

CHAPTER 4

Reexamining Overexcitability: A Framework for Understanding Intense Experience

MICHAEL M. PIECHOWSKI AND CHRISTIANE WELLS

Very bright children enter school with high hopes only to have those hopes dashed by the crushing reality of rigid requirements and tedious pace of learning. Schools are not designed to serve those who are eager to learn and whose relentless questioning and uncommon interests strain the patience of teachers and peers. A bright 16-year-old expressed what typically happens:

I'm a very misunderstood person. I know that I am blessed by God with many talents that others don't have and I'm thankful, but people think I'm bigheaded and a show off when all I'm doing is trying to have fun.

People think my life is easy because I'm talented, but I have a lot of problems of my own just because of these talents. I often even get cut down for something good that I do. This is very hard to cope with.

I'm not a very confident person, though people think that I am. I don't think I'm very good looking, talented or smart but others say I am, so I just kind of go along with them. I'm afraid of losing in sports and in relationships. (Piechowski, 2014, p. 212)

A number of difficulties are apparent that are the direct result of the gap between this boy and his peers. Speaking in full sentences and giving articulate answers were interpreted by others as showing off, and his painful sense of isolation was mistaken for confidence. He could, of course, as many gifted students do, hide his abilities, and even deliberately lower his grades. However, if he did that, he would not be true to himself, creating internal conflict and further distress.

Another gifted student, who stood up for her values and was bullied throughout middle and high school, had this to say:

You can't escape who you are. You can deny it, even run from it, but can never, never escape it. Most people were ashamed of the bad parts of themselves. I was ashamed of my *good* qualities. Maybe being strong would serve me well when I grew up, but it was destroying my life right now. Why couldn't I be like other teenagers? Other kids didn't fret over the things that worried me. (Blanco, 2003, p. 106)

Gifted and creative children experience and act differently from their peers, but this difference is often misunderstood. Excitement and high energy are often viewed as hyperactivity, persistence as nagging or disrespect, questioning as undermining authority, imagination as not paying attention, strong emotions as immaturity, creativity and spontaneity as distractibility, and self-directedness as oppositionality. Gifted children may be described as hard to manage, badly behaved, or just plain odd—despite, or perhaps because of, their intelligence. Today, gifted students of different ethnicities and lower social strata are often not recognized as gifted (Peterson, 1997, 2009, 2018). Such students do not always “make nice”; instead, they may appear defiant when they feel they are not respected.

A DIFFERENT QUALITY OF EXPERIENCING

Giftedness represents a higher level of energy. Gifted children tend to be more active than their peers. Their physical, intellectual, or emotional energy tends to be high unless, by lack of acceptance, it has been dampened into depression.

We believe many gifted children also engage with the world more vividly and more intensely. They experience life at a high pitch but also with greater sensitivity to nuance. Thoughts and sensations race and tumble over each other, often on many tracks simultaneously. Memories, desires, and a rich tapestry of feeling produce a multidimensional perception of the world, other persons, and one's

own life and its many possibilities. It is like having a dish antenna that captures tens of thousands of channels instead of a few dozen.

The concept of heightened excitability, or *overexcitability*, was used by Kazimierz Dabrowski, a Polish psychiatrist and psychologist who was interested in the psychological makeup of intellectually and artistically gifted youth (Dabrowski, 1964, 1967). These young people came to him with a crisis of values, existential despair, doubts about their vocation, stage anxiety, depression, and other intensely felt emotional difficulties. To mental health professionals, such crises look pathological. However, to Dabrowski, the emotional forces that brought on this suffering and misery also pushed for emotional growth and resolution. To explain this phenomenon, he developed a theory called the *theory of positive disintegration*—because the new is in the process of replacing the old that no longer works. The theory includes the concept of overexcitabilities as part of a talented individual's developmental potential. (Sometimes, mistakenly, it is called a “theory of overexcitabilities.”) In brief, these characteristics, together with conscious effort toward becoming a better human being, are the necessary factors for advanced emotional growth (for an outline of the theory see Ackerman, 2009; Daniels & Piechowski, 2009; Mendaglio, 2008).

The term *overexcitability* is firmly established in research literature (De Bondt et al., 2019; Falk & Miller, 2009). It means to be very alive, perceptive, persistent, energetic, and intense—or quiet but feeling deeply and having vivid mental or aural pictures. Some people call this level of experiencing “intensity,” but the picture is more complex and far from fully explored (Piechowski, 2014). Keep in mind that heightened sensitivity is also involved. Overexcitabilities come as original equipment (OE), something a child is born with. Highly excitable people can be, and often are, annoying and bothersome to less excitable people.

The nervous system responds to what goes on in the external environment and to what goes on inside—the internal environment. Each person differs from one another in the ways they become stimulated. The excitement may be moderate or strong, acute or sustained. Excitability is a property of the nervous system and the brain. How the brain processes experience varies from individual to individual.

