

## FEATURED ARTICLES

### Systematic Risk-Taking

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*This article describes systematic risk-taking, a strategy designed to develop skills and increase self-esteem, confidence and courage in gifted youth. The six steps of systematic risk-taking include understanding the benefits; initial self-assessment of risk-taking categories; identifying personal needs; determining a risk to take; taking the risk; and processing the experience. Examples are included to illustrate the benefits.*

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To risk means to take a chance, to do something when the outcome is not certain. Kids might say that to risk means to try something "dangerous" — to take a chance of failure. It is important to take risks. People who do not take risks may avoid suffering, disappointment, fear and sorrow, but they may not learn, change, love, grow or live. Genuinely secure people are risk takers. "Taking chances is essential to a rich and rewarding life" (Ilardo, 1992, p. 10), and risk taking elevates people to greater psychological maturity. All children benefit from learning to take risks, and risk taking is an important skill for gifted children to learn because if they are unable to take risks, they may severely compromise their potential for high achievement or strong leadership.

It's not uncommon for the gifted to avoid situations in which they are not guaranteed success. For many gifted children who do well in school, success becomes defined as getting an "A" and failure as any grade less than an "A". By early adolescence they may be unwilling to try anything where they are not certain of an "A". Their field of choices narrows dramatically and with it their long term opportunities.

Gifted children can sometimes expect so much of themselves that they won't risk making a mistake at all. They develop the misconception that failing at something important means they are less of a person. Afraid that they might not live up to their ideals, they retreat from activities that might expose imperfections. One talented adult put it this way, "What I've lacked all my life is the ability to take risks, to pursue something within which there is danger of failure" (Walker and Mehr, 1992, p. 66). The purpose of this article is to describe the process of systematic risk taking and the characteristics of risk-friendly environments and relationships.

There are six steps to systematic risk-taking. These are as follows.

1. Understanding the benefits of systematic risk taking
2. Initial self-assessment of risk taking categories
3. Identifying personal needs
4. Determining a risk to take
5. Taking the risk
6. Processing the risk experience

Several investigators have suggested or documented benefits to risk-taking (Adderholdt-Elliott, 1987; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Ilardo, 1997; Viscott, 1977; Walker & Mehr, 1992). First, it seems to increase one's confidence about what can be done, about one's ability to take on a challenge. Second, it appears to increase a sense of control in life, reducing feelings of helplessness or victimization. Third, participation in systematic risk-taking develops skills for managing anxieties and overcoming fears. Fourth, it provides practice in important decision making. Children, for instance, tend to be disenfranchised in society; they don't often get the opportunity to make important decisions. Systematic risk taking provides this much needed opportunity for growth and leadership. Finally, risk-taking tends to be self-reinforcing and motivates people to develop the habit of taking planned risks.

The work of several writers has suggested that failure to live up to one's potential among gifted youth may be associated with an inability to take risks (Betts & Neihart, 1988; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Hendricks & Friedman, 1992; Kaufmann, 1992; Walker & Mehr, 1992). One of the themes repeated in the literature is that gifted people may only try only those things which they know they can succeed. For example, a subject in Walker and Mehr's (1992) study said, "If I know I can do something, then I'm totally confident and courageous. I can fly. But if I'm not sure, I hold back" (p. 66). The following case example illustrates the potential value of risk-taking behaviors for even young gifted children. The following case example describes a primary grade child who learned to take risks. When provided with a safe environment, support, and modeling, he began to take risks that led him away from the familiar realm of academics into the affective domain.

#### Cory

Several years ago a gifted first-grader I'll call Cory was referred to me for counseling. He was in his school's gifted program, and academically he was doing very well. He was referred because he had an ulcer. I met with him in our playroom at the clinic where I worked at the time. The playroom was a long room with a large mirror at one end. There was a sandbox, an easel with paints, a box of dress-up clothes, a wood-working bench, a fully equipped miniature kitchen, and all along one wall was a table covered with every possible kind of toy. Children, when they first entered the playroom would say, "WOW!!!" and proceed to play with something. Every child, that is, except Cory.

Cory arrived for his first session with a large green canvas backpack. The bag was so heavy that Cory was bent over double carrying it. He walked into the playroom, stopped in the center of the room and carefully put the bag down. He never noticed the toys. He began talking at the same time he began to pull the books and computer toys out of the bag. "See", he said, "this is my See and Spell. I can do all the programs."

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Watch. "He did quite a few. "And this book is about numbers; I can count to a million, want to hear me?" Cory spent the entire hour showing me every book and telling me about his academic and intellectual abilities. Not once did he comment about the toys. He never moved from his spot on the floor. Clearly, Cory seemed to believe that he had value only because he could achieve. Already, at age six, he was unwilling to take risks outside the realm of academics. Such behavior was contributing to an ulcer.

