will achieve on college admissions tests, the types of colleges and universities to which they will be accepted, their success in particular college majors, and their eventual choice of a career.

Too often, even the brightest girls in mathematics are able to persuade their parents, teachers, and counselors that they will not succeed in advanced math and science courses. Those counselors who themselves disliked math and science may feel sympathetic with a gifted girl's fears of failure in these courses. Nevertheless, it is crucial that the counselor not collaborate with the gifted girl's attempts to avoid math and science.

Counselors need to share information with gifted girls about coursetaking choices that will help them make appropriate decisions. Some examples of facts gifted girls need to be aware of are:

- The majority of college majors that lead to high status, high salary, and high levels of independence on the job require 4 years of high school mathematics preparation. These careers are not only sciencerelated careers, but also careers in business, journalism, and even in areas such as linguistics. which require computer expertise.

- College admissions officers look more favorably upon those students whose transcripts show that they have completed a rigorous series of courses with a moderately high grade point average than upon those whose transcripts show very high grades in easy courses.
- Most gifted girls who are in the moderate ranges on math and science achievement, such as the 80th percentile, have all the skills necessary to take the most advanced math and science courses in high school and college.
- Gifted girls may perform better in math or science classes that are taught by women and include many or all female students.
- Gifted girls may find it easier to learn math and science when they are able to apply the ideas to people-oriented problems.
- Girls should ask teachers for examples that are relevant to their lives rather than examples related to sports or mechanics, which may not be relevant to their experiences.

Counselors should be aware that it is not only in math and science that gifted girls often take fewer and less rigorous courses. Results of Kerr and Colangelo's ACT studies (1988) show that even in the social studies girls tend to achieve lower scores on tests of curricular knowledge than do boys. This means that gifted girls may tend to take the less difficult social studies course, such as "The Sixties" or "Marriage and Family," rather than "Western Civilization."

In order to preserve gifted girls' future choices, counselors need to ensure that the girls take the fullest and most challenging course load available in high school. Wherever advanced coursework is not available in the high school, the counselor should help the gifted girl and her parents to locate community college or university coursework that she can take in order to supplement her in-class learning.

Advisement for gifted girls should also include encouragement to take summer courses and to participate in special camps and institutes for gifted students. Gifted girls may be reluctant to take part in these activities for gifted students because they perceive that summer opportunities for gifted students lack social activities. In addition, they may be anxious about making new friends and leaving their familiar environment and friends. Counselors need to give these girls courage, and to show them how these activities can help them form their goals and achieve entrance into colleges and universities that will develop their talents.

Counselors should collect information on special institutes, camps, and school-year activities for the gifted and talented and discuss this information with gifted girls, who may not take as much initiative as would gifted boys in seeking these opportunities.

## **Increasing Social Self-Esteem**

According to Hollinger and Fleming (1988), social self-esteem is related both to academic achievement and life satisfaction. Social self-esteem is made up of two self-perceptions: instrumentality and expressiveness. Women with high instrumentality are decisive, active, and prone to risk taking, whereas those with high expressiveness are caring, communicative, and affiliative. A combination of both these characteristics seems to be necessary for girls to feel good about themselves.

How can counselors help to increase girls' expressiveness and instrumentality? Expressiveness tends to be a characteristic more commonly found among women than men. Gifted girls need to be accepting of the expressive aspects of their personality. Counselors need to show gifted girls that it is possible to be assertive and achieving and still be expressive and emotional.



Instrumentality can be increased through leadership opportunities, development of decision-making skills, and the participation in challenging activities. Too often in extracurricular activities and sports, boys take the leadership positions. Girls need a chance to lead classroom groups, to captain sports teams, and to be decision makers in clubs and groups. Counselors may want to consider leading assertiveness groups and decision-making groups for gifted girls who seem particularly shy or reluctant to take leadership positions.

Biographical information about eminent women shows clearly that as girls these women were not necessarily quiet and well-behaved; often, they were quite the opposite. Counselors may need to be the advocate and friend for nonconforming or rebellious gifted girls. It may be that these young women's assertiveness and independence will protect them from discrimination and enhance the possibility of achieving of their goals.

### **Identity Development**

Another finding derived from the lives of eminent women is that the development of identity is critical to later achievement. Bloom's (1985) study of eminent concert pianists, Olympic athletes, and sculptors showed that these people had an opportunity as early as in adolescence to identify themselves and to be identified as the "class artist" or the "school athlete." To develop a strong identity in a talent area, a gifted girl first needs to know specific objective information about how she compares to others in that area, and second, she needs to be reinforced in that identity.

Counselors can help by using objective test information to underscore a girl's talent. For instance, a counselor might say "You have scored in the 95th percentile in verbal reasoning. This means that 95% of the rest of the young people in the nation have less ability than you do to get good grades in English and to succeed in language-related careers." To reinforce a gifted girl, a counselor might say "So you've achieved an A in math again. You're really the math whiz around here!" It is also helpful to encourage other students to recognize the specific talents of the gifted girl.

