

The Sensitivity of Precocious Child Writers: More Evidence of the Double-Edged Sword

Alan Edmunds

Gail Edmunds

Western University

Abstract

This article provides further evidence of the often-observed sensitive nature displayed by children who are gifted. It also addresses the positive and negative effects this sensitivity can have on these individuals. Earlier, the authors explored this concept through an analysis of the works and life experiences of Geoffrey, aged 9, a prolific writer since the age of five years (see Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). Now, through a similar analysis of a second precocious child writer, Barbara, evidence of this heightened sensitivity and its effects are explored further. The importance of acknowledging and addressing this characteristic within the gifted population is made even more apparent. Implications for the parenting and education of individuals like Geoffrey and Barbara are discussed placing emphasis on support of the child's heightened sensitivity as a first step rather than an add-on. This support includes the provision of an environment where the sensitivity is acknowledged, celebrated, and expressed freely without judgment.

Keywords: sensitivity; emotionality; precocity, overexcitability; writing

The Sensitivity of Precocious Child Writers: More Evidence of the Double-Edged Sword

Several years ago, the current authors discussed the existence of a heightened sensitivity amongst individuals who are gifted (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). This idea was not new to the literature (e.g., Dabrowski, 1972; Mendaglio, 1995; Piechowski, 1979; Porath, 2000; Shavinina, 1999; Silverman, 1993); however, it was novel to consider this sensitivity through an analysis of the work of a young precocious writer. At the time, Geoffrey (a pseudonym) was a nine year-old grade four student who the authors were following in a longitudinal case study. He began reading at age three and writing prolifically at age five. By age nine, Geoffrey had produced over 8,000 pages of literary works, all deemed to be considerably more advanced than the writings of his gifted peers. As observed by the authors, this exceptional young boy exuded an emotional intensity across all aspects of his life. According to Dabrowski (1972), this emotional overexcitability, as he named it, is the very characteristic that creates the opportunity for intellectual development. It is “a heightened physiological experience of sensory stimuli resulting from increased sensitivity of the neurons” (Mendaglio & Tillier, 2006, p. 69). Lind (2001) stated that “overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity, and represent a real difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience” (p. 3). The current authors noted that for Geoffrey this emotionality, or sensitivity, was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it enabled him to produce engaging written productions across a variety of genres. On the other hand, during the pre-adolescent period, there was evidence that his sensitive nature was setting him apart from his peers and threatening his emotional and physical well-being—a concern of his parents as well as his teachers.

In this article, the authors examine the sensitivity evident in the literary works of a second highly precocious child writer. Barbara Follett (1914-1939), who grew up in New England, first came to the authors' attention through the National Post headline *Barbara Newhall Follett: A Prodigy From Birth* (2011, January 13). The article was a reprint of Paul Collins' (2011) piece on Barbara's life and her extraordinary writing ability. It immediately was apparent that there were similarities between Barbara and Geoffrey. Like Geoffrey, Barbara began writing at a very young age and produced a vast number of written productions in her early years, including publications that received high praise from literary experts. Edmunds and Noel's (2003) description of Geoffrey could well be said about Barbara:

...a young child who has the need and the ability to write about anything and everything he [she] sets his [her] mind to and in a very sophisticated manner. He [She] has seriously violated the expected age norms for emergent writing and for writing mastery. The volume of work is staggering, its variation is immense, and its complexity belies the age of the writer. (p. 191)

The authors set out to learn more about Barbara and were able to access her archived writings, as well as detailed accounts of her life written by her parents, at Columbia University. Ultimately, this provided a second explicit example of how emotionality can have a profound effect on the gifted population, especially growing precocious children. Given Dabrowski and Piechowski's (1977) finding that there is a strong positive correlation between intellectual level and emotional intensity, it appears that children like Geoffrey and Barbara, who exhibit remarkable gifts at an early age, may be at high risk of being negatively affected by their heightened sensitivity.

Sensitivity

According to Silverman (1983), when parents were asked to describe their gifted children, “sensitive” was the most frequent response. The “heightened sensitivity” of the gifted referred to in this article, and observed in Geoffrey (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005), can best be described as a high degree of emotionality that occurs in reaction to the behaviors of others as well as in response to events experienced and events observed. In the case of precocious child writers, like Geoffrey, this sensitivity matches closely with three of the five overexcitabilities presented by Dabrowski (1972)—intellectual, imaginal, and emotional (the others being psychomotor and sensual). “The Big Three”, as Mendaglio and Tillier (2006) called them, are especially relevant to the gifted profile.

According to Mendaglio (2012), individuals with intellectual overexcitability “manifest at an early age analytic and synthetic reasoning abilities” while those with imaginal overexcitability “are often creative, capable of generating many ideas, fantasies, and dreams, which are often expressed in artistic products” (p. 211).

Mendaglio’s description of those with emotional overexcitability is most applicable to the notion of “heightened sensitivity”:

Individuals who possess the final OE, Emotional, are described as being sensitive, often taking life events to heart, and creating intense experience of emotions in self and others. Individuals with Emotional OE are empathic. Attuned to the suffering of others, they develop attitudes of compassion, pity, and worry towards others. Emotional OE is also manifested in the need for exclusive and lasting relationships. (p. 212)

It is clear that children who are gifted can easily be identified as having intellectual intensity. Imaginal intensity is also recognized with little difficulty, especially in children who are talented in writing and the arts as their productions speak for

themselves. Piirto (2002) confirmed this in her list of personality traits that characterize creative writers. It is more challenging, however, to detect emotional intensity as it involves inner feelings as well as behaviors that may be attributed to a “problem child” or a case of maladjustment. Again, however, this overexcitability is more easily discerned in children who have a gift for writing as their emotionality is often on display in their work. In fact, young talented writers in a study conducted by Olthouse (2012) emphasized the emotional reasons for engaging in this craft; “their relationships with writing were personal and intimately connected with emotion and the development of identity” (p. 77). Such was the case in the example of Geoffrey.