The second session went exactly the same, except this time I periodically responded with, "I'm glad you can spell, Cory, and even if you couldn't spell a word, I would still like you. I like you because you're you." During that session he did glance around at the toys, but he never moved, and he never talked about the toys.

At the third session Cory again dragged in his overloaded book bag. While he talked about his accomplishments, I rolled tiny balls of clay and threw them randomly at the walls, never taking my eyes off Cory or missing a beat of what he was telling me. "What are you doing?" He asked after a couple of minutes. "Oh, I'm making clay balls and throwing them at the walls. Do you want some?" Smiling, he approached me and tore a large piece of clay off the piece in my hand. With great concentration he rolled the clay into balls. He started to laugh. In no time we were both furiously rolling clay balls and throwing them with mad abandon about the room, shrieking and giggling and tossing them at each other as well. He was loosening up.

Cory did not bring the book bag to the fourth session. He began to play in the sandbox, piling up sand and mowing it down again. He meticulously shaped it; patted it hard and traced tiny paths around it. Quietly, he stated to no one in particular, "It's a volcano." I paused and replied, "Sometimes I feel like a volcano." Cory froze; looked up from his mountain and exclaimed with astonishment, "You do? So do I!"

With that he began talking about the lava boiling underneath the earth, searching for ways to escape with fury, steam and smoke. He spoke with great animation about his mad feelings, his stomachaches and his fear that he might explode, even causing destruction the way lava rushes down a hillside, engulfing everything it contacts. Like steam through a new vent in the crust his fears flew out — that his mad feelings were bad, out of control, and that they needed to be kept underground where they couldn't hurt anyone. He destroyed his sand volcano and laughed gleefully. I suggested we kick a ball around. "In here? we'll hit things", he said. "That's ok; the ball is rubber; it'll bounce off stuff."

The next four sessions Cory kicked balls around. He threw his whole body at those balls. He kicked them with every ounce of energy he had. He kicked them to no one, to me, and to various targets we set up. And he talked. He talked about his mad feelings and his scared feelings. Cory's younger brother had a life-threatening illness. Cory was mad about the special attention his brother got. He was afraid his brother might die, and he was afraid that his anger might kill his brother. Cory believed he had to be extra good because his brother was so ill. "To make up for it," he explained. Cory was learning to take some chances — to risk saying out loud what he felt and thought, and to risk being himself. By taking these risks, Cory was gaining the freedom he needed to be more than he had been.

### Types of Risks

There are five categories of risks. They are **intellectual risks, social risks, emotional risks, physical risks, and spiri-**

**tual risks.** These five categories are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, it is possible that a particular activity might present more than one category of risk.

Intellectual risk-taking may include taking an advanced class; letting classmates know you're smart; skipping a grade; challenging the status quo. Social risk-taking may include spending time with a different peer group; being in a class in which you don't know anyone; going to a party alone; speaking publicly. Emotional risk-taking involves making yourself vulnerable. Examples may include expressing your anger with someone in authority; letting others know that you're frightened or nervous; or telling someone you love them.

Physical risks tend to be more obvious. Bungee jumping comes to mind immediately. But for some intellectually or academically talented children, participating in physical education may be a risk. Learning a new sport, seeing a doctor, running seven miles when you have always run three, and taking a dance class are other examples of physical risks.

Spiritual risks seem to be less clearly defined because they are so personal. Activities that involve spiritual risk-taking are often emotional and/or social risks as well. Believing in something beyond yourself is an example. Changing religions. Choosing to believe something different than what you've believed before. Faith is a risk.

Everyone has different comfort levels with each category of risk. Some people find social risks the easiest to take. Others are most comfortable with physical risks. In some families parents and children have opposite rankings. Perhaps social risks are the easiest for the parents and most challenging for the children. Such differences can be a source of tension and anxiety in families if parents pressure children to take risks in their most uncomfortable categories. Or, differences can be a starting point for fun and enrichment in families if there is respect for individual preferences, and a sincere interest in learning from one another.

### Procedures

Systematic risk-taking can be used in a variety of formats and settings. I have included it in the school curriculum in classroom settings, in family, individual and group therapy, and in outpatient and residential treatment settings. I begin by engaging the youth in a discussion about what "risk" means and how it relates to healthy personality, achievement, and satisfying relationships. I introduce the five categories and ask the youth to provide examples of risks for each of them. I then give them a moment to rank their comfort level with each category, assigning a "1" to the category in which it is easiest for them to take risks and a "5" to the category in which it is the most difficult for them to take risks. No ties are allowed. We talk about their rankings, what they became aware of as they thought about it, and if we are in a group or family setting we note the similarities and differences among participants. After some discussion, I suggest that they select one category on which to focus for the moment and I direct them to make a list of at least seven things that would represent a risk for them in that particular category. In large group settings I ask them to talk briefly about the risks on their lists with one or two other people. In smaller groups and family settings people are invited to share their lists with everyone present.

