

Counselors' Strategies for Supporting Emotional Well-Being in Gifted Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the strategies employed by counselors to support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents. Recognizing the unique emotional and social challenges faced by this population, the research seeks to identify effective counseling practices that can be implemented to foster a supportive environment and address their specific needs. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 21 counselors who have extensive experience working with gifted adolescents. The participants were purposefully selected to ensure diverse perspectives. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the transcribed interview data, with NVivo software assisting in the organization and coding of themes and subthemes. The analysis revealed three primary themes in the counseling strategies for supporting the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents: Building Trusting Relationships, Developing Emotional Regulation Skills, and Promoting Social Connections. Key strategies within these themes included establishing rapport, maintaining confidentiality, personalizing approaches, teaching coping strategies, stress management techniques, encouraging self-expression, facilitating peer interaction, and involving families. These strategies align with existing literature, highlighting the importance of empathetic, individualized, and holistic approaches in counseling gifted adolescents. The study underscores the critical role of counselors in addressing the emotional and social challenges faced by gifted adolescents. Effective strategies involve building strong, trusting relationships, developing emotional regulation skills, and promoting social connections. These findings suggest that a comprehensive approach, which includes personalized support and proactive engagement, is essential for fostering the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents. Future research should further explore the perspectives of gifted adolescents and the long-term impacts of these counseling strategies.

Keywords: Gifted adolescents, counseling strategies, emotional well-being, building relationships, emotional regulation, social connections, individualized support.

1. Introduction

Gifted adolescents possess unique cognitive abilities that often set them apart from their peers, yet these same abilities can also make them vulnerable to a range of emotional and social challenges. This dual-edged nature of giftedness necessitates a nuanced approach in counseling to support their emotional well-being (Bozkurt, 2024; Corso, 2007; Gallagher, 2015; Kazemi Haghighi, 2007; Saygili, 2014). Gifted adolescents frequently experience heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and mental health issues due to the pressures associated with their exceptional abilities. Alexopoulou, Batsou, and Drigas (2020) highlight that the increased expectations and self-imposed standards can lead to significant stress and anxiety among gifted adolescents (Alexopoulou et al., 2020). This population often internalizes the pressure to excel, which can exacerbate mental health problems if not properly managed. Moreover, these adolescents may struggle with perfectionism and fear of failure, further contributing to their emotional distress (Kane, 2020).

The emotional regulation abilities of gifted adolescents are also a critical factor in their mental well-being. Devi (2023) underscores the importance of emotional regulation in maintaining mental health, noting that adolescents with better emotional regulation skills are more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes. However, gifted adolescents may face difficulties in this area due to their intense emotional experiences and heightened sensitivity (Devi, 2023).

In addition to emotional challenges, gifted adolescents often face social difficulties, including issues with peer relationships and social adaptation. Yun et al. (2011) found that mathematically gifted adolescents may have deficiencies in social valuation and mentalization, which can impair their ability to navigate social situations effectively (Yun et al., 2011). Similarly, Chung et al. (2011) observed that gifted adolescents exhibit different sensitivities to gain and loss, impacting their social adaptation abilities during collaborative activities (Chung et al., 2011).

The social-emotional learning (SEL) abilities of gifted students are crucial for their overall development. Oğurlu, Sevgi-Yalın, and Yavuz-Birben (2016) emphasize the relationship between SEL abilities and perceived social support, suggesting that enhancing SEL skills can improve social support networks for gifted students. This, in turn, can mitigate feelings of isolation and enhance their social integration (Oğurlu et al., 2016).

Counselors play a pivotal role in addressing the emotional and social challenges faced by gifted adolescents. Effective counseling strategies are essential for supporting their emotional well-being and helping them navigate the complexities of their social environments. Kennedy (2018) discusses the importance of school-based counseling interventions tailored to the unique needs of gifted students. These interventions often include techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and personalized support plans (Kennedy, 2018).

