



Amy L. Boone and Mary M. Christopher, Ph.D.

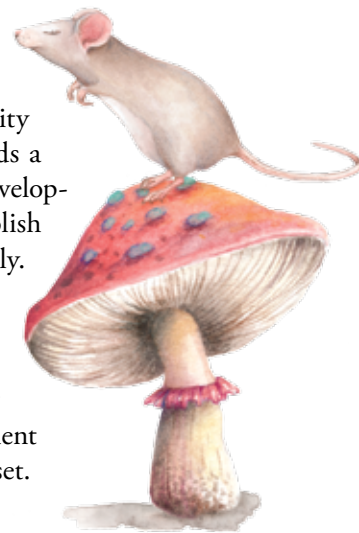


As the parents look at the ultrasound screen in anticipation, the technician excitedly exclaims, “It’s a girl!” The parents delight in the image moving on the screen and immediately begin visualizing the little one to come into their lives. In the coming weeks, lace, flowers, and pink transform the nursery into a baby girl wonderland. Friends host showers for the coming baby in living rooms that eventually look like a fairy magically pink-washed the entire room. After the baby is born, her mother dresses her in a pink and purple tutu skirt with a pink ruffled shirt. She rides home in her pink, polka-dotted car seat, and her parents place her in the crib that resembles a princess’s fairytale bedroom. From the moment her parents learned her gender, cultural gender stereotypes began creeping into her world.

As the girl grows through her toddler and preschool years, she will learn in subtle and not so subtle ways what it means to be a girl. She will experience the ways culture has defined colors as gender related. She will play with toys marketed solely to girls and avoid those intended for boys. She will hear grownups typically refer to her physical looks and largely ignore her personal interests.

When the girl exhibits gifted tendencies, she may experience subconscious confusion and conflict if her interests fail to meet cultural expectations (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Silverman, 2012). She may notice cultural connotations that beautiful people are good people; that sexual appeal rather than intelligence advances females in this society (Bloom, 2011). The resulting “halo effect” certainly may confuse a young, gifted female who already perceives she is different from many of her friends.

Throughout the gifted girl’s childhood, messages from her parents, culture, and schools will significantly influence her ability for growth. Like a small seedling, she needs a place to grow and optimal conditions for developing her gifts. She needs her parents to establish a rich environment for roots to grow deeply. She needs the ability to filter the polluted messages filled with harmful stereotypes raining down around her from the culture. She needs teachers and schools to point her to sunlight, personal growth, and achievement rather than hiding her abilities in a dark closet.



## PARENTS AS SOIL

Research repeatedly affirms that parents of gifted girls possess the strongest influence on their children's achievements (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Even more than past achievements, parental expectations impact gifted girls' beliefs about themselves (Randall, 1997). The home creates the soil where a gifted girl first finds nourishment. Parents of gifted girls often are unaware of simple ways they can create expectations that encourage optimal growth. Their girls need a soil-rich environment with a variety of nutritional experiences to cultivate their gifts.

From their earliest years, gender-biased messages inundate gifted girls. Some statements may imply a preferred role of a submissive princess needing a prince to rescue her. Other messages may relegate girls to domestic tasks only. Sadly, they may also find few intellectual toys aimed at

Parents need to recognize narrow stereotypes and work consciously against them (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008). Parents of gifted girls must advocate for their daughters even when it causes personal discomfort. Unknowing friends and family may often focus on girls' looks without ever asking about their passions and interests. Friends and family may not think to purchase open-ended toys for these girls, automatically thinking a girl will prefer culturally defined toys found only on the pink, girl aisle.

Gifted girls often experience barriers to reaching their full potential throughout their lives. Parents of gifted girls can proactively advocate for them if parents educate themselves about the realities of these barriers. Parents who remember their expectations greatly influence their gifted daughters, seek places for growth where deep roots will create a stable and secure base from which to blossom (Lamb & Brown, 2006). For opti-

autonomy and collaboration, gifted girls benefit from mentoring relationships. These mentors allow gifted girls to visualize themselves as successful adults (Navan, 2009).

