

Managing the Rainbow!

Gifted Children and Intensity



What Do The Experts Say?

“Gifted children can be exhausting, demanding, and perplexing enigmas. They often amaze, delight, and confound the adults who know, love, and teach them. Any day with a gifted child can bring a multitude of intense experiences for the adults who interact with them as well...to be gifted is to experience emotional extremes.”

– Webb, Amend, Goerss, Geljan & Olenchak, 2005

“Gifted children simply tend to be more intense than other children in everything they do. Whatever they do, they do intensely. Whatever they believe, they believe intensely. They state opinions intensely.”

– Webb, Gore, Amend, DeVries, 2007

“Gifted 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 Columbus Group, 1991

“Gifted children take in information from the world around them; they react and respond more quickly and intensely than other children. They are stimulated both by what’s going on around them and by what moves them from within. Because they can be so greatly stimulated, and because they perceive and process things differently, gifted children are often misunderstood.



Their excitement is viewed as excessive, their high energy as hyperactivity, their persistence as nagging, their questioning as undermining authority, their imagination as not paying attention, their passion as being disruptive, their strong emotions and sensitivity as immaturity, their creativity and self-directness as oppositional.”

– Daniels & Piechowski, 2009

Helping Gifted Children Live With Intensity – Suggestions for Parents & Educators

Gifted kids have an **active imagination** and may daydream or tune out in different situations. Don’t get upset with a child for daydreaming, as this may be their time to decompress from the stress of the day. Support their active imagination by providing unique/fun tasks that allow them to hone their creative skills.

The gifted child can develop **strong interests** in certain topics. Educators sometimes describe this as “tunnel vision” when the child only wants to learn about topics they are passionate about. Teach these children appropriate research strategies and skills, and allow time for them to do pet projects.

Gifted kids can get into **power struggles** with adults when they are upset. Avoid getting caught up in arguments, and discuss the situation calmly to help them understand. Using humor can often break the intense struggle, helping them step back and realize that they may be making too a big deal out of something.

The gifted can have a **lack of understanding** about why others don’t share the same interests or don’t seem to learn as quickly as they do. Provide support to help them develop empathy, patience, and understanding about the differences among people to keep them from being judgmental, and to help them make friends.

Managing the Rainbow! *Do You Have a Visual Learner?*

Does your child have emotional intensity? Do they have a vivid imagination? Or have a kind of uncanny radar that gives them the ability to read your mood, and see connections that other people don't notice? Maybe they are "**Lego Kids**" who love building and playing games, getting so wrapped up in what they are doing that they lose all sense of time? Do teachers comment that your child doesn't listen and struggles to follow directions, dislikes reading/writing, and seems distracted or shut down in school?



If this sounds familiar, you may have a "**picture thinker**" (also known as a visual-spatial learner or "right-brain" dominant). They are big-picture, divergent, and non-linear thinkers who use perception, imagination, and intuition to learn. *Read more about them here:* <http://www.visualspatial.org/spatialstrengths.php>

Among gifted students, the proportion of visual learners is very high. However, they can be at a disadvantage in a traditional classroom where teaching favors "auditory-sequential" learners, who are just the opposite: step-by-step, detail-oriented, linear thinkers who listen well, follow directions, and can learn by drill and practice. Too often, the strengths and needs of visual learners are overlooked, while the weaknesses become magnified by the demands of regular curriculum. *For a comparison of visual vs. auditory learners, read this:* <http://www.visualspatial.org/vslasl.php> or see Chapter 2 of *A Parents Guide to Gifted Children* (Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries, 2007).

Many parents and teachers dislike "labels" for children, but on the other hand, once a child feels understood, and their needs are being met, they often have more resilience and emotional energy for difficult tasks and challenges, and this can help turn around a frustrating experience in school.

The Visual-Spatial Identifier, a 15-question quiz, can help you understand whether your child is a visual learner. *Find it here:* <http://www.visualspatial.org/vsi.php>

Here are some great resources to help you find out more about visual learning:

Visual Leap

by Jesse Berg (2015)

A terrific book for teachers, students, and parents who want to learn visual strategies to help improve reading, writing, vocabulary, note-taking, and creating essays.

Upside-Down Brilliance: The Visual-Spatial Learner

by Linda Kreger Silverman (2002)

Learn practical ways to recognize, reach, and develop visual-spatial abilities.

The Shut Down Learner: Helping Your Academically Discouraged Child

by Richard Selznick (2008)

One of the worst feelings a child can have is being discouraged in school. The sense of hopelessness can become almost insurmountable. Without jargon or technical language, this book helps parents understand their "Lego kids" and offers solutions.

