

Interview Article

An Interview with Steven Pfeiffer- Dealing with what we know and what we don't know about gifted kids

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Abstract

This in-depth interview with Steven Pfeiffer delves into the complexities of gifted children, exploring both what we know and the gaps in our understanding. Pfeiffer, a clinical psychologist and academic, has dedicated over four decades to studying giftedness, including its identification and the social-emotional needs of high-ability children. He introduces his "Tripartite Model," which expands the traditional view of giftedness beyond high IQ to include outstanding achievements and latent potential. The interview discusses key topics such as designing effective educational programs for gifted children, the roles of parents and teachers, and the importance of nurturing emotional intelligence, social skills, and character strengths. Pfeiffer also emphasizes a holistic approach to child development, advocating for the integration of cognitive and emotional growth. Through his book, *Parenting from the Heart*, Pfeiffer provides parents with practical advice grounded in scientific research, focusing on fostering resilience, empathy, and success in children. He highlights the unique challenges faced by gifted individuals, including heightened sensitivities and struggles with social integration, offering valuable insights for educators, parents, and researchers. This interview serves as a significant resource for rethinking how we support gifted children.

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Michael F. Shaughnessy: First please tell us just a little bit about you and your education and experiences.

Steven Pfeiffer: Hello, Michael. It is nice to have this opportunity to chat with you about my recent article that appeared in The Creativity Post! As an academic clinician, I am growing used to the fact that posts in social media outlets such as www.TheCreativityPost.com garner considerably more attention and 'reads' than my articles in peer-review journals!

Okay, you ask about my education and background. Here's a brief synopsis. I am, by training and career focus, a clinical psychologist who has divided my 44-year career between working in mental healthcare facilities and medical

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centers about half of my career, and the other half as an academic clinician working for over twenty years as a Professor at Duke University and Florida State University.

Back in the 1970's, my doctoral training was at The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, followed by an internship in clinical psychology in upstate New York. I then completed a post-doctorate in family therapy at the Philadelphia Child and Family Training Center – at the time, one of the leading mental healthcare centers embracing a relatively new clinical emphasis on parent and family work.

During my career, I served as Director of the Devereux Institute of Clinical Training & Research, and Director of Duke University's gifted program, Duke TIP. I also served in the US Navy Medical Service Corps as an officer and clinical psychologist. In my appointments as a tenured academic clinician, at Duke and Florida State, I taught courses, supervised student research and clinical work, published scientific papers, and ran an active research lab.

In the spring of 2019, I retired from my academic career as a professor. This was around the time that COVID-19 broke. I launched a new career path as a consultant and parent coach. I've had the good fortune of working with hundreds of parents and families as a therapist, advisor, consultant, counselor, and coach since my retirement from the university, both here in the USA and internationally. Zoom and other video conferencing apps have been a blessing to my new-found international work! Which I love and find extremely rewarding and gratifying.

I enjoy writing and have published a lot of scholarly books and peer-review journal articles on my work. Actually over 300. Perhaps most fulfilling has been completing my most recent book, which is my very first non-academic, 'trade' book written specifically for parents of bright kids. It is titled, *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids* ([*Parenting from the Heart*](#)). Published by Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, it has become quite popular in its short, 6-month history! I'm overjoyed and humbled that readers are finding the paperback book an easy read, valuable and informative in helping to successfully raise their own kids! That was my goal in writing this book – hoping to translate all that I learned in my career into stories that would empower parents to raise well adjusted, resilient and happy kids!

I should add that I am also a test author. The most recent test that I coauthored is the Gifted Rating Scales™ -2. The GRS™ -2 scales are published by MHS and designed as a multi-dimensional screening tool to help identify high ability kids in the schools. There is a teacher scale and a parent scale – both scales are easy to complete and score, and yield a whole lot of useful psychometric information to assist in identifying gifted kids in the schools.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What do parents, and then what do teachers need to know about that "gifted kid"?

Steven Pfeiffer: That is a fascinating, and even a provocative question! And not such an easy question to answer in 2-to-3 sentences! If the reader is familiar with my research and writings, and the talks and workshops that I have led, then they know that I have taken a slightly radical view on what we mean by the gifted child, or the gifted student. For a great many years, giftedness has been equated with high IQ. This is what was taught to me during my doctoral studies at UNC-Chapel Hill. And it is still the predominant view at most universities and in the public schools, both here in the USA and globally. High IQ kids are gifted; gifted kids all have high IQ's. It is, arguably, an elegant and neat way to view bright kids! A view that is easy to understand and easy communicate to the lay public. And easy to measure!