Renzulli and Gelbar (2019) highlight the leadership roles of school counselors in identifying and supporting twice-exceptional (2e) students—those who are gifted and have concurrent disabilities. This dual identification requires counselors to adopt specialized strategies that address both the giftedness and the accompanying challenges, ensuring holistic support for these students (Renzulli & Gelbar, 2019).

Gifted adolescents are also at risk for specific issues such as social anxiety and emotional eating. Godor et al. (2020) explore the differential relationships between social anxiety and emotional eating among normative versus academically gifted students. Their findings suggest that gifted students may exhibit distinct patterns of emotional eating linked to their social anxiety levels, necessitating targeted interventions to address these behaviors (Godor et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the social and emotional problems affecting gifted students can have long-term impacts on their well-being and academic performance. Yıldız (2021) reviews case studies highlighting various social-emotional problems in gifted and talented students, emphasizing the need for early identification and intervention to prevent negative outcomes (Yıldız, 2021).

Proactive attention to the affective concerns of gifted adolescents is crucial for their overall development and well-being. Peterson (2002) argues for a proactive approach in addressing the emotional needs of gifted students, suggesting that early and continuous support can prevent the escalation of mental health issues (Peterson, 2002). This approach aligns with the findings of Sedillo (2015), who discusses the prevalence of suicidal ideation among gay gifted adolescents and the importance of proactive mental health support to address these risks (Sedillo, 2015).

To develop effective counseling strategies, it is essential to understand the perceptions and emotional intelligence of trainee counselors. Yaakob et al. (2022) investigate the emotional intelligence of trainee counselors, highlighting its importance in understanding and addressing the emotional needs of gifted adolescents. Training programs that enhance

the emotional intelligence of counselors can improve their ability to provide empathetic and effective support to this population (Yaakob et al., 2022).

Counselors must also consider the educational support needs of underrepresented gifted adolescents. Stormont, Stebbins, and Holliday (2001) discuss the characteristics and support needs of underrepresented gifted students, emphasizing the need for culturally responsive counseling practices. These practices can help address the unique challenges faced by underrepresented students and ensure equitable support (Stormont et al., 2001).

The emotional and social challenges faced by gifted adolescents necessitate a comprehensive and nuanced approach to counseling. By understanding the specific needs and vulnerabilities of this population, counselors can develop targeted strategies to support their emotional well-being. The literature underscores the importance of proactive, individualized, and culturally responsive interventions in addressing the unique challenges of gifted adolescents. As the field continues to evolve, ongoing research and training are essential to equip counselors with the skills and knowledge needed to support gifted adolescents effectively. This study aims to contribute to this body of knowledge by exploring the strategies employed by counselors to support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents, providing insights that can inform practice and improve outcomes for this unique population.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This qualitative research aimed to explore the strategies employed by counselors to support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents. The study adopted a phenomenological approach, seeking to understand the lived experiences and perceptions of counselors working with this unique population. Participants were purposefully selected to ensure they had substantial experience in counseling gifted adolescents. The final sample consisted of 21 counselors, all of whom had at least five years of experience in the field and were currently working in educational settings that included gifted programs.

2.2. Measure

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews, which provided the flexibility to explore key

topics in depth while allowing participants to introduce relevant issues organically. The interview guide included open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed descriptions of the counselors' strategies, challenges faced, and perceived effectiveness of their interventions. Interviews were conducted either in person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and availability.

Each interview lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accurate transcription. The interviews continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, meaning that no new themes or insights were emerging from the data, indicating a comprehensive understanding of the counselors' strategies had been reached.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process involved several steps to ensure a thorough and systematic examination of the interview transcripts. Initially, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were then read multiple times to immerse the researchers in the data and gain a holistic sense of the content.

Coding was performed using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. An initial coding framework was developed based on the research questions and relevant literature. This framework was then refined and expanded as new themes and sub-themes emerged from the data. NVivo software was utilized to organize and manage the coding process.

