



Celebrating your gifted child's sensitivity

Fiona Smith Registered Psychologist
Gifted Minds

An Australian Mensa Initiative
2017 Australian Mensa Inc.
mensa.org.au

*Australian Mensa provides this information which may be of interest to members or the public.
The opinions expressed in this document are solely those of the author and not of Australian Mensa.*

Why definitions matter

The notion of the intense, sensitive gifted child has become something of a hot potato in the field of gifted education. This is largely because of the broadening chasm between definitions of giftedness currently favoured by educators and those historically favoured by psychologists. The child considered gifted based on her academic performance and the ability to do well in tests at school, may be somewhat different from the child who has been identified as gifted by a psychologist based on the attainment of a high IQ score.

Educators may perceive giftedness in quite a different way to how it is perceived by psychologists, or indeed, by parents. The biggest difference is whether an individual can be gifted if they do not achieve high marks at school or eminence in their field. If gifts are not translated into recognised talents is an individual still gifted?

The Columbus Group emphasises the importance of seeing the bigger picture. Their landmark definition states: *“Giftedness is asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them particularly vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counselling in order for them to develop optimally (The Columbus Group, 1991).*

While this definition hinges on the idea of asynchrony and the role of individual difference, the definition of giftedness currently favoured by the NAGC (National Association of Gifted Children), possibly the most influential body in

the field of gifted education in the US, is somewhat different: *“Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).”*

When opinions differ

When there is such a lack of consistency in defining giftedness, it is not surprising that there is also a lack of agreement in understanding characteristics that may accompany the experience of advanced cognitive ability. Educators see gifted children within the school environment. Psychologists and parents see them outside the school environment. Both educators and psychologists may have had individual experiences of either being gifted themselves, or of raising gifted children. Both groups have their own baggage with regard to how they identify and understand giftedness. This affects the interactions they have with gifted individuals.

The concept of ‘overexcitability’

The idea that gifted individuals may have ‘over’ reactions to stimuli and to other people has been accepted by many of the psychologists who work with them. The Columbus Group definition came about largely as a result of the collaboration of a group of women with many years’ experience working with this population and who had already embraced the work of Polish psychologist, Kazimierz Dabrowski. Michael Piechowski, a colleague of Dabrowski’s, borrowed the concept of ‘overexcitability’ (OE)

from his broader Theory of Positive Disintegration (TPD), first using it in reference to the experience of gifted individuals in the 1970s.

Overexcitability has been translated from the Polish word 'nadpobudliwosc', which means the capacity to be superstimulated, and Dabrowski never meant what he called the overexcitability domains to be seen as purely negative characteristics. Rather, he saw them as innate and describes those who have overexcitability as showing 'strength and perseveration of reactions incommensurate to their stimuli' (1970, p. 98).

High levels of overexcitability are intense, prolonged reactions that are unusually strong in comparison to those of other people. Below are the five domains that Dabrowski explored:

- *Psychomotor*: an extreme need for activity and a delight in being active, both physically and mentally, nervous tics increasing with frustration due to inactivity.
- *Sensual*: delight and disgust reactions to sensory stimuli whether sights, sounds, smells, tastes or textures.
- *Intellectual*: craving for knowledge and a love of learning plus a desire to learn in the company of like minds, whether older in age or of like intellectual ability.
- *Imaginational*: high levels of creativity in the visual, written or performing arts and a delight in and blurring of reality due to fantasy, daydreaming, pretend play and vivid dreaming.
- *Emotional*: extreme feelings of joy, rage, delight and irritation, often changing quickly, high levels of empathy, compassion and tolerance and a craving for the company of like minds as friends.

There has been considerable controversy about the borrowing of the concept of overexcitability domains for use within the field of gifted education. Dr Linda Silverman has been a strong advocate for overexcitability domains as a useful lens through which to understand the heightened intensity and sensitivity of the gifted individuals she has worked with during her long career as a leading psychologist in the field.

The concept of 'openness to experience'

There has been a recent attempt to link the concept of overexcitability with the concept of 'Openness to Experience', one of the factors that make up the Big Five Theory of Personality (FFM) Vuyk, Krieschok & Kerr (2016).

