



Living with Intensity: Part Two

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Living with Intensity: Helping Gifted Kids Cope



Agenda

- 1 Intensity and Giftedness: Let's Review
- 2 Living with Intensity: Strategies to Modulate Overexcitabilities
- 3 Living with Intensity: Intensity in Adolescence
- 4 Living with Intensity: Coping with Stress and Exquisite Perception
- 5 Living with Intensity: Misdiagnosis & Missed/Dual Diagnosis: Implications
- 6 Living with Intensity: Integrating Intensity
- 7 Living with Intensity: Family Dynamics and Intensity
- 8 Living with Intensity: Perfectionism and Levels of Development

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“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 counseling in order for them to develop optimally.”

The Columbus Group, 1991

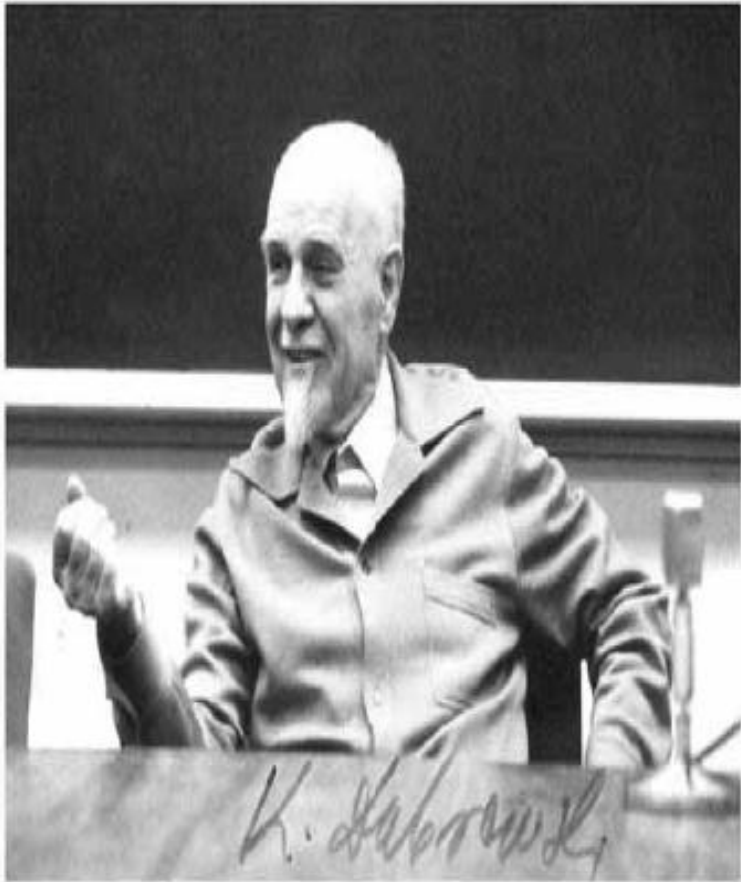


The profile of each gifted child is affected by:

- **Asynchrony of developmental tasks in each area**
- **Birth order in the family**
- **Gender**
- **Family constellation (including extended family)**
- **Cultural, linguistic, economic background**
- **Temperament (introversion/extraversion; range of intensity/sensitivity; optimism/pessimism)**
- **Overexcitabilities (Dabrowski)**
- **Unique combination of cognitive/affective characteristics of giftedness**



Kazimierz Dabrowski 1902-1980



The Man

- Polish psychiatrist, psychologist, musician, educator
- Lived through two world wars
- Imprisoned by Germans/Communists
- Directed a mental health clinic in Poland
- Emigrated to Canada later in life

His Work

- Theory of Personality
- Development fueled by tension within self
- Developmental potential
- Multi-levelness
- 5 Overexcitabilities
- Lifespan development that is NOT age-based, or stage theory

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- **Nonontogenetic** – unrelated to physical maturation
- **Role of Emotion** – “the emotional sphere at every level of development is the decisive factor that determines and controls human activity” (Dabrowski, 1970, p. 112)
- **OE expressions reflect a person’s level of development, and therefore look very different at different levels**
- **OEs are isolated at low levels and integrated at high levels**

* Source: Dabrowski Workshop



OVEREXCITABILITIES : THE GIFTS AND CHALLENGES

The overexcitabilities can be thought of as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual and emotional energy which cause inner turmoil, but can result in creative endeavors as well as advanced emotional and ethical development in adulthood.



