

GATE MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELING RESOURCE NEWSLETTER

October-November 2018 Edition: GT Peer Relationships
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AS the GATE middle school counselor, I am sending a monthly newsletter with tips, resources, strategies, and interventions to support GT students. This month's topic is GT peer relationships; the featured resources include two articles providing research-based information and tips for parents, as well as 10 common questions GT kids ask about friendship, and 12 tips for making and keeping friends. Parents or teachers may use these tools to have conversations with their gifted students, or gifted students may read the tips for making friends and common questions on their own.

"Making friends can be hard for any child, but for socially awkward gifted children or twice-exceptional kiddos, the challenge is only multiplied. While their brains are working on overdrive, and they can have an intelligent conversation with an adult expert in the field in which they are interested, put them in the same room with kids their own age, and all bets are off. And, because they often develop asynchronously, gifted children may lag behind emotionally." (5 Tips for Helping Gifted Children Make Friends by Colleen Kessler, article attached)

Featured Resources (attached):

1. **5 Tips for Helping Gifted Children Make Friends** – short article by Colleen Kessler with practical suggestions for parents.
2. **Highly Gifted Children and Peer Relationships** – this article by Deirdre Lovecky addresses possible issues with peers for highly gifted children, and provides strategies for successful peer relationships.

3. **10 Common Questions About Friendship** – handout from the book “The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp, and Ready for (Almost) Anything”_by Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle.
4. **12 Tips for Making and Keeping Friends** – handout from the book “The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp, and Ready for (Almost) Anything”_by Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle.

Featured Books:

1. **A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children** – by James T. Webb, PhD. Et al. This book is a comprehensive guide to understanding and supporting gifted children; it addresses and supports all aspects and challenges that come with giftedness.
2. **The Gifted Teen Survival Guide: Smart, Sharp, and Ready for (Almost) Anything** by Judy Galbraith & Jim Delisle. This book is an excellent resource for students and parents alike; it covers a variety of topics relevant for gifted teens, including relationships.

5 Tips for Helping Gifted Children Make Friends

 sengifted.org/5-tips-for-helping-gifted-children-make-friends/

by Colleen Kessler

Making friends can be hard for any child, but for socially awkward gifted children or twice-exceptional kiddos, the challenge is only multiplied. While their brains are working on overdrive, and they can have an intelligent conversation with an adult expert in the field in which they are interested, put them in the same room with kids their own age, and all bets are off. And, because they often develop asynchronously, gifted children may lag behind emotionally.

Let's face it, fitting in and building relationships is tough. It's hard for all of us. We fear rejection, want to be liked, and long for acceptance. We want to find our people. But, when they're not interested in the same games as their age peers, or seem to know everything and want to talk all the time, it can be overwhelming for gifted children that just want to fit in.

Finding the right people for our gifted children sometimes feels like it's impossible. And, as parents, we want our kids to be connected and happy.

Here are five tips for helping our gifted children make (and keep) friendships:

1. Be Understanding

I don't know about you, but I am not likely to win any Mother-of-the-Year awards anytime soon. I struggle to keep my patience and understanding on track when I watch my son and daughter sabotage their own chances at making friends.

I have even been known to tell my kids to "stop being weird."

Not really the most effective parenting technique.

But, just as making friendships is tough for gifted children, parenting them through it is even harder. It's miserable to sit and watch them be socially awkward, and difficult to keep from swooping in there to help them be a better friend.

Parents, we need to try harder. We need to realize this is not something we can do for our gifted children. We just need to be there for them. We can offer a sympathetic ear, and even some advice when it's asked for. But we can't solve their problems. We can be an understanding presence for them whenever and wherever they need it.

2. Don't Offer Platitudes

It takes time, patience, and hard work to make strong friendships. Don't tell your gifted children (or yourself) otherwise. It's not as simple as taking your child to the busiest playground in your area or inviting someone over for a play date. Or telling your child to just be nice to people.

