

# Overexcitability and the Gifted

by Sharon Lind

A small amount of definitive research and a great deal of naturalistic observation have led to the belief that intensity, sensitivity and overexcitability are primary characteristics of the highly gifted. These observations are supported by parents and teachers who notice distinct behavioral and constitutional differences between highly gifted children and their peers. The work of Kazimierz Dabrowski, (1902-1980), provides an excellent framework with which to understand these characteristics. Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist, developed the Theory of Positive Disintegration as a response to the prevalent psychological theories of his time. He believed that conflict and inner suffering were necessary for advanced development – for movement towards a hierarchy of values based on altruism – for movement from “what is” to “what ought to be.” Dabrowski also observed that not all people move towards an advanced level of development but that innate ability/intelligence combined with overexcitability (OE) were predictive of potential for higher-level development. It is important to emphasize that not all gifted or highly gifted individuals have overexcitabilities. However we do find more people with OEs in the gifted population than in the average population.

## OVEREXCITABILITIES

Overexcitabilities are inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. Found to a greater degree in creative and gifted individuals, overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity, and represent a real difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience. Dabrowski identified five areas of intensity-Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional. A person may possess one or more of these. “One who manifests several forms of overexcitability, sees reality in a different, stronger and more multisided manner” (Dabrowski, 1972, p. 7). Experiencing the world in this unique way carries with it great joys and sometimes great frustrations. The joys and positives of being overexcitable need to be celebrated. Any frustrations or negatives can be positively dealt with and used to help facilitate the child’s growth. The five OEs are described below. Each description is followed by several examples of strategies, which represent a fraction of the possible solutions to issues that may cause concern for overexcitable individuals or those who work and live with them. These should serve as a springboard for brainstorming additional strategies or interventions that will help improve the lives of overexcitable people.

## PSYCHOMOTOR OVEREXCITABILITY

Psychomotor OE is a heightened excitability of the neuromuscular system. This Psychomotor intensity includes a “capacity for being active and energetic” (Piechowski, 1991, p. 287), love of movement for its own sake, surplus of energy demonstrated by rapid speech, zealous enthusiasm, intense physical activity, and a need for action (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). When feeling emotionally tense, individuals strong in Psychomotor OE may talk compulsively, act impulsively, misbehave and act out, display nervous habits, show intense drive (tending towards “workaholism”), compulsively organize, or become quite competitive. They derive great joy from their boundless physical and verbal enthusiasm and activity, but others may find them overwhelming. At home and at school, these children seem never to be still. They may talk constantly. Adults and peers want to tell them to sit down and be quiet! The Psychomotor OE child has the potential of being misdiagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

## PSYCHOMOTOR STRATEGIES

- Allow time for physical or verbal activity, before, during, and after normal daily and school activities-these individuals love to “do” and need to “do.” Build activity and movement into their lives.

- Be sure the physical or verbal activities are acceptable and not distracting to those around them. This may take some work, but it can be a fun project and beneficial to all.
- Provide time for spontaneity and open-ended, freewheeling activities. These tend to favor the needs of a person high in Psychomotor OE.

### **SENSUAL OVEREXCITABILITY**

Sensual OE is expressed as a heightened experience of sensual pleasure or displeasure emanating from sight, smell, touch, taste, and hearing (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Those with Sensual OE have a far more expansive experience from their sensual input than the average person. They have an increased and early appreciation of aesthetic pleasures such as music, language, and art, and derive endless delight from tastes, smells, textures, sounds, and sights. But because of this increased sensitivity, they may also feel overstimulated or uncomfortable with sensory input. When emotionally tense, some individuals high in Sensual OE may overeat, go on buying sprees, or seek the physical sensation of being the center of attraction (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Others may withdraw from stimulation. Sensually overexcitable children may find clothing tags, classroom noise, or smells from the cafeteria so distracting that schoolwork becomes secondary. These children may also become so absorbed in their love of a particular piece of art or music that the outside world ceases to exist.

### **SENSUAL STRATEGIES**

- Whenever possible, create an environment which limits offensive stimuli and provides comfort.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for being in the limelight by giving unexpected attention, or facilitating creative and dramatic productions that have an audience. These individuals literally feel the recognition that comes from being in the limelight.
- Provide time to dwell in the delight of the sensual and to create a soothing environment.