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Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities

Psychomotor (P):
love of motion,
surplus of
neuromuscular
energy

Imaginational (M):
free play of the
imagination, capacity
for fantasy

Intellectual (T):
intensified activity of
the mind, questioning,
reflective thought

Psychomotor

Sensual

Imaginational

Emotional

Intellectual

Sensual (S): sensory
sensitivity (good and
bad), appreciation of
balance and aesthetics

Emotional (E):
intense and complex
feelings, strong
attachments,

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PSYCHOMOTOR OVEREXCITABILITY

LOOKS LIKE

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

MODULATION SUGGESTIONS

- Plan for movement before and after activities
- Involve child in physical activities
- Teach relaxation strategies
- Teach the signature signal of your child that calming is needed
- Provide time-out as a choice not a punishment

Source: Chapters 1 & 3



SENSUAL OVEREXCITABILITY

LOOKS LIKE

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

Source: Chapters 1 & 3

MODULATION SUGGESTIONS

- Provide environments that limit offensive stimuli and maximize comfort
- Provide opportunities to dwell in delight
- Foster control of child's living space
- Co-create aesthetic environments
- Note attachments to comfort objects may last longer



IMAGINATIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY

LOOKS LIKE

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 for boredom Need for novelty and variety

MODULATION SUGGESTIONS

- Encourage imaginings and creative thoughts
- Provide opportunities for design and invention
- Foster calming techniques through guided imagery
- Develop imagination through problem-solving
- Record creative and imaginative ideas either in print or via video/voice

Source: Chapters 1 & 3



INTELLECTUAL OVEREXCITABILITY

LOOKS LIKE

Intensified activity of the mind

Curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, avid reading, keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning

Penchant for probing questions and problem solving

Search for truth and understanding, forming new concepts, tenacity in problem solving

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)

Source: Chapters 1 & 3

MODULATION SUGGESTIONS

- Honor the need to seek and understand truth
- Alter sleep patterns as necessary
- Teach inquiry methods for areas of interest
- Seek interactions with idea peers
- Allow projects based on individual interests
- Recognize that precision of logic is essential for some
- Foster self-reflection such as journaling



EMOTIONAL OVEREXCITABILITY

LOOKS LIKE

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, attachment to animals, difficulty adjusting to new environments, compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships, loneliness

Well-differentiated feelings toward self

Inner dialogue and self-judgment

MODULATION SUGGESTIONS

- Accept feelings and their intensity
- Teach a “feeling” vocabulary
- Model emotional “temperature taking”
- Find outlets for social concerns through volunteer and service learning projects
- Role play or anticipate new emotional experiences in unfamiliar situations or settings
- Explore the range of feelings and listen and respond with care and empathy

Source: Chapters 1 & 3

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INTENSITY IN ADOLESCENCE

- **Distinction between puberty (biological, sexual maturation) and adolescence (personal identity and place in social context beyond family)**
- **Time of biological change is a natural disintegrative state (Dabrowski)**
- **May or may not be a time of dysfunction**
- **Giftedness brings challenges of increased cognitive development and enhanced social and emotional awareness**
- **May begin in gifted children younger than typically developing child**
- **Physical/emotional/social/spiritual development may show great levels of unevenness**



INTENSITY IN ADOLESCENCE HOW ADULTS CAN SUPPORT

- Develop trust and rapport to guide the ability to see one's self more objectively and reflect on others without judgement
- Deep need to help others and personal craving to connect with others
- Help create understanding of this dynamic
- Provide insight into how deep need to connect can be confused with developing sexual feelings





STRATEGIES FOR ADOLESCENT SUPPORT

- **Encourage multi-generational support**
- **Honor dignity and personhood of young person but provide guidance and boundaries**
- **Pay attention to wisdom and ethical regard**
- **Provide opportunities for personal responsibility and decision-making**
- **Provide opportunities to interact with mentors and true peers**
- **Create curriculum that integrates subject matter which encourages original thought and develops intellectual risk-taking**
- **Recognize “chance” factors or happenstance is not controllable**

* Source: Chapter 4

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Stress

- **Environmental or self as source**
- **Each Self experiences pressure differently**
- **Stress can be positive-be impetus for growth**
- **Many pressures are related to giftedness (complex thinking, expectations of others, inability of adults to face global issues)**
- **Pressure to be perfect (competing needs from self and others)**





SUGGESTIONS FOR ADULTS/CAREGIVERS

- Help children recognize personal stress patterns and develop coping skills to match
- Recognize the essential role of emotional growth and do not separate from intellectual growth
- Ensure that personal needs are not imposed on children
- Demonstrate genuine empathy when the child is struggling emotionally; provide support and not solutions
- Listen closely to the stories children tell—they provide clues to the support they desire
- Validate and mirror appropriate emotional responses