Intense acting and reacting may appear excessive and out of proportion to the situation, yet these are often essential components of talent. Without passion no talent can be strong (Piirto, 2004). Intensity creates a distinctly different quality of experience—not just more than the “normal” average, but distinctly more alive and alert. A highly sensitive child also responds to fine nuances of emotion, as well as to errors and gaps in knowledge, qualities of imagination, and refined sensory experience. This needs to be distinguished from the more negative connotation of sensitivity of people who are easily offended or upset.

The research has shown that not all gifted individuals experience Dabrowski's overexcitabilities, but those who do are often misunderstood and sometimes mislabeled. Since the first edition of this book, more information has come to light about the history of overexcitability, and there has also been increased knowledge and understanding about twice-exceptional children—those who are gifted and also diagnosed with a second exceptionality (see Chapter 16 by Carpenter, this volume). In this chapter, we will encourage an understanding of the overexcitabilities as a neurological difference that creates challenges, and we will also present updated research as part of the discussion.

FIVE AREAS OF INTENSITY (OVEREXCITABILITY)

Individual intensities have many possible expressions, as shown in Table 4.1 (Piechowski, 1979, 2014).

Psychomotor

High energy level finds expression in rapid talk, gesticulation, intense athletic activity, hard physical work, and a tendency to be highly competitive or driven. One student described his high energy level as always present: "It would be easier to tell you when I don't feel the most energy" (Piechowski, 2014, p. 49). Another wrote, "Often I get bursts of energy that make me twitch or jump as if suddenly shocked with a high dosage of electricity" (Piechowski, 2014, p. 46). He named exactly what this is—nerve cells conducting stimulation as pulses of electricity.

Psychomotor overexcitability also includes hyperactivity, as well as the expression of emotional tension through a psychomotor outlet. Examples include pacing and gesticulating, but also outbursts of anger and explosiveness.

Sensual

Heightened responsiveness to sensory stimuli makes sensory experience rich, alive, and refined, with a person taking delight in beautiful objects, textures, tastes, aromas, or sounds. As one adolescent said,

I seem to notice more smells than a lot of other people. I love dark, musty smells and earthy smells, herbs and things like that. I love the smell of clean air in spring and tree blossoms and

Table 4.1
Forms and Expressions of Overexcitability

Psychomotor	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Surplus of Energy</i>: rapid speech, marked excitation, intense physical activity (e.g., fast games and sports), pressure for action (e.g., organizing), marked competitiveness • <i>Psychomotor Expression of Emotional Tension</i>: compulsive talking and chattering, impulsive actions, nervous habits (e.g., tics, nail biting), workaholism, acting out
Sensual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Enhanced Sensory and Aesthetic Pleasure</i>: seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, hearing, and sex; delight in beautiful objects, sounds of words, music, form, color, balance • <i>Sensual Expression of Emotional Tension</i>: overeating, sexual outlets, buying sprees, desire for the limelight
Intellectual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Intensified Activity of the Mind</i>: curiosity, concentration, capacity for sustained intellectual effort, avid reading; keen observation, detailed visual recall, detailed planning; passion for precision • <i>Passion for Probing Questions and Problem Solving</i>: search for truth and understanding; forming new concepts; tenacity in problem solving; passion for precision • <i>Reflective Thought</i>: 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Free Play of the Imagination</i>: frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, facility for detailed visualization, poetic and dramatic perception, animistic and magical thinking • <i>Capacity for Living in a World of Fantasy</i>: predilection for magic and fairy tales, creation of private worlds, imaginary companions, dramatization • <i>Spontaneous Imagery as an Expression of Emotional Tension</i>: animistic imagery, mixing truth and fiction, elaborate dreams, illusions • <i>Low Tolerance of Boredom</i>: need for novelty and variety
Emotional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Feelings and Emotions Intensified</i>: extremes of emotion and of positive and negative feelings, complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, awareness of a whole range of feelings • <i>Strong Somatic Expressions</i>: tense stomach, sinking heart, blushing, flushing, pounding heart, sweaty palms • <i>Strong Affective Expressions</i>: inhibition (timidity, shyness); enthusiasm, euphoria, pride; strong affective memory; feelings of unreality, fears and anxieties, feelings of shame and guilt, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods

Table 4.1, continued

Emotional, continued	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Capacity for Strong Attachments, Deep Relationships</i>: 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 • <i>Well-Differentiated Feelings Toward Self</i>: inner dialogue and self-judgment
---------------------------------	--

Note. Information gathered from Piechowski, 1979, 2014.

things and the smell of clean bodies, especially hair. (Piechowski, 2014, p. 57)

Sensual and emotional overexcitability often combine together, making the experience richer and more meaningful. Like the psychomotor form, sensual overexcitability can also include the expression of emotional tension through sensual outlets, such as seeking comfort in food.

Intellectual

A gifted mind is easily stimulated by questions, theories, the quest for truth, and a craving for knowledge, discovery, and new problems to solve. For example,

I read stories deeper, read into questions, find catchy puns or mistakes of words in people's writings, et cetera. If something has no meaning I try to give it some. If it means something I wonder why. When given a topic to write about, for example, I usually have a completely different approach to the same topic than does the rest of the class. (Piechowski, 2014, p. 66)

One of the consequences of intellectual intensity may be an interest in uncommon domains and involvement in games that require accumulation of considerable knowledge and highly complex rules. To their classmates, "nerds" and "geeks" may appear odd and incomprehensible (Anderegg, 2007). Intellectual is the only type that Dabrowski saw as not requiring treatment, or accommodations, but he was concerned about the likelihood of one-sided development.

