

“I know I’m right”

Conflicts of gifted children and conflicts with gifted children

Theory and practice for teachers, parents, and counselors

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Inhoud

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PART I WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK

1. Introduction

Our vision is based on our belief that the conflicts you experience are opportunities to guide you through life. We know, from our research and from many meetings with gifted people, that they have – and have had –to deal with conflicts from a young age.

The mission of this book is to give insight in the process of conflicts experienced by the gifted from a young age and to clarify these situations. If gifted people learn from, for example, parents and teachers how they can cope with conflicts, they can learn from these situations and win back their autonomy. This will be a great benefit for them for the rest of their lives.

We have collected many cases and studied multiple experiences of gifted persons of different ages. The stories of their lives tell us a lot about how they deal with their giftedness. We believe that giftedness is basically a set of positive characteristics. It is not a disease. This is an important issue to start with.

After analyzing this information, we discovered that gifted people of all ages experience serious and less serious conflicts. We also saw that gifted people encountered several conflicts during their lives and many admit that they did not

learn from these conflicts. In their minds, they perceived a direct link with their giftedness – something we also observed. We believe that studying the conflicts experienced by the gifted can prevent escalation and serious damage. We recommend looking at a gifted person more as part of a system (e.g. home, school, peer group). The gifted are not victims, but taking the system into account, action is possible. By action, we mean: maintaining a connection, always looking for the dialogue.

1.1 A case: Rosalind

As a child, Rosalind lives with her brother and parents in a small town. She is a very alert and inquisitive girl with many interests. She has some girlfriends she plays with outside school. She sometimes feels different to her schoolmates.

Rosalind 5 – 8 years old

Rosalind, 5, is angry at her teacher. She comes home and tells her mother that her teacher has been unfair: She blamed her friend Tom for something he didn't do. And Rosalind knows, because she was there when it happened. Her parents try to calm her down and say that the teacher must have been right in some way and that Rosalind has to behave and obey the teacher. Sometimes she shouldn't take everything literally, her parents say. Having a row with the teacher is not very good for her future, even though the teacher may not be right. Rosalind doesn't understand her parents' arguments. For her, values like fairness and honesty are more important. And everyone should think that too. Now she's also disappointed

in her parents. She feels that her parents don't understand her. So she decides to stop telling her parents about everything she experiences.

Rosalind, 6, comes home from school feeling very sad. She had asked her teacher a question about the traffic rules for one-wheeled and three wheeled bikes. Her teacher didn't answer the question, but became irritated. Now Rosalind is angry at him. She had just asked a question she found interesting. But he found her question inappropriate and odd. He said that children weren't taking him seriously when they ask such questions. Maybe Rosalind should think about that after school. But Rosalind is disappointed again.

Rosalind, 8 years, is angry at her brother. He has taken a book of hers and hasn't returned it. She's afraid he has damaged it. She wants her book back! How could he do that? He knows that books are so important for her. Doesn't he understand that? It's *her* book!

Rosalind 12 – 18 years old

Rosalind, 12, tells her mother she doesn't want to go to church any more. The family goes to church every Sunday and her mother is shocked. At school things aren't going well and Rosalind has changed schools several times. Her parents thought it was a good idea to have her tested. The outcome was a surprise for the school and for her parents. The tests showed that she's very smart and this may explain why she's not always understood at school. The school gives her extra work but they don't know what else to do.

Rosalind, 15 years, tells her biology teacher that his theory about the human skeleton isn't right. She knows this because she has read about this and her mother is a medical doctor. Her teacher is not amused: how dare she give him criticism? What she's saying is definitely not true. Rosalind is very angry and tells her mother what the teacher did and that she thinks this shouldn't be not allowed at school. This teacher is unfit for this job. She doesn't want to attend his lessons again. Her mother tries to calm her down but Rosalind sticks to her opinion. He's not a good teacher and she's not going to any of his lessons again . The teacher should explain why she isn't right first, because she knows she's right. Her mother reluctantly admits that Rosalind is right, but she doesn't want a conflict with the school. Finally, she and Rosalind are summoned to school because the situation has gotten out of hand and the school director has become involved. It is decided that Rosalind has to obey the rules of the school, be polite to the teacher and offer her excuse to the teacher. She has to have sessions with the school psychologist too. After several sessions, Rosalind has the impression that the aim is to change her behavior in order not to get into any further conflicts. She has to conform to the unwritten rules... She loses her faith in the psychologist and this method of discussion and feels even less understood. Her motivation to do well at school decreases and her mood becomes somber. It seems to her that no one understands or supports her, while she's convinced she has done nothing wrong. She doesn't feel accepted – even rejected – and feels she has no possibilities to do anything about the situation.

