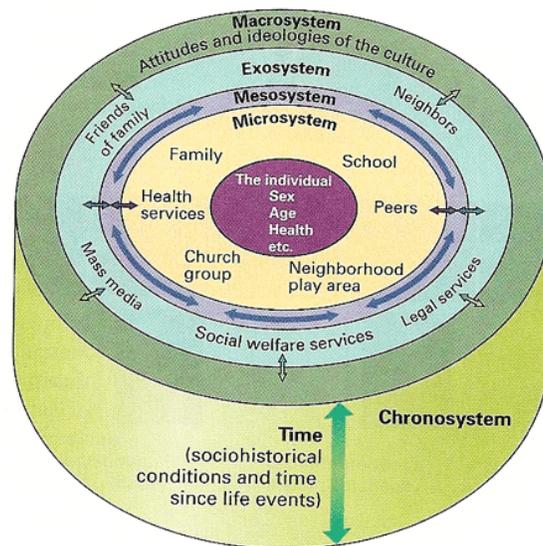


Overexcitabilities in Gifted Students (of All Ages)
by Marcia J. McKinley, JD, PhD
June 20, 2013

A Developmental Psychologist's View of the Person

- There are many domains of development (i.e., cognitive, emotional, social, spiritual, physical) within each person.
- Individuals are set within systems, ranging from those in which they directly interact (e.g., peer groups) to societal-level groups.
- All interactions are bidirectional.



(Image captures Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development)

Using this Model to Understand Gifted Individuals

Most people

- by definition, are “normal,”
- experience synchronicity among the different domains in development,
- live in a world built for “normal,”
- which gives them “goodness-of-fit” within their environments.

Not our children! (And not many of us!)

Differences/Abnormality

- Many possible definitions of “abnormality”
 - 3 Ds: dysfunctional, deviant (violation of social norms), distressing
 - Different from the norm (68% of the population falls within 1 standard deviation of the mean on many personality and intellectual characteristics)

- What is different/abnormal for the rest of the population may be very normal for gifted individuals. For example, Dabrowski's theory posits that gifted individuals are often *overexcitable* in one of five ways:

Intellectual Overexcitability

Intensified activity of the mind: curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, avid reading, keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning, fast rate of learning, extremely good memory, dislike of slow-paced work

Penchant for probing questions and problem solving: search for truth and understanding, forming new concepts, tenacity in problem solving, analytic and evaluative thinking

Reflective thought: thinking about thinking, love of theory and analysis, preoccupation with logic, moral thinking, introspection (but without self-judgment), conceptual and intuitive integration, independence of thought (sometimes very critical), seeing patterns and relationships

Imaginational Overexcitability

Free play of the imagination: frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, facility for detailed visualization, poetic and dramatic perception, animistic and magical thinking

Capacity for living in a world of fantasy: predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions, dramatization

Spontaneous imagery as an expression of emotional tension: animistic imagery, mixing truth and fiction, elaborate dreams, illusions

Low tolerance of boredom: need for novelty and variety

Emotional Overexcitability

Feelings and emotions intensified: positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions and feelings, identification with others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of feelings

Strong somatic expressions: tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart, sweaty palms

Strong affective expressions: inhibition (timidity, shyness), enthusiasm, ecstasy, euphoria, pride, strong affective memory, shame, feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Capacity for strong attachments, deep relationships: strong emotional ties and attachments to persons, living things, places, attachments to animals, difficult adjusting to new environments, compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships, loneliness

Well-differentiated feelings toward self: inner dialogue and self-judgment

Psychomotor Overexcitability

Surplus of energy: rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity (e.g., fast games and sports), pressure for action (e.g., organizing), marked competitiveness

Psychomotor expression of emotional tension: compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, nervous habits (tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out

Sensual Overexcitability

Enhanced sensory and aesthetic pleasure: seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, form, color, balance

Sensual expression of emotional tension: overeating, sexual overindulgence, buying sprees, wanting to be in the limelight

From Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Embracing intensity: Overexcitability, sensitivity, and the developmental potential of the gifted. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults* (p. 10-11). Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.

