



Interview Article

An interview with Steven I. Pfeiffer: Parenting from the heart

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Abstract

More research on the psychology of gifted individuals will contribute to the effectiveness and efficiency of applications that can be made thanks to a better understanding of these individuals. In this interview, he answered very critical questions about consulting the gifted with Prof Dr Steven Pfeiffer. He is a popular speaker, author, parent coach, and international consultant. It is recommended that researchers and practitioners in the field of gifted education and creativity analyze key codes in the interview to find the practical and pertinent answers they seek.

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Michael Shaughnessy: In your opinion, what do you mean by "optimal mental health" and how can parents help their kids achieve it?

Steven Pfeiffer: I began exploring the idea of how to encourage a young child's positive mental health and well-being back in 1998. At the time, I was Executive Director of Duke University's gifted program, Duke TIP. Meeting with one of the extremely bright Duke TIP students who was misbehaving in class and upsetting the other students, I had an epiphany. I recognized that many fabulously bright students – intellectually gifted kids, kids with super high IQ's – with

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magnificent “*head strengths*,” didn’t always have nearly as well-developed “*heart strengths*.” By heart strengths, I mean skills, personal assets, and values in the areas of self-awareness, social maturity, open-mindedness, self-control, resiliency, honesty, gratitude, agreeableness, kindness, empathy, humility, compassion, self-reflection, tact, and forgiveness. And responsible decision-making. I view these character strengths, virtues, interpersonal skills, and social competencies as part of what I mean by, “*strengths of the heart*.”

In my view, supporting *peak mental health* entails kids having these critically important *heart strengths*. Of course, ‘optimal’ mental health is a hypothetical. It’s an abstract, a figurative concept. Based on the positive psychology movement, optimal mental health is an ideal that we can strive towards over the course of our lives. But we live in a world where *optimal* or *perfect* is never on the menu! In my own clinical work, optimal mental health suggests kids, adolescents and families that are not only free from personal conflict, psychological distress, or psychiatric symptoms, but are actually feeling optimistic, energized, passionate about their work, and excited to get up each morning and face the day’s challenges.

In my new book, **Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids**, I talk a lot about specific ways that parents can optimize, encourage, and boost their child’s mental health, resiliency, success in the classroom and in the social world outside of school. How parents play a major role in advancing their child’s mental health, spirit, flexibility, and overall well-being. In my research and clinical work, over the course of my 40+ year career, I’ve found three super traits that can make a real difference in optimizing mental health and well-being: emotional intelligence, character strengths, and social skills. Parents can encourage the development of their child’s heart strengths – their social skills, emotional intelligence, and their character strengths, to optimize their child’s well-being, resilience, happiness, and life success!

Michael Shaughnessy: What is your definition of good parenting?

Steven Pfeiffer: Good parenting, or what I prefer to call *smart parenting*, consists of caring, sensitive, and loving adults teaching their children developmentally-appropriate and culturally-valued skills, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors that encourage honesty, self-confidence, empathy, and compassion. That also encourage and reinforce self-control, integrity, curiosity, perseverance and ‘stick-with-it-ness,’ mental and physical toughness, optimism, social competence, moral strength, concern for others, independence, and the ability to accurately read their own and others’ emotions. Essentially, I am describing the three super traits in my *strengths of the heart* model: emotional intelligence, social skills, and character strengths.

Smart parenting requires that parents’ model these same good behaviors, be willing to change any harmful or dysfunctional patterns that they learned as kids, be more ‘in the present,’ learn how to keep their cool around their children, and continually work to create a peaceful, harmonious home life. Smart parenting also requires that parents embrace self-care. Based on my definition, smart parenting is a full-time job! It takes a whole lot of conscious effort to be successful. It’s an on-going process!

Michael Shaughnessy: Tougher question- what is your definition of good parenting for Gifted Talented and Creative (GTC) kids? (You could probably write a small book on this!)

Steven Pfeiffer: Smart parenting of bright or GTC kids requires pretty much the same approach that is required to successfully parent all kids! I would think that we as a society are looking for the same outcomes for all kids – self-confidence, curiosity, intellectual risk taking, perseverance, grit, love of learning, passion, optimism, empathy, respect for others, compassion. Writer Michele Borba recently published a nice little book titled, *Thrivers*. She describes seven teachable strengths that align closely with my *strengths of the heart* model. Borba contends that her seven teachable strengths – or my three *strengths of the heart* – lead kids to shine and become what she calls *thrivers*. I wholeheartedly agree.