Parents of gifted girls must recognize the pervasive halo effect in society and speak to their daughters truthfully about it. The halo effect creates a bias in which a person perceives someone's internal qualities by making a judgment based on external appearance. Contrary to what culture implies, beauty does not equal goodness and physical unattractiveness does not equal badness or worse, a license to mock or disrespect. Douglas (2010) pointed out that when President Clinton appointed Janet Reno as Attorney General, media immediately spoke disrespectfully about her appearance and physical size. The public questioned her sexual orientation and mocked her because she was not considered physically attractive. Parents of gifted girls can point out this treatment of Reno as reprehensible. They can also point to Reno's professional competence and intellect. Those who knew her personally spoke of her compassion and legal expertise. Unfortunately, the public did not hear much about this.

Although it may seem deflating to talk with a gifted daughter about these seemingly insurmountable obstacles, knowledge and awareness foster efficacy and, in turn, agency, which allows gifted young women to see themselves as important contributors to society (Navan, 2009). Parents who understand their role as the most important voice influencing their gifted girls' worlds carefully choose fertile soil full of enriching nutrients whereby lifelong roots can grow.

## CULTURE AS WATER

Gifted girls experience more mixed messages from peers, society, parents, and teachers than any other group (Randall, 1997). As gifted girls

Because females often subconsciously wrestle with the balance between autonomy and collaboration, gifted girls benefit from mentoring relationships.

their gender (Lamb & Brown, 2006). As gifted girls' intellectual curiosities expand, parents must take a firm stance in supporting their daughters' gifts.

Parents must encourage their daughters to explore, take risks, and grow deep roots of resilience, strength, and self-confidence (Silverman, 1991, 2012). They should purchase toys with a broad range of exploration possibilities rather than prescribed, scripted play (Levin & Kilbourne, 2008).

mal social and emotional development, gifted girls need to interact with other girls who are their intellectual peers (Meredith, 2009). When gifted girls interact with each other, they experience resilience and increased self-esteem (Navan, 2009).

Parents also help their daughters grow deeper roots when they expose them to successful female mentors (Navan, 2009; Silverman, 1991). Because females often subconsciously wrestle with the balance between



grow, gender-determined cultural messages rain down around them, suggesting many ways to embrace their femininity. Oftentimes, when a person waters a plant, she may not even notice at first glance that the water is tainted. To the naked eye, the water appears normal and even harmless. In the same way, the objectifying stereotypes that society embraces seem so commonplace now, many people do not even perceive the grave dangers posed to females. Beginning at birth and continuing throughout life, every female experiences various social settings and influences, creating a self-perception of what it means to be a girl (Silverman, 2001). From the moment a girl's gender is known, her surroundings shower her with messages about how girls look, act, and what they prefer. The frilly, pink going home outfit with the pink-washed nursery begins this highly gendered journey into childhood.

Some big-box retailers still delineate toy aisles for girls and toy aisles for boys. The blue aisle for boys includes Legos, superheroes, tools, weapons, and sports equipment. The pink girl aisle contains Barbies, Bratz, kitchen utensils, dress-up clothes, and Monster High dolls. Pink and purple dominate the entire aisle devoted to girl toys. Consider the implications for a preschool-age gifted girl. She may enjoy building with Legos with an older brother or neighborhood friend, so she eagerly searches for some Lego sets that she might want for her birthday at the store. She gravitates to the pink aisle as her subconscious self tells her to do. She cannot find the Legos she built with previously. She wanders to the boy aisle and she sees them.

As Delisle & Galbraith (2002) so adamantly noted, this girl wades into the waters of confusion so many gifted girls experience. Thirty years ago, companies like LEGO marketed to both genders with the same products. Today, LEGO, and most other companies, have chosen to limit offerings

to each gender based on their marketing (Sifferlin, 2012). LEGO has introduced a line of products specifically for girls. This line, called LEGO Friends, features some neutral colors, no primary colors like the original bricks and a plethora of pinks and purples. Offerings in the line include a pet salon, a bakery, and a rehearsal stage. In com-

Teachers and schools  
can encourage the  
development of voice,  
an essential quality that  
fosters self-confidence in  
gifted girls.

