



## PSYCHOLOGY OF DEVELOPMENT

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### Peculiarities of personality of individuals with harmonious and disharmonious types of giftedness development

*This article discusses peculiarities of personality development of individuals with harmonious and disharmonious types of giftedness. Description of the development types is based on the statements of "The operational giftedness concept". Definition of them is connected with the complexity of the very phenomenon of giftedness. The authors' objective is to prove that complications that occur in the gifted children's behavior, communication and education are not an immanent feature of giftedness itself.*

*The first part of the article includes facts that characterize personality of truly gifted children with harmonious type of development. In the second part three groups of problems that determine formation of personality of children with disharmonious type of giftedness are defined. In conclusion the authors show that psychological support to children with evidence of giftedness may help to switch a child from disharmonious to harmonious type of giftedness development.*

**Key words:** *Giftedness, harmonious type, disharmonious type, personality, peculiarities of development, evidence of giftedness, psychological support.*

In «The operational giftedness concept» [6] in accordance with the elaborated concept of giftedness as a systemic quality of mind a special attention is given to the structure of the gifted child's personality. When grading giftedness it is recommended to keep in mind that giftedness with harmonious and disharmonious types of development should be differentiated (though in real life there isn't such a clear border). The reason for that is that kids who overmatch the others in their abilities and performance are usually considered as kids with exclusive, special giftedness. Their performance might be uncommonly high. At the same time it is noted that particularly these children often have serious problems that need special attention and relevant help from teachers and psychologists.

How true and grounded is this opinion? If it is true, then a natural question occurs: is giftedness a gift or a burden? This in its turn lies in the basis of the vision of giftedness nature as of a consequence of several personality defects and grounds the idea that gifted kids are difficult kids.

A years long study and observation of truly gifted children give us the right to make a conclusion that the problems that the «gifted» children happen to have are



not the immanent feature of giftedness itself. Let us give a few examples.

A spectacular example of a gifted pupil was our testee S.N, a participant of our longitudinal study (started in 1970) with pupils of a specialized mathematical school №2. We observed Sasha N. until he got the school diploma. Being a schoolboy, he “worked” in the experiment securely, busily, but at the third task he slowed down. It turned out that before that he discovered a regularity and was searching for a proof for himself. Having solved his problem, he gave the answer to the next task and explained: “That is what we are taught to do. If you find a new regularity it is necessary to prove it before using it”. He was trying to excuse himself. Seeing that the experimenter was putting away the research forms, he asked: “But what about the rest of the experiment?” – “The experiment is over. You have exhausted the material possibilities,” – the experimenter calmed him down. The boy embarrassedly looked at the nearly blank form: “But what was the point of presenting so many positions if it was only needed to derive a theorem?” The experimenter explained that several people would need to tackle a lot of tasks before they could do that. Sasha was confused: “Can it be so?” Just bewilderment, no sign of the winner’s excitement, no feeling of superiority. This exceptional modesty of the strong pupil together with the brilliant reaching of the highest level in the experiment promised outstanding results in the future.

When we found Sasha 5 years later, he was already a post-graduate student. He easily made a pause in his studies. Being told that we would like to repeat the experiment by a new procedure, he said with humor: “I’m a theoretician now and I manage my time myself”. He came on the first appointed day. The experiment was done by a new procedure, but a relevant one to “Creative field” method [1]. Sasha demonstrated as high level of creative capacities as he did five years ago.

The next time we met with Sasha in spring 2002, he was a leading scientist already. Still he behaved in the same modest way. He willingly came to my institution for the experiment. He worked securely. The experiment results were identical to the previous. The talks that we had with him showed that his system of values stayed the same.

But how correct was our prognosis of creative potential presence, and its realization in professional life?

In ten years after finishing his postgraduate studies S.N. published a book related to his dissertation. We managed to get the review. Here is a short extract from it: «When the author started writing his book, there was no article devoted to the topic in Landau-Lifshits. Now there is one. And although it sounds sacrilegious, there is something to compare it with... The author has written a book that no researcher in this sphere can do without.”

In 2003 Sasha N. became the first Corresponding Member of the Russian Academy of Science among his schoolmates. On the insistence of the institute’s staff he was elected the Director of the institute he was working at (one of the most “elite” institutes of the Russian Academy of Science). By the way, being asked previously if he had a laboratory in the institute, he said that he didn’t because at the institute they all were



just research fellows.