Imaginational

Imagination enables creative inspiration, invention, and discovery of new possibilities, as well as the ability to see the humorous side of events. Daydreaming may be idle or creative; deep absorption in private imagery may be trancelike. Boredom is anathema, and the need for novelty is absolute. As one student noted, “Once in a while I try to hypnotize my plants. And I even tried to put a rock in a trance, but I think that day I was desperate for something to do” (Piechowski, 2014, p. 101). Vividness of imagery, unusual metaphors, and rich dreams are typical of writers and other creators. A surprising number of children have imaginary friends, often unknown to the adults around them (Piechowski, 2014; Taylor, 1999). Humor may also be a defense mechanism, especially for class clowns, as a way of coping with their giftedness or a difficult life at home (Jacoby, 1988).

Imaginational overexcitability can also look like inattention. Some students are so engrossed in daydreaming and their inner worlds that it has a negative impact on their ability to pay attention in the classroom. In some cases, the world in their imagination becomes more important than concrete reality for the individual, and it is important to help the child establish a balance between these realities.

Emotional

The heightened intensity of emotional life produces a wide range of feelings experienced very deeply—compassion, responsibility, self-examination and self-judgment, fears and anxieties, and deep attachments to people, objects, and places. A strong sense of fairness compels a child to act—often in defense of another not being treated fairly—by standing up to a teacher. Emotional intensity becomes evident early and tends to remain for life:

Sometimes after talking to someone, being alone watching the animals at sunrise, I feel as if I should conquer the world, do anything and everything. I feel like I am a bird who can soar with . . . just me, the wind, and the sun. (Piechowski, 2014, p. 156)

On the downside, there may be depression: “Depression, especially self-induced depression, causes me to think deeply and search deeply into myself, it may also cause me to react violently or forcibly to a situation or problem” (Piechowski, 2014, p. 160).

RESPONSE TO STRESS

Because they have less control over their lives, children and adolescents are often subject to more stress than adults, not less. As mentioned previously, emotional tension may be funneled into a psychomotor channel through actions that allow for its discharge. Examples include compulsive talking and chattering, acting on impulse, displaying nervous habits (kicking one's feet, drumming fingers, pacing, biting pencils and fingernails), working compulsively, or acting destructively. Emotional discomfort, such as feeling sad or upset, may be shunted into the sensual sphere as a source of comfort. Examples include eating rich foods, drinking alcohol, stroking furs or another person, or inhaling perfumes. To a child with a rich imagination, anxiety can paint horrors and catastrophic scenarios. To an intensely intellectual child, anxiety or conflict can also lead to endless rumination and internal argument. Harrison and Van Haneghan (2011) explored the relationship between overexcitabilities and insomnia, fear of the unknown, and death anxiety in gifted middle and high school students. They found that gifted students had higher levels of insomnia, fear of the unknown, and overexcitabilities compared with typical students.

SELF-RECOGNITION

When gifted children are asked which expressions of overexcitability apply to them, they readily give examples of corresponding behaviors and feelings. Strickland (2001) developed an instructional unit for gifted middle and high school students to aid the exploration, understanding, and acceptance of these often unsettling traits. Instruments for measuring these characteristics have been developed over the years, spurring research studies including other countries, such as Venezuela, Turkey, Taiwan, Mexico, Spain, and Korea, that found strikingly similar profiles. Thus, the five characteristics of intensity (overexcitability) in the gifted have cross-cultural validity (for a review, see Falk & Miller, 2009).

The items in Table 4.1 are a tool for counseling gifted students, individually or in groups. When students produce their own examples for the items that apply to them, this focuses their attention on their experience and acknowledges and affirms them as persons. Similarly, one can use the questions of the Overexcitability Questionnaire (OEQ) one at a time (see Figure 4.1). When responses are written out, the student has the benefit of creating a record of the experience that they can consult at a later time. Rivero (2010) described how teens can recognize, work with, and enjoy their overexcitabilities.

Figure 4.1 *Overexcitability Questionnaire*

1. Describe how you feel when you are extremely joyous, ecstatic, or incredibly happy.
2. What has been your experience of the most intense pleasure?
3. How vivid are your dreams, daydreams, and fantasies? Describe.
4. What kinds of things get your mind going?
5. Describe what you do when you feel full of energy.
6. What attracts you in people you like, and what in those you become close to?
7. How do you act when you get excited?
8. How well do you visualize events, people, and things—real or imaginary? Give examples.
9. What do you like to concentrate on the most?
10. What physical activity (or, inactivity) gives you the most satisfaction?
11. What pleasures do you derive from looking at things?
12. What pleasures do you get from different tastes?
13. What delights you in different smells?
14. What pleasures do you experience from touching?
15. What pleasures do you experience from different sounds?
16. Do you sometimes catch yourself seeing, hearing, or imagining things that aren't really there? Give examples.
17. How do you think about your own thinking? Describe.
18. What gives you the strongest urge to do something? Please, elaborate.
19. Does it sometimes appear to you that things around you have a life of their own, and that animals, plants, and all things in nature have their own feelings? Give examples.
20. When you are faced with a difficult idea or a concept, what do you do in order for it to become clear?
21. What do you do when you feel poetic? Describe.
22. How often do you carry on arguments in your head? What sorts of things are they about?
23. When you ask yourself, "Who am I?" what is the answer?
24. When you were young, did you have an imaginary playmate? One, or several? Please, describe.