### **INTELLECTUAL OVEREXCITABILITY**

Intellectual OE is demonstrated by a marked need to seek understanding and truth, to gain knowledge, and to analyze and synthesize (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Those high in Intellectual OE have incredibly active minds. They are intensely curious, often avid readers, and usually keen observers. They are able to concentrate, engage in prolonged intellectual effort, and are tenacious in problem solving when they choose. Other characteristics may include relishing elaborate planning and having remarkably detailed visual recall. People with Intellectual OE frequently love theory, thinking about thinking, and moral thinking. This focus on moral thinking often translates into strong concerns about moral and ethical issues-fairness on the playground, lack of respect for children, or being concerned about "adult" issues such as the homeless, AIDS, or war. Intellectually overexcitable people are also quite independent of thought and sometimes appear critical of and impatient with others who cannot sustain their intellectual pace. Or they may become so excited about an idea that they interrupt at inappropriate times.

### **INTELLECTUAL STRATEGIES**

- Show how to find the answers to questions. This respects and encourages a person's passion to analyze, synthesize, and seek understanding.
- Provide or suggest ways for those interested in moral and ethical issues to act upon their concerns-such as collecting blankets for the homeless or writing to soldiers in Kosovo. This enables them to feel that they can help, in even a small way, to solve community or worldwide problems.
- If individuals seem critical or too outspoken to others, help them to see how their intent may be perceived as cruel or disrespectful. For example saying "that is a stupid idea" may not be well received, even if the idea is truly stupid.

## **IMAGINATIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY**

Imaginational OE reflects a heightened play of the imagination with rich association of images and impressions, frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Often children high in Imaginational OE mix truth with fiction, or create their own private worlds with imaginary companions and dramatizations to escape boredom. They find it difficult to stay tuned into a classroom where creativity and imagination are secondary to learning rigid academic curriculum. They may write stories or draw instead of doing seatwork or participating in class discussions, or they may have difficulty completing tasks when some incredible idea sends them off on an imaginative tangent.

## **IMAGINATIONAL STRATEGIES**

- Imaginational people may confuse reality and fiction because their memories and new ideas become blended in their mind. Help individuals to differentiate between their imagination and the real world by having them place a stop sign in their mental videotape, or write down or draw the factual account before they embellish it.
- Help people use their imagination to function in the real world and promote learning and productivity. For example, instead of the conventional school organized notebook, have children create their own organizational system.

## **EMOTIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY**

Emotional OE is often the first to be noticed by parents. It is reflected in heightened, intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, and strong affective expression (Piechowski, 1991). Other manifestations include physical responses like stomachaches and blushing or concern with death and depression (Piechowski, 1979). Emotionally overexcitable people have a remarkable capacity for deep relationships; they show strong emotional attachments to people, places, and things (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977). They have compassion, empathy, and sensitivity in relationships. Those with strong Emotional OE are acutely aware of their own feelings, of how they are growing and changing, and often carry on inner dialogs and practice self-judgment (Piechowski, 1979, 1991). Children high in Emotional OE, are often accused of "overreacting." Their compassion and concern for others, their focus on relationships, and the intensity of their feelings may interfere with everyday tasks like homework or doing the dishes.

## **EMOTIONAL STRATEGIES**

- Accept all feelings, regardless of intensity. For people who are not highly emotional, this seems particularly odd. They feel that those high in Emotional OE are just being melodramatic. But if we accept their emotional intensity and help them work through any problems that might result, we will facilitate healthy growth.
- Teach individuals to anticipate physical and emotional responses and prepare for them. Emotionally intense people often don't know when they are becoming so overwrought that they may lose control or may have physical responses to their emotions. Help them to identify the physical warning signs of their emotional stress such as headache, sweaty palms, and stomachache. By knowing the warning signs and acting on them early, individuals will be better able to cope with emotional situations and not lose control.

## **GENERAL STRATEGIES**

It is often quite difficult and demanding to work and live with overexcitable individuals. Those who are not so, find the behaviors unexplainable, frequently incomprehensible, and often bizarre. Overexcitable people living with other overexcitable people often have more compassion and understanding for each other, but may feel conflicts when their OEs are not to the same degree. Finding strategies for helping children and adults deal with and take advantage of these innate and enduring characteristics may seem difficult. However, resources may be gathered from varied places: Literature regarding counseling, learning styles, special education, and classroom management; parenting books; even popular business texts. Perhaps the best place to begin is with the following general strategies, applicable regardless of which OEs are present.

## **DISCUSS THE CONCEPT OF OVEREXCITABILITY**

Share the descriptions of OEs with the family, class, or counseling group. Ask individuals if they see themselves with some of the characteristics. Point out that this article and many others like it indicates that being overexcitable is OK and it is understood and accepted.