Another episode distinctive for gifted children we witnessed at Moscow school № 57 when the kids were preparing to go to International Academic Competition (Olympiad) in Australia. P.I. came to the form master and asked to shift the day of his duty (the person on duty mops the floor in the school), because he will be in Australia at that day. He asked about it because he dismissed any thought that someone else could do his duty instead of him. This different facts describe similar personality organization of our testees. It features no sense of exclusiveness, which is a result of consistent targeting at working in the field of interest, the full absorption by this activity. Unfortunately, the high achievements, widely demonstrated in early childhood, logically lead to comprehension of own exclusiveness. The absence of it indicates integrity and self-sufficiency of the character.

As the "Kaleidoscope" theory of V.Frankl says, "when you look in the kaleidoscope you can see only the kaleidoscope; that's how it differs from binoculars or the telescope" [7, c.72]. In this model of cognition a person only produces his world, and only the person can be seen in it. That's why the final conclusion of Frankl sounds so logical: «Only as I step back and forget my own existence, I gain the ability to see something bigger than myself. This self-renunciation is the price that I have to pay for learning the world. To say it shortly, I have to ignore myself». [7, c.72]. If a person cannot do it, his cognitive abilities diminish, because he stems the tide of his cognition. A similar connection between creativity as a result, but not the goal, and consistently realized – and therefore developing – activity seen by the person as the meaning of life, can be easily seen in V.Frankl's analysis.

It needs to be underlined, that while researching the peculiarities of a gifted person's personality it is important to keep in mind that giftedness is the main trait that characterizes the personality. The uncommon longing for learning, inexpugnable desire to share the discoveries with other people, the commitment distinguish the personality of a truly gifted person. Therefore a more correct formulation is used for children's giftedness: «kids with signs of giftedness», because even if the abilities of a child are bright and super ordinary, his or her personality is not set yet.

This is fully true concerning children with disharmonious type of giftedness. The disharmonious type of giftedness is featured by combination of separate high capacities and achievements and serious disturbances of development that require special attention of specialists. «The operational concept of giftedness» states that the disharmonious type of development may be based on a different genetic resource and different age development, that can be characterized either by accelerate pace (about 80%), or by slow pace (about 5%), or even by disturbance of the necessary integration processes. This is particularly typical for highly gifted children. "Their psychics is almost always characterised by a complex of different psychological, psychosomatic and even psychopathologic problems, whereby they are included into the "risk group" [6, C.31].

In scientific and especially popular publications the peculiarities of such child's



personality formation (including the difficulties in adaptation to school surrounding, psychological problems in communication, perfectionism, emotional imbalance and low self-esteem) are often defined as specific, inherent to giftedness phenomenon. A touch of fatalism – “it goes with the gift” – defines the general strategy of working with gifted children. Analysis and definition of real mechanisms, that create these problems, are essential in order to make this work effective, to not overlook the child’s giftedness behind the “wall” of problems.

We may conditionally divide the problems typical for formation of personality of gifted kids with disharmonious type into three groups.

The first group features dissynchronicity of different psychical functions development. In that case the child demonstrates obvious signs of giftedness and at the same time dramatic lag (or obvious disturbances) in development, for instance in development of psychomotor and verbal spheres. Motor clumsiness, dyspraxia, dysarthria, dysgraphia are frequent companions of high intellectual abilities. These development disorders often lead to failures at school and other manifestations of disadaptation.

If a gifted young musician or a poet fails to cope with school program on maths or physics, this is perceived as a natural thing. But if an intellectually gifted kid is not able to learn the educational material, this creates a shock in his parents and becomes a puzzle for his teachers. Often capacities of such kids are ignored by the teachers. Pedagogues consider lots of children with pronounced signs of giftedness (in special fields, the accelerated development by intellectual parameters) as lagging in general mental development. Therefore these children get to correction classes. Without adequate environment for development the child’s capacities diminish, and his self-esteem goes down abruptly. The child loses faith in his abilities and cognitive interest.

The opposite approach in the educational practice is ignoring development disorders (as it was noted above) and attributing them to giftedness phenomenon. In this case a child does not receive the necessary and timely psychological and pedagogical help.

In 2002 Yura E. was six years old. He was brought to an interview \* with the aim to select a “strong” school because the child had a phenomenal memory size and strong calculation capacities. Yura could reproduce from memory a big sequence of numbers and a new melody, heard only once. The pedagogues of his kindergarten thought that this abilities show his giftedness, including a special gift for studying foreign languages and maths. They thought natural that he had difficulties in communication with grown ups and peers and disorders in emotional development. They also considered natural for a “remarkable mathematician” to lack empathy. The examination showed that the kid had general verbal and sensomotor underdevelopment and serious disorders in space perception.

