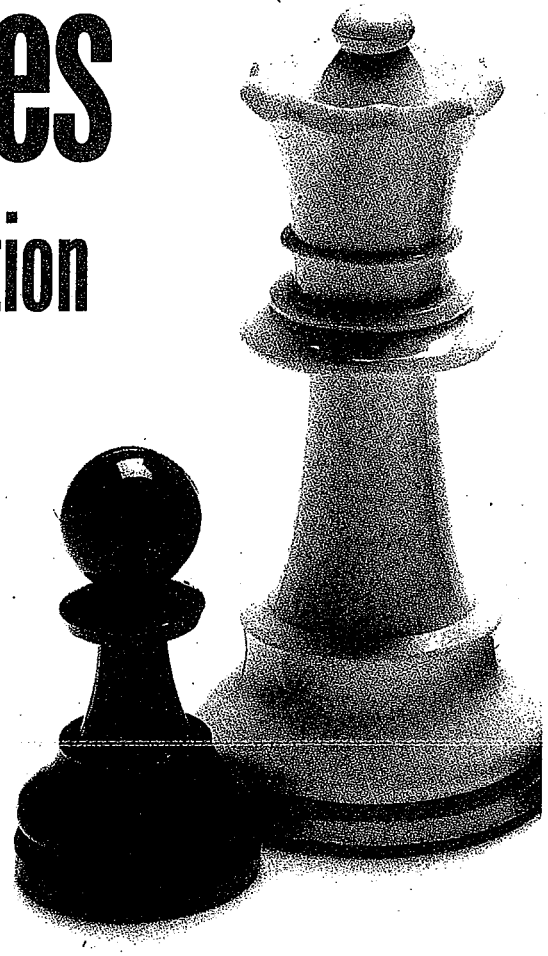
Parental Strategies That Support Academic Motivation in Gifted Children



By Dr. Alex C. Garn

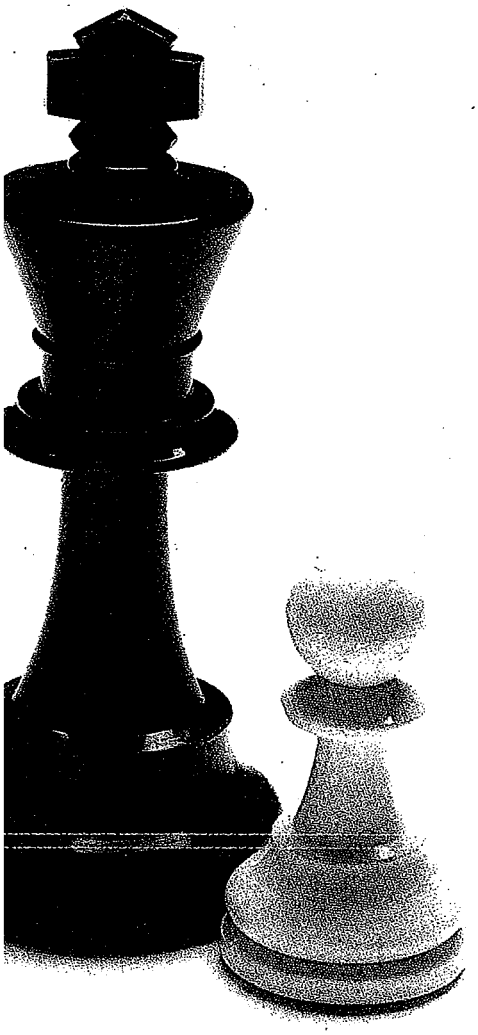
Parenting in the 21st century is not an easy task. This is especially true when parents try to facilitate academic motivation at home. With advances in technology, many young people face distractions at home that can sidetrack their engagement in and enjoyment of school-based learning. For example, choosing from hundreds of television channels, watching movies on demand, navigating the Internet, or playing video games are just a few examples of how technology can divert a child's motivation for school-based learning. Gifted children are no different. In fact, seminal research by McCoach and Siegle (2003) suggests that motivation is a key factor in determining the level of achievement in gifted populations. Parents who understand the intricate nature of motivation can help maximize the learning potential of their gifted child. Therefore, the purposes of this article are to: (a) inform parents about different types of academic motivation relevant to gifted children, and (b) provide strategies that parents can use to support the academic motivation of their gifted child.