Summary of the Analysis of Geoffrey’s Writing

To set the stage for the analysis of Barbara’s writing, it is useful to review the highlights of the authors’ analysis of Geoffrey’s writing and life experiences (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). Findings regarding his early writing were as follows:

- it had a purpose and was initially driven by compassion for his brother
- he had a pervasive need to write on a daily basis
- his choice of writing tool was a pencil despite access to computers
- most of his writing was done in the same quiet location within the home
- he concentrated on particular themes for extended lengths of time (e.g., adventure stories, science, world affairs, philosophy, and nature)—referred to as sensitive periods by Shavinina (1999)
- he explored various writing genres (e.g., short story, essay, poetry)
- he included illustrations with his work

- his sensitive nature was evident across all his writing, whether it be fiction or non-fiction—a compassion for others, a heightened response to life experiences and to world affairs, celebratory in regards to special times of the year (e.g., the changing of the seasons and holidays), an acute awareness of the natural world, and an expressed desire for love and harmony

His life experiences included:

- a rich home environment (e.g., access to books of all kinds and participation in intellectual discussions)
- supportive parents who allowed their child to pursue what interested him
- ongoing music instruction (piano and violin)
- a desire to spend significant amounts of time alone, especially when writing
- difficulties coping in the regular school environment
- physical as well as emotional reactions to events that disturbed him (e.g., violence)

The authors concluded that the future for young Geoffrey may be difficult as his exceptional emotionality was proving to affect all aspects of his life:

It is perhaps his sensitive nature that will set him apart the most. It would be a travesty if this gift of caring and compassion was stifled in an effort to be accepted. Not only would his emotional well-being be in jeopardy but it may dampen the outpouring of his highly creative and thoughtful prose, and also reduce his insatiable appetite for knowledge. (p. 76)

Barbara—A Precocious Child Writer

Given that Barbara Follett lived almost one hundred years ago, the story of her life is best gathered from three sources—her archived writings, an autobiography written by Harold McCurdy (1966) in collaboration with Helen Follett (Barbara's mother) and the

website “Farksolia” (www.farksolia.org) created by Barbara’s nephew, Stefan Cooke. The focus here is on her preadolescent years in keeping with the analysis of Geoffrey’s works. The following highlights of her early life were gleaned from the above sources:

- She was born in Hanover, New Hampshire, on March 4th, 1914.
- Her parents, Helen Thomas Follett and Roy Wilson Follett, were teachers, essayists, and literary critics.
- At age four, she first became fascinated with the clacking of a typewriter.
- By age five, she was using the typewriter to write stories, letters, and poems.
- By age six, she had produced a 4500-word creative story.
- At age eight, she wrote fictional stories such as *The Adventures of Curis*, *The Magic Violin*, and *The Allegro of the Earth*.
- At age nine, she completed her story *The Adventures of Eepersip*. Soon after, the manuscript burned in a house fire. Barbara re-wrote the work over several years. In 1927, *A House Without Windows, and Eepersip’s Life There* was published by Alfred A. Knopf. Barbara was 12 years old at the time. The first printing of 2500 sold out before the publication date. The book was well received as evident in reviews printed in the *New York Times*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, and *The American Girl*.

Barbara’s Writing

First productions. Helen, Barbara’s mother, wrote in detail about her child’s introduction to writing. The initial curiosity was sparked by a small typewriter that sat on their kitchen table.

“What are you doing that for?” Barbara asked me, one morning. And I answered, “Oh, just for fun - it’s a letter to Grandmother.” And then came the question, “What is it about?” To that I replied, “It’s mostly about you.” Well, that started something! I read her all those words I had written, not only once, but twice, and then again, each time pointing out with my finger the very word as I said it.

“I want to write something about you,” she announced, finally. So she told me what words to write, and I tapped them out slowly, as she stood by, watching. If the words I had written about her were exciting, the ones she wrote herself (via me and the typewriter) were a hundred times more so, for they were hers. They were enclosed, of course, in the letter to Grandmother, but not right-off - not until they had been read, and re-read many times, until she was satisfied that indeed they were her very own words.

This was only the beginning. A five and six year old curiosity was stirred. She wanted to know more of this fascinating world in which people said things with a pencil, or with a pen they took out of their pockets, or with a machine they carried from room to room around the house. She preferred the machine at that time...She was in a hurry to write more things about me; and she wanted me to write things about her; and she liked reading both of them, and then the sending of them both to Grandmother in Boston.

“And now let us say things about the clock,” she announced one morning. I was taken aback...she was going to write something too about the kitchen clock, and we were to read to each other what we had written...I wrote of the clock in terms of its minutes and hours...and how different her story was from mine...To her it was not a clock at all; it was Mrs. Clock...Some of the story she wrote herself, while I spelled out the words for her; and then, she told me the rest, and I tapped out the words that were so definitely her

own...in an every-day kitchen, the things in the kitchen were taking on an importance that converted them all into things to write about.

And that is what happened. My contribution to the scheme was, primarily, to encourage (and, at times, to insist upon) this expression in words, and to turn it into a daily habit...the putting down in words the day's story or event...served to keep alive and stimulate both curiosity and imagination as well as the desire to say more things in written words.

Barbara's early writing included entries in a "diary book". Some entries, like the following one written in 1920 (age six), simply described daily events:

Yesterday Ding and I went out and saw Miss Langan's rabbits. One had a black nose, the outlines of his ears were black, he had a black spot on his tail, and he had little, narrow bands around each foot. Those were black, too.

Other entries, also written in 1920, show an emerging creative writer:

Ellertigmor are animals with noses as long as broomsticks, dark brown, beady, fierce eyes, mouths big enough to swallow somebody with one gulp and with teeth sharper than the sharpest knife on earth.

There are scores, hundreds, millions, and billions of them in mountains, sometimes they are scattered all over a cavern, and lots of miners have been destroyed by them.

Further entries from the same year demonstrate benevolence, especially towards animals:

We are going to have a Christmas for the animals. One of the presents is already done up; and I am knitting a rug and I shall either get it finished before this Christmas or I shall not give it to them until next Christmas. After I finish the rug I am going to knit a blanket.

