Chapter 12
Counseling the Gifted

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Introduction

In recent years, the field of gifted and talented studies has paid increasing attention to issues affecting gifted youth and factors that promote healthy social-emotional development in this population (Neihart, Reis, Robinson, & Moon, 2002). However, the field continues to have a heavy emphasis on achievement outcomes, to the neglect of “other important outcomes such as happiness, wellbeing, and life satisfaction” (Moon, 2003b, p. 16) that can be facilitated by counseling. Similarly, while a great deal of attention has been paid to the need for differentiated curriculum, very little work has been done to provide guidance to counselors and psychologists regarding how they might differentiate their typical counseling practices in order to be more effective with gifted clients. Several clinicians have developed new counseling models that are designed to address the needs of gifted clients (Mendaglio & Peterson, 2007; Moon, 2003a), but few of these models have been evaluated in clinical trials. In other words, although counseling can be an important mechanism for promoting the holistic development of gifted persons, most of what is currently known about how counselors might work with this population is grounded in the scholarship of theory and/or clinical practice rather than empirical research.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an overview of the current state of the art regarding counseling gifted students. The chapter begins by giving clinicians an overview of the developmental issues facing gifted students and the typical presenting problems of this population when they seek assistance from counselors. Then counseling models that have been described in some depth in the literature are reviewed in three categories: individual, family, and group. Finally, implications for practice, training, and research are discussed. It is hoped that the chapter will serve as a rough guide for practicing clinicians and encourage university-based counselors and psychologists to initiate programmatic research to test interventions with this population.
Developmental Challenges

Gifted individuals experience both typical and atypical developmental challenges. Typical developmental challenges are those associated with maturation. Gifted people generally experience the same typical developmental challenges that others experience. For example, like other children, gifted children gradually learn to walk, talk, and socialize as they grow older.

At the same time, gifted people may experience these typical developmental milestones on a different timetable than their peers. This creates an atypical developmental challenge. The developmental path of a gifted individual can be accelerated or delayed. At younger ages, acceleration is more common; in adolescence, delay is more common. For example, gifted preschoolers may exhibit more “terrible two” behaviors at 18 months than at the more typical age of 30 months because they have the cognitive characteristics of children a year older and, therefore, begin asserting an independent will earlier. Similarly, when highly intelligent children progress more rapidly through the stages of friendship, they may have difficulty creating friendships with children their age, because their chronological peers are not yet capable of forming the type of friendship they expect and desire (Gross, 2000, 2004). On the other hand, financial independence from parents may be delayed for gifted individuals because they spend more years in school receiving advanced education to prepare themselves for professional careers. In these examples, the gifted individual is experiencing a typical developmental sequence on a different timetable than are their same age peers—earlier in two cases, later in another. It is the difference in timing that creates challenges for the gifted individual. Developmental challenges created by atypical trajectories through typical developmental sequences are common among gifted individuals, but they usually can be resolved by the individuals themselves, without professional assistance. When professional assistance is needed for these issues, good intervention modalities include bibliotherapy, psychoeducation, and group counseling.

In addition to the challenges associated with having developmental trajectories that differ from same-age peers’, some gifted individuals experience atypical developmental challenges that are related to their giftedness. These developmental challenges are not found in all gifted children, but can create serious problems for those who are affected by them and often warrant professional intervention. For example, gifted children with AD/HD (Moon, Zentall, Grskovic, Hall, & Stormont, 2001) or learning disabilities (Olenchak & Reis, 2002; Reis, Neu, & McGuire, 1997) can experience extreme levels of frustration and peer rejection that can contribute to emotional or behavioral disorders. Similarly, peer teasing and/or bullying related to giftedness can create serious emotional distress in some gifted individuals (Peterson & Ray, 2006a, 2006b).

Developmental challenges that affect gifted individuals can be divided into two types: endogenous (arising from characteristics within the gifted individual) and exogenous (arising from the environments in which gifted individuals live). These two categories of atypical developmental challenges are discussed in detail below, followed by a discussion of common presenting issues for gifted clients.

Endogenous Challenges

Developmental challenges that result from asynchronous development with same-age peers are endogenous. Almost all gifted individuals experience asynchronies at