<https://www> And believe me, I've tried everything.



Keep giving your gifted children opportunities to meet new children and adults. Take them to museum classes that fit their interests, library programs for homeschoolers, join a co-op, etc. If necessary, chat with your kids before you go to these places or events. Coach them on how to talk to other kids.

Don't put pressure on your child to make friends, though. And, don't step in and try to do it for them. It's a terrible feeling for even young gifted kids to realize that their mom making them be friends with one another.

3. Encourage Them to Get Involved

Some of my best friendships were made through my involvement in sports, clubs, and through jobs I held. Our shared experiences helped us to forge a bond that, in many cases, has stood the test of time.

This can be the same for your child. Is he interested in LEGO or robotics? See if there is a First Lego League team in your area. How about camping and crafts? Maybe your daughter can join an American Heritage Girls group. Does she want to play a musical instrument? Instead of simply taking lessons, see if you can find a homeschool band program.

Give your kids that same opportunity to be around other like-minded kids. Who knows what will happen.

4. Practice Social Skills

Gifted children often struggle socially and emotionally. Social interactions are difficult and they don't always know how to behave or read cues from others.

You can guide your gifted kids toward a better social awareness by role playing, or talking them through, situations in which they may find themselves. We work on new things depending on where we are going, but there are some issues we seem to need to work through constantly like:

Volume control – some gifted children struggle with this when talking. (And, if you come into my house at any given time, you're likely to be thrown backwards from the dueling volume levels from four intense children at once.)

Personal space – this is a HUGE challenge for one of my gifted kids. I am constantly reminding him that he is "in my face," and he needs to maintain boundaries. So, we practice this often.

Using the telephone – some gifted children have trouble figuring out what to say, and as making a phone call is a life skill, we practice calling friends and relatives.

Introductions – meeting someone new for the first time can be intimidating, but for a gifted child, it can be overwhelming. The fear of failure, not being liked, or of saying the wrong thing can paralyze your child. We practice what to say when we meet new people.

5. Empathize

The most important thing you can do for your child is to validate his feelings and be there for him. Empathize with him when he laments about not being invited to a party, or over a missed opportunity to talk to someone new. Tell her, "I know it's hard to make new friends. I struggle too. Thank goodness your dad is with me when we go to events because he helps me break the ice with new people. We're lucky to have him to help pave our ways."

Not only will these tips help your gifted children make friends, but they'll bring your family closer together as you navigate the difficult social waters together.

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Colleen Kessler, Catholic wife, homeschool mom of four gifted/twice-exceptional kids, author of books for teachers, parents, and children. Follow her blog at <http://www.raisinglifelonglearners.com/>

Highly gifted children and peer relationships

This article by Deirdre Lovecky reviews the research on highly gifted children and peer relationships. The author highlights possible issues with peers for highly gifted children. She also discusses strategies for developing successful peer relationships.

Topics: Social/Emotional Development: Peer Relations (<https://www.davidsongifted.org/Search-Database/topic/105189/entryType/1>) / Support: GT Research (<https://www.davidsongifted.org/Search-Database/topic/105168/entryType/1>)

Author: Lovecky, D. V.

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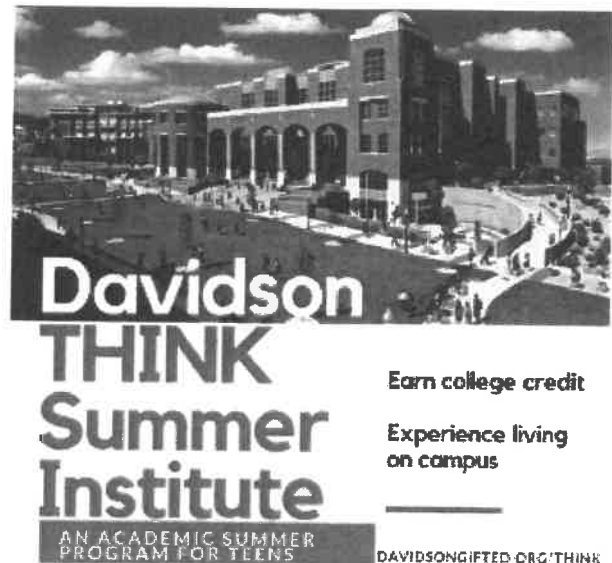
Volume: Vol. 5, No. 3, pp. 2, 6 and 7