Barbara's appreciation of music was also evident at this young age:

Friday Daddy and I went to an orchestra rehearsal. I saw lots of the instruments come in. Indeed a few of them were already there, and getting tuned up. There were two things they played that were prettier than anything else. One of them was Brahms' D major symphony, and the other was one of the variations played mostly for the first and second violins.

All of these diary entries were written in a child's attempt at cursive writing. In fact, there is little evidence of any printing in Barbara's early productions. Her spelling, punctuation, and formatting were as presented above.

Barbara's early writing also included many creative stories such as *The Life of the Spinning-Wheel, the Rocking-Horse, and the Rabbit* which she wrote before turning six. In the following excerpt from this story, it is clear that she has an understanding of the feelings of her characters:

The fairy evidently knew his name because she said to him: "Good day to you, my dear Mr. Rabbit, I have two wands because one of them is for you to keep always for yourself."

"Oh no!", said Mr. Rabbit, "you'll want it yourself."

"No, no, take it," said the kind fairy.

"I thank you," said Mr. Rabbit politely, "that is the very thing that I came into the woods for."

"What do you want it for?" said the fairy.

"I want it because Mr. Horse is brown, and Mrs. Spinning-Wheel wants him white. I want to do what she wishes, you know."

"Yes, I know," said the fairy, in her softest voice.

These descriptions of the speakers' voices—"politely" in the case of Mr. Rabbit and "in her softest voice" in the case of the fairy—give the reader a real sense of their characters. This depth of understanding is not typical of young children who are very much ego-centered.

At age seven, according to McCurdy (1966), Barbara focused on non-fiction when she created a flower diary and then a butterfly diary. These scientific catalogues contained her detailed observations of the color and structure of various flowers and butterflies. According to Renzulli's three-ring conception of giftedness (1998), this sensitivity to the aesthetic characteristics of nature is a trait of those who are highly creative.

Correspondence. Another form of Barbara's earliest writing was undoubtedly influenced by the period in which she lived. The artifacts of her work include a vast number of typed letters that were written as early as age five and then regularly throughout her short life (Barbara disappeared in 1939 at age 25). It was in these letters that Barbara wrote in detail about her life experiences. Her correspondents, who numbered more than 40, included family friends and individuals she met both in her neighborhood and on travels with her parents.

Mr. Oberg, an elderly man who restored antiques, was her first significant correspondent. Barbara's mother explained to McCurdy (1966) in an interview:

They [Mr. Oberg and Barbara] met in his shop in Providence when she was four. She was carrying a stuffed toy rabbit who had lost an eye. Mr. Oberg took sympathetic notice and paused in his work on two ancient clocks to repair the deficiency in her rabbit. She was impressed. (p. 3)

They began a correspondence that lasted many years. At age six, Barbara wrote:

My dear Mr. Oberg:

Nonillion thanks to you, Mr. Oberg, for the letter in poetry about the little yellow chair, the dear pictures that go with it, and the chair itself.

I will now tell you how Daddy and I got the chair. As it happened, the box was hidden in the Post-Office; Daddy took me out on a sled, and he, himself, went on skis. When we started home Daddy put the box on the sled and me on the box.

When we got home the box was opened in the living-room, as we call it, and we all stood around. Grandfather Bunny sat on the top of the box! Pretty soon the box was open, and there in it was the BEAUTIFULLEST yellow chair in the world!

There was one thing that was missing; it was you, YOURSELF.

Barbara's letters always exuded kindness, an attention to detail, and an acute awareness of the feelings of others as well as her surroundings.

Music and nature. Themes, such as music and nature, were also apparent in Barbara's letter writing. For example, at age eight, she told Mr. Oberg about her imaginary friends who were obviously connected to her love of music:

I pretend that Beethoven, the Two Strausses, Wagner, and the rest of the composers are still living, and they go skating with me, and when I invite them to dinner, a place has to be set for them; and when I have so many that the table won't hold them all, I make my family sit on one side of their chair to make room for them. My abbreviation for the Two Strausses is the Two S's. Beethoven, Wagner, and the Two S's have maids; Beethoven's maid's name is Katherine Velvet, Wagner's maid's name is Katherine Loureena (she got the name Loureena when she was a little bit of a girl because she loved to skate in the Arena), and Strauss's maid's name was Sexo Crimanz... One morning when I had two chairs set out, one for Beethoven and the other for Wagner, I hadn't pretended long enough to get my family used to them, and Daddy suddenly grabbed the chair that Wagner was sitting in, but I held on to it squealing, "Hey, that's Wagner's chair!" Then he went around to Beethoven, and I was looking suspiciously at him all the time. But he turned around again and didn't bother Beethoven. I suppose that when he got around there, he thought that Beethoven was there.

At age eight she also wrote to her aunt thanking her for the violin she had sent her. In Barbara's detailed description of this violin, it is obvious that she recognized the intricate beauty of the instrument and was very knowledgeable about musical tuning:

You know how much I have wanted a violin, and you know that I have wanted one for a long time... Daddy unwrapped the violin and brought out the most beautiful one that anybody ever saw, for a small violin. There was, at the end of the case, a little box, and I lifted the cover up. Inside were all sorts of little odds and ends needed on the violin, such as rosin, another E string, and the only thing that mother said she could play out of that outfit, was a violin tuner. It was a little thing that had marked on it the strings of the violin, G, D, A, E, to tune the violin by. The violin was exquisite, the G string was gut wound with wire, the D string was gut, the A string was gut also, and the E string was metal. The back of the violin was made of pretty dark wood mottled with darker wood, and the front of it had on it little marks of age. Also the underneath part of the neck was very light wood mottles with darker wood, and also the outer part of the part of the violin between the back and the front was the same as the back, light wood mottled with darker wood. The part of it that comes down under the strings over the front of the violin was black and the dainty little strings stretched over it added to its beauty... and with it were several books to play from, and a stand. The lessons have just begun, every day for two weeks...

