

# FINDING PROFESSIONAL HELP FOR YOUR GIFTED CHILD

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You have a gifted child. You are noticing some behaviors that concern you, or, based on observations of your child in school, your child's teacher has shared some concerns. You decide to get help from a professional, but you don't know who to see or what to look for. What do you do? The following are some suggestions to help in your search.

## 1) When should I look for professional help?

Happy, healthy kids come with a variety of behavior patterns, so it isn't always easy to know when there is a problem. The easiest clue is when there has been a *change* in behavior, to something that worries you. A previously active, high-achieving child becomes reclusive, alienated or angry. A previously happy child becomes sad and vulnerable. Depression or anxiety in a family may become less and less tolerable over a period of years, or the onset of adolescence, normally a potentially difficult period for a family, may make previously tolerable behavior intolerable.

Gifted children may display other problems in need of therapy or academic counseling. These may include such things as underachievement, emotional problems, ADHD or ADD, learning disabilities, difficulties with social relations, or perfectionism. Mental health professionals might be consulted if your child seems bored in school or is capable of getting high grades with little effort; in such cases, assessment of your child's giftedness and his or her specific learning needs might help in establishing a more suitable learning program. A mental health professional might suggest consulting a physician to rule out any treatable medical problems.

## 2) Who should I consult with?

Your child may need mental health services or testing or both. Depending on exactly what is needed, one or more professionals may need to be consulted. Let's look at mental health services first, and then testing in Question #5.

When consulting with any mental health or assessment professional, you should look for three things: **A)** Professional training; **B)** Experience with gifted children and families; and **C)** rapport between your family and the professional.

**A)** Mental health professionals come with a variety of *training backgrounds*:

**Psychologists** have either a Masters degree (M.A. or M.S.) or a Doctorate (Ph.D.-Doctor of Philosophy, or Psy.D. - Doctor of Psychology). They have from three to five years of post-college training in psychology, including some internship experience, during which time they have learned the fundamentals of human behavior and the assessment and treatment of emotional and behavioral problems. (Some psychologists are trained for work other than provision of services to clients.) Psychologists can have a degree of Ed.S. (specialist degree in education in the area of school psychological services) or Ed.D (doctor of education); these degrees may or may not imply competency in personality assessment or psychotherapy. In Minnesota, the use of the label "psychologist" requires a license; look for the "LP" (Licensed Psychologist) designation.

**Marriage and Family Therapists** may have a variety of post-college training backgrounds, leading to a Masters or Doctorate degree, and have had special training in human behavior and working with relationships; some do individual work as well. In Minnesota, look for the designation "LMFT", which stands for Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. This will indicate that the professional continues to meet the requirements for licensure.

**Social Workers** have post-college training and internship experience leading to a Masters or (more rarely) a Doctorate degree (M.S.W. or D.S.W.), and are trained in the treatment of emotional and behavioral problems of individuals and families. In Minnesota, licensure is required and carries the designation LICSW (Licensed Independent Clinical Social Worker). As with psychologists, some social workers are trained for other kinds of service and do not provide direct services to individuals or families.

**Psychiatrists** have a Doctorate of Medicine (M.D.), with residency training in psychiatry after medical school. Sometimes psychiatrists will have training in therapy with individuals and families; many spend the majority of their time concentrating on problems that require medication or hospitalization. If another mental health professional is consulted, it is a good idea for that person to have a working relationship with a psychiatrist, in case psychological medications would be useful.

**B)** Ask what *experience and training* a mental health professional has had in working with gifted children and their families. Across Minnesota, and across the country, there is an unfortunately small number of such professionals. Gifted people make up only a small part of the population, some professionals don't see a special need, and there aren't many training programs that offer special experience in counseling gifted. In some cases, special experience with gifted is not necessary; usually, however, insight into the problems of being gifted and how these relate to other emotional issues, as well as knowledge of useful approaches to problems, is increased when the professional knows about gifted people. A professional who does testing and assessment of gifted children should have specific training and experience in the use of appropriate instruments, the interpretation of results, and recommendations based on the results.