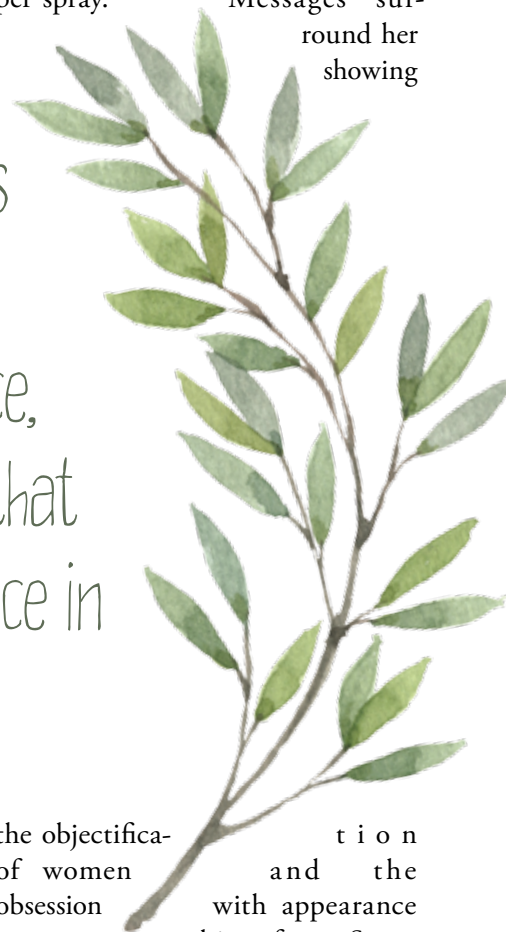
parison, the offerings marketed to boys include a satellite launch pad, police helicopter, and stunt plane. To further the stereotypes, the LEGO Friends line uses the following words in advertising: beauty, chill, cupcake, puppy, shop, house, and perfect. In advertising the sets marketed to boys, the company uses words such as send, catch, action, capture, build, stop, and rush. Research shows that gender stereotyping in toys contributes to lower math and science scores for middle school girls, yet the practices are pervasive (Kerr, Vuyk & Rea, 2012; Reis, 2001).

As the gifted girl grows up, the tainted messages continue to wash over her. Unfortunately, the messages move from simply unfiltered to what some might consider to be overt and polluted. As exposure to culture increases, the confusing messages do

as well (Kerr et al., 2012; Reis, 2001). She sees T-shirts marketed to her that say, "I'm too pretty to do my homework, so my brother does it for me." She processes the shirt worn by a boy that says, "Nice girls don't use pepper spray."

Messages surround her showing

the objectification of women and the obsession with appearance in everything from Super Bowl commercials to the stunning statistic that 80% of early adolescent girls are dieting at any given time (Lamb & Brown, 2006). Lamb and Brown (2006) discussed extensively the importance of parents helping their daughters interpret and understand the culture. Parents must identify the distorted messages or pollutants seeping into their gifted daughters' lives. As parents monitor, discuss, and evaluate cultural messages with their gifted girls, they can provide opportunities for developing the girls' intellectual gifts, emphasizing the importance and worth of abilities and character over the external emphasis from culture (Reis, 2001).



## EDUCATION AS SUNLIGHT

Girls excel at every level of education. Bloom (2011) affirmed that girls score higher than boys on achievement tests from kindergarten through high school. Seventy-two percent of girls nationwide graduate from high school compared with 65% of boys. Women receive 58% of bachelor's degrees in the United States. They outnumber men in universities at the undergraduate, graduate, and professional levels and the average high school grade point average of girls exceeds that of their male counterparts. Gifted girls certainly comprise much of the success reflected in these statistics. Therefore, with numbers like these, should teachers and schools concern themselves at all with issues relating to gifted girls?