Barbara had a similar fascination with all things related to nature. A letter written to Miss Deane that same year indicated that Barbara was enamored by fairies and used them in her experimentation with the playwriting genre:

Yesterday I started writing a fairy play. There are three fairies in it, Viren, Raindu, and Rondaintu, and they all have very important parts. The play is called The Fairy's Nest, because the fairies all make a little nest on a big rock covered with vines. There is also a goblin in the play, who is the worst enemy of the fairies. The fairy parts are written in poetry, but the goblin part isn't. It may have four acts, or the third and fourth may be together; I'm sure I don't know. It may even turn out to be a one-act play.

Also at the age of eight, Barbara typed a thank you letter to Mrs. Lathrop who had sent her a book. The theme of nature is clearly evident as she writes of animals, insects, and springtime. It should be noted that Barbara mentions a secret language she created called "Farksoo" and presents a poem along with the translation:

Thank you ever so much for sending me a copy of Walter de la Mare's Down A-Down Derry. I think the pictures are wonderful and especially the frontispiece is a wonderful illustration of a fairy. I also love the poem that goes with that picture. I think it is perfectly wonderful the whole business.

I have now started a story about kittens, and the most important character is Verbiny, the princess who found the mother-cat in the woods, caught her, and tamed her. One of the four kittens had a black back arched up like a kangaroo rat's, and at the top of each white stocking was a band of yellow. All the kittens catch little crickets and grasshoppers, and one of the kittens catches a bay mouse, and a kitten names Citrolane catches two sparrows, one with each paw. But just a little while after the kittens are born they want so much to see what is on the other side of the fence that fences in their property that they climb up over it and jump down and almost land on a porcupine, but he good-naturedly steps aside in time. In a chapter called Springtime I have written down a little poem in a secret language that Verbiny called Farksoo. In the secret language was this:

Ar peen maiburs barge craik coo
 Peen yar fis farled cray pern.
 Peen darndeon flar fooloos lart ain birdream.
 Avee lart ain caireen ien tu cresteen der tuee,
 Darnceen craik peen bune.

I will now translate as best I can.

As the (and maiburs means a flower that comes in May,) begin to come the air is filled with perfume, the dandelion fluff floats like a, (and birdream means something very beautiful.)
 Also like a fairy in her dress of gold,
 Dancing to the wind.

Farksoo, and the planet Farksolia, captured Barbara's attention for some time. She later described the people of Farksolia as "twice as highly developed as we are here on Earth" which perhaps was a reference to those on Earth who, unlike herself, failed to appreciate and respect nature.

At age nine, nature was again the theme as Barbara wrote the following thoughtful exposé to another of her correspondents, Mr. St. John:

...Nature did not plan her children to be killed, except sometimes by one another, but she planned them to live and enjoy the earth—the sunlight, the flowers, the trees, and all Nature's beauties. If only we mortals will wake up and learn a lesson, here is a lesson for us to learn. As Nature has not planned her children to be killed, why do we kill them? Who can answer this question? Nature has trusted to us, animals' big brother and sisters, to leave her babies alone. If only some of us could wake up and be brought to see the right side of this very complicated subject, they would think, the way I do, of the person who gets wounded, what he feels like, and how his feelings are hurt. Why do we kill pigs for pork or ham? why do we kill cows for beef? or lambs for their meat? When we kill the animals we are not doing what Nature has planned, no matter what this might be.

Volcanoes that spout up ash and kill plants near by cannot help it, for Nature has planned it; worms we hate because they are ugly—they do nobody no harm, and they cannot help how they look, for Nature has planned it...

Nature has not planned naughty boys to throw stones at chipmunks, squirrels and birds; Nature has not planned us to catch fishes and eat them (something which even I do); Nature has not planned naughty boys to catch lizards or salamanders with crooked pins (something which I cannot bear to think about).

Now about butterflies. If we could only be brought to see as I do. Why do people have to know exactly where every spot on a butterfly's wing is? There is no need to make collections of butterflies, for why do we have to know just exactly about them? Human beings are so fussy! Much the better way of finding out about butterflies is to catch them and out them in a sieve and describe them. I think that it is much better not to get their description exact and let the butterfly live on, in its lovely life, than to kill and get everything exact. This is what I do, and I hope that you think it is better as well as I.

Again, Barbara was critical of those on Earth who failed to value nature. She attempted to enlighten them in the hope that they would respect nature just as she did.

Her concern for the natural world was always apparent in her letters to Mr. St. John. She obviously respected his knowledge on this topic and asked for his advice on occasion:

I am also thinking about how to make birds feel happy on our new house lot. I want to attract small birds, especially humming-birds and wrens. I want plenty of lilac trees and rhododendrons for the humming-birds. In the winter I want to have luxury on hand for the darling little snow buntings. I am not going to have any cats, and I hope with all my might that the neighbors' cats (if they have any) will keep away. In the summer I want especially thrushes, goldfinches, song sparrow, orioles, and possibly redstarts. Do you know how I can make them comfortable?

In her anticipation of her summer trip to Sunapee, she later described to Mr. St. John exactly what she was missing about the place she loved so much and it was everything natural:

...I want as long as possible in that green, fairylike, woodsy, animal-filled, watery, luxuriant, butterfly-painted, moth-dotted, dragonfly-blotched, bird-filled, salamandious, mossy, ferny, sunshiny, moonshiny, long-dayful, short-nightfall land, on that fishy, froggy, tadpoly, shelly, lizard-filled lake—oh, no end of lovely things to say about that place, and I am mad to get there...

This obvious connection with nature permeated much of what Barbara wrote, even in the annual messages she sent to her adult correspondents at Christmas time. At the age of ten, she wrote the following poem to accompany her Christmas greetings:

SILVER MAGIC

On Christmas morn,
 Children, first looking from the windows,
 See how desolate and bleak the garden is.
 Withered the flowers, butterflies flown,
 Summer gone from the woods.
 But hist!—magic!
 Out there, the leaves that flutter down
 Are elfin butterflies, pearled with frost-patterns.
 Flowers and ferns of the garden
 Have come in fairy lace on the window-panes.
 And what is this,
 Wound about with climbing vines of the garden all turned to silver,

Lighted with candles that make fireflies
 In every shining ball and glazen pendent?
 Summer has come into the cottage!
 It is May in the hearts of the children:
 And sweet as songs of the thrush at twilight
 Are the Noels raised by their happy voices.
 Fairies, oh! Fairies,
 Come dancing soft as shadows,
 Set the wood a-whirl with snowy wings.
 Weave your iridescent webs,
 Wind them in beauty about the Tree:
 Touch it with wands of frost
 Until it is tipped and trimmed with icicles,
 Sparkling—gleaming!

