



A Longitudinal Study of Positive and Negative Life Events, Stress, and Academic Performance in Gifted Youth

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Participants



- 11 years, 1995-2005 (in grades 2-6 initially)
- SENG-funded in final year
- Midwestern school district of 20,000 students
- Many graduates to Ivy League institutions
- ½ in Challenge Center sometime during K-6
- 1 high school: over half of National Merit finalists in state
- 120 parents initially; approximately 100 after 2 years; 70 parents continued throughout; 58 students returned surveys at end



Methodology

- Collaborated with an elementary principal (formerly in gifted education)
- Parents filled out **checklist** of life events at the end of each year.
- As each grade-level cohort graduated, sent **open-ended questionnaire** (*positive experiences, challenging experiences, supports/hindrances, positive/negative personal qualities, most stressful events, concerns educators/parents should be aware of, opinions about attention to social/emotional in G/T programs*)
- Qualitative analysis: themes
- Quantitative analysis: frequencies, correlations
- Master's-level assistant: qualitative analysis

Most Positive, Most Challenging

- Most Positive Experiences

academics (54)
extra-curriculars (37)
athletics (21)
family/peers (10)
service (9)
profound life changers (7)

- Most Challenging

transitions (22)
academics (20)
peers (18)
deaths (10)
injury/illness (8)
family difficulties (8)
expectations (7)
failure/rejection (7)
getting in trouble (2)

Positive, Satisfying Experiences

- (**Mom's promotion** at work) "She was happier, and we were all happier."
- (**Vacation** in same place each year) "Helped me to see the joy in the outdoors and simplicity in life, strengthened my relationships with my family, aided me in learning who I am."
- (Having a **serious boyfriend**) "I think I have matured more and gotten more serious about life."
- (Being called with 2 hours' warning to fill in for a tardy **symphony soloist**) "It proved to me that I can be a professional performer, and it's what I really want to do. It was such a rush! I really felt like I communicated something to the audience."

Satisfying, Positive: **Challenge Center**

- “The **Challenge Center** let me know it was OK to enjoy learning.”
- “Allowed me to **not be self-conscious about my brightness**: make friends similar to me”
- “The **acceptance** made me feel that I was a kid who was truly special and had something to offer for the rest of my life.”
- “I had the **opportunity to learn differently**, think differently, and excel as far as possible.”
- “I developed great **friendships** with people who were at the same skill level as me; I retain many of those friends yet today.”
- “Developed my **outlook on life**”
- “Became **not afraid to take risks**”



More about the Challenge Center

- “Its learning-based atmosphere and the freedoms we had to work at our own pace . . . Helped me to be fairly **self-motivated** and an **independent thinker.**”
- “It facilitated **my social ‘opening up’** . . . Helped me become comfortable with myself and my **personality.**”
- “Helped me **to get out and meet new people**”



Satisfaction from Academics

- Sense of “validation,” “**accomplishment**” (major theme), “confidence,” “worth,”
- “Felt **ready for college**”
- “Proved that **working hard pays off**”
- “Taught me that **learning could be fun**”
- “**Let me grow up**”
- “**Changed my life**—made me want to major in history”
(National History Day; AP history; Foucault)
- (**Teachers**) “They have more life experience and were able **to share with me those experiences.**”
- “Got me involved with the community”
- “It was the first time **I realized I was different** than the other students. I never before had teachers show everyone what I was doing, and I felt I was a good student.”
(first-grade teacher’s response to science project)



Satisfaction from Athletics

- “taught me the value of **hard work**”
- “showed me what **teamwork** and some hard work can accomplish”
- “made me realize the rewards of having a **positive attitude** in everything I do”
- “academics, not athletics, have always been my strong suit, so when I made an accomplishment in track, I felt like I actually **worked for it.**”



Satisfaction from Service

- “Realization of value, sanctity, innocence of youth, appreciation for the development of the mind”
- “Dancing is a passion of mine, and **seeing those young girls grow and learn from me is very fulfilling.**”
- [Mission trip] “strengthened my faith, fueled my desire to go on a foreign exchange”
- [Mission trip] “gave me a totally different **perspective** on my life. . . . Learning what has influenced their morals and philosophies.”
- [developing a tutoring program for Sudanese “Lost Boys” at my school] “learned . . . helping others . . . **can deeply affect the helper and the person helped.** I’ve learned to organize and motivate.”
- [co-founding Gay Straight Alliance] “furthered my education about GL issues and motivated me into more local **activism**”