The parents got recommendations on correction work with their kid. It was also advised to choose a school with “mild” educational program and without big load of

\* The neuropsychological examination was done by Goryacheva T.G., Cand. Sc. (Psychology)



studies. Unfortunately, having a strong faith in the kid's giftedness, the parents accused the specialist of incompetence.

As we discovered afterwards, as a result of the development disorders that were not diagnosed in time and refusal of his parents to accept the correction interventions, the boy was not able to study at the school that his parents selected for him. Besides, his phenomenal capacities were "natural" and disappeared with advancing age. But his lack of communication skills, impulsivity and emotional "deafness" stayed the same.

The second group features disorders in general regulation and will. In spite of the highest level of capacities development this kids lack realization in activity. "The fountain of ideas" does not transform in any product. This discrepancy creates serious intrapersonal conflicts that lead to "Oblomov phenomenon". These kids usually get associated with perfectionism as personality peculiarity, although the origin of the phenomenon differs from striving for perfection.

But striving for perfection, the manifestation of perfectionism, can also hardly be considered a specific trait of a gifted kid's personality, although it is habitual to it with no doubt. As V.T.Kudryavtsev fairly notes, perfectionism is intrinsic to any sound subject of educational activity – the one who wants and who is able to study, "the studying one" instead of "a taught one". But, according to the data of Y.D.Babaeva and V.S.Yurkevich, in the cases of kids giftedness perfectionism leads to stress, especially if the child outlives his failures long and painfully. The authors of the book "The Gifted Children" [4, c. 47] point at the non-specificity of this phenomenon. They say that a gifted child makes overstated demands on himself, he "judges by adult standards and hurts and upsets himself without need». Particularly this sometimes creates the low self-esteem in such kids. The «unhealthy» forms of perfectionism are mostly typical for the kids from the third group.

The third group features kids with bright advanced development. If achievement of such kid is vivid against his peers' achievements, this attracts attention of the adults. Occurrence of high capacities in a child provokes exploitation of them. This leads to artificial stimulation of their development detriment to the age specific activities. In this situation the kids are "robbed of childhood", but what is even worse, their personality development becomes distorted and depleted. The feeling of own specialness may create snobbery in a child, and this may result in failures in communication with peers. Constant admiration of people around creates situation where the child by and by loses the right to make mistakes or have failures, because this abruptly lowers his status and is not accepted by adults. It is important to mark the primary role of family here, because it can be a strong factor of a child's personality development distortion. When a specially gifted child is born in a family, it usually breaks the culturally customary stereotypes of kids raising (for example that a child should read by a certain age) and urges to pay more attention to the child's needs. Our observations of the families with gifted children showed that they differ a lot both by styles of kids raising and by the attitude to the kids' abilities (even up to ignoring of the high abilities). Still there is



something common for all this families: this is an explicit or unconscious expectation of high results from the child. Even if the child's giftedness is ignored, his failures at school, at the academic competition, etc. cause if not annoyance, then at list bewilderment in his parents.

Here is a typical example from a colleague's practice (who works as a psychologist at one of the leading regional gymnasiums). Kolya has come to school with his eyes tear-stained. "What happened?" – "My mother scolded me for a long time yesterday". "What was wrong?" – "I did not win the Kolmogorov Tournament in individual championship, and the team got only the second diploma". "Were you the only one in the team?" – "No, there were 6 people. But I wasn't attentive when I wrote down the task. As a result we lost 4 points and got the second diploma in the first League". "Were you the eldest one?" – "No". – "Were you the captain?" – "No". But I inattentively wrote down the task. And my mom said that I will soon become just like everyone else, get down to zero. And my dad too... And I will not study dance as well any more, because I also do not "shine".

Kolya was so upset that he even could not hide his mood from his classmates: "I'm depressed. I feel that people will not respect me anymore, because I didn't win the tournament".

A child's self-esteem depends greatly upon the adult's appraisal. If the child feels that his achievements do not match with what the adult expects from him, he will try by all possible means to overcome this mismatch.

