

# What can Parents, Teachers and Counselors Learn from the Knowledge on Gifted Adults?

by Noks Nauta 2013

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Giftedness appears in all areas of life and colors all domains. Gifted adults possess the positive aspects of giftedness, such as passion, energy, and focus; as well as the negative sides like fear of failure, procrastination, problems in making choices, burn-out, boredom, and conflicts at work as well as in their private lives.

Knowledge about giftedness in adults is building gradually (Jacobsen, 2000; Streznewski, 1999; Nauta & Ronner, 2007, 2013). There is no significant difference between the gifted child and the gifted adult. Many gifted adults were not detected as gifted in their childhood and knowledge of their giftedness could increase their happiness, energy, and renew their drive. Knowledge of adult giftedness could also help parents, coaches, and counselors provide support for gifted children and help them to better prepare for their future. This article contains a short overview of important aspects. We recommend further reading of articles and books in the references list for those who are interested. Reactions are welcome!

## Giftedness: an existential model

There are hundreds of definitions of giftedness. In the Netherlands, a person who is a quick and intelligent thinker, who can handle complex cases, who is autonomous, curious, and passionate by nature, sensitive and emotional, intensely alive, and enjoys being creative would be considered to be gifted (Kooijman-van Thiel, 2008). A very high IQ is one of the characteristics, but not the only one. This more descriptive model is not a definition or an instrument for measurement, and helps those who are gifted to become more conscious of their talents, strengths, weaknesses, and potential pitfalls.

## Gifted adults at work

The primary themes that are relevant in gifted adults in relation to their work are (a) making choices where to work, (b) relationships with supervisors, and (c) conflicts at work.

What kinds of jobs are suitable for gifted adults? In general gifted adults are able to do any kind of work, but are often unhappy when they are not challenged, when the work is not interesting, or when they work in bureaucratic, rigid cultures. Boredom is also a risk. Gifted adults need space to do their work in their own ways and are happier in an autonomous position (Reijseger, Peeters & Taris, 2013).

Some gifted people go from job to job, often changing every 2 to 3 years. When they are not aware of their talents or their needs, this pattern wears them out and they do not find accomplishment. Some need professional help to determine which talents are most important for them to fulfil. The process of making choices can be stressful and it may help to be aware of the ways choices can be made (Nauta, Ronner, & Groeneveld, 2009).

A qualitative study among members of Mensa in the Netherlands asked about the relationship of gifted adults with their supervisors at work. The data indicated that a good supervisor for gifted workers is a person who sees the talents and gives the gifted workers enough trust and space for their own way of working without controlling them (Nauta, Ronner, & Basseur, 2012). It is important that gifted workers make clear what they need at work to use their talents best, which is also in benefit to the company!

Workplace conflicts of the gifted show a specific pattern as found in a qualitative study by Van der Waal, Nauta, & Lindhout (2013). The conflicts always start from the sharp observations of the gifted: they often see very soon what is wrong in the organisation or in the department and then want to make improvements. Often these are big issues, dealing with important values such as

justice. The gifted adult's mode of communicating these concerns is often not effective. Conflicts at work can lead to personal damage: many of our interviewees lost their jobs, and some developed mental problems. This pattern of conflicts was also found in gifted children. Thus, we recommend that parents, coaches, and counselors help gifted children to become more effective in communicating about what they see and what bothers them.

#### Relationships of gifted adults

Gifted adults may have had challenges in starting and maintaining friendships and intimate relationships. A significant difference in IQ (more than 10 to 20 points) between individuals seems to be a barrier in the building such relationships. Being more aware of that mechanism and learning more effective communication skills early in life may help individuals better connect and build more satisfying relationships.

In a study among 354 members of Mensa in the Netherlands compared to a community sample, Dijkstra et al (2012) found that, compared to the control group, the members of Mensa found it more important to find or have a partner of high intelligence; this was especially so for single respondents. In practice it appears to be difficult for many highly intelligent persons, especially in the higher IQs, to find a partner who meets their intelligence level.

#### Gifted adults' learning

As is true for some gifted children, learning and studying of gifted adults may be difficult when there is fear of failure, when they have not achieved skills for studying, when they have learning disorders (undetected because compensated for by giftedness), or when their preferred learning style is unknown and therefore not effectively used (Van de Ven & Nauta, 2012).

Motivation to learn, based on natural curiosity of the gifted, should be nurtured and stimulated as early in life as possible. There is great need for more attention to the barriers that some gifted academic students experience. Counselors and psychologists of academic students need more knowledge in recognizing gifted students to providing them better support. Academic teachers need to overcome prejudices (... 'when you are so smart, you can help yourself') and develop tools to help these students.

#### Gifted elderly

When reaching an older age, some gifted persons may become lonelier than others. Annemarie Roeper (2007), famous in gifted education, describes her experiences in older age in her essay, "Growing Old Gifted." Knowing about their giftedness may be of help (IHBV, 2012), and is a strategy that we recommend.

#### Author

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