Openness to Experience is a personality factor defined by a craving for new experiences, an enjoyment of both outer and inner worlds, high levels of curiosity, an enjoyment of formulating new ideas, strong aesthetic sensitivity, vivid imagination, and a tendency to have flexible, fluid value systems.

The FFM encompasses five major factors or domains: extraversion (E), neuroticism (N), openness to experience (O), agreeableness (A), and conscientiousness (C).

There are six O facets: Fantasy, Aesthetics, Feelings, Actions, Ideas, and Values (Costa & McCrae, 1992).

Vuyk, Krieschok & Kerr (2016) posit links between O1: Fantasy and Imaginational overexcitability (OE), as both describe people with an active and detailed imagination who enjoy fantasy and daydreaming and who engage vividly in those activities. O2: Aesthetics is seen to link with Sensual OE, as both describe an

ability to become absorbed in beauty and arts, with strong enjoyment of these activities. The O3: Feelings facet and the Emotional OE both describe a full range and intensity of feelings. O4: Actions is seen to link with Psychomotor OE because both describe a love of novelty and moving out of one's comfort zone. O5: Ideas and Intellectual OE, describe intense curiosity, a passion for learning, and a need to understand theories and reasoning. Those who score highly on O6: Values are those who place little importance on authority and do not support dogmas, preferring to revise rules whenever needed. Vuyk, Krieshok & Kerr see no direct link with a specific OE, but suggest that there may be some crossover with Emotional OE, because of its emphasis on high levels of moral reasoning and a strong sense of justice or fairness.

Living with intense and sensitive gifted children

To the parents, educators and psychologists who live or work with gifted individuals, it makes little difference how the characteristics and reactions they must deal with every day are defined. What matters is how they are understood and managed. Adults must first determine the contexts that provoke the child's strongest reactions.

It has been suggested that psychologists only deal with gifted individuals when they are in crisis and, therefore, have a skewed, if not warped, idea of the nature of their intensity and sensitivity. Yet psychologists also deal with many gifted children who need an IQ test to help determine educational programming. These children, who are referred by teachers and brought in by parents, do not necessarily present with complicating factors. Most psychologists who have spent time assessing the cognitive

ability of gifted children comment on the joy involved in watching them rise to the increasing level of challenge and blossom before their eyes, relishing the full degree of extension never experienced in the classroom.

When fully engaged and intellectually challenged these children show an intensity of reaction that is evident in their demeanour—at this point they are 'quiveringly alive', as Piechowski so eloquently characterises it. Yet when facing chronic boredom and heightened levels of frustration, these children show an intensity of reaction and a degree of sensitivity that can very easily be misinterpreted and misdiagnosed.

What makes reactions more intense?

Gifted children react when they are frustrated by chronic boredom. Just like any other person, their levels of reaction differ depending on a number of variables. Gagne's (1985) catalysts give a good indication of the influences that affect reactions. In the Differentiated Model of Giftedness and Talent (DMGT) the catalysts were listed under the headings of Intrapersonal: including physical, motivational, volitional (e.g., the desire to achieve), self-management and personality characteristics and Environmental: including milieu (e.g., surroundings), persons, provisions and events. Chance was included as a factor that could influence both Natural Abilities and Catalysts.

Gagne's Model outlines how natural abilities are translated into Talents through the Developmental process of learning, both at and outside school, and practising. For abilities to translate into recognised talents the child needs to experience sufficient challenge in her areas of strength. When challenged, the child engages the needed Intrapersonal Catalysts, especially those

of motivation, desire to achieve and self-management. When a gifted child is not challenged and stretched intellectually, frustration ensues, which intensifies extreme reactions.

What is good about being intense and sensitive?

Intense reactions and sensitivity to stimuli are not bad things and should not be seen as negative personal characteristics that need to be 'fixed'. A sensitive child is wide open to sensory input, using vision, hearing, smell, touch and taste. This allows strong reactions that are exquisite and disgusting, engrossing and unnerving. Sensitivity also concerns emotional reactions and emotionally sensitive children are those who can draw on their innate empathy to understand the nuances of interactions and show compassion and tolerance to those around them.