## **FOCUS ON THE POSITIVES**

Jointly discuss the positives of each overexcitability when you first introduce the concept, and continue to point out these merits. Benefits include being energetic, enthusiastic, sensual, aesthetic, curious, loyal, tenacious, moral, metacognitive, integrative, creative, metaphorical, dramatic, poetic, compassion-ate, empathetic, and self-aware.

## **CHERISH AND CELEBRATE DIVERSITY**

One outcome of the pursuit of educational and societal equity has been a diminishing of the celebration of diversity and individual differences. Highly gifted individuals, because of their uniqueness, can fall prey to the public and personal belief that they are not OK. It is vital when discussing OEs that individuals realize that overexcitability is just one more description of who they are, as is being tall, or Asian, or left-handed. Since OEs are inborn traits, they cannot be unlearned! It is therefore exceedingly important that we accept our overexcitable selves, children, and friends. This acceptance provides validation and helps to free people from feelings of “weirdness” and isolation

Another way to show acceptance is to provide opportunities for people to pursue their passions. This shows respect for their abilities and intensities and allows time for them to “wallow” in what they love, to be validated for who they are. Removing passions as consequences for inappropriate behavior has a negative effect by giving the message that your passions, the essence of who you are, are not valuable or worthy of respect.

## **USE AND TEACH CLEAR VERBAL AND NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

All people deserve respect and need to be listened to and responded to with grace. Overexcitable people need this understanding and patience to a greater degree because they are experiencing the world with greater intensity and need to be able to share their intensity and feelings of differentness to thrive. It is vital to learn good communication skills and to teach them to children. Good communication skills are useful on multiple levels, from improving the chances of getting what you want, to nurturing and facilitating growth in others. Regardless of one’s motivation for learning these skills, the outcomes will include less stress, greater self-acceptance, greater understanding from and about others, and less daily friction at home, school, work, or in the grocery store.

When learning communication skills be sure to include both verbal-listening, responding, questioning, telephoning, problem solving (Faber and Mazlish, 1980), and nonverbal-rhythm and use of time, interpersonal distance and touch, gestures and postures, facial expressions, tone of voice, and style of dress (Nowicki, 1992). Verbal and nonverbal strategies improve interpersonal communication and provide the skills individuals need to fit in when they wish to, to change the system if necessary, and to treat others with caring and respect.

## **TEACH STRESS MANAGEMENT FROM TODDLERHOOD ON**

Everyone deals with stress on a daily basis. But overexcitable individuals have increased stress reactions because of their increased reception of and reaction to external input. There are many programs and books about stress reduction. The key components are to (1) learn to identify your stress symptoms: headache, backache, pencil tapping, pacing, etc. (2) develop strategies for coping with stress: talk about your feelings, do relaxation exercises, change your diet, exercise, meditate, ask for help, develop organizational and time management skills and (3) develop strategies to prevent stress: make time for fun; develop a cadre of people to help, advise, humor you; practice tolerance of your own and others’ imperfections.

## **CREATE A COMFORTING ENVIRONMENT WHENEVER POSSIBLE**

Intense people need to know how to make their environment more comfortable in order to create places for retreat or safety. For example: find places to work or think which are not distracting, work in a quiet or calm environment, listen to music, look at a lovely picture, carry a comforting item, move while working, or wear clothing which does not scratch or cling. Learning to finesse one’s environment to meet one’s needs takes experimentation and cooperation

from others, but the outcome will be a greater sense of well being and improved productivity.

### **HELP TO RAISE AWARENESS OF ONE'S BEHAVIORS AND THEIR IMPACT ON OTHERS**

Paradoxically, overexcitable people are often insensitive and unaware of how their behaviors affect others. They may assume that everyone will just understand why they interrupt to share an important idea, or tune out when creating a short story in their head during dinner. It is vital to teach children and adults to be responsible for their behaviors, to become more aware of how their behaviors affect others, and to understand that their needs are not more important than those of others. The key is to realize that you can show children and adults how they are perceived, you can teach them strategies to fit in, but they must choose to change.

### **REMEMBER THE JOY**

Often when overexcitability is discussed examples and concerns are mostly negative. Remember that being overexcitable also brings with it great joy, astonishment, beauty, compassion, and creativity. Perhaps the most important thing is to acknowledge and relish the uniqueness of an overexcitable child or adult.

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