Life Changers

- (several **faith-based experiences**)
- “when I got my **driver’s license.**”
- “getting my **braces off** after 4 years”
- “proud of my accomplishments with my **health . . .**
keeps me active, in sports, meeting people through that.”
- (**moving**) “taught me **how to face change,**
brought me closer to my family . . . allowed me to
prove to myself that I **could grow** because of
situations that I first perceive to be detrimental.”



Extracurriculars: Positives

- “Music has improved my life. People I became involved with . . . had good **influences** on me and it became a major pastime. . . Helped me be more **independent and self-sufficient**.”
- “I loved using all of my energy on something so beautiful and powerful” (performing in Les Miserables)
- “Gave me a family of friends and **a place to belong** (vocal music, show choir)



Life Events (listed by parents)

(94) death in extended family

(77) illness in family

(13) new or chronic serious illness—self

(13) change in family constellation (including exchange student)

(10) scary accident

(7) major change in health

(6) death of friend

(6) moving to Challenge Center

(5) parent or teacher jailed

(4) car accident—at fault

(3) relocation

(2) mental illness—self

(2) family financial reversal

(1) personality conflict with teachers

(1) drug treatment

Most Stressful Events

- **Transitions:** changed churches; first day of middle school; starting a new school; moving across town; going to high school; “Challenge Center kids (MS) went to different schools”
- **Peers:** Bullying—“multiple boys ridiculing me” (6th gr.); “one boy fighting/ mocking me” (K-3); “trying to find a group of friends”; “being rejected by a girl I really loved”; “shuffling between friends, trying to find where I belong”; “friendship problems”; “had few/no friends”; “being anti-social due to lack of knowledge in such areas.”
- **Family:** father’s alcoholism; parents’ fighting; divorce; “being sent to drug rehab unnecessarily”; “parents grounding me and taking things away due to poor grades”; aunt’s refusal to communicate with family”
- **School:** (besides references to ACT, SAT, AP pressures “because of the great importance put on these tests by most people); “learning to write cursive”; many references to large projects; competition with peers; “my group and I needed to finish a movie and right toward the end of editing, we lost all our footage.”



Most Stressful Events

- **Overcommitment**

“I’m in too much stuff. While they’re all things I like to do, the demands on my time are incredible. I feel as if I can’t do one thing well because I have to move on to the next thing. I can’t practice my violin as much as I want because I have to write 3 articles for newspaper, but I can’t do it after school because I have to work and I don’t have time on the weekends because I have a tennis match, a 3-hour youth symphony rehearsal, and—somewhere in there—my homework. And where is my social life?”

- **Injury/Illness/Accident:** football injuries; asthma, Type I diabetes diagnosis; dog diagnosed with bone cancer; crashing my car
- **Rejection:** not getting into Yale, All-State Orchestra, advanced soccer team, concert choir; being rejected by a girl



Life Events vs. Life Stressors

Surprising findings:

“Things that you thought would bother me—didn’t.”

Challenges

Mentioned by Students (not Parents)

- (16) AP classes, testing, accelerated classes
- (16) Over-participation in activities, no time . . .
- (14) Social/friendship issues, bullying
- (11) Choosing a college
- (9) College applications, financial matters
- (8) Transition to middle school, high school, or back to regular school
- (6) Conflict within family, between parents
- (5) Loss of a friendship, boy/girlfriend
- (4) Sibling to college
- (5) Illness, migraines, depression
- (3) Feeling inadequate, not belonging, self-conscious
- (3) Moves
- (3) Deaths in family, including death of parent
- (2) Not making the team; suicidal friend; friend with eating disorder
- (2) Competition for grades
- (1) Pressure to live up to “genius” reputation; effect of 9/11; concerns about the job market for future; learning cursive; alcoholic father; giving speeches; too many jobs; not meeting goals; drug use; quit gymnastics because of back disease

