

DWELLING ON THE RIGHT SIDE OF THE CURVE:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING  
OF PARENTS OF GIFTED CHILDREN

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Natalie Anne Rimlinger

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## ABSTRACT

Research has shown that parenting a child who is exceptional is difficult. Gifted children by statistical definition are exceptional and therefore, the experience of their parents should be an area of potential concern. The existing literature has largely overlooked the psychological wellbeing of the parents of gifted children. It has highlighted the concerns of the parents about their child, however the impact of these concerns on the parents' psychological wellbeing has not been investigated systematically. Further, much of the literature has explored the lives of gifted children and their family using qualitative methods. This makes it difficult to compare the experiences of the children and parents to normative samples and to then draw conclusions as to whether there are measurable differences between the populations

In a cross-cultural (Australian and USA) study, parents who considered their child gifted were asked to complete an online survey. The behavioural characteristics of gifted children were examined with a commonly used standardised psychological measure of child behaviours. The parents of the children reported higher levels of a range of problematic behaviours including conduct, emotional difficulties, peer problems, and hyperactivity/inattention, and lower scores on prosocial behaviours. When twice exceptional children were removed from the analysis the results remained largely unchanged.

In both countries, parents reported a moderate level of confidence in their child's teacher and a moderate degree of satisfaction with the frequency of contact and nature of their relationship with their child's teacher. Across all aspects of school experience as investigated by this study, the majority of parents were ambivalent.

Problematic child behaviours have been shown to be negatively associated with parental psychological wellbeing and results showed this was true in the current sample. The

parents completed standardised measures of mental health and parenting stress. They reported significantly higher levels of anxiety and higher scores on parenting stress.

Multiple regressions showed that child behaviour was a key predictor for both measures of parental psychological wellbeing. Child conduct problems were strongly associated with parental anxiety. For parenting stress child conduct was again a significant predictor as were peer problems and poor prosocial behaviours. Lower levels of trust in the child's classroom teacher were also a significant predictor of increased parenting stress. Again, removal of parents of twice exceptional children from the analysis had little impact on results.

Findings of psychological distress in parents that was associated with their children's problematic behaviour suggest a need to investigate the wellbeing of both parents and children more deeply. The high frequency of behaviour problems in the children suggests a need to broaden the definition of "gifted" so that it encompasses social, emotional, and intellectual characteristics. The findings also raise the question whether standardised psychological measures developed for the full range of intellectual ability are appropriate for the assessment of the social and emotional needs in this population.