

Gifted Children: Emotionally Immature or Emotionally Intense?

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Abstract

This paper examines the emotional intensity of gifted children in terms of the Overexcitabilities that are a component of Dabrowski's theory of emotional development. Descriptions of emotional intensity are given together with examples of behaviour associated with emotional intensity that are often mistakenly perceived as emotional immaturity. It concludes that emotional intensity in the gifted is essential to the learning process and that gifted children need adult understanding and support to accept their rich inner experiences and value emotional intensity as a strength.

Introduction

I am a very misunderstood person....People think that my life is easy because I am talented but I have a lot of problems of my own just because of these talents. I often get cut down for something good that I do. This is very hard to cope with. I am a very sensitive and emotional person. I get angered or saddened very easily. I can also get happy easily. I think I like this part of me. All these emotions make me feel good about myself....I am not a very confident person, though people think I am. (Male age 16; Piechowski 1998)

In the field of gifted education it is often not well known that giftedness has an emotional as well as a cognitive substructure: cognitive complexity gives rise to emotional depth. Gifted children not only think differently from their peers, they also feel differently. Michael Piechowski explains this difference in feeling as intensity; an expanded field of subjective experience. "Intensity, in particular, must be understood as a qualitatively distinct characteristic. It is not a matter of degree but of a different quality of experiencing: vivid, absorbing, penetrating, encompassing, complex, commanding-a way of being quiveringly alive". (cited in Silverman, 1993. p. 3)

The Overexcitabilities

Emotional intensity can be understood as a positive characteristic for gifted children in the context of Dabrowski's theory of Emotional Development. Emotional development proceeds as a function of the interaction between the individual's developmental potential and environment. Developmental potential is constituted of a person's talents, intelligence, five forms of psychic overexcitability and the capacity for inner transformation. (Dabrowski 1972; Piechowski 1979)

Overexcitability (expanded awareness and a heightened capacity to respond to stimuli of various types) is a translation from a Polish term which means the capacity to be superstimulated. The term overexcitability was chosen to convey the idea that the stimulation is well beyond the common and average in intensity and duration. The difference in intensity and sensitivity is not only greater than normal, it is also a difference in the very quality of experiencing.

Overexcitabilities can be thought of as an abundance of physical, sensual, creative, intellectual and emotional energy that can result in creative endeavours as well as advanced emotional and ethical development in adulthood. As such, they are a positive force for the gifted, as they feed, enrich, empower and amplify talent. (Piechowski 1999)

Overexcitabilities are assumed to be innate and appear in five forms:

Psychomotor - surplus of energy, restless, curious

Sensual - sensory and aesthetic pleasure

Intellectual - strong signs of analysis and synthesis, theoretical thinking, probing questions, learning, problem solving

Imaginational - vivid fantasy life, spontaneous imagery, sensitive to imaginary realities

Emotional - intensity of feeling:, complex emotions and feelings, extremes of emotion, sensitivity, identification with the feelings of others, difficulty adjusting to change.

(Dabrowski 1972; Piechowski, cited in Silverman, 1993)

Emotional Overexcitability

High levels of Emotional Overexcitability are exhibited by gifted children, adolescents and adults as the capacity for emotional depth. The depth and intensity of emotional life are expressed by the gifted through a wide range of feelings, attachments, compassion, heightened sense of responsibility and scrupulous self-examination. While these are normal for the gifted and appear very early in gifted children, they are often misunderstood as signs of emotional immaturity rather than as evidence of a rich inner life. (Piechowski & Colangelo 1984)

Table 1: Forms And Expression Of Emotional Intensity.

Intensity of feeling: positive feelings, negative feelings, extremes of emotion, complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, laughing and crying together

Somatic (bodily) expression: tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing

Inhibition: timidity, shyness

Strong affective memory

Fears and anxieties, feelings of guilt

Concerns with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Relationship feelings: emotional ties and attachments, concern for others (empathy), sensitivity in relationships, attachment to animals, difficulty in adjusting to new environments, loneliness, conflicts with others over depth of relationship

Feelings toward self: self-evaluation and self-judgment, feelings of inadequacy and inferiority

(Piechowski 1979)

Emotional Intensity

Descriptions of emotional intensity experienced by gifted people include the following:

*flooded by unexpected waves of joy
a feeling of being incredibly alive
so happy that I want to laugh and cry or be silent and shout all at the same time
beautiful music or the beauty of nature can move me to tears
even the greatest pain has been ecstatic and full of life.*

These same people describe their inner experiences of emotional intensity as:

*moments of disequilibrium and estrangement
the familiar suddenly feels alien
feelings of unreality
intense feelings of difference
rapid shifts in perspective
dissatisfaction with self
inner turmoil
feeling of being overwhelmed
despair. (Piechowski 1998)*

I am often overwhelmed by emotion. At these times I feel the need to cry and not control it, to sit in it and make sense of it. This emotional intensity is a strength that supports my personal growth. (female adult)