Asynchronicity (Inner and Outer)

“In terms of development chronological age may be the least relevant piece of information to consider. Kate, with an IQ score of 170, may be six, but she has a “mental age” of ten and a half. . . . Unfortunately, Kate, like every highly gifted child, is an amalgam of many developmental ages. She may be six while riding a bike, thirteen while playing the piano or chess, nine while debating rules, eight while choosing hobbies and books, five (or three) when asked to sit still. How can such a child be expected to fit into a classroom designed around norms for six year olds?” (Tolan, as cited in Silverman, 2004)

What Is At Stake?

“The presence of OEs naturally leads to potential for higher-level development in adult life. They may be difficult to live with in children, but they are the essential ingredients in the development of creative, passionate, morally aware adults. The marriage of cognitive complexity and emotional intensity, and the enhanced awareness and moral sensitivity born of that marriage, render gifted individuals vulnerable. When advanced cognition brings information into awareness for which the child or adult is emotionally unprepared, vulnerability is the natural result. But we must be careful not to equate emotional fragility with immaturity. Most of world's treasures are delicate and need to be handled with care, like fine china, crystal, paintings, roses, orchids, and children. All delicacy is at risk in crude and aggressive environments. It is the vulnerability of the gifted that requires special provisions.

Dabrowski (1979/1994) found morally and emotionally advanced adults gentle, delicate, nonaggressive, likely to withdraw rather than retaliate, “heroic” in their sensitivity. He felt that

because of their sensitivity and integrity, these individuals are capable of bringing humanity to a higher set of values, but that they are at great risk of being destroyed by society because of their inherent differences. The values Dabrowski considered indispensable to harmonious living include: an empathic attitude toward others, tolerance (not aggression), responsibility for others and for self, a just attitude (treating everybody by the same standards), helping each other, giving though to the harmed and humiliated, to invalids, to the sick, to the ineffectual and those devastated by their own loneliness, truthfulness, authenticity, and just social care.” (Silverman, 2004)

So, what is a parent to do?

First, put on your own oxygen mask:

1. Have you considered whether you are gifted? (*The Everyday Genius* by Mary-ellen Jacobsen) What feelings does that leave you with about your past, your future, your responsibilities to your children?
2. Take care of yourself.
3. Be willing to mourn.
4. Recognize that you don't have to go it alone, but that this may mean a special support group:
 - a. Relationships with other families with “average” children may be strained. Try to establish relationships with other families of gifted children.
 - b. Make sure that the professionals you choose, for yourself or your child(ren), are familiar with giftedness.
5. Be democratic, but don't give up your parenting authority!
6. Model strategies that you are trying to teach.

And then put on your child's oxygen mask:

1. Understand giftedness; how this affects all parts of the child's life (Normality and abnormality are on a continuum; the DSM and school system makes them into categories)
2. Validate, acknowledge, reinforce the child's experience and uniqueness and educate him/her about others' responses
3. Affiliation and affinity: find groups and ways to connect to the world
4. Address overexcitabilities
5. ...preferably in “teachable moments”

“Imagine a time when as a chatty, inquisitive youngster, Trisha's kindly grandmother witnessed her being scolded. As her grandmother extended an understanding hand, Trisha might have heard:

Trish, honey, show me your new books, will you? I'm so interested in what you're learning at school these days. Your mother tells me you're crazy about astronomy. Is that right? You know, Trish, you and I are quite alike. When I was your age I was so full of questions, I think it drove my parents and teachers crazy. I wondered about everything, and questions kept coming to my mind. It's really too bad that people get annoyed with questions. But in some ways I think people like you and I move so fast with our thinking that others can't keep up. That's why they're bothered. Our questions are just fine—no problem there. But I learned something a long time ago—a secret—that I want to share with you that you don't have to tell anybody else. No one will ever tell you, but it's true. People have about two-question limit at a time. Smart girls like you and I have loads more than that. But just between you and me, we can tell by the look

in their eyes when we've zoomed past them and they've reached their limit. That's when we go to our journals and write down all the secret, unasked questions. I brought one for you today, and here it is. It's your very own secret question book. You don't need to share anything you write in it with anyone else. But whenever you like, Grandma will be happy to listen to any question you have.” (Jacobsen, p. 117)