Year: 1995

(<http://www.davidsongifted.org/THINK-Summer>)

Research on social adjustment and development of highly gifted children suggests that the more highly gifted the child, the more likely there will be less than optimal social and emotional adjustment (Butks, Jensen & Terman, 1930; Gallagher, 1958; Gross, 1993; Hollingworth, 1931; Janos & Robinson, 1985). Gross (1993) found that the majority of these children (over IQ 160) tended to internalize problems. On the outside they looked more socially mature, but on the inside they experienced more loneliness, isolation and peer difficulties than moderately gifted children. The children themselves identified problems with social acceptance and feeling valued for their opinions, difficulties with social skills and dealing with being picked on by age peers. Hollingworth (1931) identified the ages of four to nine as the most problematic for highly gifted children due to differences in levels of social development of these children as opposed to age peers.

Research on children's friendships shows that when asked to pick qualities that determine what makes a best friend, average children, ages four to seven, associated friendship with sharing materials or activities, or offering assistance, defense against others and other friendly behavior. Older children, above age ten or so, chose sharing interests, private thoughts and feelings, having a mutual sense of respect and affection. As children grow older they increasingly understand friendship in terms of reciprocity and mutuality. Friendships become interdependent (people need each other), last over time, and imply an understanding of thoughts, feelings and personalities of the individuals (Selman, 1981).



Highly gifted children may be at a higher level of development in the understanding of reciprocity in relationships, and are then out of sync with age peers in expectations about friendships; however, they may not yet have developed to the level of mental age peers, especially in the early years. As they get older, differences in social development tend to decrease because the basis for friendship becomes more mutual for all children, only the depth and degree of commitment continue to develop.

An example of a highly gifted child out of sync in social development is Jade, age six, and her friend Joan, age nine (Gross, 1993). Sometimes Joan would not want to play with Jade who would feel that Joan didn't like her anymore. Jade's mother attributed Joan's response to Jade as resulting from peer pressure not to play with a younger child, and indeed this might be so; however, Jade's response also suggests that she is acting at a level of social development where the child still feels one must always be accepted as a play partner (inclusion) to be a friend. If one is not allowed to play, then one is not a friend, and the gifted child would feel this as not being liked anymore. The older child would see the situation as one in which friendship is more constant, not dependent on always playing with one; indeed, the older child would expect to have more, different kinds of friends and not always play with all of them. While friendship would still be disrupted by conflict, it wouldn't be disrupted by exclusion from an activity.

Social asynchrony may be characterized as the result of general asynchronous development, that is, the intellectual, social, emotional, physical and chronological ages of the child are quite different (Columbus Group, 1991). The child may not fit with either age peers or mental age peers and his or her understanding of the basis of relationships will be quite different from both groups. Yet, putting the child with social age peers for all activities is not the answer either because then he or she will not fit in terms of intellectual understanding or level of interest. In fact, one of the problems for highly gifted children playing with older children is that just being older is no guarantee that the relationship will work. Older children may not match in level of understanding or depth and breadth of interests. For example, Ian, age six, with an IQ over 200, loves dinosaurs and has extensive knowledge of them and paleontology in general. Many peers of all ages also like dinosaurs, but it is rare for Ian to find someone with whom to discuss his interests because age peers know too little and older children still know too little and are uninterested in the theories which Ian is investigating. In fact, they think he is rather a show off because he keeps correcting them. Ian finds he must keep his interest for knowledgeable adults. Ian never quite feels he has a true friend because no one really shares his interests. This becomes especially important when we consider that research on the development of children's friendships suggests that friends perceive themselves as similar to each other in like activities and then believe they share common patterns of behavior (Fine, 1981). This means both that the friend likes the same activities, and likes the behavior of the speaker, and this sharing is mutually reinforcing. If there is no such friend, a highly gifted child will feel isolated and not accepted.