Note. From "Mellow Out," *They Say. If I Only Could: Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright* (2nd ed., p. 363), by M. M. Piechowski, 2014, Royal Fireworks Press. Copyright 2014 by M. M. Piechowski. Reprinted with permission of the author.

Intensities and sensitivities need to be accepted as the child's natural way of experiencing the world. Daniels and Meckstroth (2009) and Kurcinka (2015) offered strategies to help children and parents cope with intensities and sensitivities in an understanding and accepting way.

OVEREXCITABILITY AND NEURODIVERSITY

Although Dabrowski's theory places the overexcitabilities within a theory that serves as an alternative framework to pathologizing intense experience, there is some overlap with modern psychiatric diagnoses. Dabrowski's (1938/2019) early work described conditions that were not named until after his death in 1980. Two examples include Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which both include symptoms that overlap with certain types of overexcitabilities. When the overexcitabilities were first introduced to the field of gifted education in 1979, these conditions had not yet been established in their current forms. We would like to discourage counselors from the dichotomous thinking that characteristics are indicative of *either* overexcitability *or* a disorder. It makes much more sense to think of these characteristics and symptoms as coexisting on a continuum of variation based in the nervous system. Neurodiversity is a way of viewing these developmental conditions as "naturally occurring cognitive variations with distinctive strengths" (Silberman, 2016, p. 16). Examples of how exceptional ability and brain differences coexist can be found in Gail Saltz's (2017) book *The Power of Different*.

Before his theory was fully developed, Dabrowski (1938/2019) wrote about the overexcitabilities as characteristics of nervousness, which he differentiated first into four types and later into five. His 1938 paper, "Types of Increased Psychic Excitability," is now available in English, and it includes detailed descriptions of these characteristics. In Dabrowski's early work, at times he was describing what would be considered symptoms of ADHD in modern times (Mika, 2006). His description of psychomotor overexcitability could easily be taken for the hyperactivity-impulsivity dimension of ADHD:

Real difficulties begin with the transition to systematic learning. The largest number of children receiving a negative grade for behavior are from this group. These children fidget in their seats, disturb their classmates, shoot scraps of paper and metal nibs, find thousands of reasons to leave the classroom, and display an excessive mobility of attention. After class, and sometimes during class, they initiate fights, and most often take part in them and in other psychomotor excesses. Among boys, excelling in being independent, inclined toward rebellion in school, we are most often dealing with those with psychomotor overexcitability. (p. 7)

Our discussion of the overexcitabilities in this chapter has been tailored to gifted students, but we feel it is important to point out that not all students who experience heightened responsiveness to stimuli will be identified as intellectually gifted. Also, Gallagher (2013) concluded that a minority of intellectually gifted students form a cluster who do not demonstrate overexcitability, preference for intuition, and openness to experience. This minority illustrates the heterogeneous nature of giftedness. The overexcitabilities look different based on their combination and strength, and there is overlap between certain types and diagnosable conditions, such as ADHD. In contrast with the OEQ, the Overexcitability Questionnaire-II (OEQ-II) is a self-report instrument consisting of 50 items (the five types of overexcitability are equally represented), scored using a 5-point Likert scale. Research on overexcitability using the OEQ-II and instruments that measure the hyperactivity-impulsivity and inattentive dimensions of ADHD has shown that there is a strong relationship between psychomotor, imaginal, and sensual overexcitabilities and ADHD (Rinn & Reynolds, 2012).

There are no accommodations for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Section 504 available in schools for overexcitability, but educators can better understand how to find the positive aspects of ADHD, ASD, and other developmental conditions based on Dabrowski's ideas and his theory. The overexcitabilities can still be accommodated informally by parents and professionals. A diagnosis can be a useful tool, but the overexcitabilities offer a way of understanding the lived experience of intensity without the pathologizing lens of a deficit model.

As a child psychiatrist, Dabrowski acknowledged that sometimes the overexcitabilities require clinical interventions, and he wrote that the psychomotor type may require pharmacological treatment. This position was made clear only in his Polish works. We want to emphasize in this chapter that Dabrowski was a proponent of mental hygiene, and he believed that parents, educators, and clinicians could work together to provide a healthy and appropriate environment for children that would foster a positive developmental path.

ASYNCHRONOUS DEVELOPMENT AND OVEREXCITABILITY

In Dabrowski's (1938/2019) earliest writing he described the uneven development of highly gifted children. The overexcitabilities in his theory were differentiated into types and also into levels, with increasing complexity at higher levels. Silverman (2013) described the complexity inherent in the asynchronous development of the gifted and how it impacts their lives. The overexcitabilities are

a part of the definition of giftedness as characterized by asynchronous development. Asynchrony may exist not only in regard to peers but also within the child.