Unfortunately, research also points to a plethora of barriers gifted girls face that schools and teachers must address. Like plants closed in a box, gifted girls fail to grow without the sunlight of a supportive educational environment. Teachers routinely nominate more boys than girls for gifted testing and frequently impose similar stereotypes on girls that they receive from society (Reis, 2002). Gifted girls frequently attribute their success to hard work rather than innate ability and often avoid competition in order to preserve important friendships (Reis, 2002). Gifted girls also often struggle with perfectionism, creating unrealistic expectations for themselves in all avenues of life (Kerr et al., 2012; Reis, 2002). Overexcitabilities can generate a level of intensity gifted girls cannot maintain over time (Navan, 2009). Some gifted girls also struggle with the blessing and curse of multipotentiality (Reis, 2002). The combination of these issues with which many gifted

girls grapple and the overwhelming cultural messages inundating these girls points to the importance of schools and teachers to provide adequate sunshine for these girls in the dark places of inner struggle.

Teachers and schools can encourage the development of voice, an essential quality that fosters self-confidence in gifted girls. Navan (2009) referenced multiple studies pointing to the primary way females learn about

Gifted girls already  
possess what they  
need for intellectual  
success; teachers can  
come alongside them  
and continue to offer  
opportunities for growth.

self is through relationships. Gifted girls need community with other gifted girls. In isolation and without interaction with other females of similar intellectual abilities, these gifted girls often retreat from their non-gifted peers for fear of not fitting in (Navan, 2009). They also downplay their accomplishments for fear of further isolation (Reis, 2002; Silverman, 2012). As a result, gifted girls without a voice blend in with the rest of the girls their age and hide their gifts. Teachers and schools can identify this phenomenon and gently encourage gifted girls out of hiding. Plants do not grow well when closed up in a dark closet. Gifted girls do not grow well

when their gifts largely remain unnoticed and hidden.

Once gifted girls find their voice, they continue to need teachers who understand the intricacies of gifted girls. When teachers assume the role of advocate for gifted girls, they remove the clouds that continually roll into these girls' lives attempting to shadow who they really are and stunting their growth. The confusion between autonomy and collaboration can often create a cloud that hinders the growth of gifted girls (Navan, 2009). Gifted girls intuitively understand the value in developing relationships, yet feel drawn to work alone if no intellectual peer is available (Navan, 2009; Reis, 2002). When a teacher understands this dilemma, he or she helps gifted girls recognize that developing autonomy gives them greater potential to form meaningful relationships with others (Navan, 2009).

Schools should constantly seek ways to support and affirm gifted girls. Supporting them in various ways points them toward the sunlight and affirms them. Gifted girls already possess what they need for intellectual success; teachers can come alongside them and continue to offer opportunities for growth. Schools should identify gifted girls as early as possible (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002; Silverman, 2012). They can encourage gifted girls' participation in advanced math and science subjects and a variety of extracurricular experiences. Teachers should communicate the critical truth to gifted girls that they are intellectually able and not just lucky (Delisle & Galbraith, 2002). Teachers and schools can foster the self-esteem of gifted girls by understanding and communicating the need for the girls to develop expressive and instrumental personality traits. The expressive traits of nurturance, kindness, and gentleness combined with instrumental traits of decisiveness,

assertiveness, and independence create the highest self-esteem among gifted girls (Randall, 1997). Society often rewards girls for expressive personality traits but discourages the instrumental traits believed to be too masculine.

