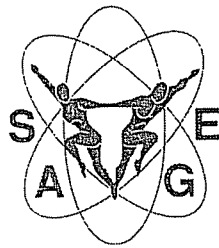


"Imagining the Way"

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

**19th Annual SAGE Conference
The Society for the Advancement of Gifted Education**



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KEYNOTE SPEAKER – Michael Piechowski

Living with Intensities and Sensitivities

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Children exhibiting strong excitabilities are often embarrassed and made to feel guilty for being “different.” Criticized and teased for what they cannot help, they begin to believe there is something wrong with them. Sometimes they learn to disguise their intensity, sometimes they seek refuge in imaginary worlds of their own creation, sometimes they try to “normalize” themselves and as a result suffer depression or ill-defined anxiety.

The expressions of heightened excitability listed in Table 1 fall into two basic categories:

- (1) The natural expression of a given intensity and sensitivity and
- (2) The way emotional tension may be funneled through them.

When gifted children are asked which expressions apply to them they readily give examples of corresponding behaviors and feelings. Pearl Buck said, “The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him...a touch is a blow. A sound is a noise. Misfortune is tragedy. A joy is an ecstasy. A friend is a lover. A lover is god. And failure is death.”

Intensities and sensitivities are the foundation of talent and creativity. Because this manner of experiencing tends to be viewed as overreacting, it is often treated as something to be cured—“for the good” of the child. Parents tend to worry about these intensities. They fear their child will be judged and rejected, and they wish to protect it from unnecessary pain. It is true that a high level of intensity and sensitivity creates problems for many people who don’t know how to respond and how to help the child with it. It must be remembered that the problem is often even more acute for the young person.

Accepting and acknowledging that this way of experiencing is natural for an excitable child, reassures the child. Some allowances and adaptations to the child’s intensity and sensitivity go a long way. This was done in a preschool class in Denver. The classroom atmosphere was open to the free expression of the children’s heightened excitabilities. A restless child endowed with a high level of energy focuses attention best when free to move around and use his or her hands. An emotionally sensitive child may at times be overwhelmed by great tension and stress. Holding the hand of an understanding adult may be enough to provide relief. A warm bath and rubbing the child’s back are also effective methods of soothing to restore balance. In some children emotional and sensory sensitivity are so high that noise, lights too bright, unpleasant smells or tastes may be extremely upsetting. One then needs to take the child out of the noxious environment or remove the offensive stimulus. Because this is how the child’s nervous system reacts, it is critical to not demand that the child “get over it.”

Strategies to cope with overexcitabilities:

1. *Patience*

Parents and teachers must exercise considerable patience to not condemn it as “overreacting” but see it as the child’s inner reality.

Consistent order of living space and the rhythm of family life

The child’s sensitivity requires having his or her own order of things preserved. That children need order and predictable routines is well known. When a sensitive and intense child is thrown off balance by his own emotions and vivid imagery, a departure from routine (for instance, in the way a story is told), may be extremely upsetting because the child absolutely needs reliable markers of consistency and support.

2. *Loving acceptance* and understanding is the strongest support. For understanding emotional life, two kinds of skill are absolutely necessary:

- the ability to listen
- the knowledge of human development.

3. *Knowing how to listen.*

Listening attentively— without prejudice and without preconceived notions— requires putting on strong brakes so that one stops oneself from interpreting and thinking of what to say. Listening requires taking in how the other person sees his or her situation and how he or she feels about it.

We have to listen, carefully and attentively, to hear *the intended message*—the feeling behind the words, the yet-unarticulated level of experience, not yet capable of being consciously grasped and expressed. We listen like this when we give the other person our full attention. Giving and receiving attention is a wonderful gift.

A bright 17-year old high school student realized the importance of listening well. She understood that one listens to help the person hear themselves, not to give advice or to interfere, even with the best intentions:

I wish I were more sensitive to others, and this is something I have been working on. I’ve come to think that the way to be sensitive to someone else is just to be there and listen, don’t preach, just listen. I feel I could tell them what I believe about the question, but know they must come to their own decision. This belief makes it possible for me not to worry overly about someone else’s problems, because I feel what they decide to do is what they should do. People worry if they feel you are doing something wrong. I cannot feel this way. Each person’s life goes the way it will; I would not want to forcibly change anyone’s life.