“No one had ever explained to Chad that many gifted people struggle with the impossible choices presented to them because of their multiple talents. Which ones do they give up for the sake of others? It's an experience of loss, because for multiply talented individuals, many gifts must remain underdeveloped. No one had ever approached Chad in the teachable moment during his key developmental stages with a kindly and accurate portrait of his true self. If that right person had appeared at just the right time, it might have gone like this:

‘Chad, I see that you are excited about so many things. It's hard to have so many interests. It's a real challenge, and yet it's also a gift. I've had four different careers by now, and I'm not crazy about any of them even though my colleagues think I'm crazy. Don't ever forget that when you learn something in one area, it nearly always has some value in another. You know, like Michael Jordan's switch from baseball to basketball—both require speed, agility, teamwork, and concentration. It's just that for him close wasn't close enough. Baseball was good for him, but basketball was great. When you find something you love, you will still need to find the courage to stick it out in the hard times. Once you've attained a nugget of expertise, your credibility will allow you to really do things your own way. You've really got something, Chad. Don't let your enthusiasm run you; learn how to run your enthusiasms.’ (Jacobsen, p. 224)

“The same lightbulb might have gone on during Sandra's adolescence had a discerning mentor appeared on the scene at a teachable moment. Perhaps one of Sandra's teachers—who had taken the time to build a trusting relationship with Sandra—might have responded to her complaints about tripping herself up by blurting out the truth:

‘You are dealing with one of the most difficult problems gifted people confront, Sandra. You really do detect falsehoods, and your exceptional ability to see through the veneer of any given situations means you really can see what others do not. That's a gift, Sandra, and don't ever let anyone convince you otherwise. Not everyone is comfortable digging to such depths. And, as you are discovering, when you pull back someone's cover-up to reveal what they want to keep hidden, you're in line for an all-out attack. Give yourself permission to pause a bit to do some consequential thinking and perhaps to say no to some of your truth-telling inclinations. Ask yourself two things: (1) Is this piece of truth directly tied to one of my most inner convictions? (2) Am I willing to go to the wall for this, no matter what the outcome? If the answer to both of those questions is yes, then off you go, full speed ahead.’ (Jacobsen, p. 239)

6. Avoid “too” or “over” phrases (see Daniels & Piechowski, chapter 3)
7. Work from a strengths perspective (see Daniels & Piechowski, chapter 3)

References, Readings, and Websites

References

Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (Eds.) (2009). *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults*. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.

Jacobsen, M.-E. (1999). *The gifted adult: A revolutionary guide for liberating everyday genius*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Silverman, L. S. (2004). The universal experience of being out-of-sync: An expanded view. Retrieved from <http://www.gifteddevelopment.com/Articles/counseling/c230.pdf>

Other Suggested Readings

Fonseca, C. (2011). *Emotional intensity in gifted students: Helping kids cope with explosive feelings*. Waco: Prufrock Press.

Ruf, D. (2005). *Five levels of gifted: School issues and educational options*. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.

Webb, J. T. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders*. Scottsdale: Great Potential Press.

Important Websites

<http://www.educationoptions.com/>

This website, by Dr. Deborah Ruff, has an online estimate of talent and linked to multiple resources, with a focus on educational options.

<http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/>

This website was started by the mother of two gifted children and is now a nearly complete reference for all things gifted!

<http://nagc.org>

This is the website for the National Association of Gifted Children.

<http://www.sengifted.org/>

Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG) offers numerous resources on the social/emotional needs of the gifted. One of its newest initiatives is twice-exceptionalities.