However, as I have argued, it is a somewhat naïve and overly simplistic view that misses the mark in explaining and understanding the complexities and nuances that undergird high abilities, human potential, and talent development. Let me briefly explain what I mean. By the way, I talk a lot about this very point in many of my books and articles.

Human intelligence is, of course, important is school success and in life success. Absolutely. High IQ explains, correlates with, and predicts to a ton of important, real-world outcomes. I am a huge advocate for understanding human intelligence in my work as a clinical psychologist and in my consulting work with families and schools. I had the good fortune at UNC of studying with research professor John Carroll, one of the architects of the Cattell-Horn-Carroll hierarchical theory of human intelligence – today considered the pre-eminent model of intelligence and cognitive abilities. So I buy into the value and importance of respecting human intelligence in my work with high ability kids!

However, I never fully bought into the notion that giftedness is just a number on an IQ test. I've always maintained that giftedness encompasses a much broader range of human traits and abilities than simply high IQ. Dating back to my dissertation research on creative problem solving back in 1977, I held the view that the term gifted should encompass more than simply high IQ. The term gifted should honor well-accomplished performers and creative producers in all of the various fields of society. The term should honor those hard working, highly successful students in the classroom, even if they don't have extremely high IQ test scores. In essence, I believe that the term should honor anyone who is exceptional or distinguished – or on the road to becoming distinguished or exceptional. In one or more culturally-valued fields. Such as the arts, music, dance, theater, debate, student council/leadership, computer programming, engineering, athletics.

Back to your question! I have developed one model of giftedness, which I call the tripartite model. I've talked about the tripartite model in many of my articles and books. I also write about the tripartite model in the test manual for the new GRS™ -2. The tripartite model and my respect for how extraordinary talent is nurtured and develops guided the development of the GRS™ -2! Let me say at the start that no one model of giftedness is correct! Models offer alternative ways to conceptualize a psychological construct, such as giftedness. Essentially, the tripartite model provides three distinct but complementary lenses through which teachers can view academic giftedness. The three views are the basis for the tripartite model and lead to three different ways to screen, identify, group, and even provide resources and educational programs for students who we label as gifted! The first perspective in the tripartite model is giftedness through *the lens of high intelligence*. The reader is familiar with this first perspective!

When we view the gifted student through this first lens, tests of cognitive ability or their proxy are used to assess students who are functioning at a certain, predetermined level above average intellectually. Within this first lens, the student can be identified using any number of reliable IQ measures. The rationale for gifted programs based on viewing giftedness through this first lens of high IQ is that certain bright students with superior intelligence need or are entitled to advanced, intellectually challenging, and/or faster paced academic material not typically found in the regular classroom.

Okay, the tripartite model, however, offers two more lenses through which educators can view academic giftedness! The second lens I call *the outstanding accomplishments perspective*. Let me explain. This second perspective emphasizes performance in the classroom (or lab, theater stage, dancefloor, orchestra pit, athletic field). According to this second perspective of giftedness, evidence of academic excellence is the *sine qua non* to qualify as a gifted student and to qualify for admittance into a gifted program, not high IQ. When you embrace this second, alternative perspective, you rely on direct academic performance measures to identify students who might be considered gifted, not IQ tests. The importance of creativity, imagination, and inventiveness is emphasized when viewing giftedness through this second lens. Also, motivation, drive, persistence, grit and academic passion are important to consider and measure from this second perspective.

The rationale for gifted programs based on an *outstanding accomplishments perspective* is that students who excel academically have earned and deserve special academic programs and opportunities because of their outstanding effort and superior classroom accomplishments. From this second perspective, gifted programs would consist of highly enriched and academically challenging curricula.

Finally, the third lens through which one can conceptualize academic giftedness, based on the tripartite model, is what I call *potential to excel*. Some students – for any number of reasons – have not been provided enough opportunity or intellectual stimulation to develop what remains latent and as yet undeveloped or underdeveloped intellectual or academic gifts. This third perspective is based on my own experience working with many students of high potential, the experience of countless other educators, an abundant body of published research.