Asynchronous development is highly individual, and it is easy to forget that a child who is highly advanced compared with their age peers intellectually may struggle with a deeply asynchronous inner experience in which they feel alone and misunderstood. Working with children to uncover the sources of their challenging behaviors is not easy, but it creates an atmosphere in which students are granted agency in the process and their autonomy is nurtured.

Dabrowski saw the overexcitabilities as causing a disruption in adaptation to the environment, and each type has its own challenges in the classroom as well as in other settings. This difficulty in adaptation creates both internal and external conflict for a child. Another issue related to overexcitability is a low tolerance for frustration. The types of overexcitabilities possessed by a child dictate the ways that these reactions will appear—whether they are related to an excess of energy, seeking comfort in food or affection, emotional outbursts, a deep imaginal process, or asking questions. Rarely do these types appear in isolation, and this is especially true in a child who is intellectually or creatively gifted.

One of the foundations of Dabrowski's theory is his construct of multilevelness, which is more than viewing different levels of personality development. He was aware that there is enormous complexity in human life and that the overexcitabilities contribute to experiencing life in a deeper and more complex way than experienced by those without them. Individuals who experience the overexcitabilities perceive the world differently, and this contributes to their feeling of being out of sync with the world around them. Twice-exceptional students who both are gifted and have a disability are the most asynchronous, and these children often require a great deal of help to learn to live with their differences (see Chapter 17 by Silverman, this volume, which covers asynchrony).

ACCOMMODATING INTENSITIES (OVEREXCITABILITIES)

Psychomotor Intensity

In a Denver preschool, children endowed with high levels of energy, instead of being forced to sit still in their seats and become progressively restless, were allowed to move around and use their hands. Having an outlet for their excess energy, they were able to focus well and learn (Tucker & Hafenstein, 1997).

Sensory Sensitivity

In some children, emotional and sensory sensitivity are so high that noise, overpowering smells or tastes, or very bright lights can be extremely upsetting. If it is not possible to take the child out of the offending environment or to remove the distressing stimulus, buffers such as dark glasses or earmuffs can be helpful to lower the level of stimulation (Probst, 2008).

At the other extreme is sensory seeking, in which a child craves stimulation through the senses. This is the classic sensual overexcitability described by Dabrowski and includes children who require regular hugs, chew on their clothes or other objects, or enjoy strong odors and search them out. Providing a safe outlet for sensory needs, sometimes called a sensory diet, is critical for helping these children focus and transform this energy successfully.

Intellectual Intensity

Many gifted children have a hard time stopping their endless thoughts in order to go to sleep. Techniques for slowing down and quieting their mind (e.g., visualization, counting, relaxation exercises) may be helpful. Some gifted children use a form of meditation that leads them to a peaceful and joyful state (Piechowski, 2001, 2014). Even young children can benefit from 5-minute meditations that can be progressively extended to 20 minutes (Murdock, 1978).

Imaginational Intensity

A child with a vivid imagination may be upset by images seen on television, scary movies, stories in the news, or sensational gossip. To help children distance and distract themselves from these frightening images, the disturbing image can be replaced with a more positive picture, or the “bad images” can be put into a strong file cabinet and locked away.

Children with strong imaginational intensity must be helped in learning how to take control of their visualizations. They sometimes torment themselves using their visual imagery and even create alternate worlds where they suffer (Wells, 2017). There are exercises available to help guide children in using their imaginations in a safe and healthy way. An example is the psychosynthesis exercises discussed in Piechowski’s (2014) book *“Mellow Out,” They Say. If I Only Could* (2nd ed.), which includes a description of how to use this method.

Emotional Sensitivity and Intensity

For children who are easily overwhelmed, crowded and noisy places, new situations, or long, drawn-out events can lead to emotional overload. These kinds of situations are best handled with advance preparation. Proactive interventions, such as explaining the nature of the occasion, the people involved, and the general flow of the event, can remove the uncertainty that is often a source of anxiety and stress. Physical interventions, such as holding the hand of an understanding adult, soaking in a warm bath, or having one's back rubbed, are also effective ways of soothing to restore emotional equilibrium.

Accommodating the overexcitabilities is not synonymous with making excuses for a child's behavior. Greene's (2014) Collaborative & Proactive Solutions (CPS) model is useful for working with this population because it is grounded in empathy and honoring the child's autonomy. Although gifted children often astonish adults with their intellectual abilities, it is important to remember that they are still developing. One of the benefits of applying Greene's CPS model to gifted children who struggle with emotional intensity is that it allows for the acknowledgment that all children have some skills that lag behind. Rather than viewing an emotional child as manipulative, willful, or defiant, adults can change their lens and instead collaborate with the child to determine the source of their challenging behaviors (Greene, 2014).