Being alone and the desire to escape. By age nine, Barbara had started writing her novel *A House Without Windows* that would be published in 1927. During the writing process, she posted this note on her door—an indication that she appreciated privacy and quiet time:

NOBODY MAY COME INTO THIS ROOM IF THE DOOR IS SHUT TIGHT (IF IT IS SHUT NOT QUITE LATCHED IT IS ALL RIGHT) WITHOUT KNOCKING. THE PERSON IN THIS ROOM IF HE AGREES THAT ONE SHALL COME IN WILL SAY “COME IN,” OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT AND IF HE DOES NOT AGREE TO IT HE WILL SAY “NOT YET, PLEASE,” OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. THE DOOR MAY BE SHUT IF NOBODY IS IN THE ROOM BUT IF A PERSON WANTS TO COME IN, KNOCKS AND HEARS NO ANSWER THAT MEANS THERE IS NO ONE IN THE ROOM AND HE MUST NOT GO IN.

REASON. IF THE DOOR IS SHUT TIGHT AND A PERSON IS IN THE ROOM THE SHUT DOOR MEANS THAT THE PERSON IN THE ROOM WISHES TO BE LEFT ALONE.

While this desire to be alone may have been directly linked to Barbara’s need for quiet during the writing process, she often wrote about being alone and her frustrations with the behavior of others. It appears that her compassion for those around her was very clouded by the actions of some. She wrote about “how vile the slaughter of trees is getting” and “if man could only be contented with all these luxuries”. Her exasperation

with those who focused on what she considered the trivia of life is clear in her article titled *Make your talk more interesting*:

Talk about something! Get rid of your female friends who talk about nothing but their children, and your gentlemen friends who talk about nothing but books and colleges and automobiles. Or, if you can't get rid of them talk about something really worth while. The worst part of this dull talk is that the listeners are interested! Instead of listening intently and gossiping about everybody...why don't you say: "I'm not interested can't you talk about anything but other people's affairs?" (I don't mean that you should be really rude though.) Now think what effect that would have...

Perhaps this frustration with others, and knowing few individuals like herself, lead to a loneliness and a desire to escape life as she experienced it. She shared with Mr. St. John how one of the characters she was writing about escaped her loneliness by going to live in the wild:

Did you know that I have been writing a story, started long, long ago? I will tell you about it. It is about a little girl named Eepersip who lived on top of a mountain, Mount Varcrobie, and was so lonely that she went away to live wild. She talked to the animals, and led a sweet lonely life with them—just the kind of life I should like to lead. Her parents all tried to catch her, with some friends of theirs, and every time she escaped in some way or other. Toward where I am working now, Eepersip's ways of escaping grow more and more foxy, though now they have given up trying to catch her, but for the first few times she saved herself by way of the deer which grazed in the meadow where Eepersip lived. She loved the flowers, trees, animals, and all Nature's wonders as much as you or I do, or even more. She played games with butterflies! She often thought that she was going to learn from end to beginning butterfly history.

This theme of loneliness and escape appeared in many of Barbara's writings. As McCurdy (1966) observed, "In spite of the affection which she manifests in her letters to Mr. Oberg, Mr. St. John, and 'dear Daddy Dog', and in her accounts to her baby sister, she often wrote about escaping from parents or other adults, and at times all human beings" (p. 53). It was a foreboding forecast of her future.

Summary. While Barbara's writing continued throughout her relatively short life, the presentation of her written productions ends here at age 10 as it mirrors the time frame covered in the analysis of Geoffrey's work (Edmunds & Edmunds, 2005). It is perhaps Barbara's own words that best encapsulate her early writing—"I am so easy to get inspired with new inspirations..."

The Home Environment

Barbara's father, Wilson, an essayist, critic and editor, expressed very opinionated views on facilitating young children's development. His views (Follett, 1928) undoubtedly influenced Barbara's life at home, particularly the freedom she experienced. He penned:

There are certain realities which ought to be part of every child's inalienable inheritance, and of which we systematically disinherit nearly all children. The chief of such important realities are, perhaps, these: (1) leisure; (2) privacy when required; (3) freedom; (4) familiarity with nature; (5) spontaneous activity; (6) gratification of curiosity; (7) equal companionship when needed; (8) the right to be taken seriously as a human being at all times... Suffice it to say that the completely normal child is one who has had the fullest measure of this inheritance that is humanly possible. And the average child of twelve or fourteen... is one who has been as completely deprived of all eight of these natural advantages as the insane ingenuity of the race can manage.

In his description of Barbara's development up until age fourteen, he stated the following:

She has been left alone. She has had her own room from birth, her own study and collection of books from the age of reading. She has chosen her books, has read what she could get pleasure out of, and has reread things as often or as seldom as she chose. She has never been herded in gangs, or standardized in any sort of pattern. She has never entered a school except for a few minutes as a visitor. She has run wild in the country for months at a time, learning birds, animals, insects, trees, ferns, flowers. She has climbed mountains of altitudes suited to her age, and carried packs graduated to her strength. She has swung a paddle, and swum like a young water-rat, and sailed a rude makeshift contraption in wild weather, and slept on the ground, and pawed mountain cranberries from under snow with numbed fingers, and tamed deer mice. Out of pure curiosity, she has used a typewriter

haltingly at four, accurately at five, fluently at six, with professional competence at seven, until at eight the expression of her thoughts through its keys was nearly as instinctive as breathing. She has asked questions and got them answered—when there were answers that could be found. She has had a perennial crop of grand passions (Anglice “crushes”)—two years absorption in clocks; five in a particular stuffed animal; three in butterflies; in Ludwig Beethoven; in ships and the sea; in yellow as a color; in the Roman tongue and Julius Caesar personally; in pirates and piracy—and no one has sat on them or laughed at them.