From that point we speculate about what is needed to take any or all of those risks. Is there a skill to learn? Would support from someone else make it possible to take the risk? Do

they need to work up to it gradually? In other words, are there some smaller risks they might take to build the courage needed for the bigger risk? Would the risk be easier if they were to take it with someone else or with a group? Are there resources they need? Finally, I tell them to give it some thought, and be prepared in a couple of weeks to determine a risk from any category that they would be willing to take.

As a classroom teacher, I assign a risk-taking exercise every quarter. Following the initial introductions I tell the class that they have two weeks to decide what kind of risk they want to take. They need to complete it before the eighth week of the quarter. The exercise is not graded, but it is allocated some points toward the quarter grade. If they make the effort to take the risk, they earn the points toward their grade.

Step 6, processing the risk, is the most important phase of systematic risk taking. As a clinician, I have processed risk experience in therapy sessions, in group meetings in the milieu, and on hikes during wilderness trips. As a teacher of the gifted and as a school counselor I always provide some in-class discussion time to talk about their risk-taking exercise during the eighth week of the quarter. It is also acceptable to communicate about the risk with me in other formats such as meeting with me privately, writing it out, tape recording it, drawing a picture, etc. My expectation is that they process what happened with the risk.

Most of the learning, most of the change in people, comes not as a result of taking the risk, but as a result of processing the risk. The processing phase includes expressing feelings and thoughts about the experience and analyzing and evaluating the experience. The processing that follows risk-taking activities serves several purposes. It provides for the expression of feelings. It helps to clarify strengths and weaknesses and identify needs. It encourages curiosity about self and others and sharing insights. It also helps define effective strategies for meeting goals.

It is common for some gifted youth and families to initially take risks that fall in their easiest category; they stay within their comfort zone. This tends to be more true for gifted youth who are teacher dependent and anxious for adult approval, the Type 1's that Betts and Neihart (1988) describe. Creatively gifted students and those who have well developed autonomy seem to have less difficulty challenging themselves in their more difficult categories.

The risks that gifted youth choose to make reveal something about their self-perceptions, their anxieties, and their self-esteem. Bobbi, a seventh grader, decided that her risk would be to sit with a different group of peers at lunch. Michael said he wanted to learn to play guitar. Cindy had always taken college prep courses in high school. She decided to take the risk of sitting in on a VoAg class. "I see them around all the time, those guys in cowboy hats and boots, talking rodeo. What the heck do they do in those classes?"

John, an artistically talented young man, was fascinated by film, but never in his life had he been to a sporting event. He took the risk of attending his first high school football game. He decided it was a risk he wanted to take before he graduated. Cathy, age 17, came from a dedicated Mormon family, and she decided it would be a good risk to attend a variety of different church services on Sundays with her friends. She wanted to check out whether she really believed what she thought she believed. She was required to obtain written parental permission to take that risk.

As youth have more experience with risk-taking and also observe others taking risks, they begin to take more challeng-

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ing risks. Their confidence and trust in themselves grows. The support they experience from others who are also taking risks encourages them to take on greater challenges. For example, after a semester of systematic risk-taking in the high school seminar for gifted students, Lisa decided to talk openly with her mother about a sensitive topic that had caused considerable tension in their relationship. Gerry chose to confront his father about his alcoholism and abandonment following the divorce.

At times, adolescents may confuse thrill-seeking with risk taking. It is important to clarify the difference. Thrill-seeking is often the product of boredom or a need to prove oneself. Unlike risk-taking, the only point of thrill-seeking is the surge of excitement or adrenaline rush. Consequently, it becomes necessary over time to seek greater and greater thrills in order to continue the illusion of growth or change. Thrill-seeking, unlike risk taking, has no real substantive value. By contrast, risk-taking contributes to increased self-confidence, skill mastery, changes in attitudes and beliefs, and goal achievement.

## **Risk-Taking and Leadership**

Research about patterns of achievement among gifted women in particular suggests that systematic risk-taking experiences may help to combat hesitancy and withdrawal among bright girls and may promote leadership. For example, Professors Betty Walker and Marilyn Mehr (1992) undertook a cross sectional study of 1,250 gifted women, ages 19 to 92, who graduated from Hunter College High School. Walker and Mehr were able to draw several conclusions about the importance of risk-taking regarding life satisfaction, leadership, and achievement. They stressed that gifted women must be encouraged to take risks in order to achieve. They noted that the willingness to take risks was essential to leadership. Walker and Mehr concluded that if bright women do not have successful risk-taking experiences early in life, they may fail to take action at critical choice points in their life later on. To experience freedom of choice implies a willingness to take action, and action always means risk. It is difficult to fulfill potential without taking risks.