Rosalind, 18 years, has a conflict with her father. He thinks she's a bright girl and should go to university to study law. She, however, wants to go to art school and

become an artist. She wants to do something that really interests and inspires her. She doesn't want to take up a study in which her behavior will constantly be corrected and where she is forced to do what others want her to do. She finds it annoying that she has to tell her parents that she wants to choose her own career against their wishes, but she feels she will become very unhappy if she goes to university now.

Her parents want the best for her, but don't understand her and are disappointed in her. Family members and friends of her parents don't understand this either. Some of them had been asked in the past to convince her that she shouldn't harass her parents with this behavior that is so against them. Some of them think she's weird and say that she needs therapy.

She refuses adamantly to do what her parents say. As soon as she can, she leaves home to live on her own. She hardly sees her parents or her brother anymore.

Rosalind at 24

Rosalind, 24, has an office job to earn money to live. She still has creative aspirations but she doesn't earn enough from them. So she decides to work in an organization. She now has a job that does not offer her enough challenges. Her colleagues find her a bit weird and she's a loner. Her interests and hobbies are very different from theirs so she feels shut out and lonely, although she knows that no one shuts her out on purpose. To get some joy out of her work, she thinks very carefully about how the work and the tasks are structured in this organization. She has a dozen ideas about how this could be done more efficiently. She cautiously

talks about this with colleagues but they become angry at her because implementing her ideas would result in the work being done by fewer staff, so some people could lose their jobs. They go to the supervisor and tell him they don't want to work with Rosalind anymore. She is not a loyal colleague. Then she gets into a conflict with the supervisor. She cannot conceal her ideas about how the work could be done more efficiently. She cannot understand that no one else sees this and she thinks it's inevitable that changes are needed. When she speaks up, her boss doesn't want to hear it and fires her. Rosalind knows she is right. They just never listen to her. Now she's aware of a kind of pattern in what happens in her life. But she doesn't know how to change this. She understands the world around her less and less.

Rosalind at 30

Rosalind, 30, is married. Her husband considers her to be someone special, different from the others. Often he doesn't understand her, but at the start of their relationship he overlooks that and thinks things will get better. They both love travelling and this provides them with a lot of good experiences. After two years of marriage, the problems start to pile up. They have many conflicts on trivial issues, like doing the dishes, or what meal they should eat. More seriously: Rosalind cannot talk to her husband as he doesn't understand how she thinks. His friends also find her strange. Rosalind's discussions with him are often about which of them is right, and in general about honesty and fairness. And she thinks he understands so little but then gives his opinion without any grounds, which she is

allergic to. She takes these discussions very seriously and looks up all the information available to acquire more knowledge about the issue. He tries to understand her, but that doesn't work out well, although he still loves her. They end the relationship after two years, but they remain friends. They conclude that they cannot be happy by staying together. Rosalind sees and feels this as a failure, she is not good enough as a human being. She goes to her family doctor to talk about this it. She feels really somber.

Her doctor refers her to a psychologist for counseling. She still recalls the bad experience she had at school with the psychologist. The new psychologist does not fully understand her but advises her to engage in more activities that make her happy and give her energy. That makes sense to her. Based on this, she puts all her time and energy into her painting. She becomes a member of a group of painters and once a year they organize a big exhibition. She is allowed to join in because they appreciate the quality of her work. This brings her into a productive flow. She had thought of a theme to work on and expresses this in her paintings. The order in which the paintings are to be exhibited is very important in her vision, it is a composition in itself. This leads to a big conflict with the owner of the gallery. The owner finds some of her paintings not good enough, he thinks they will not sell (which means less income for him). Rosalind only wants to exhibit her paintings as a series. Her artistic idea will fall apart otherwise. Rosalind refuses to compromise. She is the artist, isn't she? Her contribution in the exhibition is cancelled.

Rosalind at 45

Rosalind, 45, needs a job to make a living. Her paintings aren't selling well and she can't live on the money she earns from them. She tries finding work via employment agencies but they always ask about her education and experience in work. Many of them don't want her in their files because of the conflicts she gets into and they cannot offer her to the employers they work with. A friend tells her she could do cleaning work in private houses. It's not her favorite pastime, but she needs the money to live and eat. So she goes looking for cleaning houses. Often she only works a few times in one house before getting into a conflict with the owner. She wants to do it her way and in her own time, which the owners do not always appreciate. But why not? She's not harming anyone is she?

Rosalind at 55

Rosalind, 55, is lonely. She doesn't have much money. She does some cleaning work but can hardly live from that. She has only two close friends. She has had one year of therapy with a therapist who is specialized in people of above-average intelligence and this therapist opened her eyes about her conflicts, giving her tools to deal with these situations better. This came at a good time because things were going badly, she was feeling somber more frequently and she often had suicidal thoughts, which made her anxious. Now she feels better and has her own business in web design, which is doing really well. She renewed contact with her parents, who are very old now, and luckily they are proud of her, though they still want to talk to her about all the conflicts in her life. She persists in saying: but I know I'm right...