Barbara’s mother, in her written account of their home life (McCurdy, 1966), also emphasized the richness of the environment. She wrote of “many books” and “a friend’s piano and music to suit an assortment of tastes” (p. x). According to Mrs. Follett, when Barbara was quite young, there was an intellectual atmosphere within the home due to her husband’s position at the university:

A lively gathering-place our home was at tea-time. Students and young Faculty came, sometimes a well-known author or musician. Always plenty of talk and animated discussion. Here, among the guests, the barely four-year-old made frequent appearances. (p. x)

Mrs. Follett was quick to explain that Barbara did not lack playmates of her own age. When the family lived in close proximity to other families:

...Barbara found playmates of her own size. They climbed trees and played games, and often visited each other’s homes. Sometimes, a parent took them all to a puppet show, to the museum, or to a children’s concert. Delighted as she was to be a part of this group, Barbara was also happy to be alone with her animal friends who sat around in chairs while she read one of her favorite stories... (p. x)

It is clear from these descriptions of Barbara’s home environment that she was, like Geoffrey, surrounded by high levels of intellectual stimulation. In addition, both young writers were given a significant degree of freedom in pursuing their interests and neither child was dissuaded from exhibiting their sensitive nature. In fact, in both homes, emotional sensitivities were celebrated. This parenting style is best described as responsive—showing interest in a child’s behavior but not stifling it or attempting to

significantly influence it. According to Miller, Lambert, and Speirs Neumeister (2012), “it may be that responsiveness is the most important dimension for creative expression” (p. 347).

Further, the behaviors of Geoffrey’s and Barbara’s parents were not unlike those of others who are considered effective parents of children who are gifted. In their critique of the literature on parenting gifted learners, Jolly and Matthews (2012) found that:

Effective parents of children of all ages encourage their children to ask questions, and use their imaginations through play; they react to their child in a developmentally appropriate manner, and they allow their young high-ability children to make decisions commensurate with their age. At younger ages, in their capacity as their child’s first teacher, these parents gauge their child’s ability level and motivation and are highly engaged with their children in family activities. These parents report engaging their children in intellectual activities more often than parents of average-ability children do, and they also report supporting independence, encouraging the development of a sense of responsibility, and providing unconditional love and support for their child. (pp. 272-273)

Barbara’s Schooling

Barbara never attended school. Her education was primarily the responsibility of her mother who was at one time a high school English teacher. According to McCurdy (1966), who spoke directly with Helen about Barbara’s education:

...she undertook to conduct Barbara’s education at home rather than send her to school, in order to allow her full intellectual individuality to flourish under a schedule of work that grew naturally out of the child’s interests and preferred ways of inquiry and expression. (p. ix)

Helen herself wrote the following about how this education was carried out on a daily basis:

Each day a schedule was made out that roughly corresponded with that of the early grades of the school system: arithmetic, geography, science, reading, arts and crafts, music, and the beginning of French. A week’s work divided up as we thought best. Added to each day’s studies came that of typing for ten or twenty minutes which meant, at first, the copying of words and sentences, and later, the composing of sentences of her own.

The regret (or blessing?) was that I couldn't watch the details of this schooling idea taking place on a sunny table presided over by a small girl on a sunny porch. It was my part to make out the schedules, and her part to carry them out, clip her papers together, and then bounce outdoors to find a playmate for the afternoon... The child had, I think, the best of the bargain, for she learned the good habit of working alone, with occasional calls for help... I was glad to answer. (p. xi)

The following lesson plan prepared by Helen in 1923, when Barbara was nine years old, is typical of those used in Barbara's schooling:

French:

Copy neatly, making all corrections in spelling, the sentence written in English of lesson 25.

Copy also Lesson 22 which you wrote in French. Make all corrections and copy neatly. Use only half a sheet of paper for your exercises.

Write in French Lesson 23. Use only half a sheet of paper; date it; and write the number of the lesson. Please make it a better looking sheet than the preceding one you wrote.

Translate the first page of Blanche-Neige.

Arithmetic:

Page 39: examples 112, 113, 114, 115

Page 40: Read the rules printed in heavy type about Ratio. Do examples.

Science:

Write a page that will interest me. Write carefully, and look out for your spelling.

Painting:

You haven't yet done the new picture for a Shelley poem.

Music:

Try to get some practice on the piano and some on the violin. Remember you are going to take a lesson from Bruce this week.

Write a letter to either Mr. Paul or Mr. St. John. If you don't feel like a letter and do feel like working on your story, do the latter.

BE A GOOD GIRL; KEEP BUSY; DON'T BOTHER MISS RALPH.

Have some good work to show me.

And how did Barbara respond to her home schooling? It is obvious by the volume of her written productions that her writing flourished. The content of that writing also divulges that she savored the time she spent outside exploring nature. Perhaps most

revealing is what she wrote in one of her creative stories. It included a conversation between a father and a mother about whether or not their child should attend school. The mother says:

What of that? What is education compared with such a sacred life with Nature and the fairies, and the butterflies and bees (which are Nature) and all the lovely things which she now has? Think how much happier she now is than she would be with school-teachers, lead-pencils, other school-children, arithmetic, French, history? I have always wondered what to do with her. I have always hated to send her to school, for she is not the kind of child for school.

While Barbara and Geoffrey grew up in vastly different periods, especially in regards to public education, one can still imagine Geoffrey taking a similar stance in his early writing. After all, school was not always a happy place for Geoffrey. There were particular years when his gifts were not fully understood, when the curricula was inappropriate, and the environment was not emotionally supportive.

Barbara's Adolescence and Early Adulthood

To put Barbara's early years in context, her rather idyllic upbringing during that time did not continue into adolescence and early adulthood. In fact, she faced much turmoil. It was the era of the Great Depression. In addition, her father, with whom she had a very close relationship, left her mother for another woman when she was fourteen; she saw very little of him after that despite the many desperate letters she wrote to him. One of those letters, noted by Cooke (2013), is as follows:

Dear Daddy:

It seems to us that New York must be a sort of Louis XI's palace, full of snares, temptations, pitfalls, traps, and everything else for enticing and entangling its helpless victims.