Understanding Different Types of Motivation

Before highlighting specific parental strategies for supporting academic motivation, it is important to clarify what motivation is and why it is so crucial to learning and school achievement. In simple terms, motivation is the inspiration that regulates action and behavior. One of the major reasons why motivation is considered to be so important in any context is because it helps explain why people act and behave in certain ways. For example, motivation can help parents understand why their child sometimes does his or her homework without being asked while other times he or she must be forced to complete it. Motivation is thought to be highly complex because there are numerous reasons that inspire one into action. Therefore, motivation is generally divided into categories based on the underlying reasons of inspiration: (a) intrinsic motivation, (b) extrinsic motivation, and (c) amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2009).

Intrinsic motivation occurs when the underlying inspiration of behavior is based on the internal satisfaction, pleasure, and enjoyment that one feels from engaging in that particular action or behavior. For example, a gifted child may read a book because he or she enjoys the story and gains satisfaction from doing so. Intrinsic motivation is considered the most natural form of motivation that produces consistent, long-term, and self-regulated learning behaviors because learning is a part of human nature (Ryan & Deci, 2009). The essence of intrinsic motivation is that the behavior itself, as opposed to an external contingency, is viewed as the reward. For example, a gifted student who is intrinsically motivated to complete a science project does so because he or she is interested in the topic and derives satisfaction from working on it. A good grade may result from the science project, but this external contingency is not the inspiration of the student's learning behavior.

Of course, not all learning tasks are considered interesting, pleasurable, and fun. In these instances external contingencies such as meeting teachers' or parents' expectations, getting good grades, or staying out of trouble provide the inspiration for learning behaviors. Extrinsic motivation, therefore, occurs when the inspiration of actions and



behaviors is dependent on external contingencies. In other words, inspiration comes from an external source. For example, a gifted child may study hard for a mathematics exam because she wants to get into a particular college and she knows getting good grades will help her do so. Another gifted student may study for that same mathematics exam because he knows his parents will ground him if he does poorly. Both are examples of how extrinsic motivation regulates learning behavior, but would the same level of or commitment to studying be exhibited?

Reeve and Halusic (2009) suggested that with extrinsic motivation, the level of internalization that a student has for the external contingency (e.g., rewards) impacts the type of learning action and behavior to expect. The more autonomous or self-directed external contingencies are viewed (i.e., high internalization), the more powerful and consistent the behavior would be. On the other hand, when there is a low level of internalization for external contingencies or they are viewed as controlling, learning actions and behaviors are generally minimized and rarely self-directed. So, the gifted student who viewed getting good grades in mathematics as valuable would be more likely to study with greater intensity because she internalized the personal worth of getting good grades. In the second case, the gifted student would likely study at an intensity that would allow him to avoid punishment. The possibility of parental punishment controls the learning action. Without that threat of punishment, limited learning action would be expected because the external contingency (i.e., grade) is not highly internalized or valued by the student.

Amotivation occurs when external contingences do not inspire learning action or behavior (Legault, Greens-Demers, & Pelletier, 2006). According to Legault et al. (2006), this lack of motivation can stem from a number of different factors; however, lack of stimulation for the task and lack of value for the task appear most relevant to gifted students. With gifted children, there may be times when learning tasks at home or school are unchallenging. Unchallenging tasks are often viewed as boring to the point that learning behaviors are not even ignited through external controls. In other words, punishment, or the potential of it, is considered a better option than completing the learning task. Similarly, gifted students may also experience a lack of value for certain learning tasks because of advanced critical thinking skills. For example, it is not uncommon for learning tasks to receive a high level of scrutiny from gifted learners. Tasks viewed as worthless, unauthentic, or irrelevant may produce amotivation and cause learning behaviors to be minimized or cease altogether.

In summary, intrinsic motivation is the most powerful type of academic motivation that facilitates consistent self-initiated and self-regulated learning actions and behaviors. Extrinsic motivation is based on the external contingencies such as academic or personal rewards and punishments. The amount of internalization for external contingences one has dictates the involvement in learning actions and behaviors. The more personalized the external contingency, the stronger the involvement in the learning action or behavior. When internalization is low, the external contingency is often viewed as controlling and involvement in learning actions and behaviors is minimized (e.g., doing as little as possible to receive or avoid the external contingency). Amotivation is a complete lack of motivation that is often associated with a lack of learning value or stimulation. Internal satisfaction is not present and external contingences do not inspire learning action or behaviors.

