

Chapter 8

Guidance Techniques that Work

In the previous chapters, suggestions for identifying gifted students, providing career counseling, providing academic guidance, and dealing with specific psychological adjustment problems were presented. Many techniques and strategies are useful across all kinds of counseling with gifted students. In a way, many techniques presented here are actually just the manifestations of positive, helpful attitudes toward gifted and talented students.

These suggestions for counseling gifted students are based on the experiences of counselors at the Guidance Laboratory for Gifted and Talented at the University of Nebraska and the Counseling Laboratory for Talent Development at The University of Iowa. They are grouped into two categories: designing guidance services for the gifted and talented, and counseling techniques.

Designing Guidance Services

Although it is probably not necessary that gifted students have a separate, specialized counseling service, it may be useful for the counselor to have a different system for keeping records and providing services to gifted students. Having a system of records and a plan for counseling gifted students ensures that gifted students' needs will not be overlooked in the course of trying to provide a wide variety of services to a diverse student group. Sometimes a school already has an individualized approach to guidance that emphasizes the talent development of each student; a system like this can be easily modified to provide for the special needs of gifted students. Some suggestions for structuring guidance services to gifted and talented students follow.

1. The file of every gifted and talented student should contain the transcripts of that student's coursework; a clear description of the student's special talents; a description of all results from ability tests that have been administered to that student by the counselor, school psychologist, or a private psychologist; any interest, personality, or values inventory results that may exist for that student; a record of summer school attendance and attendance at special camps and institutes for the gifted and talented; a description of out-of-class accomplishments, particularly awards, recognitions, and outstanding products; and a goal-setting sheet similar to the one described in chapter 5 on Career Planning in which a student has outlined two or three goals and his or her plans for attaining those goals.

2. If an assessment program does not already exist in the school, the counselor may wish to develop his or her own psychological assessment system for gifted students. Psychological assessment may consist of additional tests of intellectual abilities and aptitudes that the counselor is qualified to give; vocational interest tests; personality tests with which the counselor is familiar and competent; and values inventories.

3. The counselor should keep a library of materials likely to be of particular interest to gifted and talented students. Career education materials should include biographies such as those listed in the Resources section for gifted girls, materials for career counseling, as well as career education and college planning materials specially designed for gifted students. I referred to many of these materials in chapter 6 on counseling gifted girls, chapter 5 on career counseling, and chapter 4 on college planning. Also in the counselor's library should be a copy (or multiple copies) of favorite books for bibliotherapy.

4. Counselors can design a guidance plan for each gifted student that focuses on the development of talent. Each academic year the counselor should meet with the student alone several times, and at least once with parents to plan for the academic year ahead. Individual sessions with the gifted student alone can be devoted to developmental counseling focusing on the student's adjustment and achievement of his or her own goals. Sessions with parents can evaluate the overall impact of curriculum and special activities on the student's development, and also can be informational sessions about future opportunities and goals.

5. For the counselor with a large caseload of gifted and talented students, group guidance is not only an efficient way of providing registration, but also an opportunity for gifted students to interact with one another in planning for the future and discussing current issues in their lives. Group guidance with the gifted and talented can be organized around topics covered in this handbook. Group sessions might include a workshop on adjustment and self-esteem; a workshop on sex roles, relationships, and giftedness; a career planning workshop; and a college planning seminar.

6. The counselor should work closely with the gifted coordinator and with teachers of gifted students in developing a consultative relationship. The gifted education coordinator and other teachers need to be aware of the counselor's special expertise. In addition, the counselor can learn from the gifted educator and teachers more about the characteristics and needs of his or her gifted clients. Too often consulting remains on an informal basis and busy schedules overwhelm the good intentions of all parties to meet. Therefore the counselor might want to set up, at the beginning of each year, at least one formal meeting with the teachers of the gifted and perhaps the gifted student representative in order to develop a plan to meet the needs of gifted students.

Techniques for Counseling the Gifted and Talented

Most of the techniques for counseling gifted and talented students are simply the techniques all good counselors use: listening skills, persuasion skills, and behavior change skills. The following techniques are really attitudes and behaviors that can help the counselor to be more effective with intellectually able students and students with specific extraordinary talents (Kerr, 1990).