In my experience, smart parenting of GTC kids – or for that matter, smart parenting of any child who is a special needs or neuroatypical child, requires the parent to do a few additional things smartly! I actually talk a lot about this in my new book. For example, smart parenting of GTC kids requires that parents buy into the following six things:

Accept that their Gifted or Talented child is different

Every child is unique. No two kids are the same, even twins growing up in the same family! Kids who are gifted and talented are different in many ways from their non-gifted peers. They have special needs that oftentimes challenge and confuse their teachers and peers. Special needs students are different. This can put an added burden on the parents and family. Parents of GT kids need to understand, support, and value their child's distinctive learning and social-emotional needs, struggles to fit in, and oftentimes asynchronous development, overexcitabilities, greater emotional reactivity, multipotentiality, and quirky behaviors. And passion.

Become an expert on giftedness and gifted education

Reading self-help books like the one that I wrote is crucial for parents to learn as much as they can about giftedness and exceptionalities. Parents of special needs kids benefit immeasurably from readings, websites, podcasts, attending college classes, and gifted conferences and parent workshops offered by organizations such as NAGC and SENG. Smart parenting includes becoming an expert about giftedness, individual differences, gifted education, ability grouping, talent development, acceleration, honors, IB, and AP classes, home schooling, dual enrollment at colleges, and twice exceptionalities.

Learn to advocate for their child

Smart parents of GT kids – really, all neuroatypical or quirky kids, often need to take on the role of child advocate and ambassador for their child. Many educators and parents view gifted kids as a low priority. Many view parents of the gifted as pushy. Smart parents of GT kids may find themselves needing to advocate to educate, inform, and correct misperceptions and myths about the gifted. The challenge is to advocate in a tactful, gentle, but self-assured and knowledgeable way. This certainly isn't easy when you're advocating for your own child! Smart parents of GT kids need to learn when and with whom to pick their battles, when to back off, and how to gracefully compromise.

Encourage their child's unique strengths

Every GT child is born with a unique profile of abilities. For example, some kids display, at a very young age, uncanny musical, drawing, dance, or reading ability. Other GT kids surprise us, at a very early age, with almost supernatural theatrical talent or artistic, gymnastic, mathematical, athletic, or spatial ability. The number of potential gifts is limited only by what society values. Smart parents of GT kids recognize that their child may possess multiple gifts. The point is that smart parents are observant of their child's natural or innate abilities and support them. Young, world-class achievers almost never reach the highest levels of accomplishment without family support.

Don't shy away from discipline and setting family rules

Clearly stated parental expectations and family discipline, rules, and limits for conduct are crucial for all kids, including GT kids.

Smart parents recognize and communicate the value and importance of helping their gifted child to understand and respect rules within the home, school, and neighborhood. When your child learns to graciously follow family rules and respect discipline, they are acquiring foundational social-interpersonal skills on how to get along with others, maintain friendships, deal with conflict and disagreement, and control their emotions. To my surprise, some authorities in the gifted field suggest that gifted kids need fewer constraints or limits than others. There is absolutely no research supporting this idea. As a parent, it is tempting to think that your GT child has better judgement and is more socially mature or more emotionally intelligent than other kids her or his age. Not true! Smart parents of GT kids respect the importance of discipline and family rules.

Avoid being overly competitive or pushy

The last point that I'll make on what makes a smart parent is this: You've probably heard about or even know a parent who is living through their GT child. They are way too emotionally attached to their gifted kid and almost absorbed by her skill and accomplishments. This is the stereotypical "tiger mother" or "stage mom." I have seen otherwise loving parents pathologically preoccupied, spellbound, and riveted by their own young child's gifts. They lose all perspective on social graces and what an appropriate role model as a parent should be! They become *over-the-top*, living through their

gifted child's accomplishments. This reckless behavior by overinvolved tiger moms and dads can have a hugely deleterious impact on their GT child's psychological well-being and talent development. Smart parents of GT kids learn to moderate their enthusiasm, pride, and involvement to manageable levels!

Michael Shaughnessy: Grandma's Rules- I think immediately of Premack's principle- am I off on this?

Steven Pfeiffer: This question is too funny! Hahaha.... The Premack Principle, if my memory serves me correctly, is a theory of reinforcement that proposes that less probable behaviors can be reinforced by pairing them with more probable or desired behaviors. I believe it was named after psychologist David Premack and is a hallmark of applied behavior analysis. A nifty tool for parents and teachers – and dog trainers! – to encourage a desirable, but low frequency behavior.

Grandma's Rules are totally different! First of all, Grandma's Rules were proposed by me and not David Premack! Second, Grandma's Rules are based on my experience as a family therapist and parenting coach. They are grounded in techniques, skills, attitudes, and guidelines that help parents become more calm, self-assured, comfortable, and confident adults *and* parents. For simplicity's sake, I call these rules and guidelines *Grandma's Rules*. They aren't rocket science! In my new book, **Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids**, I dedicate a chapter to ten of these rules, canons, or tenets. In my work with hundreds of parents of bright and gifted kids, I've learned that these important rules help parents become calmer, more centered, reflective, compassionate, and better-adjusted adults and more-effective parents!