[Barbara describes a beautiful spot she has found hidden far in the woods near their house and then continues.]

I intend to make a great many visits, basket and shovel in hand, to this veritable Eden-of-cultivated-things-gone-wild, and I hope you will come along

“... up to the pig-sties,
and sit on the farm-yard rails!
Let’s say things to the bunnies,
And watch ‘em skitter their tails!
Let’s—oh, anything, Daddy—
So long as it’s you and me....”

For several years, Barbara remained with her mother who struggled with poverty as well as the emotional effects of the marital split. Then her mother sent her to live with friends. Barbara rebelled and not long after met her future husband who she married at age nineteen. The marriage was not without problems, including adultery on her husband’s part. Barbara left their home in 1939 and was never seen again. As McCurdy (1966) concluded, Barbara’s life after early childhood was an intense drama. Her reaction to this drama was one of deep sadness and extreme pain thus leading McCurdy to state that genius in some cases can be a “costly gift” (p. vi). He wrote:

...As a child of four in New England she was already seated at a typewriter expressing her dreams. By thirteen she had published a book with Knopf, *The House Without Windows*, which concentratedly summed up some of the major aspects of these inner truths and which was acclaimed by critics like Howard Mumford Jones for its literary qualities. And by twenty-five, on a December evening in 1939, she had stepped out of her apartment in Boston and vanished from the world, as completely and mysteriously as the heroine of that book, who had been crowned queen of the fairies high among the mountain snows and was then carried away by butterflies. (p. v)

As Collins (2011), who also studied Barbara’s life, stated, “Some prodigies flourish, some disappear.”

Summary of the Analysis of Barbara’s Writing

To parallel the analysis of Geoffrey’s life and work provided earlier, the following is a summary of Barbara’s early writing and life experiences:

Early writing

- it had a purpose and was initially driven by a desire to write letters to her grandmother
- she had a need to write on a daily basis and was encouraged to do so by her mother
- her choice of writing tool was the typewriter
- much of her writing was done in a quiet location within her home
- she concentrated on particular themes for extended lengths of time (e.g., clocks, butterflies, fairies, music, and the sea)
- she explored various writing genres (e.g., short story, letter writing, poetry, novel)
- she included illustrations with her work
- her sensitive nature was evident across all her writing, whether it be fiction or non-fiction—a compassion for others, an acute awareness of the natural world, a heightened response to life experiences, celebratory in regards to special times of the year (e.g., the changing of the seasons and holidays) and an expressed need to escape

Life experiences

- a rich home environment (e.g., access to books of all kinds and participation in intellectual discussions)
- supportive parents who encouraged her to express herself
- several key adults who corresponded with her regularly
- home schooled - no interest in going to public school
- ongoing music instruction (violin)

- a preference to spend significant amounts of time alone, whether writing or exploring nature
- difficulties understanding some human behaviors

The similarities between Geoffrey's and Barbara's lives are readily apparent—the need to express thoughts and experiences in various writing genres and the home support to do just that, a deep appreciation for the natural world, a love of music, and a difficulty dealing with the intense emotions of some life experiences (e.g., death, injustices).

Differences between these two child writers are also evident. Geoffrey's own feelings and emotions are often spoke of directly in his writings. No interpretation is necessary; the reader can feel along with him. Barbara's on the other hand, were often disguised in her characters' actions and words; she appeared to escape in her fictional works. In fact, her exquisite visual details have the capacity to take the reader on this escape with her.

Implications for Parents and Educators

Parents and educators often struggle with how best to provide an intellectually stimulating environment for the young gifted child. Naturally, we want the child, who is so able, to excel and contribute to society in a very meaningful way. From early childhood to late adolescence, educational decision-making surrounds such issues as public school or home school, regular classroom or special program, remain with peers or accelerate to a higher grade level, narrow the field of study or broaden the curricula, etc... While the gifted child's "well-being" is typically discussed as a component of this decision-making, it is not always at the forefront nor is it often discussed specifically in terms of behaviors linked to emotional intensities.

In light of the heightened sensitivities displayed by Geoffrey and Barbara, it is apparent that while the opportunity to express one's thoughts and emotions is extremely important, it still does not protect one from the challenges of being highly sensitive—further evidence of the double-edged sword analogy. In Geoffrey's case, he was misunderstood by his peers and in Barbara's case, she had difficulty dealing with the real world. These struggles are suffered by many individuals but being so acutely sensitive leads to different experiences for those like Geoffrey and Barbara. As Sal Mendaglio clarified in an interview with Shaughnessy (2010), such individuals feel more because they see—perceive—more. Sword (2005) explained, “feeling everything more deeply than others do can both be painful and frightening.”

The obvious question is how can parents and educators help gifted children who experience these heightened sensitivities. A good starting point is to consider what is done for children with other types of exceptionalities. Elfrink (2008) described a well-received comprehensive "demystification" curriculum for students with learning disabilities. The goal is to remove the mystery about the exceptionality by facilitating an understanding of oneself and how one learns. Students explore their individual strengths and weaknesses, and they are taught how to advocate for themselves. Parents are involved in the process. Campbell-Whatley (2008) also reported the success of a similar endeavor. In her study, students with learning disabilities received lessons focused on self-awareness training, self-exploration, problem-solving, self-concept, and coping skills. As a result, they demonstrated significant positive changes in self-concept and self-awareness. It is apparent, then, that students benefit greatly from learning more about themselves. There is no reason to think this would be any different for the sensitive,

gifted student. As an anecdotal aside, this brings to mind a gifted adult's response to the Edmunds and Edmunds (2005) article on sensitivity. In her words, "it made me cry because finally I understand why I am like I am."