What happened throughout her life?

Rosalind at 59

Rosalind, 59, hears about cafés organized for people who are gifted. At first, she doesn't want to have any contact with people in a café. In the past, she had often had bad experiences in such situations. Her husband used to like it but she always thought: they talk about nothing, only social talk... she always got bored very quickly and then went home to do her own things.

Now it's different: to her surprise she meets like-minded people and she talks with them without getting bored. A speaker talks about conflicts experienced by gifted persons and suddenly she thinks: Hey, this is me! She starts crying. That evening changes her whole life and how she looks at herself. Suddenly, everything comes together. It's late but never too late to use these insights in a positive way. It will take time, she realizes, but she's more positive about her life than she ever was. She makes friends with some people in the café and she's asked to illustrate a book on conflicts experienced by gifted people. This is something she's very good at!

1.2 Recognition worldwide

Since 2011, we have been collecting stories, publishing and talking about our ideas on giftedness and conflicts in different parts of the world. We have found that gifted people all over the world acknowledge these stories. Gifted people of all ages experience conflicts and we have found that giftedness frequently plays a role in these conflicts. After studying gifted adults, we then became interested to learn at

which moment these situations start playing a role in the lives of the gifted. We discovered that situations and patterns that resemble the pattern of the conflicts experienced by gifted adults start much earlier in life. We identified the pattern in gifted children from about the age of 10 and we expect it also to be visible at younger ages if you know what signs to look for. So we have become convinced that it is crucial to tell other people about this, people who may be interested, like parents of gifted children, and teachers and professionals working with gifted children.

2. Motivation and the aim of this book

2.1 Personal motivation

Giftedness and conflicts, why this combination and why so much attention for them? When the second author of this book (Noks Nauta) found out about her own giftedness, the reason that triggered her exploration into her own characteristics was a conflict with serious consequences that she had had at work. At the time, she didn't understand what was happening. She was 49 years old, functioning well (good evaluations, feedback from colleagues and students) and loved her job. But something went very wrong in the relationship with her supervisor. She became physically and mentally ill and had to stop working. A friend (who herself was a member of Mensa) heard about this and told her that giftedness might play a role in this situation. Although Noks had always been a good student at school – she had a degree in medicine and she was studying psychology at that moment – she had never thought of herself as being gifted. Giftedness was not a topic that was written about often and she just had the idea that she worked hard.

When after a few months she decided to do an intelligence test, the psychologist who performed this was very impressed, she had never tested someone with such a high score, she told her. Noks could not believe it. Upon becoming a member of Mensa in the Netherlands, she was astonished to find that she was not the only one with a work conflict! As a medical doctor specializing in occupational health, she immediately decided that she had to find out more about this. But to her surprise, she couldn't find any research literature on this topic.

From that moment, in 2000, Noks studied giftedness in adults. When she met Ido van der Waal, a workplace mediator, Ido found her personal history so fascinating that they started to collaborate. Ido also discovered that he had a personal motivation for working on this theme. He has dyslexia and recognizes some of the characteristics of giftedness in himself.

This book is the result of the collaboration between Noks and Ido, the sum of their knowledge, experience and motivation.

2.2 Professional motivation

In 2011, Ido and Noks launched a survey on work conflicts experienced by the gifted. The survey consisted of a questionnaire and in-depth interviews. Ido also interviewed gifted children aged 8 to 18 and some young adults. Ido also has a lot of experience as a mediator in workplace conflicts.

Studying the interviews, we both soon concluded that workplace conflicts experienced by the gifted show quite a specific pattern when we compared them to conflicts at work in general. (Van der Waal et al, 2013). This motivated Ido even more to focus on this target group. He found the pattern of the conflicts of the gifted fascinating. Additionally, he is very much motivated to transform conflicts into something positive. He is convinced that these conflict patterns start early in life, so it is important to use this knowledge in relation to gifted children and their environment (system).

The intensity and the deep-rooted intention to convince the other person that something really can be performed in a better way (more efficient, more effective), which is purely positive when seen from the gifted person's perspective, leads unnecessarily to conflicts and damage in our opinion. We see conflicts with these characteristics developing both at work and in private life.

The positive element of conflicts experienced by the gifted, i.e. their intention to improve something, is rarely valued as such. We have not found discovered any other authors who have written wrote about this subject¹. An important reason for this is the ineffective communication and, for instance, the constricting emotions of the other, leading to resistance. Other reasons include bad timing and circumstances.