I think that most knowledgeable and open-minded individuals agree that not all students start out on an equal footing. Some children being raised in poverty, violence, in families in which intellectual and educational and cultural activities are neither encouraged nor nurtured in the home, or in which English is not the primary language spoken in

the home, and kids growing up in rural and overcrowded, or dangerous communities where intellectual and educational opportunities are rare, are all at a distinct disadvantage for developing their latent gifts.

From this third perspective, the *almost or potentially gifted student* is viewed as very likely to substantially increase their cognitive abilities and academic knowledge when provided with special resources or placement in a special gifted program. The assumption underlying this third perspective is that with time, an encouraging and highly stimulating environment, and the proper, well-timed psycho-educational interventions, this third group of special need students will eventually actualize their yet unrealized high potential and distinguish themselves from their peers as gifted. Gifted programs for this third group of students might consist of a highly motivating and enriched curriculum that may include compensatory interventions.

Whew. Back to your original question, Mike! Parents and teachers need to understand that giftedness is more than simply high IQ. There are many different ways to view and identify high ability students. My tripartite model is but one way. Other writers, such as François Gagné, Howard Gardner, Robert Sternberg, Rena Subotnik, Joe Renzulli, and Julian Stanley have proposed other, elegant paradigms. The final point I would make is this: In my www.TheCreativityPost.com piece, I suggest that there are at least six indisputable facts about high ability kids that parents and educators should be aware of. I'm sure you will ask me about these irrefutable facts as the interview continues!

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Do we really know how to guide these children to maximize their "potential"?

Steven Pfeiffer: The good news is that there is considerable evidence how to best educate and challenge high ability students. As you know, I am a psychologist, not an educator, so the extensive work in the area of gifted curriculum and gifted instructional design is way outside of my area of expertise! But the interested reader can easily locate the burgeoning literature that supports evidence-based, well-documented ways to motivate, challenge, stimulate, and arouse the learning and further development of high ability students.

My own work as a parent coach is based on a sports coaching model that includes working with parents and kids on how to encourage their potential. How much does one push their gifted child? When is it prudent to back-off? When is too much of a good thing in encouraging your child's gifts ineffectual and even, at times, harmful to reaching their potential? How can you determine if your child is enjoying their effort, practice, and hard work in support of developing their potential? How can you ascertain if your child is 'on track' or 'missing the mark' in pursuit of their gifts? How do you know what your child's potential might be? These are all valid questions that I hear from parents that I have worked with!

The truth of the matter, in my humble opinion, is that one never really knows a child's "true potential" – whatever that might be! At least when the child is quite young. For young kids, we are always making, at best, *reasoned predictions* about a young, gifted child's ultimate potential. And this makes perfectly good sense. There are so many factors that contribute to actualizing one's potential. And many of these factors are, quite frankly, beyond a parent or teacher's control.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Is potential a good word or a bad word to use with gifted kids?

Steven Pfeiffer: I don't have any problem with the term "potential" when speaking with parents or teachers or gifted kids. As long as we never forget that *potential* is a hypothetical construct, not something real. It's a hypothetical goal or target that we envision a person could reach if they maximize their drive, motivation, effort, enthusiasm, and purpose.

We never actually know what any person's actual or real potential might be. We make inferences based on evidence that leads us to infer that they are on what I like to call "*a success trajectory*." A *success trajectory* leading in a direction that likely maximizes their God-given potential. In my experience, gifted students, as well as gifted young athletes, dancers, musicians, artists, writers, and actors, all value knowing that they have almost boundless potential to excel at their God-given gifts, if they work hard, are persistent and focused on their craft or gift, and open to coaching and feedback.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Driven—are some gifted kids more driven than others- and why?

Steven Pfeiffer: This is another topic outside of my bailiwick. I haven't conducted any research in the fields drive and motivation. For this reason, I am reluctant to offer an opinion or judgement. I can say that, in my own clinical work, I have observed many gifted kids with low initiative, ambition, drive or motivation. And I have also observed a great many gifted kids in my practice with very high, almost soaring, ambition, initiative, enterprise and passion to excel. I suspect that, like a great many other things, many factors go into the equation that leads to why some gifted kids are more driven or motivated than others! Genetics, biochemical and hormonal influences, early childhood experiences, parenting style and parent-child relations, multi-generational history, peer and sibling circumstances, are all likely culprits helping to explain individual differences in drive and motivation. And add to this equation the influence of the child's own self-concept and view of themselves as a kid with high potential. These dynamics all likely help explain why some gifted kids are more driven than others!