Schools and teachers can incorporate educational practices that foster the development of efficacy in gifted girls. These practices include identifying giftedness appropriately, responding to overexcitabilities, promoting self-regulated learning experiences, reading biographies of role models and mentors, teaching resiliency, and dispelling gender myths (Navan, 2009). Gifted girls who successfully grow in self-efficacy move easily into the significant and vital goal of agency. Agency involves intentionality and forethought with a developed sense of self-reflectiveness (Bandura, 2001). Gifted girls who possess a strong sense of agency understand their own gifts and the value their gifts have to society (Navan, 2009). Gifted girls who develop agency act with intentionality. They plan ahead in the short term and for the future (Reis, 2002). They self-assess, competently allowing for reflection and reaction to their surroundings and situations (Navan, 2009). Gifted girls with a developed sense of agency grow into women who appreciate their valuable contributions to society, while rejecting the cultural messages that they should be able to do everything (Reis, 2002). They turn into powerful world-changing women who will teach our children, embrace the hurting, speak out against objectification of women, care for the sick, seek justice for the oppressed, lead people, run businesses, and so much more.

## CONCLUSION

All of these educational practices lead to increased cultivation for gifted girls' growth when regularly communicated to parents of gifted girls (Levin

& Kilbourne, 2008). Most parents of gifted girls strive to help their daughters reach their full potential; however, without knowledge of the myriad of issues related to gifted girls, this can be a challenge. When schools and teachers educate themselves about the issues, they can communicate the issues to the parents of gifted girls. Again, parents provide the most important voice their gifted daughters hear. When parents understand issues of their gifted daughters and then advocate on their behalf, the girls thrive and ultimately blossom because they are firmly planted, well-watered, enriched, and deeply rooted.

## REFERENCES

- Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 52, 1–26.
- Bloom, L. (2011). *Think: Straight talk for women to stay smart in a dumbed-down world*. New York, NY: Vanguard Press.
- Delisle, J. & Galbraith, J. (2002). *When gifted kids don't have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.
- Douglas, S. (2010). *Enlightened sexism: The seductive message that feminism's work is done*. New York, NY: Times Books.
- Kerr, B., Vuyk, A., & Rea, C. (2012). Gendered practices in the education of gifted girls and boys. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 647–654.
- Lamb, S., & Brown, L. (2006). *Packaging girlhood: Rescuing our daughters from marketers' schemes*. New York, NY: St. Martin's Press.
- Levin, D., & Kilbourne, J. (2008). *So sexy so soon: The new sexualized childhood and what parents can do to protect their kids*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.
- Meredith, C. (2009). Young, gifted and female: A look at academic and social needs. *Gifted and Talented International*, 24, 109–120.
- Navan, J. (2009). *Nurturing the gifted female*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Randall, V. (1997). Gifted girls. *Gifted Child Today*, 20(4), 42–49.
- Reis, S.M. (2001). External barriers to gifted experienced and talented girls and women. *Gifted Child Today*, 24(4), 26–37.
- Reis, S.M. (2002). Gifted females in elementary and secondary schools. In M. Neihart, S.M. Reis, N. Robinson, & S.M. Moon (Eds.) *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 125–136). Waco, TX: Prufrock Press, Inc.
- Sifferlin, A. (2012). *LEGO's new "Friends" line for girls: Offensive?* Retrieved from <http://healthland.time.com/2012/01/26/legos-new-friends-line-for-girls-offensive/>
- Silverman, L. (1991) Helping gifted girls reach their potential. *Roeper Review*, 13, 122–123.
- Silverman, L. (2012). *Giftedness 101*. New York, NY: Springer.

**Amy L. Boone** is a graduate student at Hardin Simmons University working on a master's of education in gifted education. She taught elementary school in Texas and currently teaches prekindergarten at a private school. Her research interests include social and emotional issues of gifted learners, parenting gifted children, and academics for gifted students.

**Mary M. Christopher, Ph.D.**, Associate Dean of the School of Education at Hardin Simmons University (HSU), completed her Ph.D. at Texas Tech University. After teaching for more than 15 years in Texas, Oklahoma, and Kentucky, she has served as professor in educational studies for 18 years, program director for the master's in gifted education, and program director for the Doctorate in Leadership program at HSU. She serves as consultant and professional development facilitator for school districts throughout Texas. Her research interests include topics related to the academic, social, and emotional needs of gifted learners. She currently serves as Past President of TAGT.