Thematic analysis was employed to identify patterns and themes across the interviews. The researchers independently coded a subset of transcripts to ensure reliability and then compared and discussed their coding to reach consensus. This process helped to refine the coding scheme and enhance the credibility of the findings.

Finally, the themes were synthesized and interpreted in relation to the existing literature on counseling gifted adolescents. This interpretive phase aimed to generate insights into the specific strategies counselors use to support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents and the contextual factors influencing these strategies. The findings were then organized into coherent narratives to address the research questions and objectives.

3. Findings and Results

The study involved 21 counselors who specialized in working with gifted adolescents. The participants had

diverse backgrounds, with a majority being female (15 out of 21) and the remaining six being male. The age range of the counselors was from 30 to 55 years, with an average age of 42. Most participants (14) held a master's degree in counseling or a related field, while the remaining seven had

a doctoral degree. In terms of professional experience, the counselors had between 5 and 25 years of experience, with an average of 12 years. The participants were drawn from various educational settings, including public schools (12), private schools (6), and specialized gifted programs (3).

Table 1

The Results of Thematic Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Building Trusting Relationships	Establishing Rapport	Active listening, empathy, consistent presence
	Maintaining Confidentiality	Secure environment, trust-building, privacy assurance
	Personalizing Approach	Individualized plans, cultural sensitivity, recognizing uniqueness
	Continuous Communication	Regular check-ins, open dialogue, non-judgmental attitude
Developing Emotional Regulation Skills	Showing Genuine Interest	Asking about interests, remembering details, showing care
	Teaching Coping Strategies	Deep breathing, mindfulness exercises, journaling
	Identifying Emotions	Emotion labeling, self-awareness, feeling identification exercises
	Stress Management Techniques	Time management, relaxation methods, physical activity
	Cognitive Behavioral Techniques	Challenging negative thoughts, cognitive restructuring, positive self-talk
Promoting Social Connections	Encouraging Self-Expression	Art therapy, music therapy, creative writing
	Building Resilience	Encouraging perseverance, promoting optimism, learning from failures
	Peer Interaction Opportunities	Group activities, social clubs, collaborative projects
	Facilitating Group Discussions	Peer support groups, classroom discussions, conflict resolution sessions
	Encouraging Family Involvement	Family therapy, parent workshops, regular family updates
	Building Support Networks	Mentor programs, buddy systems, community resources
	Addressing Social Skills	Social skills training, role-playing, communication exercises
	Promoting Inclusivity	Anti-bullying programs, diversity celebrations, inclusive policies
	Navigating Peer Pressure	Assertiveness training, scenario planning, boundary setting

The data analysis revealed three main themes in the counselors' strategies for supporting the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents: Building Trusting Relationships, Developing Emotional Regulation Skills, and Promoting Social Connections. Each theme encompasses several subcategories that highlight specific strategies used by the counselors.

3.1. Building Trusting Relationships

Establishing Rapport: Counselors emphasized the importance of active listening, demonstrating empathy, and maintaining a consistent presence to build rapport with gifted adolescents. One counselor noted, "Taking the time to listen and truly understand their concerns helps in creating a safe space for them."

Maintaining Confidentiality: Ensuring a secure environment and building trust through privacy assurances were critical. A counselor shared, "Confidentiality is paramount. They need to feel that what they share remains between us unless there's a risk of harm."

Personalizing Approach: Tailoring individualized plans, showing cultural sensitivity, and recognizing each student's uniqueness were key strategies. "Every student is different,

so our approach has to reflect that individuality," explained one participant.

Continuous Communication: Regular check-ins, fostering open dialogue, and maintaining a non-judgmental attitude were highlighted as essential for sustained engagement. One counselor mentioned, "Frequent and honest communication helps keep the relationship strong."