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Your book "Strengths of the Heart" - what are you trying to say to parents?

Steven Pfeiffer: I wrote my book, *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids*, to provide parents with particularly salient and important lessons that I learned in my 40+ years' working as a clinical psychologist with high ability kids and families. That was my goal in writing the book! I spend almost three years writing the book. I wanted to make sure that I covered the most important lessons that I had learned as an academic clinician in my research lab and as a therapist and parent coach in my clinical work. I had already written way too many academic papers and books! I thought that it was time, in the twilight of my career, to try my pen a trade book that parents would find easy to read, highly informative, upbeat, authoritative but not academic, esoteric, or arcane, and accessible. That was my goal. With the blessing of my publisher and editor, I started drafting an outline for the book back in late 2019 and early 2020. Right after I retired my tenured faculty position at Florida State University.

Much of my research and clinical work at Florida State, and before that at Duke University, has focused on how to raise kind, compassionate, resilient, optimistic, and successful kids. I decided that this would be the core theme in my new book for parents. My editor was aware of my frequent parenting workshops, and my reputation as a trusted and valued '*parent whisperer*' – and had the confidence that I could pull off the challenge of writing a practical, hands-on book for parents on what I call in my research and writings "*strengths of the heart*." *Strengths of the heart* are a triple package of social-emotional-character strength "super traits." In my book, I talk about these super traits – Emotional Intelligence, Social Skills, and character strengths. What each one is, why they are important in the lives of their kids, and how they can be taught and encouraged in the home.

I spent much of 2021 and 2022 getting my ideas together, researching social media, and the countless articles and book chapters written on these three super traits and reviewing my own notes from hundreds of parent coaching sessions and workshops that I have led. And then I rolled-up-my-sleeves and started writing the book. It was truly a labor of love!

The book is intentionally short – only 120 pages(!), inexpensive (it sells for less than \$18.00 USD, and easy to read. The book's main thesis is that when parents of bright kids help their children to develop savvy and age-appropriate social skills, strong emotional intelligence, and keen character strengths, then good things are almost always going to start to happen! The kids will be happier. They will tend to stay out of trouble and make smart decisions. They will get along well with others. They will feel good about themselves. And they will cope well with adversity and life's challenges!

In the book, I intentionally included an early, important chapter titled, *Grandma's Rules to Help You Become a Cool Parent*. This chapter is based on my work with countless parents over the years. Teaching the parents of the kids that I have worked with basic, uncomplicated, and yet important techniques, skills, and guidelines to encourage them to become more calm, self-assured, comfortable, and confident adults and parents. In my clinical work, I came to realize that I couldn't coach parents until they first learned the skills and attitudes that make them calm, reflective, compassionate, and thoughtful parents! What I've come to call "*Grandma's Rules*." What is gratifying is that these rules are supported by solid, hard-nosed research! They are not wild-eyed personal ideas that I "cooked-up" on my own!

The ten rules are all tried-and-proven, evidence-based principles that make parenting easier, more effective, and more enjoyable. The ten guidelines and instructions that I cover in my chapter about *Grandma's Rules* are: model good

behavior; change harmful patterns; be more in the present; reduce the stress in your life; learn self-compassion and self-kindness; learn how to keep your cool; try to let the little things go; identify and then disarm your triggers; create a peaceful home life; and embrace self-care: Eat healthy, get enough sleep, and exercise regularly.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: Emotional intelligence, character strengths and social skills are your 3 main realms. But who is responsible for these- parents, teachers or perhaps coaches or mentors?

Steven Pfeiffer: A great question! And a relatively easy one to answer! In my humble opinion and based on my almost 50 years' work in the field, I believe that we all bear responsibility for nurturing, cultivating and encouraging kids' social, emotional, and character development. Parents. Teachers. Really anyone who works with children and youth!

This point speaks to my belief that we need to do a much better job focusing on not only what I call the “*head strengths*” of today’s children and youth. Which we are so darn focused on in today’s schools. We need to give equal attention to how we can cherish, foster and promote the “*heart strengths*” of today’s kids. This harkens back to an earlier time in our history when we were willing to focus on the “whole child,” and not just their intellectual and academic development. For society’s wellbeing and the future of civilization, we all should be concerned about how to nurture the heart, soul and mind of our next generation.