* Source: Chapter 5

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Dabrowski and Mental Health

- **Seeks to answer question: What is mental health?**
- **His view of mental health is not typical**
 - Both disintegration of mental structures and active developmental processes
 - Not a balanced approach
 - Problems may signal that the personality is developing
- **Misdiagnosis and missed diagnosis may be related to TPD (Theory of Positive Disintegration) and OEs**
- **Giftedness and characteristics MAY be be confused with a pathological condition (misdiagnosis) OR**
- **Failure to recognize either the giftedness or the disorder (or both) and results in missed diagnosis**



Misdiagnosis & Missed/Dual Diagnosis: Implications

- **Giftedness is important to accurate clinical diagnosis**
- **Clinical difficulties may be related to giftedness and overexcitabilities and/or may include a clinical diagnosis**
- **Adaptation of non-productive behaviors is important—giftedness, OEs and disintegration are not excuses for behaviors; rather explanation**
- **Understanding behaviors at varying Levels of Development is essential as behaviors may look pathological**
- **OEs are often a cause for misdiagnosis; frequency, duration, or intensity of an action or reaction are good indicators of whether this is typical or not**

* Source: Chapter 6



When to Find Outside Help



- Are intensity, duration or frequency of behavior interfering significantly at home or school?
- Are behaviors causing family difficulties? Among siblings? Between parenting partners?
- Are there changes in eating, sleeping or moods?
- Are drugs or alcohol suspected?

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■ **Loneliness of Inner Intensity**

- Rich interplay of imagination, intellect and emotion may be a solitary venture
- Need outward expression in the world to feel a sense of well-being
- Lack of such experiences can be lonely and isolating

■ **Grounding and Stamina**

- Psychomotor experiences combined with aesthetics (sensual) can be a key to integration
- Platform for integration and vehicle for expression of intensity

■ **Role of Therapist**

- Can enliven the client through validation and empathy
- Unconditional positive regard can foster discovery of the client's inner resources
- Reciprocal and responsive exchanges provide opportunities for growth

* Source: Chapter 7

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Family Dynamics

- Parents with strong OEs are likely to have children with strong OEs
- Giftedness can be a quality of the family
- If child is identified gifted then it is likely that the parents are also
- Parents have difficulty acknowledging own giftedness
- High OEs create challenges for the entire family

- Extended family may be affected
- Adults need to be able to recharge
- Parents must cope with behaviors associated with high OEs often early in life
- Multiple children in the family with varied patterns of OEs coupled with parent sensitivities/intensities can be demanding

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Patterns in Parenting

Accepting Accommodating Differences

- Parents recognized children differed from norm in intensity and sensitivity
- Families made accommodations to needs of children

Parenting Style

- Differed from typical families
- Issues surrounded sharing authority with children and “openness” about adult issues

Resources and Resiliency

- Concern about adequate resources
- Connections with other families provide deep sense of community

Adult Self-care

- Important not to forget adult needs
- Additional stress (energy, financial, emotional) requires attention

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Giftedness and Perfectionism

Immobilize

- **Lack of challenge and/or stimulation may lead to creating complexity**
- **Competition for grades/prizes**
- **Accustomed to success; failure avoidant**
- **Incapable of meeting inner standards or meeting expectations of others**
 - **Paralysis**
 - **Underachievement**

Energize

- **Passionate drive to create**
 - **Move beyond limits thought possible**
 - **Experience “flow”**
- **Envision possibilities where none exist**
- **Push beyond reasonable limits**
- **Experience great joy commensurate with the struggle**



Dabrowski's Theory and Perfectionism



- Perfectionism looks different at different levels of development
- Moves from debilitating “other-oriented perfectionism to integrated perfectionism of the personality
- Writers who perceive perfectionism to be a negative trait focus primarily on perfectionism at Level 2 (tries to live up to societally imposed perfectionism)
- Self-perfection emerges at Level 3



Channeling Perfectionism

Teachers

- Provide rigorous and challenging work
- Ensure opportunities to struggle
- Praise for effort not achievement (Dweck)
- Develop safe environment for risk-taking
- Focus on learning experiences not only the final product
- Allow for multiple attempts to work toward mastery

Parents

- Clinical experiences does not equate exacting parents with perfectionistic kids
- Many perfectionists consider that they are MORE perfectionistic than parents
- If self-worth is tied to achievement then authoritarian parents seemed perfectionistic
- Healthy perfectionists had parents who did not expect perfectionism

You

- Appreciate the trait
- Reframe “mistakes” as learning experiences
- Set priorities for yourself
- Start a project (or two or three) instead of procrastinating
- Don’t punish yourself
- Recognize the positive and negative aspects of perfectionism



“Although awareness and resources are essential in this process, we know that awareness and resources are not enough. We must *use this knowledge on behalf of our gifted children and campaign for them until they have the experience and ability to advocate for themselves.*”





**Do You Have
Any Questions?**