Parental Strategies for Supporting Academic Motivation

In this section, three parental strategies for supporting the academic motivation of gifted children are explained in detail. These strategies are grounded in motivational theory and supported by research in diverse learning contexts. Each strategy is linked to intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and/or amotivation. It should be noted that the social environment factors such as parents or teachers are highly influential on the different types of academic motivation that learners experience (Garn, Matthews, & Jolly, 2010; Kaplan & Maehr, 2007; Mangels, Butterfield, Lamb, Good, & Dweck, 2006).

Strategy 1: Emphasize the Process

Learning outcomes receive a great deal of attention in the current state of education. For example, school administrators and teachers often focus on test scores and grades when making determinations of students' achievement, ability, and success. It is not hard to understand this mentality because educational policy rewards districts and schools that achieve high test scores and punishes districts and schools that achieve low test scores. That

is, "high-performing" districts generally receive more state or federal funding than "low-performing" districts. In this type of environment, it is easy for parents to follow the same path as most school administrators and teachers and concentrate their attention on learning outcomes. Children who obtain good grades and high test scores are rewarded (e.g., praise, increased autonomy, access to enriched curriculum, entrance to elite universities), and those who attain poor grades and low test scores are punished (e.g., criticism, loss of privileges, remedial work).

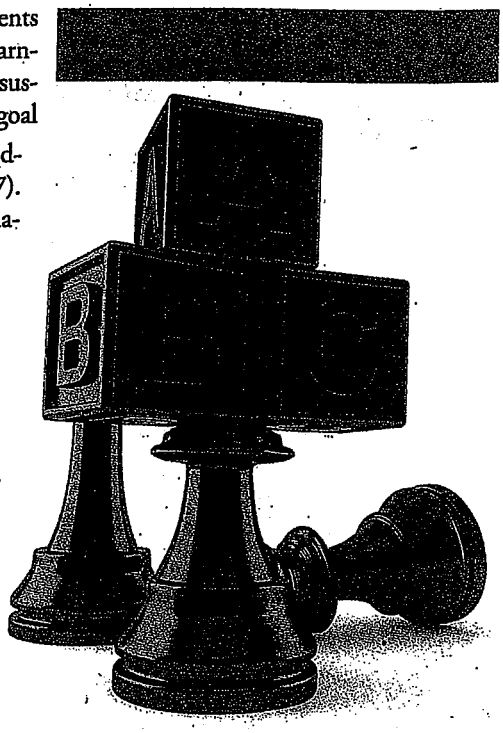
The process of learning often gets lost in the shuffle. This may not seem like a problem for gifted children because they are more apt to get good grades and score high on achievement tests. In an ideal world, learning outcomes always accurately reflect the learning process. Unfortunately, this assumption is not always true. Academic assessments often represent only a narrow portion of learning that takes place or, if the student already knows the material, no learning at all. For example, a teacher may provide an in-depth unit on the principles of buoyancy, but create a test with surface-level questions. Thus, the learning outcome for a gifted student (e.g., getting 100% on the test) is not an accurate reflection of what he or she learned about buoyancy. If the student is rewarded for getting 100% on the test (i.e., learning outcome), then it is likely for the reward to be associated with answering surface-level questions accurately instead of how much is learned (i.e., learning process).

Numerous motivational theories and research evidence links learning environments that emphasize the learning process with intrinsic motivation and learning environments that emphasize the learning outcome with extrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2009; Mangels et al., 2006). There are multiple motivational advantages to focusing on the process of learning over the learning outcome. When learning is focused on the process, it directs the child to the steps needed to master a learning task. In essence, the learning goal is to develop a comprehensive and deep understanding, and children are more likely to accomplish this in a process-oriented learning environment. On the other hand, focusing on the learning outcome creates an external contingency to learning (e.g., grade) and tends to promote extrinsic motivation.