SELF-COMPASSION AND LEARNING TO LIVE INTENSELY

Talking with children and adolescents about the overexcitabilities can help them learn to accept these characteristics as an aspect of their developmental potential rather than negative characteristics or symptoms. Diagnoses such as ADHD do not always follow an individual throughout the lifespan because symptoms can change, and they do not necessarily continue meeting clinically significant levels. It is possible for a highly active child to be diagnosed with ADHD during elementary school but no longer meet the threshold for such a diagnosis by high school, or the subtype might change from hyperactive-impulsive to combined type (including symptoms of hyperactivity-impulsivity as well as inattention). Helping a child with strong psychomotor overexcitability understand their high energy level as something to harness and use for their benefit is a way to positively reframe what might otherwise feel like a problem.

One important reason for educating young people about their excitability and propensity to react intensely is to help them remember that there is a reason for the depth of their feelings when things get difficult. Overexcitability at its core is a very strong reaction to stimuli, and this can lead to dangerous or impulsive behaviors in young people who feel distraught. Dabrowski's earliest writing was based on his study of self-mutilation and suicide, and in this work, he showed a connection between the overexcitabilities, emotional tension, and intensity of experience (Dabrowski, 1937; Piechowski, 2014). This connection has also been found in research where strong overexcitabilities were present in young adolescents who died by suicide (Cross et al., 1996, 2020).

There are a variety of methods for helping gifted youth deal with the less pleasant manifestations of overexcitability. For instance, Gaesser (2018) described the benefits of using Emotional Freedom Techniques as an anxiety management strategy. Another way to cope with anxiety is through mindfulness exercises, and Sisk and Kane (2018) have shared many useful ideas for working with gifted children in this area.

MULTILEVEL DEVELOPMENT IN ADOLESCENCE

From the earliest outline of his theory, Dabrowski emphasized two types of developmental processes, which he termed unilevel and multilevel. By unilevel, Dabrowski meant that there is no universal hierarchy of values present, and values are seen as changeable and without a criterion of deciding higher versus lower values. For Dabrowski, values were a key indicator of one's emotional growth. A multilevel process means becoming aware of the subjective, inner realities of others and of other dimensions and levels of reality. It involves a restructuring process—an inner transformation—that he called “disintegration”:

The course of multilevel disintegration is accessible to objective study and the experiencing individual is conscious of it. The process of evaluating one's own internal environment is essential for multilevel disintegration. The feeling of the separateness of one's own self increases and this is so not only in contradistinction to the external environment, but also, even primarily, in relation to one's own inner environment, which is evaluated, is made into a hierarchy, and becomes a subject of more precise cognition and appraising thought. A “subject-object” process takes place in one's own self. One's internal milieu is divided into higher and

lower, into better and worse, and into desirable and undesirable.
(Dabrowski, 1967, p. 69)

Multilevel development emerges from strong overexcitabilities, as well as other aspects of what Dabrowski called developmental potential, including special talents and abilities and dynamisms. The dynamisms are actually the products of certain types and combinations of overexcitabilities. Here one can see the process of positive disintegration in action during adolescence, and it can be intense and turbulent. The initial multilevel disintegration is spontaneous, and it emerges directly from emotional overexcitability. Strong feelings of guilt and shame, and feelings of disquietude and dissatisfaction with oneself, are some examples. There is a questioning of the self, one's values, the meaning of life, and one's place in the world. At this point, the individual experiences a vertical split between their higher and lower self. This produces inner turmoil—an existential crisis—that necessitates action in order to resolve the conflict.

Multilevel disintegration in adolescents can include characteristics such as periods of depression and anxiety, emotional lability, and feelings of unreality. Disparities in social differences, such as a lack of mirroring from true peers or unshared experiences among available age peers, can lead to discomfort and a feeling of being out of place (Jackson & Moyle, 2009a). Eye-opening case examples of adolescents in growthful crisis are described by Jackson (1998), Jackson and Moyle (2009a, 2009b), and Jackson et al. (2009).

Research Insights Into Multilevel Development

The first research on overexcitability in the gifted in the United States was conducted with a longer version of the questionnaire provided in Figure 4.1. It picked up not only examples of the five types of overexcitability, but also evidence of both unilevel and multilevel processes in adolescents. The hallmark of multilevel development is complexity—in the words of gifted teenagers, adults can see their depth of processing (see Piechowski, 2014, for numerous examples). Chapter 15 in this volume on the exceptionally gifted, by Hutchens and Morelock, provides some insight into how the complexity inherent in extraordinary intelligence lends itself to a multidimensional experience of reality. Although the overexcitabilities are the raw materials of multilevelness, they do not necessarily translate into a multilevel process.

An example of the difference in cognitive complexity between unilevel and multilevel processes in adolescence can be seen in studies of epistemology. Gallagher (2019) studied the changes in epistemological reasoning in gifted and typically developing adolescents, and a unilevel process is seen in young people

who engage in dualistic thinking, as well as in the second and third stages of reasoning, which include multiplicity and contextual relativism, respectively. It is not until the highest stage in her study, commitment without relativism, or dialectic, that a multilevel cognitive process is at work. These students display a complexity in their thinking and a need for integrating interdisciplinary perspectives, as well as a desire for mentors to guide their learning journeys.