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Gifted Children and the “Big 5” Overexcitabilities

The Parent’s Guide to Gifted Children (2007) explains that:

“Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist, developed a theory that has enormously affected our understanding of gifted children and adults. His theory includes the concept of “**overexcitabilities**”, referring to a person’s heightened response to stimuli. This concept has shed light on the intensity and sensitivity so often displayed by persons with unusually high mental abilities. “

“...excitability seemed to occur in five different areas (intellectual, imaginal, emotional, sensual, and psychomotor). Some individuals showed their excitable passion and intensity in all areas; others in fewer areas, perhaps only one or two.”

“The idea is that gifted children’s passion and intensity lead them to be so reactive that their feelings and experiences far exceed what one would typically expect.”

“These overexcitabilities are both a major source of strength to gifted children and also often a cause of substantial stress, a source of personal frustration, or a basis for criticism.”

- Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries, 2007

The accompanying table illustrates the five OEs and explains how they might appear to parents or educators.

Using color-coding to represent the different OEs, you can see how they cover a spectrum of behaviors, and you can begin to think of them as a “rainbow” of traits.

Understanding the colors of a child’s unique rainbow can help both parents and educators make sense of their often perplexing, or even exasperating behavior.



The group “Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted” or SENG (sengifted.org) published a 2001 article on the OEs by Sharon Lind who said the following:

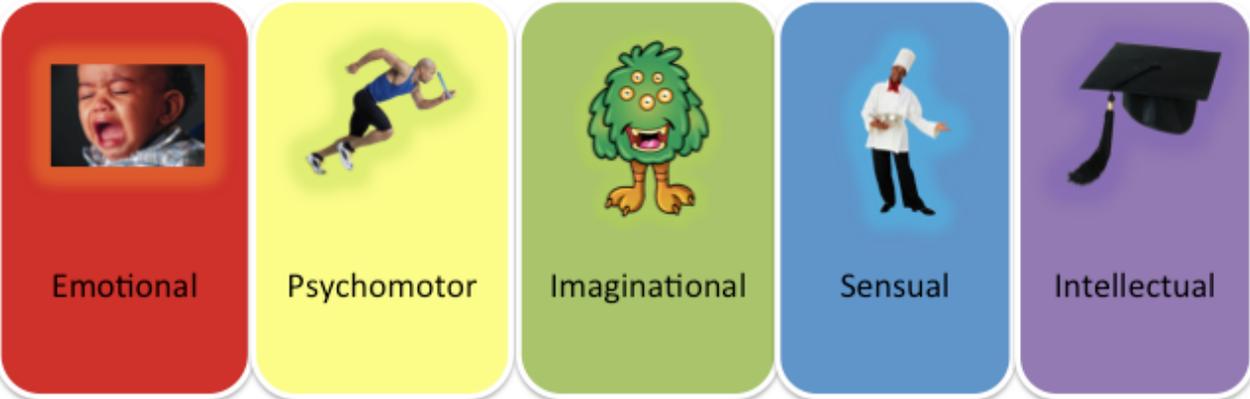
“One outcome of the pursuit of educational and societal equity has been a diminishing of the celebration of diversity and individual differences. Highly gifted individuals, because of their uniqueness, can fall prey to the public and personal belief that they are not OK.”

“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. 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.”

Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities (OEs)