Showing Genuine Interest: Demonstrating interest by asking about students' interests, remembering details, and showing genuine care were noted as effective techniques. "When you remember small details about their lives, it shows you care," remarked a counselor.

3.2. Developing Emotional Regulation Skills

Teaching Coping Strategies: Counselors utilized deep breathing, mindfulness exercises, and journaling to help students manage stress. "Mindfulness and breathing exercises can significantly reduce anxiety levels," said one counselor.

Identifying Emotions: Helping students label their emotions and develop self-awareness through feeling identification exercises was a common practice. A counselor

noted, "Teaching them to identify and name their emotions is the first step in managing them."

Stress Management Techniques: Techniques such as time management, relaxation methods, and physical activity were frequently used. One counselor observed, "Incorporating physical activity into their routine can greatly help in managing stress."

Cognitive Behavioral Techniques: Strategies like challenging negative thoughts, cognitive restructuring, and promoting positive self-talk were emphasized. "Helping them reframe negative thoughts can change their entire outlook," explained a participant.

Encouraging Self-Expression: Using art therapy, music therapy, and creative writing allowed students to express their emotions healthily. A counselor shared, "Creative outlets like art and music provide a way for them to express what they might not be able to say in words."

Building Resilience: Encouraging perseverance, promoting optimism, and learning from failures were strategies to build resilience. "Teaching them that setbacks are opportunities for growth is crucial," noted a counselor.

3.3. Promoting Social Connections

Peer Interaction Opportunities: Facilitating group activities, social clubs, and collaborative projects helped students build peer connections. One counselor stated, "Group activities can help them feel less isolated and more connected to their peers."

Facilitating Group Discussions: Conducting peer support groups, classroom discussions, and conflict resolution sessions fostered a supportive environment. A participant mentioned, "Group discussions allow them to share experiences and support each other."

Encouraging Family Involvement: Engaging families through family therapy, parent workshops, and regular updates was essential for holistic support. "Involving the family ensures that the support continues at home," said a counselor.

Building Support Networks: Establishing mentor programs, buddy systems, and connecting students with community resources were effective strategies. "Having a mentor or buddy can provide additional support and guidance," explained one participant.

Addressing Social Skills: Social skills training, role-playing, and communication exercises were used to enhance students' social abilities. "Role-playing different scenarios

can help them practice and improve their social skills," noted a counselor.

Promoting Inclusivity: Implementing anti-bullying programs, celebrating diversity, and creating inclusive policies were critical. One counselor shared, "Promoting inclusivity ensures that all students feel valued and respected."

Navigating Peer Pressure: Training in assertiveness, scenario planning, and setting boundaries helped students handle peer pressure. A counselor mentioned, "Teaching them to set boundaries and assert themselves is key to navigating peer pressure."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the strategies employed by counselors to support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents. The analysis revealed three primary themes: Building Trusting Relationships, Developing Emotional Regulation Skills, and Promoting Social Connections. These themes align with existing literature and provide valuable insights into effective counseling practices for gifted adolescents.

The first theme, Building Trusting Relationships, emphasized the importance of establishing rapport, maintaining confidentiality, personalizing approaches, continuous communication, and showing genuine interest. These strategies are essential in creating a safe and supportive environment for gifted adolescents, who often experience heightened sensitivity and emotional intensity.

Alexopoulou, Batsou, and Drigas (2020) highlight the significant levels of stress and anxiety among gifted adolescents, which can be alleviated through strong, trusting relationships with counsellors (Alexopoulou et al., 2020). By actively listening and demonstrating empathy, counselors can create a secure environment where students feel valued and understood. This approach aligns with Kennedy's (2018) emphasis on the importance of personalized and empathetic counseling interventions for gifted students (Kennedy, 2018).

Maintaining confidentiality was also identified as a crucial strategy. Gifted adolescents need to trust that their private thoughts and concerns will be kept confidential to feel comfortable sharing openly. This finding is supported by Peterson (2002), who advocates for proactive attention to the affective concerns of gifted adolescents, emphasizing that a trusting relationship is foundational for effective support (Peterson, 2002).