It is important to encourage and prepare gifted children for leadership in early childhood. Educators and counselors can encourage gifted children to identify their own goals and to learn to make their own choices. They can model expecting or predicting imperfections and failure. When gifted children make mistakes, or do poorly, adults can give them the confidence to accept failure and move forward. Parents and teachers can also discuss the conflicts the children may feel about achievement versus social acceptance, about the price they

may have to pay if they decide to pursue an unconventional path, about how to make choices for themselves. This is especially needed for gifted girls and gifted students from non-mainstream cultures.

**A**chievement, especially high achievement, means overcoming and mastering fears. Significant accomplishments in life often begin by taking small risks. There is always some fear with risk. There is no risk if there is no fear. Sometimes risks may be accompanied by feelings of panic, disappointment or guilt. By exploring their patterns of risk-taking and the feelings that go with them, gifted youth can identify their patterns of fear and look at how fear limits their lives. They may fear looking foolish, or being rejected, hurt, or embarrassed. They may fear fear.

It is not realistic to think that one can always eliminate the fear. Even Barbara Streisand still has terrible stage fright prior to a performance. Although fear and hesitation are a natural part of the growth process, it is possible to reduce fear and to learn to manage anxieties.

Usually it is our thinking that makes us anxious. Negative or pessimistic self-talk increases feelings of fear: "I can't do this." "They're going to make fun of me." "I'm going to be sick." "Everyone's going to laugh at me." Once this pattern of self-talk is identified, parents and teachers can help youth practice and establish more positive, affirming thoughts to replace the risk-inhibiting ones. Adults can also encourage gifted children to make a plan for taking a series of risks to develop the skills needed to increase confidence for the bigger risks. Systematic risk-taking helps clarify and master fears. As a result of systematic risk taking, confidence and self-esteem are improved.

### **Risk-Friendly Environments and Relationships**

There are several things that can be done to support risk-taking behavior in gifted youth. Risk-friendly environments and relationships can be established in which mistakes are viewed as opportunities to learn and to try new things, not as something to be avoided. There is encouragement to take reasonable chances and an expectation that individuals set their own goals. People tend to put forth the most effort when they can take reasonable chances on things that matter to them most. Therefore, it is important to allow gifted students to determine for themselves what kinds of risks they want to take. Avoid the temptation to prescribe the risk.

Homes, classrooms, and clinical settings that are risk-friendly stress goals over procedures. Rules are not so rigid that they interfere with risk-taking. In risk-friendly environments people actively seek change because change is valued and framed as an opportunity to learn. In contrast, environments that inhibit risk-taking are characterized by tension and fear. Rules get in the way of problem-solving, and people are dependent on old ways of doing things.

It is possible to help students, clients, friends, coworkers and family members become aware of choices and to encourage them to set higher goals and to take risks. Youth need specific guidance to help them understand what steps are involved in reaching those higher goals since they rarely have experience with figuring out how to build gradually over a year or two or three toward some specific outcome. Longer-term goals might include things like taking the initiative to handle a conflict assertively, competing, deciding to learn to do something

very difficult, giving a public presentation, or spending time in a different environment.

In a section of their book titled "How to Help", Walker and Mehr (1992) outline several actions that educators and parents can take to nurture talent in bright women.

Young females need help to recognize their own talents and abilities. They need someone to help them set challenging goals. Someone who encourages them to take risks, to begin, even as children, to aim high, strive for honors and awards and learn the skills of leadership.... Those smart girls who escape, or overcome, the tyranny of perfection seem more willing to take risks as adults and thus put themselves in the position to achieve leadership." (pp. 72-73).

**O**ne of the most effective steps to encourage risk taking is to model risk-taking behavior. It is especially helpful if youth have the opportunity to observe adults working with their fears so that they get the message that it is acceptable to be unsure of how to proceed, to be wary of possible outcomes, and to be uncertain about success.

Parents and professionals can cooperate to support risk-taking behaviors in gifted students. For example, parents can make risk-taking a family affair by deciding that all members of the family will learn something new together, or will respond to a situation differently. Or maybe a parent and child can risk something together. Parents can encourage their children by taking steps outside their own comfort zones. It is this attitude toward life, a willingness to risk and challenge limitations, that children learn from adults.

### **Conclusion**

A gifted child who receives only nurturance and support from adults is at risk for feeling dependent and somewhat incompetent as an adult. Gifted youth need experiences that challenge their limitations as well as their beliefs about themselves and others if they are to attain high levels of achievement and leadership. Helen Keller suggested that "security" is a myth. She said, "life is either a daring adventure or nothing" (cited in Viscott, 1977).

Taking risks forces individuals to consider carefully what they think and feel about success and failure. Tim McMahon said, "Risk-taking is inherently failure-prone. Otherwise it would be called sure-thing-taking." There is no such thing as a sure thing. To take a risk means to make an active choice toward your own growth.

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