



## Understanding Introversion

Who are the introverts?... "the child who immediately comes home from school, escapes to the privacy of his room for time alone,... the quiet student who always has a book in hand, commonly plays alone, and whose favorite place is the reading corner; the [child] who is vocal and social in a small group of people but who becomes silent and withdrawn if she is made to work in a larger one; the adolescent with only one best friend who lives in another city or state and who is content with that situation..." (*Burrus & Kaenzig, 1999*).

These are just a few examples of introverted children who typically grow up into introverted adults. Introverts are at times described as, "...reflective, cerebral, bookish, unassuming, sensitive, thoughtful, serious, contemplative, subtle, introspective, calm, modest, solitude-seeking, and shy" (*Cain, 2012*). Introverts frequently prefer to spend time alone and are not always comfortable around large loud groups of people. They rarely talk to others about their problems or share elaborate details when they do share stories. Introverts do not need "fixing," it is okay to be introverted.

Introversion is not a synonym for recluse or hermit; it is not the same thing as feeling alone. Loneliness is a feeling of isolation or rejection, which is different than wanting to be alone. All children need to feel supported, appreciated, or respected. Families and schools need to recognize that strong criticisms or put downs can cause some gifted children to shut down or close themselves off from others, and gifted introverts are especially prone to this type of escapism. They may even create a fantasy world to escape to in their minds where they feel respected, understood, or appreciated.

"Many gifted children tend toward social introversion. With their intellect, sensitivity, and intensity, gifted children often feel different..." (*Webb, Gored, Amend, & DeVries, 2007*).

### **Who are the introverts?** Approximately...

- 30% of the general population
- 60% of gifted children
- 75% of highly gifted children

(*Silverman, 2009*).

**Helping Introverts Build Relationships** Some parents worry when their child is content to play alone most of the time. Introverted people enjoy the company of other people, but they also need plenty of time to be alone to “recharge their batteries” by thinking, reading, studying, or playing alone. When they are alone they can focus on the topics or ideas they find enjoyable without interruptions from other people.

But how much alone time is too much? Adults need to closely observe to decide if the child is spending a lot of time alone because she enjoys her “alone time” or because her lack of social skills is keeping her from developing appropriate relationships with her peers. If the child is able to interact happily with same age peers in typical social situations, then there is no need to worry about her “alone time.”

Adults can provide support and guidance to help gifted introverts learn how to make and keep friends. One suggestion is to develop the child’s understanding and use of emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is “the ability to perceive and express emotions, use emotions to think more effectively, and understand and manage emotions” (*Whitney & Hirsch, 2011*). When gifted children have a stronger sense of emotional intelligence they may decrease moodiness and increase their resiliency which will help them make better emotional choices and ultimately get along better with other people.

Adults can have conversations with introverts about the stages of friendship to help the child recognize that people have friends for different reasons. Introverts need to know they do not need to reveal their deepest secrets or interests with all friends.

### **The Stages of Friendship** (*Gross, 2002*)

- **Stage 1: Play Partner** In the earliest stage of friendship, the relationship is based on “play partnership.” A friend is seen as someone who engages the child in play and permits the child to use or borrow their playthings.
- **Stage 2: People to Chat to** The sharing of interests becomes an important element in friendship choice. Conversations between “friends” are no longer related simply to the game or activity in which the children are directly engaged.
- **Stage 3: Help and Encouragement** At this stage, the friend is seen as someone who will offer help, support or encouragement. However, the advantages of friendship flow in one direction; the child does not yet see themselves as having the obligation to provide help or support in return.
- **Stage 4: Intimacy/Empathy** The child now realizes that in friendship the need and obligation to give comfort and support flows both ways and the giving of affection, as well as receiving it, becomes an important element in the relationship. This stage grows a deepening of intimacy; an emotional sharing and bonding.
- **Stage 5: Sure Shelter** This type of friendship is perceived as a deep and lasting relationship of trust, fidelity, and unconditional acceptance. It’s okay to have just one or two sure shelter friends.