Another group of highly gifted children exhibits peer difficulties because of unusually large discrepancies between social and cognitive development. In fact, they may be less mature than age peers in some respects, yet far ahead intellectually. In addition, many exhibit inappropriate behaviors that elicit ridicule and rejection from peers. The literature suggests significant problems with social interactions for some children. For example, Dahlberg (1992), Kennedy (1995, and May 1994) all described case histories of highly gifted boys far ahead of age peers intellectually but who had little positive social connection with any peers.

Research on popularity in average children suggests unpopular children exhibit behaviors that make them stand out and lead to rejection. Putallaz & Gottman (1981) included such behaviors as asking questions that were irrelevant to the group topic, talking about themselves and their problems, feelings, opinions and interests when others were doing something else, introducing new topics abruptly, disagreeing when first joining a group, and not understanding how to disagree positively (that is, naming the general rule being violated and offering an alternative suggestion). Instead, unpopular children tended to call the group's attention to themselves, tried to control group activity, and to distract the group. Other children saw them as bossy, opinionated, controlling, and self-centered.

In this author's experience highly gifted children with severe peer difficulties tended to behave like the unpopular children in Putallaz and Gottman's (1981) studies. They had little idea of how to approach others to initiate an activity, or to join in an activity in progress. They also lacked the idea of reciprocity in relationships when peers were already starting to manage relationships more mutually. Many exhibited inappropriate social skills for their age such as substituting monologues for conversations, interrupting peers, insistence of their own agenda versus going along with a group goal or sharing ideas with another, asking irrelevant and fact-oriented questions, and wanting everyone else to observe the exact rules they have decided are the right ones. They also often needed to win, and had little idea of sharing time, attention or materials. Many seemed to feel entitled to getting their own way or they wouldn't play at all. Other immature behaviors for their age caused many problems such as poor reactions to mild stress like crying, running away, or telling teachers on peers. Children who showed little empathy or ability to care about another had difficulty connecting with peers, as did those who tended to immerse themselves in fantasy play instead of attending to peers. After about age nine, intense immersion into fantasy play was regarded as immature by many age peers. All of these problem behaviors occurred in a variety of highly gifted children including those in regular classes, pull-out programs, and special classes for the gifted. They tended to be more problematic for highly gifted children with attentional deficits, but were not restricted to this group, nor were these behaviors restricted to interactions with age peers.

Highly gifted children who are most successful in dealing with peers are those who are able to go along with group goals, be flexible and able to assume multiple social roles (listener, active questioner about another's interest, noticing affect state and activity level of peers, finding commonalities with which to connect to the others). Many gifted girls do these things very well.

In attempting to assess reasons for peer relationship problems in highly gifted children, it is necessary to determine if the child's behaviors are appropriate in general. Does the child relate well to adults because adults allow him or her to be in charge of the interaction, putting up with behaviors that peers would not such as determining the topic or carrying on a monologue? Can the child relate to any peer group well? Is the child able to initiate activities with peers at all, or does he or she show little interest in peers? Does the child show significant behavioral problems that include acting out, withdrawn or obnoxious behaviors? Depending on the answers to these questions, different strategies need to be implemented.

The highly gifted child having peer difficulties because he or she is advanced over age peers in expectations for reciprocity and mutuality, in moral development and in specific needs for close intimate friends, needs contact with older gifted peers at similar levels of social development no matter what his or her age. Even in preschool years many highly gifted children are ready for best friends and yearn for that closeness and intimacy. These children cannot be happy in a typical preschool class where friendships change daily based on activity needs.

