

On Being Invisible: The Highly Gifted Child

by Muriel Fraser

It should be fun to be brighter than most of the people around you, right? Well, only up to a certain point.

The world seems to belong to those with an IQ of about 130. This is just high enough to get into Mensa, the largest high-IQ society. At that level people are understood by many others, yet their extra ability gives them sparkle and often makes them into leaders. They tend to march at the head of the group.

But what of a child who is so far ahead that he has turned the corner and is out of sight? He will be puzzled by it all and may come to feel invisible.

There are good grounds for this feeling. Studies have shown that there is a “window of comprehension” of about 30 IQ points. A highly gifted child may be very fond of people who are outside his range, but they will never really understand him or his needs. They may lack faith in this small, unusual creature and betray him without meaning to. This leaves him with no one he can really count on.

A child with a very high IQ who knows no one else within his “window of comprehension” is trapped behind one-way glass.

This problem hardly exists for most Mensans. They are in the top 2%, scoring higher than 98% of the population, but if they have an IQ of about 130, their “window of comprehension” will overlap with most of the people they are likely to meet socially.

However, the situation is quite different for those who join the Triple Nine Society, the main group for those with very high IQs. Triple Nines are in the top 0.1%, scoring above 99.9%. And with an IQ of at least about 150, they are outside the “window of comprehension” of almost all the population. Still worse off are Triple Nines who score well above the cutoff for this group. They have little in common even with most Mensans.

This is why Triple Nines typically face isolation from the time they are small. They are different in ways that the other children cannot understand, and may be mobbed as a result. This situation is dramatized in the novel, *Lord of the Flies*, where the precociously rational child is hounded without mercy. By having the gifted child in the story murdered, the novelist spared himself the job of trying to figure out how such a child manages to carry on afterwards.

Even when they are left in peace, these highly gifted children often have to play alone, because what their play may be misunderstood, as well. It’s frustrating to

build a sand castle with turrets and a moat, only to have a classmate try to make it posh by adding a double-car garage.

Conversely, many of the activities that gladden the hearts of the others will drive such a child to distraction. Like Brownies. When forced to dance around a papier-mâché mushroom while singing a song about being an elf, one child rolled her eyes. This got her classified as a danger to troop morale and, to her delight, quietly thrown out. Finally she had more time to herself.

Such children may prefer the company of older ones, yet find themselves locked into their own age-group. The cruelest irony is when well-meaning teachers don't know about their older friends but do notice that they seem to be on the sidelines in class. Teachers may then try to "help" these children by holding them back in school until they become more "socially mature". However, being given simpler work and younger classmates merely serves to increase both their painful boredom and desperate loneliness.

When people are denied sensory stimulation they eventually begin to hallucinate, since the mind must be kept busy. A gifted child whose mind is starved of intellectual stimulation finds his thoughts turning inwards, too. This can cause acute misery. Stress like this can derail lives that once looked full of promise.

Since the real problem lies not with the very high IQ itself, but with its rarity, this can be mitigated by a favorable environment. A highly gifted child from a professional background is likely to meet at least a few others who understand him. If, on the other hand, he grows up in an ordinary neighborhood he may know no one within his "window of comprehension". He keeps tossing out conversational balls, but no one catches them and throws them back. This is one of the most important reasons for having special classes for gifted children to help them break the one-way glass.

Their other pressing need is to have enough free time. Highly gifted children may resign themselves to being invisible and learn how to find intellectual stimulation without relying on people. They explore, they make things and they read voraciously. But if they're loaded down with busywork, obliged to be with children they can't communicate with or forced to play endless team games, these escape routes are blocked, leaving them with nowhere to turn. They have no time to conquer boredom through activities that interest them. They also have no time to find books that speak to them and use these as a substitute for companionship.

A very high IQ is a double-edged sword. Just these children have a great capacity for misery, they can also find great joy and satisfaction when they are allowed to fully use the complicated machine inside their heads.

One highly gifted two-year-old, left unattended with a ball of twine, climbed up and down tying all the furniture together, to turn the room into a giant spider web. That gave the room a satisfying complexity and improved the decor enormously. Such children want to construct their own worlds and they need to be given the time and opportunity to do so. Then they can develop interests which will help sustain them on the often rocky road ahead.