While I have your attention, I want to get back to a point that you raised in one of your first questions! And which I didn’t get around to answer! In The Creativity Post piece that you earlier reference (www.TheCreativityPost.com), I suggest that there are *six indisputable facts about gifted kids* that parents and educators should be aware of. Let me briefly mention these irrefutable facts before we conclude the interview! They are:

- First, authorities in gifted education, experts in the science of expertise, and leaders in the talent development field concur that gifted persons learn at a faster pace and with greater depth and complexity than their neurotypical classmates;
- Second, a youngster’s gift can present in one specific domain, such as academics, or music, dance, theater, athletics, computer programming, software development, or in multiple domains. Some highly gifted kids are precocious in one domain, whereas others have multiple talents that can amaze and dazzle their peers, teachers and parents;
- Third, no matter how precocious a young, gifted child’s gifts might appear, the nurturing of the gift or talent is required for the gifted child to maximize her or his full potential. Even extraordinarily gifted young kids will need to work hard and be mentored to reach the highest levels of their God-given gifts.
- Fourth, we humans present with a wide diversity of gifts and talents. The number is limited only by what society deems relevant and noteworthy and willing to support. But also, we know that the levels or degrees of giftedness vary tremendously across domains! Many in the gifted field like to consider the minimal threshold of two standard deviations above the mean – or the top 2 -to- 5% of kids as gifted. There really is no exact science that can help us set the minimal threshold demarcating gifted *vs.* not gifted. That said, there is tremendous variance or range of abilities among the top 2-to-5% of kids, whatever the field! I like to use the example of pole-vaulting. Pole vaulting is a personal interest of mine, and an athletic event that I am very familiar with. I was a pole vaulter in High School. I was pretty good back in H.S., I was one of the top pole vaulters at my H.S. I was considered a gifted jumper! And I was among the top 4-5 pole vaulters in our school district. Still considered a gifted jumper! But when I got to the state track and field meet, there were at least 7-8 pole pole-vaulters who were clearing higher heights than me! One fellow who garnered a Division I scholarship was actually jumping almost 2 feet higher than the rest of us! He was, indeed, very gifted compared to the rest of us gifted vaulters! You get my point.
- The fifth point is that gifted students often find themselves bored in classrooms that are ill-equipped to meet their intellectual and academic needs, and almost unquenching thirst for knowledge and facts. For a great many gifted kids, this is a chronic problem. Gifted kids sense their differences from same-age peers, often at an early age, and often struggle to ‘fit in’ to normative academic, social, recreational, an cultural activities.

- Finally, the sixth indisputable fact is that a great many gifted kids – we simply do not have any hard data to know the exact numbers or percentages – experience heightened feelings of sensitivity and emotional reactivity, along with asynchronous development, peer relation struggles, and an inner turmoil due to a sense of being different and having different interests than their peers. This creates an outlier status.

Michael F. Shaughnessy: What have I neglected to ask?

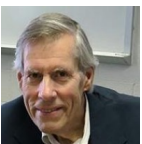
Steven Pfeiffer: As usual, Mike, you've done an exceptional job – one might say, a gifted performance, in asking me a wide range of interesting and important questions based on my post that recently appeared in www.TheCreativityPost.com. I don't think you've missed anything, Mike. It was a pleasure thinking through your questions and writing down my responses. I hope that your readers find the interview interesting and thought-provoking!

Biodata of Joanne Foster



Steven Pfeiffer is a popular speaker, scholar, and internationally recognized authority on the gifted. He is a licensed and board-certified clinical psychologist whose work focuses on gifted identification and the social-emotional needs and character development of high ability children and youth. 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 is Professor Emeritus at Florida State University. Prior to his tenure at FSU, he was a Professor at Duke University, where he served as 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 as a Psychologist in the Department of Pediatrics, at Ochsner Clinic and Medical Center, in New Orleans. He also served as Executive Director of Devereux's Institute of Clinical Training & Research, headquartered in Villanova, PA. Dr. Pfeiffer is a highly regarded 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. He is lead author of the *Gifted Rating Scales (GRS™2)*, and author of *Essentials of Gifted Assessment*, published by Wiley in 2015 and considered the gold standard on gifted identification. His most recent book is titled *Parenting from the Heart: Raising Resilient and Successful Smart Kids*. The paperback book is published by Routledge and available from the publisher and online at www.Amazon.com.

Biodata of Author



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