On the other hand, highly gifted children with more age level social development may stand out with older peers in accelerated programs. Behavior that may seem inappropriate may be quite appropriate for age. Thus, a child radically accelerated like William Sidis (Wallace, 1986) playing with his hat in class was immature by the standard of Harvard students, but was more like others of his age (11 years).

Many highly gifted children with peer problems connect only with adults with whom they feel safe, unfortunately as they grow older, behaviors that are tolerable in early years become hindrances in the formation of more mature friendships with adults as well. A 6-year-old who thinks conversation is asking questions and testing adult knowledge is not acting inappropriately for his or her age, but a 9-year-old is. Thus, adults who mentor highly gifted children, especially in situations where gifted peers are few, need to be aware of the nuances of relationships they share with the child. The mentoring relationship is not about intellectual interests alone but about relationships; otherwise the mentoring relationship exists at a preschool level of complexity - we are friends because I need you for this activity.

In situations where the highly gifted child exhibits significant behavioral problems with gifted peers, adult intervention including psychotherapy is necessary. The goal is not to make the highly gifted child conform to peer expectations, but to help the child develop adequate social skills to support cognitive and emotional needs. Without appropriate intervention, social difficulties are likely to be life-long. Finally, in highly gifted children who have trouble with age peers, intervention will need to focus on finding peers who fit the highly gifted child's level of social expectation and need as well as level of interests.

A boy like Ian, with a wish for a friend to share his interest in dinosaurs, and be friends through thick and thin forever, will need to meet gifted peers with an agenda and sophistication like his own.

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Comments

Educator on 9/5/2016

The description and diagnosis of peer relationships is right on. What I need is solutions to make such a child happier living with this problem. Class room problems and making friends seems to be a crying need. Are there any formulas or prescriptions to help a gifted child enjoy classroom experiences?

Other on 4/14/2015

The separation of social and cognitive maturity is important in understanding the thought process of profoundly gifted children, and emphasizing the influence of emotional quotient is an important part of peer relationships. These children are sensitive to even the slightest changes that must be openly explained; if not, both social and cognitive abilities can be impacted.

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Friendship 101

No one can argue about the importance of having friends. They support us in good times and bad; they enhance our enjoyment of many things, from athletic events to parties, special projects, even studying. Especially as your parents and teachers start exerting less influence over your actions and beliefs—a normal and natural part of your development that begins at around age 12—your friends assume greater influence and play a more central role in your life.

Gifted or not, we all need friends; gifted or not, we all sometimes have problems making and keeping friends. But being gifted can put a unique spin on social relationships and occasionally complicate them. Following are some questions about friends and friendship that gifted students have shared with us in surveys, interviews, letters, and conversations.

10 Common Questions About Friendship

- 1. Does everyone have trouble making friends, or is it just me?** Relax; it's not just you. Some people seem to make friends effortlessly—they're in the right place at the right time with the right social skills. Other people find it difficult to connect because of shyness, circumstances, or whatever. But everyone—whether adept or awkward—has to work at forming and sustaining meaningful friendships. (For tips on making friends, see page 201.)
- 2. Do I have to conform to be accepted and have friends?** It's not a bad thing to go along with the crowd—as long as the crowd is right for you. It's only when you compromise your own values, beliefs, and goals that conformity becomes a problem and can even be dangerous. On the other hand, if you always insist on doing things your way, be prepared for a lonely life. The key is to find a social group and some close friends who complement you, not contradict you. (For more about popularity, see pages 207–210.)
- 3. Is it normal to have just a few close friends?** Yes. Gifted children and teens tend to be more adult-like in their relationships, favoring a few intense relationships over several more casual ones. What's important is to have at least one or two friends who you can rely on. When it comes to relationships, quality matters more than quantity.
- 4. Does it matter if my friends are two, three, or even four years older or younger than I am?** No. Adults have friendships with people of all ages, so

why shouldn't you? What matters is to cultivate friends you can count on and relate to. Sharing the same birth year isn't as important as sharing interests, goals, and values. (For more about breaking age barriers, see pages 204–206.)