Example of Discrepancy between Parent and Female Teen

Parents reported

Tragic death of friends

Death of a friend of the family

Death of godfather

Student reported

Quitting gymnastics because of back disease in gr. 10

Sister leaving for college

Student didn't report

Deaths

Discrepancy between Parent & Teen

Male with high stress (8 in MS, 10 in HS)

Parents listed

family move

move to a new school (private; returned later)

asthma (30 days absent; 40 days absent)

mom back to work

parental unemployment

parental job change

recovered from depression

Student listed

bullying (K-3, 6)

couldn't go on debate trip because of coach

Stress Levels:

Elementary

Middle School

High School

1 xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

2 xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

3 xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

4 xxx

5 xxxx

6 xx

7 x

8 x

1

2 xxxx

3 xxx

4 xxxxxxxx

5 xxxxxxxxxxxx

6 xxxxxx

7 xxxxxx

8 xxxxxxxx

9 xxx

10 xx

1 xx

2 xxx

3 x

4 xx

5 xxxx

6 xxxxxxxxxxxx

7 xxxxxxxxxxxx

8 xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

9 xxxxxxxx

10 xxxxx

What Helped You to be Successful, Satisfied? (*No surprises*) ($N = 50$)

- (35) **Study habits**
(priorities, organization, time management)
- (32) **Internal resources**
(motivation, dedication, attitude)
- (15) **Involvement**
- (14) **Support** (parents, friends, teachers/coaches)
- (9) **Stress management**
- (6) **Religion**
- (4) **Personal qualities**—
sharing emotions, meeting new friends, getting help
- (3) Knowing one's limits re:
overcommitment, balance
- (3) **Self-care** (sleep, exercise)



What Helped? (beyond the usual)

Involvement

Dedication/Commitment/Determination/ **Work Ethic**

Positive **attitude**

Making the best of everything—“Don’t sweat the small stuff”

“Taking a **calm and level-headed** approach to problems”

“Exercising **patience** for people”

“**Listening** to other people’s situations”

“**Talking through arguments** with parents and friends”

“I just **do what feels right.**”

“Breaking down the monotony”

“**Not studying too much**”

“**Humor**—can remedy any situation”

“**Music** to calm my nerves”

“**Writing**—relaxing, releases stress, improves grammar skills”

“**Finding a focus** with violin”

What helped . . . Self-awareness

“I took **responsibility for my actions** always—successes and failures. The successes I could count as my own, and the failures made me push harder.”

“Looking back, no one ever really helped or hindered me from being satisfied with my life. I may not have been successful according to them, but I believe I have always lived my life the way I saw fit, disregarding the opinions of others when making my life decisions. **In my eyes, I didn't underachieve. I did exactly what I wanted at that period of time.** I don't regret any decisions I made academically or social in my school years.

“Finally **deciding not to care about having no friends**”

“Finding my **passions**, participating in things that utilize them.”

Who/What Helped . . . To be Successful?

Helpful People

- (45) Teacher, Coach, Director
- (41) Parent(s)
(8 mom; 3 dad; 30 parents)
- (30) Peers
- (13) Sibling(s)
- (12) Extended family
(5—grandparent(s))
- (6) Church Staff (gr. 6-12)
- (2) God/Christ
- (2) Role model
- (2) Self
- (1) Counselor
- (1) No one

Helpful Personal Qualities

- (16) Work ethic
- (15) Positive attitude
- (13) Compassion, passion,
listening skills
- (13) Self-confidence
- (11) Social (outgoing, humor)
- (9) Intelligence
(intuitive, natural
ability, logical, creative
thinking)
- (9) Character
- (8) Perfectionism, diligence
- (7) Motivation



Factors of Resilience

- Intelligence
- “Let it roll off my back—if I did poorly.”
- “Knowing the difference between mountains and molehills”
- “Make the best of any situation”
- “Optimism”
- “The realization that getting help really works”
- “She overcame similar struggles and tells me how strong and special I am” (sister)
- “Natural ability to cope”
- “Stubbornness”
- Reflection, introspection, “internal focus”
- “Drive toward self-improvement”
- “Energetic,” “clear view of goals,” “ambition”

Behaviors/People Who Hindered Success

Behaviors

- (15) procrastination
- (13) perfectionism, anxiety
- (10) too busy,
overextended
- (8) not outgoing
- (7) altering self to fit in,
please others
- (4) policies, adult world
- (3) harshness,
condescension,
bossiness
- (3) lacking motivation