Intense and sensitive reactions are only problematic when they become debilitating such that the individual can no longer function effectively. Functioning effectively is another area that is highly controversial as there is considerable variation in how parents, teachers, psychologists and gifted individuals themselves define 'effective'. Effective functioning is very much dependent on context and can be traced back to family experiences and parental understanding and expectations of what is 'normal'.

A high-functioning family of highly gifted individuals may not realise that the intensity and sensitivity of their reactions to stimuli, events and other people is unusual. For them it is the norm, as all members of their family and extended family behave and react in this way. When at school or at community events they

may be seen as 'too' intense or 'too' sensitive, compared to other children and families of more average abilities. It is extremely important that teachers and health care practitioners who interact with these individuals do not misinterpret or misdiagnose aspects of their behaviours that are actually quite normal for them.

The SENG Misdiagnosis Initiative is an excellent resource designed to help those working with gifted individuals better understand them and their particular needs. This means they can appropriately identify gifted children who have learning difficulties and disabilities while avoiding making misdiagnoses with gifted children whose reactions are intense but also 'normal', reflecting frustration due to chronic boredom.

Coping with intense and sensitive reactions

Once recognition of both the positives and negatives related to intense and sensitive reactions has been established, ways and means of enjoying and coping with these reactions can be explored. Even highly positive, pleasurable reactions can be overwhelmingly intense, leaving a small child quite overcome by the experience. When the reaction is negative or even just perceived as negative by others, then the child is even more vulnerable and at risk of labelling.

The first and most important action for all involved is to look at the context. The second is to listen to the child's own explanation, even though this may only be possible after the child has had a chance to calm down and collect her thoughts. A seemingly 'extreme' reaction may in fact be quite reasonable when the context has been explored. It is important to remember that children mirror many of the reactions they

regularly see from their parents. Gifted children are often adept at reading body language. If they are aware that a situation makes their mother or father worried or nervous it is very likely that they will react in a similar way.

Parents who speak in a negative or a despairing way of their children's extreme behaviours in front of them are setting the stage for ongoing issues. For instance, mothers bringing young daughters to see a psychologist for assessment do them no favours by loudly describing the child's difficulty with shyness and anxiety while the child is standing beside them. Young girls who constantly hear this are very likely to show these very characteristics. A positive approach and positive expectations will help the child handle her feelings.

The effects of chronic boredom and frustration

Understanding the situations that lead to intense reactions is the first step in learning how to cope with these responses. Chronic boredom is one such context (Koerth-Baker, 2016). A bit of boredom is not a bad thing and recent research shows that short periods of boredom may in fact enhance creativity. Boredom that lasts for a long time and is relentless, a situation that is often the case for a gifted child in a mixed-ability classroom in which no interventions are available, is chronic boredom.

Chronic boredom leads to high levels of frustration and extreme frustration sparks the more negative expressions of overexcitability. It is helpful for parents and teachers, if they are able to, to identify extreme frustration building up in a child. There are ways to channel this frustration. If boosting the level of daily intellectual challenge is not possible, then identifying the best method of releasing

frustration can be beneficial.

Finding catharsis

Physical exercise is one of the best ways to counter frustration. Jumping on a trampoline, swimming laps, kicking a ball, dancing or even taking part in an organised team sport are just a few of the ways to reduce or eliminate frustration. After collecting your child from school, the best move may be setting them free in a park to play and release pent-up energy in an overtly physical manner.

Another way of releasing frustration can be through a creative pursuit. Writing a diary, composing a poem or lyrics for a song, painting, drawing, designing on a computer, taking photos, playing an instrument, choreographing a dance routine, acting, pretend play or even just the opportunity for a good bout of unsupervised daydreaming can be wonderful outlets. Finally, sensory experiences such as a massage, a warm bath with a soothing essential oil, a selection of soft, slow classical music or a long cosy snuggle with a peaceful parent, pet or family member can also provide much needed release from frustration.