5. I've just met someone I'd like to be friends with, and he asked me what *gifted* means. What can I say that won't alienate him or sound arrogant? You might begin by asking him what he thinks it means. If he really wants to know, this could lead to an interesting discussion about your individual points of view. Remember, there are no right or wrong answers about giftedness; even the experts can't agree on a single definition. By now you probably have your own ideas about giftedness. Share as much or as little as you want.

6. Some of my friends seem to resent me, or they're prejudiced against me because I'm gifted. Why is that?

Usually people have prejudices when they don't understand something or someone. They may feel inferior if they don't have enough good things going on in their own lives. So putting you down may make them feel better about themselves (at least for the moment). Just be yourself, and they may come around—or you may need to start hanging out with other people.

7. How should I respond when my friends tease me about being smart?

There's no single foolproof way to cope with teasing. If the teaser is someone you respect and care about, be honest and tell her how the teasing makes you feel. Ask her to stop being critical of you and explain that the teasing isn't helping your friendship. If the teaser is someone you don't respect or care about, ignore her and walk away. At first this may seem hard to do, and it may hurt, but if the teaser doesn't get a response from you, eventually she'll move on. (For more about teasing and how to handle it, see pages 211–218.)

8. How can I cope with "leech" friends—people who rely on me for homework help and want to copy my test answers? First, ask yourself, "Are they really my friends?" People who like you only for what they can get from you don't qualify as friends. So that's something you'll have to decide. Second, if you feel like helping (with homework, not with test answers), and if you have the time, then go ahead and do it. Otherwise, simply explain that you have your own work to do and you're not available this time around. Maybe the "leeches" will take the hint—or maybe not.

"I DON'T ALWAYS KNOW HOW TO HANDLE MY GIFTEDNESS AROUND MY FRIENDS. WHO SHOULD I TELL, WHO SHOULDN'T I? WHEN AM I BRAGGING, AND WHEN AM I JUST TELLING THEM THE TRUTH?" —Max, 13

9. Do gifted students date less often than others? We're not aware of any formal studies that document an answer to this question. However, some of our survey respondents have told us—based on their own experience and that of their friends—that gifted kids are slower to date than others, and they might not date as often. Some feel that it's hard to be popular and intelligent at the same time; girls in particular believe that being smart intimidates boys

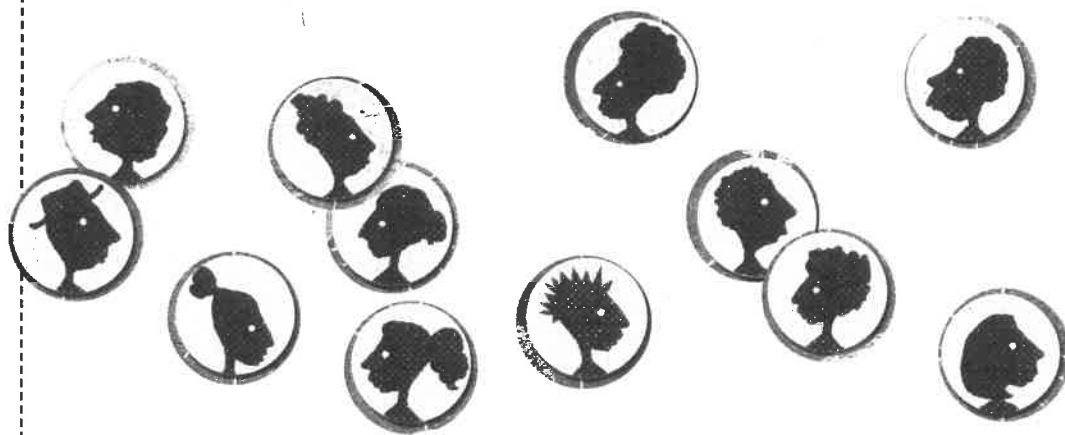
and makes them less "dateable." Dating is stressful for everyone, regardless of gender or age. If you're ready to date but it's not happening, you may wonder if there's something wrong with you. Instead of worrying or blaming yourself, you might need to go beyond your regular circle of friends (at your school, place of worship, or wherever) to find other people with whom you share common interests.