What is gratifying is that *Grandma's Rules* are supported by scientific research and considerable anecdotal clinical evidence. They are not wild-eyed, personal ideas that I have "cooked-up." Not at all. In my book, I write about ten of these tried-and-proven, evidence-based Grandma's Rules that make parenting easier and more enjoyable. And more effective! I don't want to steal the thunder of all the secrets in my new book. But I'll share some details on one of Grandma's Rules to whet your reader's appetite to get their hands on my book and read about all them!

The first Grandma's Rule, **model good behavior**, is so obvious that it almost goes without saying. But it is important to remind readers of this column, as I remind parents in my clinical practice, that kids – especially smart, high ability and gifted kids, are keen observers of others' behavior. Kids' radar is set before birth to observe and pick up the many messages that they observe in their environment. It's as basic as that. My grandma preached to me, growing up in the Bronx, New York, that kids learn what they see others do, not necessarily what they are told is the right thing to do. And she was spot-on correct! Behavioral scientists call this phenomenon *observational learning*. It is a form of social learning that starts at a very young age – among infants and toddlers!

There is an abundance of research in the behavioral and neurosciences supporting observational learning. In my book, when I talk about how parents can develop their child's empathy and compassion – components of one of my super-traits, character development! – I introduce the reader to the topic of mirror neurons as a neurophysiological basis for observational learning of empathy! Suffice to say, kids are keen observers of important and influential adults – their parents, grandparents, and teachers, and influential kids in their social world. Kids continually learn through imitating what they observe and are exposed to. What is also critically important to remember is that kids are also keen observers of undesirable and inappropriate behavior, particularly when displayed by influential adults and peers in their social world. Psychologist Albert Bandura taught us that kids learn and imitate bad behavior just as easily as they learn good behavior through observational learning.

Parents who model considerate and courteous behaviors, agreeable and helpful behaviors, behaviors such as gratitude – which I talk a lot about in my book when I introduce how parents can encourage *emotional intelligence* and *social skills*, can expect that their child will imitate these well-mannered and favorable behaviors – what social scientists call prosocial behaviors. Grandma's first rule, **model good behavior**, is such a simple, important, and powerful principle because it establishes the default interactive style of kids in their first few years of life. It is a basic and core conviction about how to interact in front of our children!

Other **Grandma's Rules** that I talk about in my book include learning how to change harmful patterns of behavior, discovering how to be more in the present, reducing the level of stress in your life, embracing self-compassion and self-kindness, identifying and disarming your bad triggers, embracing self-care, and creating a peaceful, serene home life. These are life skills that can be taught and easily learned but require constant vigilance and perfecting since for many of us, they're not the default for how we think, feel or behave as adults and parents!

Michael Shaughnessy: Emotional Intelligence- how do you define it and how do teachers and parents teach it?

Steven Pfeiffer: Quite simply, *emotional intelligence* or *EI*, as it is often called, is a person's ability to perceive or 'read,' understand, manage, and handle emotions and emotionally charged situations.

As I've already mentioned, *EI* is one of three components of my *strengths of the heart* model. The other two are *character strengths* and *social skills*. Researchers and mental health practitioners believe that people with higher *EI* are better able to recognize their own emotions and those of others, adjust their emotions to adapt to different situations, and discern among different emotions and label them more accurately.

In my new book, I offer parents a variety of techniques, tools, and games that they can use to teach and encourage *EI*. As one example that is often effectively used by teachers in the classroom to build *EI*, reading to young kids stories of high interest. And then asking them to explain *how* the different characters might have felt and *why*. Finally, you can role play with the child (or class) exaggerating the feelings that the characters in the story felt.

Michael Shaughnessy: Character strengths- how do you define them and give us a few and how parents can instill these in kids.

Steven Pfeiffer: *Character strengths* are one of the three components of my *strengths of the heart* model. Character strengths – and virtues, are considered beneficial and worthy by almost all cultures and societies, throughout history. In both the West and East. Many in the positive psychology camp contend that there are universal *character strengths* and virtues, such as humility, spirituality, prudence, forgiveness, love, kindness, integrity, and bravery. Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman, pioneers in the positive psychology camp, presented a theoretical framework and research in support of 24 universal and measurable character strengths in their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*.

Our research labs at Duke University and Florida State University investigated a number of these character strengths to determine which might be most relevant to GT kids.