People

- (25) **peers**
 - 17 (high school)
 - 4 (all grades)
- (15) teachers
- (7) parent(s)
- (7) self
- (4) administrator(s)
- (3) coach

Hindrances, continued

- Lack of self-discipline
- Handwriting
- Skipping school
- Underachievement out of boredom
- Lack of sleep
- Unorganized
- Perfectionism (2—a negative; 8—a positive)
(4 more: “too hard on myself,” “holding others to my high standards,” “expecting too much of me”)
- Social
(“not outgoing,” “not being open,” “reserved,” “shy,” “worrying,” “taking things too seriously,” “getting too worked up,” “blowing things out of proportion,” “feeling insignificant,” “teasing,” “too caring,” “fulfilling the stereotypes of the smart kid,” “pretending to be less smart to fit in”)
- “Not being able to say ‘no’”
- “Mom and Dad—refusal to allow me to make mistakes myself”
- “Mom—she has anger problems and deals with them the wrong way.”



More about hindrances . . .

Lack of confidence (18 comments)

Shyness

Over-critical nature

Sensitivity to criticism, “**stressing** over minor things”

“A tendency to **feel inferior** to everyone. I don’t know where that came from, but all of a sudden, everywhere I looked, there were people prettier than me, and funnier than me.”

Self-consciousness

“Dorkiness—social **awkwardness**”

Too serious, uptight

Too trusting

Fears—trying new things; new situations; public speaking

Hurdles and Their Impact: Family

- **Divorce:** “Changed my entire outlook on life and that of both my parents’ characters. I came to realize they weren’t ‘perfect.’”
- **Misdiagnosis:** “when family/friends thought I was bulimic, on drugs (weight loss, excessive eating, always sleeping). . . ruined my relationship with my mom, caused fights, loss of trust. After finding out the true reason, we were able to get over what we had been through and rebuild.”
- **Dad’s alcoholism:** “struggled to forgive him, and to keep him and my mom together . . . Hope, love, forgiveness helped.
- **“Parents made me go to a psychologist . . . took an hour a month. I haven’t changed.”**

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Peers

“Time of social trials in 6th, **friends abandoning me...**

Helped me establish an individuality, solidified my desire to remain firm in resisting negative peer pressure...my mom’s support [helped].”

*“All grades, except senior year, **trying to gain approval, acceptance, respect from people my age...highly negative...Many bouts of severe depression. In the end, I had to stop caring to keep from crying.**”*

“**Trying to fit in**, to get into the popular group in middle school...I would always **feel so inadequate** because I wasn’t pretty enough, dressed well enough, acted like...the kids in the cool group. Eventually I realized the really cool people were the ones that didn’t care what others thought of them. Then I started being myself and that was fun.”

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Peers

- “A close friend thinking of committing **suicide** (11th)...I was really emotional and had to decide to break a promise and ask for help. I used problem-solving techniques. My parents also helped.” (NOTE: assume heavy responsibility, seen as strong, trustworthy)
- “Trying to help a friend get through an **eating disorder**...the closest I’d ever been to this kind of difficulty...showed me how important the people in my life are...at times have been hindered by self-doubt and a feeling of helplessness”
- [ongoing struggles with **friends**—11 participants] “...caused me to be more self-sufficient to avoid loneliness; parents made me feel loved; close friends are supportive”
- (7th) “felt extremely **excluded and isolated**...I grew in my faith a lot and became a stronger person because of it”
- [**friendships**] “When they were good, they were really great; when they were bad, they were horrible.”

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Peers

- “**Middle school, just a terrible time**—lonely, awkward, irritating—made me both shy and paranoid, but determined to do better for myself. I read a lot, spent time with family, cultivated friendships outside of school.”
- “Inability to get upper **math** concepts—poor grades, tried harder. I’m not pre-dispositioned to great math abilities.”
- “**Getting a ‘B’** on a report card for the first time—disappointed in my own performance, but eventually I realized how much more important other things are. Friends gave me compassion and encouragement.”