It is important to seek ways in which bright girls can receive recognition for their special abilities. Kaufmann (1981) found that most of the Presidential Scholars had received very little in the way of recognition as high school students; some believed that the failure of their high school peers, teachers, and counselors to notice or acknowledge their academic abilities had led them to discounting their own skills. Those bright girls who receive formal awards and prizes as well as informal friendly recognition of their talents are more likely to continue their high achievement.

### **Helping Gifted Girls With Relationships**

Gifted adolescent girls and gifted women may experience problems in their relationships. Like all adolescents, gifted girls experience frustration, anxiety, and depression when they fail to have the kinds of relationships they want. All adolescents are searching for someone to love and to be loved by. However, gifted girls may suffer from their own unique dilemmas related to their giftedness. It is a fact that in our society men are attracted to women who are their intellectual equals or their inferiors whereas women are attracted to men who are their intellectual equals or superiors. In plain language, what this means for gifted heterosexual girls is a much smaller group of potential partners from which to choose. It is wrong to deny that gifted girls will have more difficulty in establishing relationships with boys (Kerr, 1985) than will nongifted girls.

One study showed that although the majority of gifted girls expected to have careers, only a small percentage of gifted boys expected their wives to work (Fox, 1976). Gifted boys' images of the ideal girl may be at odds with the reality of the gifted girls with whom they share their classes.

Unrealistic expectations on the part of both gifted young women and young men may block them from satisfying friendships. Bright girls tend to be achievement-oriented and some are perfectionistic. They may treat romantic relationships as if they were achievements. They may have overly high expectations of relationships. Perfectionistic young women may seek "the perfect guy." When

relationships don't work out, gifted girls may feel as if they have failed. Having little experience with failure in any other realm of their lives, they can be disconcerted and frightened by rejection.

Gifted young women are often unaware of the fact that a single lifestyle has been a satisfying and fulfilling one for many gifted women. In fact, single, childless women were among the most satisfied in Sears and Barbee's (1977) follow-up of elderly gifted women.

Young lesbian gifted women bear the double burden of their society's negative attitude toward giftedness as well as society's negative attitude toward their sexual orientation. They may feel particularly isolated and unsure about relationships. They are often unaware of the lives of adult lesbians and the possibilities of happy, stable relationships and supportive women's communities.

Counselors can provide realistic assessments of relationships and a sympathetic ear. Counselors may also want to consider relationship education specifically for gifted girls. Again, the lives of eminent women can often provide models for healthy relationships and partnerships. Most eminent women who have achieved success in their work and happiness in their intimate relationships are those who have based their relationships on deeply held values. These are women who seem to have found partners through their work. Although eminent women do not necessarily have partners in the same career areas, they tend to have partners who value their work and who share a style that allows a life of working together (Kerr, 1985).

Perhaps the most difficult situation the counselor may encounter in working with the gifted girl is one in which the girl is in danger of giving up academic and career opportunities in order to hold on to a boyfriend. Bright girls have attended inferior colleges, rejected scholarships, withdrawn from challenging classes, and even dropped out of high school in order to preserve relationships. Careful and caring guidance is needed to prevent bright girls from making decisions that will sabotage their own dreams and goals.

## **Helping Gifted Girls to Fall in Love With an Idea**

Perhaps the most important common theme in the lives of eminent women is that of "falling in love with an idea." Torrance (1979) defined falling in love with an idea as committing oneself to a deeply held value, a theory, or an attitude. Falling in love with an idea is the same as the process of discovering one's calling or one's vocation. People who love an idea have a deep sense of purpose. Many of the distresses gifted girls and young women face can be lightened if they have developed a deep sense of purpose. Similar to identity development, falling in love with an idea requires that the gifted girl understand her specific talent. Sometimes it is necessary for the counselor to point out how passionately a gifted girl feels about a particular activity even before the girl herself realizes her involvement with it.

Statements such as, "Kathy, your poetry shows an enormous amount of hard work. You really love creative writing, don't you?" Or, "Beth, I can see that most of your activities center around leadership. You like your courses in government and psychology and you like all your student government activities. Leadership is really an important theme in your life. I hope that you are considering a career that allows you to lead others because you have the talent and the passion for it." In this way, gifted girls are given permission to fall in love with an idea and get the help they sometimes need to nurture that process.

Value-based career counseling, a technique developed at The University of Iowa's Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development (Kerr & Erb, in press), is particularly helpful in discovering ideas worth falling in love with. Value-based career counseling can help girls to raise their aspirations; to focus on future goals; to analyze the role of relationships in their career development; to understand how their interests, needs, and values make them unique; and finally, to understand the importance of choosing a career based on deeply held values. The counselor who helps the gifted girl to fall in love with an idea has given the greatest gift that a counselor can give a bright and promising young woman.

## **Summary**

Although gifted adolescent girls now have higher aspirations than did gifted girls of the past, they continue to be unsure of their goals, to make unwise course-taking decisions, and sometimes to subordinate their career goals to relationships. Counselors can help girls to achieve their full potential by assisting in identification of the gifted; helping teachers achieve equity in the classroom; providing career education and career workshops; offering careful advising; increasing social self-esteem; developing identity; and helping gifted girls to fall in love with an idea.

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