4. *Advance preparation for changes and new situations.*

Changes, especially sudden changes, cause such children extreme stress. If changes and transitions are to be made, it is good to prepare the child in advance by explaining and giving the details of what will be encountered. For instance, going through the security check at the airport can easily frighten a sensitive and imaginative child who may think that his family is the target. When the nature of the occasion, the people involved, and the general flow of the event are explained to children, it removes the uncertainty that is likely to be a source of stress and difficulty for the children.

5. *Avoiding environments causing stress*

If the child reaches a point when he or she can no longer handle the situation and wants to leave, it is best to leave as soon as possible. *Allowing expression of feelings.* The degree of emotional intensity is a stable individual characteristic and quite independent of specific events which actually evoked the emotion. Emotional intensity, or its lack in unemotional people, is a characteristic of temperament which can be observed early in life.

Emotionally intense individuals can also be very sensitive to the feelings of others, to their being hurt, or being treated with injustice. Criticism of others is often perceived as unfair and felt as hurtful. If an emotionally sensitive child grows up with too much criticism and ridicule, the child will begin to seek self-protection in emotional withdrawal, and may create an inner shield. The price for such withdrawal and denied feeling is high: loss of emotional vitality, lack of enjoyment of one's successes and achievements, and lack of the sense of who one is, in short, a process of emotional deadening.

Watch over a child who does not show a reaction to loss and trauma. In the aftermath of September 11, children were particularly affected by the general feeling of insecurity and the anxieties that adults cannot hide. Even a mention of the tragedy can evoke an overwhelming reaction. Children who lost a parent, a relative or a friend can be helped in programs that use self-expression to help children cope with the loss. But those who don't show their grief are also having a tough time.

In many children the initial reaction is often hidden, only to emerge weeks or months later in nightmares, slipping in school work, or listlessness and withdrawal.

6. *Use imagery to cope with fears and anxieties*

A child with vivid imagination will often be upset by images seen on television, scary movies, violent news stories or sensational gossip. Some children cannot get the disturbing images out of their mind. One may suggest that the child place a more positive picture in their mind or that the bad images be put in a file and locked away. Many children have a hard time stopping their thinking. Falling asleep becomes difficult and often involves a long process of winding down. If you talk with them about their methods of slowing down and quieting their mind, you may discover surprisingly elaborate strategies.

7. *Practice relaxation*

One of the most practical things to do is to introduce children early to effective methods of relaxation. Some gifted children practice a form of meditation that brings them to a peaceful and joyful state. Young children benefit from 5-minute meditations which can be progressively extended to 20 minutes. All children benefit from guided imagery that enables them to relax and become peaceful.

8. *Exceptional does not mean abnormal*

It is a common mistake to take something exceptional as a defect. What is outside the norm is not necessarily a dysfunction. An Olympic athlete and a musical prodigy are outside the norm but it does not make them abnormal. In addition to their talents they have an “abnormally” high proportion of fast twitching muscles, which give their limbs and fingers exceptional agility. This is a natural, inborn capacity. It is unfortunate that talent may be recognized and valued, but the personality trait of heightened excitability that goes with it is not. Such a trait may look abnormal and create difficulties for the individual. Mental health professionals tend to see it as something to be cured. One of the most common misjudgments is to label a child full of energy and vitality as hyperactive.

From:

Michael M. Piechowski (2006). “Mellow Out,” *They Say. If I Only Could: Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright*. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books, 2006, pp. 23–30.

See also:

Kurcinka, M. S. (1991). *Raising your spirited child: A guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, energetic*. New York: HarperCollins.

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

Table 1

FORMS AND EXPRESSIONS OF OVEREXCITABILITY

Michael M. Piechowski, "Overexcitabilities." Encyclopedia of Creativity, vol. 2. Academic Press, 1999

PSYCHOMOTOR

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

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

INTELLECTUAL

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)

IMAGINATIONAL

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

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;
- difficulty adjusting to new environments; compassion, responsiveness to others, sensitivity in relationships; loneliness

Well differentiated feelings toward self

- inner dialogue and self-judgment