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Academics

- **[Acceleration]** “I had to contend with a few hostile ‘older kids’ and an awkward social situation. Support from teachers and some friends at the high school helped me get through it.”
- **[Accelerated English]** “Gave me migraines, had a terrible sophomore year.”
- **[Attending advanced education opportunities at other schools]** “exposed me to ridicule, taught me to brush off certain remarks. My parents and my religious beliefs supported me.”

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Self-expectations, Expectations of Others

(Self) “Stress! I would be disappointed and upset if I did an excellent job but didn’t meet my own **outrageous goals**. I will struggle with this because I am very critical and refuse to only be average. I can’t give myself reasonable limits, which although good, puts too much pressure on myself.”

(Others’) “Made me feel like if I didn’t do something better than everyone else, that wasn’t good **enough—placed more importance on my academics than me as a person.**

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Failure/ Rejection

- “Dealing with not making varsity soccer, senior year...It was extremely hard to deal with the idea that all of my hard work, since I was 5, did not result in the payoff I desired. **I’d always associated hard work and persistence with achievement of the goal...**it was hard to deal with my best not being good enough.”
- “Being a **bench-warmer** in basketball...taught me to appreciate the things I’m good at...dealt with it by finding what I could do, like work extra hard at practice.”
- [Several anecdotes about Boys State, trying to get into plays, not making concert choir] “**Taught me I’m not the best at everything.**” “Was miserable, jealous, second-guessed myself and my abilities.”

Hurdles, Impact, What Helped: Death

- **[father]** “Brought about questions about life in general”
- **[grandpa]** “first death I had experienced...parents & family gave me a better understanding of death”
- **[grandma]** “lost good friend, mentor, first family member”
- **[multiple]** “I experienced death in my immediate family for the first time in middle school—3 funerals within a month...life was not as carefree as it used to be”
- **[close cousin]** “changed my view of everything in my life...changed my life for the better...faith”
- **[brother’s car accident/death of friend]** “I learned to let family lean on me, even if I’m the youngest . . . Believing in myself, rising to the challenge.”

Miscellaneous interesting details from data yet to be correlated . . .

- Two with 99% on group ability test had 9 and 12 disciplinary referrals, respectively.
- One with a 33 on the ACT had 11 disc. referrals
- Of the 8 with 98/99% SAT, 5 had 98/99 on group ability test.
- Of the 4 who had 35/36 on the ACT, their numbers of AP semesters were 11, 12, 16, 21.
- 3 with 11, 15, and 18 AP semesters, were not at 30 or above on ACT
- 1 with a 1.8 GPA had taken no AP classes.
- 3 with lowest % on group ability tests, had GPAs at 3.8 or above.
- **5 with the lowest # of AP courses had NV > V (> 10 %pts.)**

Miscellaneous, continued

- Many events/situations were **mentioned ONLY by the student**. Interesting is the number citing bullying and/or significant social problems.
- Two students with relatively **low ability and achievement test scores** had good GPAs (“achiever habits”?): > 3.5
- There were **24 discrepancies (> 20 percentile points)** of achievement-test subtest scores over time—common in language and social studies, but also in science, math, and reading. *That’s important information for those who use ONE year’s test scores for screening for gifted programs.*
- 3 students had a **> 95% in ONLY Math**.

Miscellaneous re: Parent/Teen Agreement



- 36% had some **agreement** between student and parent—with at least one commonly cited life event. Otherwise NO agreement re: what was negative.
- 71% of the students with agreement (with parent item) had **stress levels** during their *senior* high at 7-10.
- 35% of the students with agreement (with parent item) had **stress levels** during *middle* school at 7-10
- Three student-parent sets viewed something totally opposite:
 - >making the basketball team vs. *feeling bad as a benchwarmer*
 - >going to the Challenge Center vs. *having a rough transition*
 - >making the swim team vs. *being ostracized on the swim team*
- **Parent returning to work** was never mentioned by students as challenging.

More . . .

- One male with 38 disciplinary referrals, and one with 20—both reported generally low stress.
- 22 had at least 1 disciplinary referral
- 59% had 4.0 or higher.
- 14% had 3.35 or lower
- 2% had 2.0 or lower
- 2% had 2.0-3.0

More . . .