Similarly, effort regulation is another motivational advantage of environments that focus on the learning process. Learners are more likely to maximize and sustain their effort when their learning goal is concentrated on the deep understanding of a topic (Kaplan & Maehr, 2007). In a learning environment that emphasizes the learning outcome, effort is only maximized when the outcome is challenging at the appropriate level. Otherwise, effort is minimized to the point that students can obtain the external contingency (e.g., grade, test score). Gifted students are therefore much more likely to experience academic intrinsic motivation, engage in deeper levels of learning, and reach their learning potential when the process of learning is stressed (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Therefore, interactions between parents and their gifted children should center on the process of learning. Feedback should be geared toward the amount of effort put forth in the learning process and the level of understanding the child has obtained. Finally, parents should avoid rewarding or punishing solely on the learning outcome. Rewarding for the process of learning or a combination of the process and outcome is advantageous for facilitating intrinsic motivation or extrinsic motivation with high levels of internalization.

Strategy 2: Reduce the Pressure of "Being Gifted"

For some children, the label of being gifted can generate feelings of pressure about learning. These feelings of pressure can come from a combination of internal (e.g., guilt, shame, obligation) and external (e.g., parents, peers, teachers) sources. For example, parents may place unrealistic expectations of achievement on their gifted children (Mudrak, 2011). This external source of pressure can increase gifted children's internal sources of pressure. For example, when a great deal of academic pressure is placed on a gifted student by her parents, the inspiration for studying may be focused on parental obligation as well as the avoidance of shame if achievement outcomes do not fulfill her parents' achievement expectations.



The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC, 2008) suggested that gifted children with a strong desire to please others and who face unrealistic expectations may experience unhealthy levels of perfectionism. Perfectionism is often associated with feelings of pressure, anxiety, and the use of avoidance learning strategies (e.g., procrastination). Amotivation or extrinsic motivation with low levels of internalization are more likely to arise in learners when perfectionism is associated with external sources such as parents (Miquelon, Vallerand, Grouzet, & Cardinal, 2005). This may be a result of the association between learning pressure from outside sources and feelings of being controlled (Reeve & Halusic, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2009). This is not to say that parents should not have high learning expectations of their gifted children; rather, parents should work collaboratively with their children to create realistic learning expectations. As stated earlier, these expectations should not be limited to learning outcomes. Furthermore, parents should avoid using feedback that denotes guilt and shame when their children fall short of learning expectations. A more adaptive course of action for parents would be to help their

child modify or change learning strategies that improve the chances of meeting learning expectations.

Strategy 3: Learning From Mistakes

The attitude and feedback that parents provide to their children about mistakes can have a profound impact on academic motivation. In many cases, gifted students are often able to learn content quickly, thoroughly, and recognize and rectify mistakes. Even in gifted populations, however, making mistakes is a normal part of the learning process! Deep levels of understanding and mastery learning entail a trial-and-error process. In simple terms, learning from setbacks and mistakes can actually maximize in-depth understanding. Gaining in-depth knowledge about a topic often leads to internal sources of motivation such as interest and enjoyment. According to Dweck (2006), parents who reinforce the normalcy of making mistakes in the learning process facilitate more adaptive forms of learning motivation and learning persistence in their children. Much of Dweck's work has also highlighted the problems that occur when teachers and parents place too much emphasis on not making mistakes. What often occurs under these circumstances is that mistakes become a reflection of low ability. This can lead to a host of academic problems such as developing perfectionistic tendencies, avoiding challenging learning tasks, diminishing creativity, minimizing learning effort and persistence, and experiencing amotivation. Therefore, parents should try to create learning environments that reinforce the importance of learning from mistakes.

Conclusions

Parents should keep in mind that not all academic "motivation" regulates learning behavior in the same way. Intrinsic motivation produces the most persistent, healthy, and self-directed learning behaviors. Although intrinsic motivation is not focused on learning outcomes, it typically produces the highest achievement outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2009). Extrinsic motivation with high levels of internalization (i.e., external contingencies that hold personal value) can also regulate persistent and self-directed learning behaviors. When an external contingency is viewed as controlling, learning behavior is more likely to lack self-initiation, be inconsistent, and effort will be minimized to the level of gaining the reward or avoiding punishment. Amotivation occurs when external contingencies do not stimulate learning behavior. Understanding these different types of motivation and subsequent learning behaviors can help parents implement strategies that facilitate intrinsic motivation and internalized forms of extrinsic motivation in academic situations. Furthermore, parents can avoid using strategies that unintentionally reinforce forms of academic motivation that hinder gifted children from maximizing their learning potential.

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