1. Counseling with gifted students must be child-centered, as Hollingworth (1926) first demonstrated. The more remarkable the gifts of the bright student, the greater is the investment that individuals have in the decisions that student makes. In the life of every gifted student there are teachers, parents, administrators, and friends with strong opinions about that child. In addition, there is often a great deal of information available in the records from former teachers and counselors. Despite the involvement of parents and teachers and despite the documents and records that exist, the counselor's first duty is to receive the gifted child's description of the problem or concerns in the child's own words. The child must be the focus of the counseling and therapy process. Sometimes in our rush to develop a child's talent we forget the child's own feelings and beliefs about his or her gifts. Only by understanding the child's giftedness from within the child's frame of reference can the counselor help to develop the child's gifts to their full potential.

2. In understanding the psychology of the (gifted child, intellectual abilities as well as personality characteristics must be taken into account. Many counselors of gifted students have observed that gifts seem to have a life of their own. For example, verbal precocity is a hunger for reading, writing, and expression that the individual cannot ignore. Mathematical precocity has an insistence of its own, demanding that the student go further and deeper into an understanding of math. Almost every talent carries with it its own drive and appetite for actualization. Therefore, to attempt to counsel the child without guiding the gift is to misunderstand the nature of the gifted child. It is often said that the gifted child is a child first, and then gifted. However, this statement may be misleading. A gifted child cannot be understood apart from his or her gifts.

3. A counselor's attitude toward a gifted student should be positive, constructive, and comfortable. As Hollingworth (1926) noted long ago, professionals who work with gifted students often feel threatened or are overly admiring. Neither of these attitudes is helpful. The counselor who feels threatened by the gifted child may feel tempted to test the child's knowledge, as if to make the child prove that he or she is gifted. The counselor who is threatened may avoid gifted students, not wanting students to know about his or her lack of experience.

The counselor who is overly admiring may be equally harmful. The awestruck counselor may feel overwhelmed by the verbally brilliant student's conversational abilities, allowing the counseling session to be sidetracked. Instead of being frightened or dazzled, probably the best attitude to strive for is one of friendly helpfulness and positive challenge. A counselor can be an empathic listener as well as a mentor who expects excellence from the student.

4. A counselor should always show curiosity rather than ignorance or indifference. For better or worse, many gifted students base their opinions of others on their perceptions of others' intellectual interests and abilities. In order for counselors to be effective and influential with their lifted students, it is necessary that their students perceive them as intelligent people with lively interests in the kinds of intellectual endeavors in which the students are interested. This does not mean that the counselor has to be an expert on such things as Fermat's theorem, Dylan Thomas's poetry, or the language of dolphins. Instead, it means that when students discuss these kinds of subjects the counselor should show a lively curiosity and willingness to learn about the topics that are exciting to the students. The basic techniques of good attending behaviors are exactly those that enable the counselor to show curiosity and interest. When a student remarks that she or he is interested in developing software for playing Dungeons and Dragons, the counselor can simply respond with, "That sounds fascinating! Tell me more about it." Or "What is it about developing software for games that excites you?" The counselor will learn a lot of interesting facts in these kinds of conversations, and gifted students will perceive the counselor as credible and persuasive.

5. The counseling process with gifted students often points up the necessity for change not only in the student but in the family, the school, and society. Many problems gifted students present to the counselor are not really their own problems but rather problems of the system in which they are trying to learn and grow. To help a gifted child to cope with the boredom of being in the regular classroom, the counselor must do more than help the student with coping skills. Instead, the counselor must act as an advocate for that student, helping the student to achieve a more challenging curriculum. To help the student who is experiencing extraordinary stress from academic pressure, the counselor must work with parents and students together to create a healthier attitude toward achievement.

Often, if the counselor is to do a good job as a helper to gifted students, he or she must become involved in action for change in the school system and in society. Many counselors who are experienced in working with gifted students enjoy the opportunity to meet other counselors of the gifted at state and national professional organizations that work for the betterment of gifted students. Counselors also can help empower gifted students to bring about changes themselves. By teaching their gifted students communication and persuasion skills, counselors may be able to help them to influence teachers and administrators to provide the kind of education they need.

Summary

At the beginning of this book, I said that those counselors who decide to guide gifted students are taking on a challenging but rewarding task. I have reviewed the challenges to the counselor in providing for the psychological adjustment, career planning, and academic guidance of the gifted student. The rewards of counseling the gifted student are much more difficult to describe; in fact they must be experienced. Perhaps the best way to describe the experience of counseling gifted students is to liken it to cutting diamonds. Like the jeweler who cuts precious gems, the counselor to the gifted gently guides and shapes the student's abilities and interests so that the brilliance might shine through.

References

- Hollingworth, L. S. (1926). *Gifted children: Their nature and nurture*. New York: Macmillan.
- Kerr, B. A. (1990). Leta Hollingworth's legacy to counseling and guidance. *Roeper Review*, 12(3), 178-181.