Helping your child assemble their own 'mood kit' can enable them to recover a feeling of control over their intensity and sensitivity that they may feel they had lost. A 'mood kit' is a simple box or basket filled with just a few essential items to be used in times of an intensity or frustration crisis. It helps if you first talk to your child about his reactions. You can start this by talking about your own reactions, both as an adult and as a child. Help your child identify the positive reactions he has—the delight felt when reading a great book or seeing a beautiful picture, rainbow or sunset, the joy of experiencing a fabulous new taste or learning a new dance step or performing

in a play, or understanding a difficult theory. Suggest that your child note some of these experiences so he has a private treasure trove to come back to when feeling sad or worried. Then begin talking about the other experiences she has—the times when frustration is overwhelming and her intensity of reaction is so powerful that it is scary. Tell her it is OK to have these intense feelings, that it is normal to feel rage after long periods of chronic boredom and that she can learn how to identify and control these feelings. Talk about the times when her sensitivity to noise, pain, tastes and smells made her withdraw from new experiences. Tell her it is OK to be sensitive and that she can learn how to best manage these feelings.

Then assemble the 'mood kit'. Find an essential oil or perfume that your child associates with calmness as well as one he associates with increasing his energy levels—he can use one to energise himself when feeling down and the other to relax himself when feeling stressed. Make sure you let him choose. Next find two pieces of music—one calming and one energising. Continue in this manner until your child has a box full of items she can use to help her self-regulate—those that soothe as well as those that excite. The main purpose is so that she can feel in control and has a choice. Items can include special toys or books or even pieces of material, be as creative and 'out of the box' with this as possible.

Conclusion

Once we see sensitivity and intensity as assets rather than as problems to fix, we can help gifted children learn to cope with their unique profiles of excitability, whether based on overexcitability or Openness to Experience. In this way we can nurture their feelings of wellbeing and their enjoyment of these innate personal

characteristics while helping them gain the necessary skills of self-understanding and self-regulation.

Fiona Smith is the Director of the Gifted Minds practice. Fiona's qualifications make her unique in the field, as she combines degrees in Psychology and Education, while specialising in gifted education. Fiona has worked with gifted individuals for the last eighteen years beginning at GERRIC (Gifted Education Research, Resource and Information Centre), UNSW, in 1998 and commencing her private practice in 2004.

Mensa is a not-for-profit society whose members qualify by having an IQ in the top 2% of the population. Mensa's goals include identifying and fostering human intelligence for the benefit of humanity, and encouraging research in the nature, characteristics, and uses of intelligence. The Australian Mensa Information Initiative draws on experts to answer 'frequently asked questions' in an accessible way. For more information, visit: mensa.org.au/giftedchildren.

References

Costa, P. T., & McCrae, R. R. (1992). Revised NEO Personality Inventory (NEO-PI-R) and NEO Five-Factor Inventory (NEO-FFI) manual. Odessa, FL: Psychological Assessment Resources.

Dabrowski, K. (1967). Personality-shaping through positive disintegration. Boston, MA: Little Brown.

Dabrowski, K., Kawczak, A., & Piechowski, M. M. (1970). Mental growth through positive disintegration. London, England: Gryf.

Falk, R. F., Lind, S., Miller, N. B., Piechowski, M. M., & Silverman, L. K. (1999). The Overexcitability Questionnaire–Two (OEQII): Manual, scoring system, and questionnaire. Denver, CO: Institute for the Study of Advanced Development.

Gagne, F. (2003). Transforming gifts into talents: The DMGT as a developmental theory. In N. Colangelo & G. A. Davis (Eds.), *Handbook of gifted education* (3rd ed., pp. 60–74). Boston: Allyn and Bacon. Herrnstein, R., Nickerson, R. S., deSanch.

Koerth-Baker, M. (April, 2016). *Nature*, 529, 146–149 (14)

Piechowski, M. M. (1979). Developmental potential. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 25–57). Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Piechowski, M. M. (2006). *Mellow out, they say. If I only could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright*. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books.

SENG Misdiagnosis Initiative:
<http://sengifted.org/programs/misdiagnosis-initiative/>

Vuyk, M.A., Thomas, T.S. & Kerr, B.A. (2016). Openness to Experience Rather Than Overexcitabilities: Call It Like It Is *Gifted Child Quarterly* 1–20.