Two examples of character strengths that we found relevant to our work with GT kids are *empathy* and *compassion*. **Empathy** is the ability to sense or correctly 'read' other people's emotions and feelings. It includes the ability to imagine what another person might be thinking or feeling. Emotion researchers differentiate between at least two types of empathy: "affective empathy" and "cognitive empathy. Which is also called "perspective taking." Empathy has deep roots in our evolutionary history; there is growing evidence of a genetic basis for empathy.

I like to think of empathy and **compassion** as first cousins – related but not exactly the same. Both are character strengths which our research indicates are relevant to the lives of GT kids who are successful in life. When empathy moves us to act to resolve a person's predicament or suffering, we are demonstrating **compassion**. Compassion can range from the most elementary to the most exceptional and heroic, according to renowned psychologist Paul Ekman, and even the Dalai Lama. Two examples of compassion are giving up a seat on a bus or train to an older person or helping a friend even though you have a ton of stuff to do yourself. Compassion includes caring and helpfulness. There are a zillion small ways that parents and teachers can teach and reinforce empathy and compassion. As well as the other character strengths, including **curiosity, bravery, fairness, forgiveness, gratitude, honesty, kindness, and humility**. I encourage the interested reader to check out my new book for the toolbox of strategies and techniques that I describe to install character strengths in our kids!

Michael Shaughnessy: Thought question- how responsible are teachers for teaching social skills, emotional intelligence, and character development? (seems they are over-extended already)

Steven Pfeiffer: My new book was written specifically for parents. It was *not* written for educators or teachers. That said, my Publisher is very excited about encouraging me to write a companion book for teachers based on *strengths of the heart* entitled, **Teaching from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids**. I actually love the idea! So many of the things that I talk about in *strengths of the heart* is applicable to what educators should be encouraging and prioritizing in the schools! Some of the most exciting, engaging, and interesting classrooms that I've had the great pleasure of observing embrace social-emotional learning as a core tenet of meaningful learning. Even if that's not what the teacher is calling what they're doing!

Based on my research, considerable clinical experience, and conversations with a great many parents and teachers of smart and talented kids, I came to understand that most kids who are successful in life possess three important characteristics or traits. Back in 1998, I originally named these three super traits – social skills, character strengths, and emotional intelligence, *strengths of the heart and soul*. That nickname morphed over time to the more popular term, *strengths of the heart*. The three super traits that make up my model of *heart strengths* – called by other researchers as 'soft skills' or 'SEL skills' – represent important social-emotional skills.

These soft skills make a real difference in the lives of all kids, not only gifted kids. It seems obvious to me, and to others in the social-emotional learning realm, that these three super traits make a huge difference in successful life outcomes.

Life outcomes for gifted kids such as resilience, robust mental health, happiness, job success, and subjective well-being. To me, at least, it seems a no-brainer that they should be a central or core foundational feature of all education!

Michael Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask?

Steven Pfeiffer: Not much! I am sure that your readers are, by now, tired of reading further in this interview about *strengths of the heart*! I do hope that if they've been intrigued by what I'm talking about, that they will go out and read my new book!

Autobiography of Steven Pfeiffer



Steven Pfeiffer is a popular speaker, author, parent coach, and international consultant. He is a licensed and nationally board-certified psychologist whose writing, research, and clinical work has focused on the social and emotional needs of gifted children and youth, and ways to weave positive psychology, health promotion, resilience, and optimizing mental health into clinical practice. Dr. Pfeiffer received his doctoral training at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Following his internship in clinical psychology, he completed post-doctoral training in family therapy at the Philadelphia Child and Family Therapy Training Center, University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine.

Dr. Pfeiffer was a Professor at Florida State University for sixteen years, where he served as Director of Clinical Training. Prior to his tenure at FSU, he was a Professor at Duke University, where he served as Executive Director of Duke's gifted program, Duke TIP. Dr. Pfeiffer also served as a clinical psychologist in the U.S. Navy Medical Service Corps and was a pediatric psychologist at the Ochsner Clinic and Medical Center. He also held the leadership position of Executive Director of Devereux's Institute of Clinical Training & Research, a national behavioral healthcare organization with headquarters in Villanova, PA.

Dr. Pfeiffer is a popular speaker. He was invited to testify at the White House and before the Italian Parliament. He has authored more than 200 articles, book chapters, and books, including *Essentials of Gifted Assessment* (Wiley, 2015) and *Serving the Gifted* (Routledge, 2013). He served as Editor of the *Handbook of Giftedness in Children*, (Springer, 2018), and Editor-in-Chief for the *APA Handbook of Giftedness and Talent*, (APA Books, 2018). He is the lead author of the GRS and GRS^{TM2}, published by MHS. His most recent book, written for parents, is titled *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids*. It is published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis in 2023.

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