	
Emotional	<p>What it is...extreme and complex emotions and intense positive/negative feelings; development of deep relationships and attachment to people, places and things; concern over the well-being of others or the environment</p> <p>What it may look like...highly sensitive, moody, overly dramatic, over-reacting, temper tantrums; but also compassionate, caring, empathetic, able to form strong attachments</p> <p>When upset...depressed, anxious, or angry; highly self-critical; may suffer physical illness; may lash out or withdraw; feels responsible for things beyond their control</p>
Psychomotor	<p>What it is...heightened capacity for being active & energetic</p> <p>What it may look like...rapid speech, surplus of energy, twiddling hair, tapping feet or pencils, fidgeting, compulsive organizing, very competitive, boundless physical and verbal enthusiasm/activity (that may be mis-diagnosed as hyperactivity or ADHD)</p> <p>When upset...hyperactive, frustrated, competitive, compulsive, nervous tics</p>
Imaginational	<p>What it is...heightened imaginative & creative ability; drawn to fantasy</p> <p>What it may look like...daydreaming, imaginary friends, animistic thinking, fantasy play, belief in magic; artistic, dramatic, highly visual; drawn to complex imaginative schemes and use of metaphor</p> <p>When upset...may tune out/withdraw into fantasy world, or have fear of the unknown</p>
Sensual	<p>What it is...heightened senses (seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing); unusual sensitivity to music, language, and foods</p> <p>What it may look like...delight in artistic pleasures, cooking/eating, soothing textures/fabrics; or negative physical reaction to over-stimulation from sensual input i.e., very sensitive to noise, lighting, perfumes, tags/seams in clothing; or may be picky eaters</p> <p>When upset...may over-indulge or seek comfort/luxury; may console oneself with a favorite cozy baby blanket or stuffed animal</p>
Intellectual	<p>What it is...highly intelligent; a thirst for knowledge, understanding & truth</p> <p>What it may look like...a love of logic, brain-teasers & puzzles; intense curiosity, problem-solving & theoretical thinking skills; avid reading, asking probing questions; very concerned with moral issues & fairness; independent thinkers & keen observers; but can be perfectionists and have overly intense focus (to exclusion of all else)</p> <p>When upset...can be critical or impatient with others; may over-analyze situations; may be overly perfectionistic & self-critical</p>

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Gifted? Or Just Smart?

You may question how to distinguish between being “gifted” and being “smart”. Society often equates giftedness with intellectual ability (IQ) or academic success. Indeed, some “gifted” programs focus on GPA, or increasing the amount (and/or pace) of classroom work; however, giftedness is actually defined in much broader terms.

The primary difference between a smart child vs. a gifted child is in the **depth, complexity, and intensity** of certain key traits (*see the following table for examples*).

Is My Child Gifted or Just Smart? What is the Difference?		
Trait	Smart	Gifted
Curiosity	More curious than average children	Far more curious; seeks in-depth information
Reading Level	Enjoys reading books	Reads voraciously with an ability above grade-level
Questioning Style	Asks questions that have answers	Also asks questions about abstract ideas, concepts, theories
Learning Style	Works in a step-by-step fashion to grasp concepts and can demonstrate each step on paper	Exhibits “skip-thinking” – often jumps straight to the answer without having to go thru all the steps; arrives at answer in their head and can’t always explain how
Level of Interest & Focus	Asks questions and is curious about a number of different things	Intense curiosity & focus; ability to immerse themselves in a topic; can be single-minded
Emotional Outlook	More adaptable and self-regulating; can get past an upsetting incident fairly quickly	Experiences heightened & sometimes all-consuming emotions; can have difficulty regulating emotions or letting things go
Language Ability	Learns vocabulary quickly; uses words typical for their age group	Uses advanced (“adult”) vocabulary; understands nuances of language; enjoys word play or humor
Concern with Fairness	Understands and practices fairness but often on a personal level only	Shows intense concern for fairness and equity, often on a societal or global level; grasps subtle moral or ethical questions

Finally, people often do not understand that some gifted children can be underachievers, or may even be what is known as 2e or “twice exceptional” if they are gifted and also have a learning disability.

(Note – giftedness can also sometimes be mis-diagnosed as hyperactivity or ADHD, especially in boys – get the facts in the free brochure published by SENG at sengifted.org).

Managing the Rainbow! *Gardner's Multiple Intelligences*

School programs for gifted children continue to emphasize primarily academic areas but there are other intelligences that are often neglected. Howard Gardner's 1983 book (*Frames of Mind*) influenced how schools approach education programs for children with high ability. It suggested that traditional notion of intelligence (based on IQ testing) was far too limiting.

He developed a strong case for recognizing "multiple intelligences". Of all the intelligences listed by Gardner, only two – linguistic intelligence (word smart) and logical-mathematical intelligence (number smart) – are regularly emphasized in school programs for identifying gifted children.

Students who are unusually "body smart" or "music smart" have traditionally had their needs met through participation in sports or music programs. As mentioned previously "picture smart" kids (also known as "Lego Kids") may run into difficulty in the traditional elementary classroom, although in higher grades they may have the opportunity to take classes in art, photography, drafting, or robotics.

Children who are "people smart" may engage in school clubs or student government where they can exercise their leadership skills. However the student with strong intrapersonal skills that make them "self smart" (i.e., having a well developed understanding of self) may not be supported except when school counselors or teachers discuss feelings, self-concept or self-esteem.

- Webb, Gore, Amend & DeVries (2007)



See James T. Webb et al. 2007 – *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children*