**C)** In some ways, *the rapport with an individual*, that is, how it feels to be talking to a particular professional, can be more important than specific training or experience. Indeed, if a professional has adequate training and experience, then this feeling of connection should be of utmost concern. Not everyone relates well to everyone else, and this shouldn't be taken as a sign of deep problems, but don't stay with a professional you don't feel comfortable with. In general, ask yourself if, in talking with this person, you feel *listened to, respected, and helped*. Therapy is not a "one size fits all" deal; not even all gifted kids are alike, and dealing with emotional or behavioral problems requires understanding of what motivates the child from his or her own perspective, rather than a fixed idea of what the child "should do" or "should be."

### **3) How much does it cost?**

Since you will not necessarily be looking for programs with a fixed number of sessions, the cost varies according to how long you go, what the basic fee is, whether there is testing involved, and whether other services (medical, educational, etc.) are required. In Minnesota, many licensed professionals are covered by some types of health insurance. Ask your agent or benefits administrator whether your policy covers "outpatient mental health services," and whether these can be provided by "out-of-plan providers," in case the mental health professional is not a participating provider in your plan.

### **4) What are the differences between psychotherapy, counseling, and family therapy?**

Mental health professionals will concentrate on one or more of these approaches, depending on the needs of the child. Counseling is what happens when a professional identifies a problem and suggests ways to solve it. The child and family employ the suggested approaches and see how it goes. The aim of psychotherapy is to discover the reasons behind behaviors or emotional states, so that some fundamental change can take place and the motivation for the behaviors or emotions is changed. Psychotherapy frequently deals with issues of self esteem and one's image of oneself. As an example, gifted kids frequently feel different, and therefore alienated from others. Learning about their giftedness and their similarity to other gifted kids can sometimes alter their self image in very healthy ways.

Family therapy can employ either of these approaches, but involves some work with relationships specifically. A gifted child may be working on his or her perfectionism and self-pressuring for achievement; if one or more parents is either subtly or openly also applying pressure to achieve, or if parents are finding their own sense of identity through the child, then this must be looked at in order for the child to be able to relax and possibly do better.

### **5) Does my child need testing?**

Testing should be done to help solve a particular problem, rather than simply out of curiosity. The two main kinds of testing typically sought are academic/intellectual and personality/psychopathology. Knowing your child's IQ may be reassuring, especially if it meets your expectations, but given the imprecision of the tests, the motivational and cultural factors influencing the results, and the expense, it is best to utilize testing with caution. Testing is usually used to find out what your child's abilities and characteristics are in order to plan for and facilitate appropriate learning programs in and out of school, or if you need information about possible learning deficits or perceptual problems. Many kinds of data can be obtained from a variety of assessments: creativity, learning styles, adaptive behavior (communication, self care, socialization, coordination skills), interests, preferences for independent and self directed work, visual/perceptual learning, verbal learning, study skills and attitudes. If you are concerned about emotional or personality issues such as depression or anxiety, or about drug use, a mental health professional can advise you about assessment for these.

### **Have courage!**

Most emotional and behavioral problems are solvable. More complex problems may take time; weeks or months of regular visits with a mental health professional are not uncommon and can be emotionally painful. Many times, the initial problem which brings you to therapy is related to deeper issues involving personal perspectives, motivation, and family relations. Having the courage to look at these issues for your child and for yourself, if that is what's needed, will usually end up in a cost saving, both financially and emotionally.

Have courage also to talk with your mental health professional about concerns you have regarding medications, testing, the course of therapy, or whether you feel understood in therapy. If there is a good working relationship, everyone will feel better and do better.

*(Published by the Minnesota Council for the Gifted and Talented, 5701 Normandale Road, Edina, MN 55424, 952-848-4906. A list is also available of professionals in Minnesota who are experienced in counseling, assessing, and testing gifted children; call or email MCGT [info@mcgt.net] for a copy. MCGT provides the service of information, but does not endorse or recommend any specific resources, programs, or activities, unless specifically noted. Readers are encouraged to obtain additional information and make their own evaluations.)*