The interest in and knowledge on conflicts experienced by gifted adults led us to the question: "When does this pattern start in the life of a gifted person?" Performing interviews with gifted children in different age groups led us to the conclusion that the pattern starts early in life. Based on these interviews, we immediately saw the importance of spreading this knowledge. In our eyes, it is vital to share the knowledge about conflicts experienced by gifted adults with parents and teachers of gifted children and other people working with gifted children, like psychologists and counselors. We have had many encounters with parents, teachers and other professionals in the Netherlands and in the USA, in which we

¹ Recently we found some articles about this in the general literature on management. One of the areas where positive aspects of conflicts are seen and used is the air force. Safety is a big issue there and this stimulates this innovative view on conflicts. A group of Dutch students studied how gifted people see the positive sides of their conflicts (Vos et al., 2016).

found that sharing our knowledge and experience was indeed very valuable and helpful. This is the reason for writing this book.

2.3 Aim of this book

In publishing this book, we want to focus attention on the conflicts experienced by gifted children. We want to explain the patterns and mechanisms involved and help readers to recognize these. We want to offer some tools to enable different and more positive ways of looking at conflicts. And we want to help prevent negative and sometimes destructive patterns becoming habits – as early in a child’s life as possible, which may be the most effective way.

We think that conflicts have a function. In many cases, *it is a desire for a change*. To use this information effectively, you have to identify the function and discover how to use the conflict. We aim to contribute to a change in the way people look at their own conflicts and at conflicts in general. We certainly want to highlight the positive value of conflicts in someone’s life. People who have many conflicts are often avoided and negatively judged by other people because they are unpredictable and bring about unrest. This results in the people around them not listening to them anymore but enquiring more about the reason of the conflict. Often drowning out the positive and possibly valuable aspects.

In this book we describe and analyze conflicts experienced by gifted children at school, with friends and at home. We believe these are the most important domains

in the systems of gifted children. And we elaborate on the conflicts between parents and teachers of gifted children. We see the conflicts we describe here as 'social conflicts'. These 'social conflicts' in general include situations like bullying and (sexual) harassment. We do not write specifically about these, but we see some overlap between these situations and the conflicts we describe in this book. We did not find any studies that also mention the overlap, but we did find some research on bullying of gifted children at school. (Peterson² & Ray, 2006). We will describe some results of these studies in chapter 3.

This book contains many examples from practice, as we know that recognition from examples is a very powerful way to help people reflect. We also describe in brief some theories on conflicts. We deliberately choose those theories by which parents, teachers and professionals, as well as the gifted children will understand our explanation. We have learned that the gifted often need good theory and solid arguments before being willing to change their behavior or even think about it.

This is not a handbook on conflicts but a book designed to show how conflicts and giftedness are related, and in that relation we focus on the positive (bright) side of conflicts and the use we can make of them as early in life as possible. In part II we offer some insights on conflicts, based on the theory, that we observed in interviews with gifted children and we offer some backgrounds for use in practice. Part III consists of case stories. In these stories we offer examples of how conflicts arise in real situations. We refer to the theory in part II where this is appropriate.

² We had personal email contact with Peterson (2017) and she agrees that she also sees the overlap between bullying and conflicts. We come back to this in chapter 3.

We show in some cases how they may develop in a negative way *and* how the same case may develop in a positive way. In part IV we offer some practical tools like a framework for describing a case and deliberating about it. We also offer some ideas for assignments to work on with gifted children for instance. We conclude with Part V, which consists of an epilogue, a list of references, an index and information about the authors.

2.4 Who will find this book useful?

The main group of readers we have in mind are the parents of gifted children and people who work with gifted children. Maybe gifted children themselves will be interested in reading the book too.

We are convinced that we can teach gifted children that they have a choice, that they can change their behavior, and the people within the system of the gifted child have an important role to play in this. This means that they have to recognize the situations of (imminent) conflicts and that parents, teachers and professionals also have to recognize these, and show the children how to use these situations in a more positive way and learn from them. The process and outcome of these situations can then be more positive.

We hope that all readers will discover the positive sides of conflicts and also learn how to make use of them and make conflicts positive. Giftedness offers many possibilities for excellent, innovative and brilliant outcomes. Conflicts can be seen as an opportunity to step away from problems and diagnoses (unnecessary

medicalization) to even more possibilities. This book offers the conditions for that change.

Our opinion is that in too many conflict situations people look for rules or a legal way to try to come to a resolution of the conflict. For instance, they go to court to claim their rights. We are convinced that there is another way: identifying the mechanisms of how conflicts arise and develop will lead to other ways of dealing with conflicts, in earlier stages, thereby inflicting less damage and producing more learning possibilities. In this book we focus on conflicts experienced by the gifted as we have studied cases of the gifted and know more about them. But the general idea is of course applicable to everyone.

The cases in part III are intended to present recognizable situations and to translate the insights into daily practice. That is why we also give concrete and practical suggestions for the readers from different target groups in part IV.

2.5 Acknowledgment

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³ ECHA: European Council for High Ability. They offer a training course for people working with the gifted: <https://www.echa.info/echa-training>

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