We met Sergey V., a pupil of the 8th form of one of Moscow's leading lyceums, after a teacher's council where his expulsion was discussed. The reason for that was constant long-term truancy. «It's such a pity! He has such good capacities!» – the teachers complained. – If only the psychologists could do something!» Sergey avoided communication with psychologist, gave formal answers, but the standard diagnostic techniques showed that the reasons of his academic failures were to be looked for in his family. As Sergey's mother said, he started reading and calculating independently early. But the main thing was that whatever coterie she would bring the boy, he was predicted great future: a musician, an artist, a chess player, a constructor. The boy easily fulfilled any task and dramatically outran other children. It was especially vivid in chess: Sergey would never loose in his age group. Sergey's father would happily review the games with him. He perceived the boy's victories as something absolutely natural. When Sergey was six, he achieved adult ranking, and pupils of elder forms and students of higher educational institutes became his partners. Then naturally losses started occurring. At first the boy would honestly tell about them, but his father demonstrated perplexity and displeasure. «Are you an idiot or a lazy bone?» – This was the mildest word of what he would hear as an answer. Then the losses disappeared. Sergey would bring the most difficult parties from the section and tell that he won them. His father's bad mood disappeared too. Long after that it was found out that Sergey lost all these parties, moreover he hadn't attended the section for more than half a year. In the primary school Sergey studied easily, he won all intellectual marathons. In the secondary



school he won academic competitions. Once he took not the premier, but the second place, and instead of congratulations he heard from his teacher: «Well, we'll forgive you this failure this time...»

Sergey entered a lyceum easily. He changed the school by his father's decision. The advanced courses on every school subject started at once, and the boy's performance decreased a little, the «threes» started occurring. This is a usual matter for this school, and the parents are usually informed at the first meeting that the performance may temporarily decrease at the beginning of the studying process. But every Sergey's «three» provoked a scandal in his family. Then the «threes» disappeared, and the «fours» as well. The «chess» story repeated. When it became clear that the boy stopped attending the school, his mother got a sickness list because she was afraid that he will be expelled. Having missed almost a quarter of the studies, Sergey got into a unbearable situation: he needed to quickly reach his form's level in all subjects and to not get marks lower than a «four». This task was almost inexecutable. Sergey continued to maniacally fake off the classes and tell lies about his successes at home although nobody believed him anymore. The truancy was hidden by the sickness lists. The mother tried to control her son as tightly as she could: she escorted him to school and picked him up after classes. But this didn't lead to a result. When he was in the 8th form she had to leave her job and be present at school all the time. Then the child made an attempt to go from home.

When asked by the psychologist why this situation was being discussed only after a year, the class mistress answered that formally there were no truancy (because they were all covered by sickness lists), and it never came up to performance appraisal, because when the adults managed to get the boy to the classes, he never got marks less than “three” although he missed lots of studies. His mother also said that she was afraid to ask for help anyone at the school because she didn't want to worsen the situation. After psychological help was given to the parents and after secret wardship after Sergey the situation stabilized. The boy attends school and has good performance. But he became passive, does not enjoy the studying and does not demonstrate any special interests. A gifted preschooler, he became a “grey” schoolboy.

We agree with the statement of V.T.Kudryavtsev that the extent of simplification of mental development in family may significantly exceed what we can see in pre-school and school education.

In this case we can speak about *destruction of personality from inside* [5, №5, c.55]. The fear to not comply with the expectations creates high personal anxiety and perfectionism and leads to the cognitive motivation extinction and domination of achievement motivation in the structure of personality. As a result the creative potential fades. Success in professional activity will further on always be determined by concrete pragmatic tasks.

The situation when a child's capacities are not any more obvious against the achievements of his peers (in high school it is not important at what age one learnt to complete tasks for the seventh form, at 6 or at 14) and the sense of own specialness is



hypertrophic is the most tragical. Kudryavtsev notes, that measuring own significance by achievements “the gifted child practically neglects building the foundation of his inner world, constructing and mastering of personal development general perspectives that intensively happens in childhood, adolescence and youth and develops in the life of creatively evolved adult” [5, №5, c.55]. This is the cease of personal growth and degradation.

Hereby the disharmonious type like cancer contains in itself mechanisms of giftedness elimination. The worst consequences are caused by disregard of the tasks of age development of a child in favor of increasing of separate capacities and as a result – stimulation of high achievements to the detriment of his personality development. Personality is the backbone of giftedness, and if the problems of its forming are ignored, the forming of what we actually expect from a gifted child – the creative personality – is blocked.

We believe that the most important role of psychological support to a gifted child is to switch him from disharmonious to harmonious path of development.

