

## Joy and Challenge

# Giftedness and Introversions

By Dorothy Sisk, Ed.D., Ph.D., and Michele Kane, Ed.D.

Quiet, reserved, standoffish, unapproachable, distant, and aloof — all are terms often used to describe a child who stays on the sidelines and observes from a distance. Concerned parents and educators may be eager to have that child join into group activities and participate readily. When the child shows reluctance, these caring adults may worry that he or she is unable to easily socialize with others. For the introverted child, it is the warm acceptance by others that allows for a healthy development of self and for being-in-the-world with authenticity. Understanding the characteristics and needs of introverted youngsters facilitates the accommodations needed for these quiet kids to develop optimally.

### Extrovert? Introvert? How Do We Know?

Carl Jung first described the personality dimension of extroversion/introversion in 1923, and it was popularized by the work of Myers and Briggs with their tool for assessment by the same name (Keirsey and Bates, 1984). According to Jung, each of these personality traits is a preferred way of operating in the world and a preferred means of garnering energy. An introvert is focused on the inner world of the self and obtains energy by attention to internal ideas and concepts. In contrast, the extrovert is energized by engaging with the world with a focus on people and activities.

For Western cultures, the estimates are that approximately 60 percent of the population is extroverted and 40 percent is introverted. This preferred way of

operating is similar to being right- or left-handed — it's innate and neither good nor bad, but rather an inclination for one over the other.

Some gifted researchers have indicated that introversion is more often found in the gifted population compared to the general population. Additionally, they have found that the number of introverts increases as the level of giftedness increases — in other words, more highly gifted people are introverts (Buruss and Kaenzig, 1999).

### Characteristics of Introverts

An awareness of the characteristics of introverts provides important information about how individuals, especially those who are gifted, interact in the world. A lack of understanding has led to some misconceptions. For example, clinicians and educators have long thought that being introverted was something to be modified or changed in order for an individual to develop leadership and sociability. There has been confusion, as well, related to being shy or fearful in social

### Characteristics of Introverts

(Lind and Daniels, 2000)

- Have two personas: private and public
- Seem to enjoy being alone in their room
- Are private people who reveal thoughts to only a few
- Get grouchy when around people too long
- Are perfectionistic

situations and being an introvert; while many equate extroversion with sociability. In fact, however, introverts can be sociable, just as extroverts can be shy.

As mentioned earlier, what distinguishes introverts from extroverts is where they derive their energy. Introverted children have a unique ability to energize from within. We see this when they return home after a busy and hectic day at school. Having some quiet time allows them to regroup and deal with their feelings. The sidebars below show some additional characteristics of introverts. With an awareness of these characteristics, teachers and parents can make needed modifications to the environment and alter their expectations of introverted children.



### Additional Characteristics of Introverts

(Hirsh & Kummerow, 1989); (Keirsey & Bates, 1984); (Meyers & Meyers, 1980)

- Become drained around large groups
- Prefer individual to group work
- Form a few deep attachments
- Limit their interests, but explore deeply
- Are reserved, quiet, and deliberate
- Do not enjoy being the center of attention
- Act cautiously in meeting people
- Think carefully before speaking
- See reflection as very important
- Communicate best one-to-one

## Giftedness and Introversion, continued

### Suggestions/Strategies

Familiarity with the characteristics of introverts makes it easier to develop strategies that can benefit these children when they feel overwhelmed and need to recharge their energy (Lind and Daniels, 2000). Some general strategies include those in the table below.

Helping gifted introverts learn to employ strategies such as these can enable them to cope when they are feeling overwhelmed by sensory input. Now let's see what additional steps parents and teachers can take to support these children.

### Support at Home

Compassionate parents of introverted children want to know how they can support the growth of what Marti Laney terms their "innie" child (2005). Concerned about their child succeeding in an extroverted world, many of these parents ask if they should push their child to be more extroverted. The answer to that question is a resounding "no." Parents need to help their "innies" identify and prize their strengths. Adopt-

ing the virtue of patience is a critical asset for parents of introverted children. Parents should rest assured that their innies will develop their gifts and help make the world a better place.

Learning about temperament as a family allows for all the members to have a deeper understanding of and appreciation for the strengths of introversion. A good source of information is the TED talk by the popular author of the book *Quiet*, Susan Cain ([www.ted.com/talks/susan\\_cain\\_the\\_power\\_of\\_introverts?language=en](http://www.ted.com/talks/susan_cain_the_power_of_introverts?language=en)). It can serve as a family discussion starter about the power that comes from introversion. [See the review of *Quiet* on page 10.]

Jennifer Lowes has a great guidebook for parents called *The Ultimate Parent Guidebook for Introvert Moms, Dads and Kids* (2014). In it, she lists activities like family outings or trips that can be approached as a learning experience, such as exploring a place from a historical or archaeological perspective. She also suggests adopting a child from a disadvantaged socioeconomic background or country through donations, letters, and photos. These kinds of activities are helpful

for introverts because they address their need to seek depth over breadth. These children like to dig deep, delving into issues and ideas. Being able to learn more about places from a historical and archaeological perspective, rather than spending endless hours in an automobile, meets that need. The issues of poverty and a lack of tolerance of different cultures is a concern for introverts. Getting involved in a positive way with a disadvantaged child and learning more about other countries help introverts feel they are exploring and actively involved in issues.