"I THINK IT'S IMPORTANT FOR GIFTED TEENS TO FIND A BOY-FRIEND OR GIRLFRIEND WHO CAN MATCH THEM INTELLECTUALLY. AND IT'S GREAT TO BE SINGLE BECAUSE THAT MEANS YOU'RE WAITING FOR SOMEONE WHO'S RIGHT FOR YOU."

Emily, 18

10. I don't have any trouble making friends, so why is there all this talk about gifted people being social misfits? It's true that many gifted children and teens make friends easily, but for others it's not so easy. They might perceive themselves as social misfits, which sabotages their self-confidence. Also, some people assume that because gifted kids are brighter and more intellectually advanced than their peers, they will automatically have problems relating to so-called "normal" kids.

If you are someone who doesn't have trouble forming friendships, count yourself lucky. Unfortunately, some people may still assume that if you're highly intelligent you must lack social graces and popularity, and vice versa. See Olivia's essay on page 209 for an example.



12 Tips for Making and Keeping Friends

1. **Reach out.** Don't always wait for someone else to make the first move. A simple "hi" and a smile go a long way. It may sound corny, but you'll be amazed at the response you'll receive when you extend a friendly greeting.
2. **Get involved.** Join clubs that interest you; take special classes inside or outside of school. Seek out neighborhood and community organizations and other opportunities to give service to others. And don't limit yourself to classes or organizations that are only for gifted people.
3. **Let people know that you're interested in them.** Don't just talk about yourself; ask questions about them and their interests. Make this a habit and you'll have mastered the art of conversation. It's amazing how many people haven't yet grasped this basic social skill.
4. **Be a good listener.** This means looking at people while they're talking to you and genuinely paying attention to what they're saying. (A long litany of "uh-huhs" is a dead giveaway that your mind is somewhere else.)
5. **Risk telling people about yourself.** When it feels right, let your interests and talents be known. For example, if you love science fiction and you'd like to know others who feel the same way, spread the word. If you're an expert on the history of science fiction, you might want to share your knowledge. BUT . . .
6. **Don't be a show-off.** Not everyone you meet will share your interests and abilities. (On the other hand, you shouldn't have to hide them—which you won't, once you find people who like and appreciate you.)
7. **Be honest.** Tell the truth about yourself and your convictions. When asked for your opinion, be sincere. Friends appreciate forthrightness in each other. BUT . . .
8. **When necessary, temper your honesty with diplomacy.** The truth doesn't have to hurt. It's better to say "Gee, your new haircut is interesting" than to exclaim "You actually paid money for *that*?" There are times when frankness is inappropriate and unnecessary.
9. **Don't just use your friends as sounding boards for your problems and complaints.** Include them in the good times, too.
10. **Do your share of the work.** That's right, work. Any relationship takes effort. Don't always depend on your friends to make the plans and carry the weight.
11. **Be accepting.** Not all of your friends have to think and act like you do. (Wouldn't it be boring if they did?)
12. **Remember: Friendship is not about competition.** You may have friends who are also gifted and perhaps you are driven to succeed in similar pursuits, which may lead to competition. A certain amount of competitiveness is normal and healthy among friends. However, don't let it prevent you from supporting one another through your challenges and celebrating your accomplishments together. Remind each other periodically that you are in this together, that life is not a race, and that having solid friendships is more important in the long run than winning any competition.

"AT MY SCHOOL AND IN MY COMMUNITY, I AM SURROUNDED BY GIFTED KIDS ALL THE TIME. VERY COMPETITIVE GIFTED KIDS." —*Jon, 12*