About 10 years ago at a summer creativity school “New names” we noticed a rhyme that perfectly reflected our feeling of summerhouse: “Music of pine trees and roar of trains you hear from home”.

A clear parallel could be seen between this child and famous Nika Turbina who ended her life tragically. Although the common opinion was that Oleg will become a big Russian poet, he could not attend school. Like in Nika’s case, there were difficult nights without sleep when he had asthmatic attacks. His health condition was complicated by serious endocrine disorders. When we first examined him ( he was 13) physiological infantilism was clearly seen. Except sleeping disorders in early childhood his parents reported rapid fatigability, impulsiveness, phobias, behavior disorders. During the examination he was restless, could not sit at his place, constantly ran away for some business.

Based on the early verbal development, his parents and teachers made a conclusion about general intellectual forestalling of Oleg. Therefore while choosing the school for his they considered *only advanced* schools with high studying load. He could not handle it and as a result studied in non-residence form. He didn’t have friends among his peers.

The examination showed the reasons of his studying problems. The neuropsychological examination revealed serious disorders of voluntary regulation and probably dysfunction of diencephalic structures of brain, of the right hemisphere and underdevelopment of frontal lobes of the left hemisphere. The easy exhaustion of nervous system with attention fluctuation and inability to distribute attention complicated education at mass school. Despite of “adulthood” of speech he had infantile emotional-motivation sphere which showed on all examination levels [2].

During observation the phenomenon of hyper-care in parenting style was revealed as well as lack of social experience of the child. The parents could not send Oleg to a common school because of behavior problems and poor health. The boy stud-



ied at home. He demonstrated a strong and not realized want to communicate with peers. But long deprivation from communication also cause fear of it. Oleg was afraid of peers, they were “strangers” to him. The kids felt it and also didn’t accept him.

Following our recommendations the child started attending a school near his home. It was a rural school with usual educational programme. Children of different social state and abilities attended this school. Among them there were kids who felt proud that had never read a single book. The parents worried how Oleg’s relationship with classmates will settle. But the regular attendance of school allowed the capacities of the child to be socially realized in the community of his peers. Gradually his communication problems started disappearing. Now his peers in the street were not “strangers” or hooligans any more, but his classmates. The kids started liking the boy as well, because when he came to school the life in the class and in the school became more interesting. They gathered around him as the magazine editor that won the second diploma at the regional school magazines competition. Their mate became a Winner of the President’s Award, so there was pride and not jealousy in their attitude to him. Oleg obtained a new feeling of being needed and the joy of giving. During the next 3 years of observation Oleg grew intellectually a lot. His logic became better, his analysis became systematic and the cognitive self-activity started forming. Oleg demonstrated a high level of creative abilities in the experiment by our method in 2003.

Now Oleg is a successful student of one of the best humanitarian higher educational institutes of the country. He entered the institute a year earlier than his peers. Now there is not only a dream flight, but a demanding search for himself and his own way. While at 13 year old he wrote:

*I will not fly like a bird . . .  
I was destined to fly in my dreams.  
What can I do and what should I do  
From the very moment of my birth? ...  
Perhaps I should simply write poems,  
Passing by the pine trees of my garden?*

At 18 he writes:

*The time already outraces me.  
By bushes dusted at edges,  
I run late and breathless.  
The drops riping on the branches  
Are intent and downcast.  
The heart beats hard in my breast –  
I cannot calm it or take it away.  
But I don’t need to – somewhere ahead  
The time seems to come to the finish.*

Now Oleg L. is also in demand professionally as a gifted translator. In 2004 he became a winner of a competition among young poets “Debute”. In this year Oleg was invited by US National Library (Likhachev project). Now civil motives dominate in



Oleg. On April 16, 2007 a new group "Teplotrassa" performed at a musical party. Here is word by word the mini-manifest of the group: "Teplotrassa" – is a group of poets-friends who felt the kinship of their poems...we would like "Teplotrassa" to become warmth transmitting in the end, a channel via which we will be able to transfer our warmth to you. We feel interesting different kinds of warmth. We are its researchers... we do not only write warm poems. But when we will need to give away the warmth that we gathered, we will meet together". This warmth concept comes from a poem of Oleg who is the ideologist and leader of "Grazhdanskaya oborona" group. In 2008 he became one of 19 best poets of CIS.

So we can tell with certainty that correction work diminishes factors that may lead to giftedness disappearance. Moreover it creates conditions for stability and its progressive development.

### **The Literature**

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