Sometimes my feelings are so strong that my heart races, my chest feels tight and I can't catch my breath. (male adolescent)

Whenever I am called on in class a tide of red rises up and engulfs my face. It burns so much that I am sure everyone can see it. (female age 10)

When I kill a fly or an ant or any other insect, I suddenly get a feeling like "should I have done that? That's really like going and killing a human being. I bet the animals have their own life, feelings. They must because they are really intelligent". The next time a fly gets in the way, I'll just let it go because I feel guilty. (female age 13, from Michael Piechowski's collection)

Sometimes the beauty of trees flowering or birds singing fills me with awe and I just stand there not able to move. (female age 12)

Two boys were fighting in the school ground and I burst into tears. I couldn't stand to feel their pain and cruelty. The other children called me a baby and a wimp. The teacher told me to act my age. (male age 9)

I pick up other people's feelings. I don't know how I do this. It's like being hit by a bag of sand on a rope. It's like walking into someone else's life. I am overwhelmed by these feelings. (male age 14)

Sometimes I am completely in touch with a person. It's weird and compelling at the same time. I just want to reach out to them. I don't even have to have spoken to them. (female age 18)

I was in class and a wasp flew in the window. The others were frightened and the teacher chased it and killed it. It took a long time to die. I could feel its pain inside me and I cried and shouted at them all at the same time. Nobody understood...to them it was just a wasp. (female age 14)

*I am a person who has feelings...I have friends. I love life...
NOTE: I HAVE FEELINGS. (female age 12)*

Emotional Immaturity or Emotional Intensity?

Michael was 4 years old when his mother took him to see the movie "Charlotte's Web". He left the theatre sobbing uncontrollably because the spider had died, leaving her children alone in the world. He cried for hours that day and continued speaking about death and sadness for months afterwards. His parents were concerned as he withdrew into himself. His teacher said that he wouldn't mix with other children and didn't want to play with his friends.

Thomas, 7, is described by his teachers as a shy and sensitive boy who is very aware of the needs of other children. In class, he is quiet and hesitant to do activities until he has had time to watch and evaluate them. He is, at times, uncomfortable with the noise and activity level in the room and displays extreme emotions during these times, often crying.

Rebecca 8 was working happily on her drawing in class when suddenly she threw it to the ground, stamped on it and burst into tears, yelling "it's not right, I can't do it right".

Annabel 6 taught herself to read and write before she started school. She loved books, particularly The Hobbit, which was her favourite. In her first at school she was made to read at the level of other children her age and she became withdrawn. The teacher said that she had poor social skills. In her second year she was frustrated and angry and began to misbehave and disrupt the class. The suggestion was made that she should attend counselling to correct her oppositional and anti-social behaviour.

Heightened sensitivity to things that happen in the world is a normal response for gifted children. However they may see their own intense inner experiences as evidence that something is wrong with them. Other children may ridicule a gifted child for reacting strongly to an apparently trivial incident, thereby increasing the child's feeling of being odd. Also, sensitivity to society's injustice and hypocrisy can lead many emotionally intense gifted children to feel despair and cynicism at very young ages.

The Columbus' Group's definition of giftedness includes both the cognitive and emotional components and encompasses the concept of asynchrony. (Silverman 1993) Asynchrony in the gifted means a lack of synchronicity in the rates of their cognitive, emotional and physical development. This lack of synchronicity creates great inner tension, as when a five-year old child perceives a horse through eight-year-old eyes but cannot replicate the horse in clay with her five-year-old fingers and so screams in frustration. (Morelock 1992)

Roedell (1984) discusses the unique vulnerabilities of gifted children that are associated with asynchrony: areas of vulnerability include uneven development, perfectionism, adult expectations, intense sensitivity, self-definition, alienation, inappropriate environments and role conflicts.

The gap between a child's advanced intellectual capability and more age-appropriate social and physical skills leads to unrealistic expectations for performance. Young children become frustrated when their limited physical capabilities prevent the construction of the complex projects created in their extremely capable imaginations. Adults expecting social maturity to match high level intellectual development may label a highly articulate, logical child as a behaviour problem when he or she exhibits an age-appropriate tantrum. This situation worsens when pressures to excel from teachers or parents intensify the child's frustrations. (Roedell 1984)

Because of their intellectual complexity, a gifted child can imagine a vast range of life scenarios that are unthinkable to the average child. They can and do feel with great intensity the emotions that are attached to each scenario and this can lead to them being overwhelmed by anxiety and fear. If adults in their lives respond by moralising, being dismissive or judgmental, emotionally intense gifted children may feel abnormal and decide that "There must be something wrong with me.....maybe I'm crazy...nobody else seems to feel like this".