Given that learning more about oneself is a possible solution to reducing the negative effects of the double-edged sword, how might that occur for children similar to Geoffrey and Barbara? An existing resource for parents and educators of the gifted is the non-profit organization called SENG—Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted (www.sengifted.org/). It is devoted to helping gifted individuals "understand and accept themselves and others in ways that value, nurture, and support them in families, schools, workplaces, and communities." Some of the parenting and teaching strategies offered by SENG contributors [Hébert & Kent (2000); Lind (2001); Shaughnessy (2010); Sword (2005)] to assist overexcitable children are worthy of consideration. These strategies include:

- Teach them to see their heightened sensitivity to things that happen in the world as a normal response for them.
- Create an atmosphere that encourages them to express their emotions.
- Allow them to make their environment more comfortable in order to create places for retreat or safety.
- Teach them to anticipate physical and emotional responses and prepare for them.
- Discuss the concept of overexcitability and point out that being overexcitable is understood and accepted.
- Discuss the positives of being overexcitable.

- Provide opportunities for them to pursue their passions thus showing respect for their abilities and intensities.
- Teach stress management from toddlerhood onward.
- Utilize bibliotherapy (provision of literature relevant to personal situations and developmental needs) in an effort to help them understand themselves and cope with problems.
- Arrange professional counseling when needed—early intervention is key.
- Exercise appropriate discipline as this helps them develop a sense of security that leads to the development of self-discipline and a feeling of emotional competency.
- Teach them to be responsible for their behaviors, to become more aware of how their behaviors affect others, and to understand that their needs are not more important than those of others.
- Acknowledge and relish their uniqueness.

As Moyle (2006) so aptly stated, “sensitivity must have protection, a place for expression, and reciprocity.”

References

- Bainbridge, C. (2013). *Dabrowski's overexcitabilities or supersensitivities in gifted children*. Retrieved from <http://giftedkids.about.com/od/gifted101/a/overexcite.htm>
- Campbell-Whatley, G. D. (2008). Teaching students about their disabilities: Increasing self-determination skills and self-concept. *International Journal of Special Education*, 23(2), 137-144.
- Collins, P. (2011). Vanishing act. *Lapham Quarterly (Winter)*. Retrieved from www.laphamsquarterly.org/essays/vanishing-act.php?page=all
- Collins, P. (2011, January 13). Barbara Newhall Follett: A prodigy from birth. *National Post*. Retrieved from <http://arts.nationalpost.com/2011/01/13/barbara-newhall-follett-a-prodigy-from-birth/>
- Cooke, S. (2013). *Farksolia: Barbara Newhall Follett's home on the web*. Retrieved from www.farksolia.org/contact/
- Dabrowski, K. (1972). *Psychoneurosis is not an illness*. London: Gryf Publications.
- Dabrowski, K., & Piechowski, M. M. (1977). *Theory of levels of emotional development*. Oceanside, NY: Dabor Science.

Edmunds, A., & Edmunds, G. (2005). Sensitivity: A double-edged sword for the pre-adolescent and adolescent gifted child. *Roeper Review*, 27(2), 69-77.

Edmunds, A., & Noel, K. (2003). Literary precocity: An exceptional case among exceptional cases. *Roeper Review*, 25(4), 185-194.

Elfrink, M. W. (2008). *Helping students understand and accept their learning disabilities: The demystification conference*. Retrieved from www.ldonline.org/article/6157/

Follett, W. (1928). Notes on a junior author: With a glance at precocity. *Horn Book*, 4, 6-13.

Hébert, T. P., & Kent, R. K. (2000). Nurturing social and emotional development in gifted teenagers through young adult literature. *Roeper Review*, 22(3), 167-171.

Jolly, J. L. & Matthews, M. S. (2012). A critique of the literature on parenting gifted learners. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 35(3), 259-290.

Lind, S. (2001). Overexcitability and the gifted. *SENG Newsletter*, 1(10), 3-6. Retrieved from www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/overexcitability-and-the-gifted

McCurdy, H. G. (1966). *Barbara: The unconscious autobiography of a child genius*. Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina.

Mendaglio, S. (1995). Sensitivity among gifted persons: A multi-faceted perspective. *Roeper Review*, 17(3), 169-172.

Mendaglio, S. (2012). Overexcitabilities and giftedness research: A call for a paradigm shift. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 35(3), 207-219.

Mendaglio, S. & Tillier, M. (2006). Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and giftedness: Overexcitability research findings. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 30(1), 68-120.

Miller, A. L., Lambert, A. D., & Speirs Neumeister, K. L. (2012). Parenting style, perfectionism, and creativity in high-ability and high-achieving young adults. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 35(4), 344-365.

Moyle, V. (2006). *Emotional sensitivity*. Retrieved from www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/emotional-sensitivity

Olthouse, J. M. (2012). Talented young writers' relationships with writing. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 35(1), 66-80.

Piechowski, M. (1979). Developmental potential. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 25-57). Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt.

Piirto, J. (2002). *My teeming brain: Creativity in creative writers*. New York, NY: Hampton Press.

Porath, M. (2000). Social giftedness in childhood: A developmental perspective. In R. C. Friedman & B. M. Shore (Eds.), *Talents Unfolding* (pp. 195-215), Washington: American Psychological Association.

Renzulli, J. S. (1998). Three-ring conception of giftedness. In Baum, S. M., Reis, S. M., & Maxfield, L. R. (Eds.), *Nurturing the gifts and talents of primary grade students*. Mansfield Center, CT: Creative Learning Press.

Shaughnessy, M. F. (2010). *An interview with Sam Mendaglio: About meeting the emotional needs of gifted children and adolescents*. Retrieved from www.sengifted.org/archives/articles/an-interview-with-sal-mendaglio-about-meeting-the-emotional-needs-of-gifted-children-and-adolescents

Shavinina, L. V. (1999). The psychological essence of the child prodigy phenomenon: sensitive periods and cognitive experience. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 43(1), 25-38.

Silverman, L. K. (1983). Personality development: The pursuit of excellence. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 6(1), 5-19.

Silverman, L. K. (Ed.), (1993). *Counseling the gifted and talented*. Denver: Love.

Sword, L. K. (Ed.), (2005). *Emotional intensity in gifted children*. Retrieved from www.giftedservices.com.au