The second theme, Developing Emotional Regulation Skills, involved teaching coping strategies, identifying emotions, stress management techniques, cognitive-behavioral techniques, encouraging self-expression, and building resilience. These strategies are critical for helping gifted adolescents manage their intense emotional experiences and prevent mental health issues.

Devi (2023) underscores the role of emotional regulation in the mental well-being of adolescents, noting that those with better emotional regulation skills are more likely to experience positive mental health outcomes (Devi, 2023). By teaching coping strategies such as mindfulness and deep breathing, counselors can help gifted adolescents manage stress and anxiety effectively. This finding is consistent with Kane's (2020) discussion on the benefits of mindfulness in enhancing the well-being of gifted adolescents (Kane, 2020).

Identifying emotions and developing self-awareness are also crucial components of emotional regulation. By helping students label and understand their emotions, counselors can equip them with the tools needed to manage their feelings effectively. This approach is supported by Stormont, Stebbins, and Holliday (2001), who highlight the importance of self-awareness in managing emotional and social challenges among underrepresented gifted students (Stormont et al., 2001).

The third theme, Promoting Social Connections, focused on facilitating peer interaction opportunities, group discussions, encouraging family involvement, building support networks, addressing social skills, promoting inclusivity, and navigating peer pressure. These strategies are essential for helping gifted adolescents develop healthy social relationships and a sense of belonging.

Yun et al. (2011) found that mathematically gifted adolescents often struggle with social valuation and mentalization, which can hinder their social adaptation (Yun et al., 2011). By facilitating peer interaction opportunities and group discussions, counselors can help gifted students develop the social skills needed to navigate complex social environments. This approach aligns with Oğurlu, Sevgi-Yalın, and Yavuz-Birben's (2016) emphasis on the relationship between social-emotional learning abilities and perceived social support in gifted students (Oğurlu et al., 2016).

Encouraging family involvement was also identified as a crucial strategy. Involving families in the counseling process can provide additional support and ensure that students' needs are addressed holistically. This finding is consistent with Renzulli and Gelbar's (2019) discussion on the

importance of involving families in supporting twice-exceptional students (Renzulli & Gelbar, 2019).

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 21 counselors, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. While the study aimed to achieve theoretical saturation, the insights gained may not fully represent the diversity of experiences and strategies employed by counselors in different contexts or regions. Additionally, the study relied solely on self-reported data from counselors, which could introduce bias or inaccuracies. Future studies could benefit from incorporating multiple data sources, such as direct observations or feedback from the adolescents themselves, to triangulate the findings and provide a more comprehensive understanding.

Future research should consider exploring the experiences and perspectives of gifted adolescents directly to gain a deeper understanding of their needs and the effectiveness of various counseling strategies from their viewpoint. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable insights into the long-term impacts of counseling interventions on the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents. Additionally, examining the role of cultural and socioeconomic factors in shaping the experiences and needs of gifted adolescents could help in developing more culturally responsive counseling practices. Research on the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as mindfulness training or family therapy, in different populations of gifted adolescents would also contribute to the evidence base and inform best practices.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made for counselors working with gifted adolescents. First, it is essential to prioritize building trusting relationships by demonstrating empathy, maintaining confidentiality, and personalizing the counseling approach to meet the unique needs of each student. Counselors should also focus on teaching emotional regulation skills through techniques such as mindfulness, cognitive-behavioral strategies, and encouraging self-expression. Promoting social connections through peer interaction opportunities, family involvement, and building support networks is also crucial for the holistic development of gifted adolescents. Additionally, counselors should be trained to recognize and address the specific challenges faced by twice-exceptional students and those from underrepresented backgrounds. Providing ongoing professional development and support for counselors can

enhance their ability to effectively support the emotional well-being of gifted adolescents.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

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