Smutny (1998) explains how gifted children feel deeply for others. "They sense the joys, pains, sorrows and hopes of family members, friends, classmates and sometimes become distressed when they cannot alleviate the problems of others.....Gifted children will often weep at the cruel treatment of an animal. They will frequently ask questions and express concern about world problems - poverty, war, environmental devastation". (p10) This empathy for the suffering of others makes gifted children particularly vulnerable to the many forms of insensitivity they see on television, at school or in the world around them. Often these children feel powerless to act and this sense of helplessness can lead them to despair and being critical of themselves as they feel a responsibility for these situations.

Gifted children feel a "yearn to learn". They feel driven to ask questions (about everything in life) and find answers. Many emotionally sensitive gifted children, who are simply doing what comes naturally for them, sense that their classmates do not like them, do not understand why and feel a deep sense of pain when others sneer at them for having the answers. According to Roedell (1984), if they are labelled as different and strange by their age mates, they may internalise this designation and become eccentric social isolates.

Again because of their intellectual complexity, gifted children are idealists; they are able to consider the possibilities of how things might be. At the same time they can see how far short the world is falling of the ideal and they feel keen disappointment and sometimes despair. When they try to share their concerns with others, they are often met with reactions such as denial, minimising, puzzlement or hostility. (Webb 1998)

Often adults in gifted children's lives unknowingly reinforce perfectionism by placing expectations of high performance all the time in everything on them. Teachers, parents and other adults often have inappropriately high expectations for gifted children; whether directly stated or implied. (Lind 1998) Because gifted children are often emotionally sensitive to the expectations of others, they feel obliged to meet them. Unfortunately, they often meet them at the cost of denial and suppression of their own passion, their own self. (Grant & Piechowski 1999)

Also damaging is when adults ignore high level ability and focus instead on perceived emotional immaturity, behaviour problems or social immaturity. Underestimation of ability can result in a rapid decline in self-esteem and consequently self-confidence.

Emotionally intense children may then withdraw from social interaction because they feel they have no one who can understand or accept them. This withdrawal may be diagnosed as emotional disturbance.

Gifted children's intellectual complexity coupled with emotional intensity means that they are more likely than others to experience a type of depression referred to as existential depression. (Webb 1998) They can become aware at a very early age that their life is finite and brief, that they are alone and are only one very small organism in a quite large world and that there is a frightening freedom to how one chooses to live one's life. They see that making choices among life's possibilities is arbitrary and that there is ultimately no right choice. Their reactions to this can be bewilderment, frustration, anger and then outbursts of emotion and inappropriate behaviour. At this point they question life's meaning and ask the question "Is this all there is to life? I am a small, insignificant organism who is alone in an absurd, capricious world where my life can have little impact, and then I die." (p25)

When I ask myself "who am I?", the answer is "An insignificant speck in the vast universe trying to make something of itself but probably won't succeed. A biological imperfect human being destined for certain death in the end and being forgotten, even though it attempted to make something of itself". But sometimes I get an irrational response "You are a perfect intelligence. You are destined to become a powerful person". This response sometimes scares me. (male aged 15, from Michael Piechowski's collection)

Conclusion

Delisle (1995) feels strongly that the field of gifted child education has become so enmeshed in curricula, instruction and educational reform that it has lost its soul.

Neglect of the emotional lives of children impacts on their intellectual lives and achievements as emotions are critical to the learning process and to the full development of the individual and to society. Gifted children have powerful resources to support themselves emotionally but they need help to apply their critical thinking, reasoning ability, inventiveness, imagination and willingness to explore to their own emotional intensity and sensitivity. They have not yet lived long enough to develop the objectivity that this would require.

Parents and teachers are in the best position to help gifted children to alleviate their fears, frustrations, sadness and self - doubt by teaching them to use their prodigious intellectual abilities to support their emotional richness. (Silverman 1988)

It is vitally important to their intellectual achievement and to their emotional development that gifted children understand that their intense feelings are normal for them and that they feel accepted, understood and supported. After all, it is emotional intensity that provides the driving energy, commitment and persistence that supports intellectual conceptualisation and leads to great achievement in the world. Gifted emotionally intense children need the help of significant adults in their lives to accept their rich inner world of experience and value it as a strength. This means that these adults have to accept and value their own emotional experience and feelings so that they can be positive role models for gifted children. However, speaking about and valuing emotions can be very difficult to do in a society that values logical thinking and sees emotions as the opposite of rationality.

If emotional intensity is seen and presented positively to gifted children as a strength, they can be helped to understand and value the gift of emotion. In this way gifted children will be empowered to express their unique selves in the world and use their gifts and talents with confidence and joy.

My intense emotions can, at times, be a burden; I feel intense pain as well as joy. The pain is more bearable, is easier to see as positive if I am

understood and supported in it. I don't want other people to touch my pain, to interfere, to take it away. I want to be accorded the right, the dignity, the integrity as a fellow human being to have and deal with my pain in my own way. I want and need to feel supported in this. (Female gifted adult)

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