Bailey (2011) studied the developmental process in gifted adolescents and found that the majority of gifted students are in the unilevel range. Out of 70 participants, only eight responded with answers illustrating the presence of a multilevel disintegration process. This shows that even among gifted populations, multilevelness is not a given, and the evidence may not be obvious to outside observers. This is a deeply personal process of inner growth, and it can be detected by asking questions that probe one's emotional and cognitive depths using instruments based on Dabrowski's constructs.

Dabrowski recognized that a multilevel process in adolescence may not be noticed by a counselor who lives life in a unilevel process. The theory of positive disintegration is not a stage theory, and it does not unfold in a linear fashion with a guarantee of reaching a multilevel process. Typically developing adults, who do not themselves experience life through a multilevel lens, may miss the complex processes of development presented in the theory of positive disintegration. Even when adults themselves do not easily perceive a multidimensional and multilayered reality, they must provide the right conditions to cultivate the multilevel progress for adolescents going through positive disintegration. These young people require great empathy and understanding, and safe places to explore their thoughts and feelings.

CONCLUSION

There are many characteristics that make gifted students different from their typical age peers. In this chapter, we have described five areas of intensity and sensitivity, known as overexcitabilities, found in Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration. Unfortunately, behaviors associated with these traits are often viewed as abnormal or problematic, especially when a child is under stress and the traits—with their resultant manifestations—become accentuated. When that happens, parents, teachers, and school staff become increasingly frustrated, and the child becomes increasingly distressed.

We have addressed the issue of how overexcitability overlaps with diagnosable developmental disorders and mental health conditions. In literature discussing the misdiagnosis of gifted children, there has sometimes been a misunderstand-

ing perpetuated that, for instance, the hyperactivity associated with ADHD is somehow different than the hyperactivity sometimes present in a gifted child with psychomotor overexcitability. In fact, these are not different types of motor activity, and we mean to correct that misperception here in this chapter. The difference is that psychomotor overexcitability is much more than hyperactivity. Dabrowski viewed psychomotor overexcitability as a broad construct at many levels, and therefore it sometimes manifests as hyperactivity, but it can also be transformed into the energy that drives talent. Twice-exceptional children who are both gifted and diagnosed with ADHD or ASD can be helped by learning more about what overexcitability means from Dabrowski's perspective. Offering an alternative to pathologizing intense experience can be the difference in helping a child not feel broken.

Dabrowski developed a theory that can be viewed as a forerunner to the current neurodiversity movement. He saw that talented, creative people often possess a sensitivity and intensity that can look like mental illness. Instead of pathologizing these characteristics, it makes more sense to recognize them as naturally occurring variations with corresponding strengths. To help both the children *and* the adults who work with them, it is crucial to appreciate the interplay among the child's situation, intensities, and temperamental traits. With understanding comes the possibility of a more accepting and accommodating environment. After all, adults don't ask athletes to slow down, but provide space and equipment to help them develop their exceptional potential.

REFERENCES

- Ackerman, C. M. (2009). The essential elements of Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration and how they are connected. *Roeper Review*, 31(2), 81–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190902737657>
- Anderegg, D. (2007). *Nerds: Who they are and why we need more of them*. Tarcher.
- Bailey, C. L. (2011). An examination of the relationships between ego development, Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration, and the behavioral characteristics of gifted adolescents. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 55(3), 208–222. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986211412180>
- Blanco, J. (2003). *Please stop laughing at me . . . One woman's inspirational story*. Adams Media.
- Cross, T. L., Cook, R. S., & Dixon, D. N. (1996). Psychological autopsies of three academically talented adolescents who committed suicide. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 7(3), 403–409. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X9600700305>

- Cross, T. L., Cross, J. R., Dudnytska, N., Kim, M., & Vaughn, C. T. (2020). A psychological autopsy of an intellectually gifted student with attention deficit disorder. *Roeper Review*, 42(1), 6–24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2019.1690081>
- Dabrowski, C. (1937). Psychological bases of self-mutilation. *Genetic Psychology Monographs*, 19, 1–104.
- Dabrowski, K. (1964). *Positive disintegration*. Little, Brown.
- Dabrowski, K. (1967). *Personality-shaping through positive disintegration*. Little, Brown.
- Dabrowski, K. (2019). Types of increased psychic excitability (M. M. Piechowski, Trans.). *Advanced Development*, 17, 1–26. (Original work published 1938)
- Daniels, S., & Meckstroth, E. (2009). Nurturing the sensitivity, intensity, and developmental potential of young gifted children. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 33–56). Great Potential Press.
- Daniels, S., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Dabrowski's levels and the process of development. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 19–29). Great Potential Press.
- De Bondt, N., De Maeyer, S., Donche, V., & Van Petegem, P. (2019). A rationale for including overexcitability in talent research beyond the FFM-personality dimensions. *High Ability Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13598139.2019.1668753>
- Falk, R. F., & Miller, N. B. (2009). Building firm foundations: Research and assessments. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 239–260). Great Potential Press.
- Gaesser, A. H. (2018). Befriending anxiety to reach potential: Strategies to empower our gifted youth. *Gifted Child Today*, 41(4), 186–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1076217518786983>
- Gallagher, S. A. (2013). Building bridges: Research on gifted children's personalities from three psychological theories. In C. S. Neville, M. M. Piechowski, & S. S. Tolan (Eds.), *Off the charts: Asynchrony and the gifted child* (pp. 48–98). Royal Fireworks Press.
- Gallagher, S. A. (2019). Epistemological differences between gifted and typically developing middle school students. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 42(2), 164–184. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0162353219836924>
- Greene, R. W. (2014). *The explosive child: A new approach for understanding and parenting easily frustrated, chronically inflexible children* (5th ed.). HarperCollins.
- Harrison, G. E., & Van Haneghan, J. P. (2011). The gifted and the shadow of the night: Dabrowski's overexcitabilities and their correlation to insomnia, death anxiety, and fear of the unknown. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 34(4), 669–697. <https://doi.org/10.1177/016235321103400407>
- Jackson, P. S. (1998). Bright star–black sky: A phenomenological study of depression as a window into the psyche of the gifted adolescent. *Roeper Review*, 20(3), 215–221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783199809553894>
- Jackson, P. S., & Moyle, V. F. (2009a). Inner awakening, outward journey: The intense gifted child in adolescence. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with*

- intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 57–72). Great Potential Press.
- Jackson, P. S., & Moyle, V. F. (2009b). Integrating the intense experience: Counseling and clinical implications. In S. Daniels & M. M. Piechowski (Eds.), *Living with intensity: Understanding the sensitivity, excitability, and the emotional development of gifted children, adolescents, and adults* (pp. 105–126). Great Potential Press.
- Jackson, P. S., Moyle, V. F., & Piechowski, M. M. (2009). Emotional life and psychotherapy of the gifted in light of Dabrowski's theory. In L. Shavinina (Ed.), *International handbook on giftedness* (pp. 437–466). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4020-6162-2_20
- Jacoby, L. (1988). *Humorous students in sixth grade: A comparison study with studious and athletic students* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Northwestern University.
- Kurcinka, M. S. (2015). *Raising your spirited child: A guide for parents whose child is more intense, sensitive, perceptive, persistent, and energetic* (3rd ed.). HarperCollins.
- Mendaglio, S. (Ed.). (2008). *Dabrowski's theory of positive disintegration*. Great Potential Press.
- Mika, E. (2006). Giftedness, ADHD, and overexcitabilities: The possibilities of misinformation. *Roeper Review*, 28(4), 237–242. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190609554370>
- Murdock, M. H. (1978). Meditation with young children. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 10(1), 29–44.
- Peterson, J. S. (1997). Bright, tough, and resilient—and not in a gifted program. *Journal of Secondary Gifted Education*, 8(3), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1932202X9700800304>
- Peterson, J. S. (2009). Myth 17: Gifted and talented individuals do not have unique social and emotional needs. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 53(4), 280–282. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0016986209346946>
- Peterson, J. S. (2018). Personal/social counseling and mental health concerns. In S. M. Wood & J. S. Peterson (Eds.), *Counseling gifted students: A guide for school counselors* (pp. 139–156). Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826136558.0009>
- Piechowski, M. M. (1979). Developmental potential. In N. Colangelo & R. T. Zaffrann (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted* (pp. 25–57). Kendall Hunt.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2001). Childhood spirituality. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 33(1), 1–15.
- Piechowski, M. M. (2014). *"Mellow out," they say. If I only could: Intensities and sensitivities of the young and bright* (2nd ed.). Royal Fireworks Press.
- Piirto, J. (2004). *Understanding creativity*. Great Potential Press.
- Probst, B. (2008). *When the labels don't fit: A new approach to raising a challenging child*. Three Rivers Press.
- Rinn, A. N., & Reynolds, M. J. (2012). Overexcitabilities and ADHD in the gifted: An examination. *Roeper Review*, 34(1), 38–45. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02783193.2012.627551>
- Rivero, L. (2010). *Smart teens' guide to living with intensity: How to get more out of life and learning*. Great Potential Press.
- Saltz, G. (2017). *The power of different: The link between disorder and genius*. Flatiron Books.

- Silberman, S. (2016). *NeuroTribes: The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*. Avery.
- Silverman, L. K. (2013). Asynchronous development: Theoretical bases and current applications. In C. S. Neville, M. M. Piechowski, & S. S. Tolan (Eds.), *Off the charts: Asynchrony and the gifted child* (pp. 18–47). Royal Fireworks Press.
- Sisk, D., & Kane, M. (2018). *Planting seeds of mindfulness: Creating the conditions to help gifted kids to flourish and bloom intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually*. Royal Fireworks Press.
- Strickland, C. A. (2001). *Living and learning with Dabrowski's overexcitabilities or "I can't help it—I'm overexcitable!"* https://www.hoagiesgifted.org/strickland_Dabrowski.pdf
- Taylor, M. (1999). *Imaginary companions and the children who create them*. Oxford University Press.
- Tucker, B., & Hafenstein, N. L. (1997). Psychological intensities in young gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 41(3), 66–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/001698629704100302>
- Wells, C. (2017). The primary importance of the inner experience of giftedness. *Advanced Development*, 16, 95–113.