Along these lines, the website Kids Making a Difference ([www.kmad.org](http://www.kmad.org)) chronicles the initiatives of young people. Their stories may serve to inspire a child to work with one of these young activists or emulate them.

The book *Quiet Influence*, by Jennifer B. Kahnweiler (2013), is a good resource for both parents and adolescent introverts. In the first chapter, "Stop Trying to Act Like an Extrovert," the author urges introverts to realize that the best ideas often emerge in the depths of solitude. With this in mind, parents might want to encourage their introverted kids to keep a diary in which they can capture their thoughts and get their feelings out.

Also in her book, Kahnweiler offers her own list of characteristics of introverts:

- Embrace solitude
- Think first, talk later
- Hold emotions inside
- Focus on depth
- Let their fingers do the talking (writing)
- Act low key
- Keep private matters private.



Strategies that can Benefit Introverted Children	
Outdoor activities	Spending time in nature allows for a solitary experience of connection without communicating directly with other people.
Solitary exercise	Examples are martial arts, track, gymnastics, and swimming, rather than a team sport like basketball.
Video games; computer time; listening to music; watching a movie	These activities can allow for decompression.
Creative activities (i.e., art, writing, and dance)	These pursuits provide opportunities to be alone without being lonely.
Meditation or visualization	Engaging in these practices can provide quiet times of centering and regaining a sense of calm.

## Giftedness and Introversion, continued

The author reinforces the idea that these traits are neither good nor bad, they just are.

For parents to convey this concept to their introverted children is essential. Once they realize that their parents respect them as individuals and respect their choices, they will be able to develop a sense of confidence and the ability to make independent decisions.

At times, however, an introverted child may become anxious when entering into an unfamiliar situation, often a social event, and may be reluctant to participate. To prepare for situations like these, parent and child can engage in “social preparedness,” talking about what the experience will be like — the location and what will be expected of the child. This advance discussion allows introverted children to mentally prepare for what is to come and not be faced with surprising and possibly embarrassing moments.

To boost parents’ confidence that their introverted kids will grow into their gifts and talents, author Marti Laney lists successful introverts from a variety of fields in her book *The Hidden Gifts of the Introverted Child*. Among those listed are: Johnny Carson, Diane Sawyer, Warren Buffett, Julia Roberts, Johnny Depp, Michael Dell, Jacqueline Kennedy, Bill Gates, Steve Martin, Keanu Reeves, Audrey Hepburn, and Joan Allen.

### Support at School

David Kolb (1984) has a model that includes four types of learning responses:

- Active Experimenter
- Abstract Conceptualizer
- Reflective Observer
- Concrete Experienter.

Introverted students are quiet Reflective Observers who like to work independently; and they are also Abstract Conceptualizers, especially those who are gifted. Yet, they are not always willing to expound on ideas in the classroom, which can be a problem in today’s classroom with the emphasis on constructivism and group work.

Introverts expend a lot of energy trying to cope and function in group activities. They could serve as the ideal recorder (Reflective Observer) in assigned group tasks, or they could function as the group member who does the in-depth research. The researcher role allows innies to use their deep concentration to seek out relevant information that the group needs. On the other

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**Successful introverts: Johnny Carson, Diane Sawyer, Warren Buffett, Julia Roberts, Johnny Depp, Michael Dell, Jacqueline Kennedy, Bill Gates, Steve Martin, Keanu Reeves, Audrey Hepburn, and Joan Allen.**

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hand, innies may end up doing most of the work in a group project. Here is where the teacher can help innies negotiate how much they will be responsible for and how to delegate parts of the project work to others.

In the classroom, it’s important to offer introverts a respite from the busy, noisy atmosphere. Providing

a “chill spot” that can be self-selected or headphones for solitary activities may help these students with their concentration. Allowing them time for mental rehearsal (watching prior to performing) can reduce their anxiety and create more self-assurance.

Equally important for teachers is to recognize how difficult it is for introverts to be the center of attention. Correcting the student, therefore, should be done in private to avoid humiliation. In addition, because it’s difficult for introverts to ask for modifications to the learning environment, they should receive help in self-advocacy until their “voices” become strong.

### Conclusion

The key to supporting our introverts is to help them realize that they don’t have to be extroverts. We can accept their reserved, quiet, and deliberate manner, and give them the intellectual and physical space they need to be who they are. We can assist them in developing coping mechanisms that can provide them the quiet time they need. And we can remind them that some of our greatest ideas, art, and inventions — from the magnificent work of Michelangelo and Van Gogh to Einstein’s Theory of Relativity — came from an ability to go within and use quiet inner strength to make lasting contributions.

As our article title indicates, introversion is a joy and a challenge, but the joy can greatly outweigh the challenge with the help and support of caring parents and teachers. Everyone benefits when introverts grow into their gifts.



## Giftedness and Introversion, concluded

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