- Of those with > 5 disciplinary referrals, only 3 finished the study, and none reported high levels of stress.
- 12% were < 90%ile on ACT

ABILITY vs. ACHIEVEMENT

- 20 (31%) had 98/99%ile on Otis-Lennon Ability Test
- Only 8 (16%) had 98/99%ile on Stanford Achievement Test

Case Study: Male with Perfect ACT, 21 AP Courses, Consistent re: 99%

Parents reported:

aunt's divorce after 20 yrs. of marriage (6th)
two grandmas—cancer (8th, 9th, 10th, 11th)
deaths in family

Student reported:

5 AP classes at a time
pressure to be “genius”
college decisions
deaths in family



More . . .

Male with 38 disciplinary referrals, 104
absences, 3.12 GPA, low stress (2-4-6):

Getting in trouble in 7th-8th grade...not letting it slow me down...gave me a reality check and showed me I can't always be the class clown...taught me that some people will change their opinion of you based on the choices you make...It was really stress-filled at times, but I got through it...good teachers didn't give up on me...very good counselors and supportive family...good advisor in the field I'm interested in...stayed focused...good role models.



One Case: High Stress (10 in MS, HS)

- Stanford Achievement Tests: 89% → 84% → 74%
- 82 total absences
- Grandpa's heart attack & lung cancer (6th & 7th); Mom's major surgery (9th); Grandpa's death (19th); brother's broken leg (11th)
- Foreign exchange student for entire 12th-grade year (in same class)
- Relatively low number of AP semesters (4)

Siblings: Differing Responses to Life

Brother:

9 disc. referrals
16 AP classes
4.08 GPA)
99 absences
(24 gr.12; 19 gr.10)
A's and B's (no C's)

Sister:

12 disc. referrals
2.76 GPA
51 absences
poor transition to
Challenge Center
(gr.4,5) Nanny quit, 2
grandparents died
(gr.6-8) (A's/B's/C's)
(gr.9) Incest (A's/C/s/D);
dad jailed
(gr.10) (B's/A/C)
(gr.12) (failed 2 classes)

Case Study: Persisting, Negative Life Events

- 49 absences
- 20 disciplinary referrals
 - gr.7/8: disrespectful; obscene language
 - gr. 9: excessive tardies, 1 skipping
 - gr.10: 5 skipping; 4 excessive tardies; 1 neglect school obligations
 - gr.11: 1 skipping; 2 neglect school obligations
 - gr.12: grades down (2 Bs in AP out of 4 AP classes); 16 absences
- 3.12 GPA (achievement test scores varied considerably from year to year)
- 27 ACT
- 6 AP courses (got Bs in grade 11 and 12 in AP)
- Reported very low stress levels (1-2-1)
- Problems with authority (gr. 8-12), but GPA OK (weighted, 3.9);
- Step-mom died (gr. 5); parental unemployment (gr. 5-8); remarriage/
blended family (gr. 9); Left friends—to Challenge Center (gr. 5); moved
back to regular school (gr. 7)
- Self-report: (positives) outgoing, upfront, interested, optimistic;
(hindrances) stubbornness, poor prioritizing



Limitations

- Attrition of underachievers, troubled lives
- No school data for students who moved to a different city or private school
- Not enough in important cells for analysis
- Not many students with disciplinary referrals
- Anomalies, intriguing, didn't "have company"
- Incomplete data for triangulation, comparison
- In spite of efforts (second mailings, phone calls, going to schools, disappointing # of questionnaires returned)

A decorative graphic at the top of the slide consists of two rows of circles. The top row has three circles: a solid light purple circle on the left, a white circle with a light purple outline in the middle, and a solid light purple circle on the right. The bottom row has three circles: a solid light purple circle on the left, a white circle with a light purple outline in the middle, and a solid light purple circle on the right. The word "Conclusions" is written in a large, black, sans-serif font, with the first circle of the top row partially overlapping the letter 'C' and the first circle of the bottom row partially overlapping the letter 'C'.

Conclusions

- High achievers persist in spite of life events.
- Parents may not recognize what “really troubles” their gifted kids.
- Parents may see something as positive that students see as negative.
- Overcommitment is a significant issue for highly able students.
- Academic pressures are felt intensely.
- Gifted kids are not exempt from negative life events.