

Positive Disintegration Podcast
Episode 7: Gifted Minds and Empathy

Chris Wells, Emma Nicholson, and guest Fiona Smith
January 29, 2022

Emma: Hi, listeners, welcome back to the podcast. This is Positive Disintegration, a framework for becoming your authentic self. I'm your host, Emma Nicholson, from the Adults with Overexcitabilities YouTube channel and the Tragic Gift blog. And with me is co-host and resident expert Chris Wells, a Dąbrowski Scholar and researcher. Hi Chris. How are you today?

Chris: Hi, Emma. It's great to be back. Happy New Year!

Emma: Yes, Happy New Year to you, too. We've finally made it to 2022 and I'm kind of excited today because I'm not the only person from Sydney on the podcast this episode.

Chris: I know. It's very exciting that we have two people from Sydney on this episode. I think that's cool.

Emma: Our guest today is Fiona Smith. Fiona is the director and principal psychologist of Gifted Minds, which is based here in Sydney, Australia. She has been working with gifted children, adolescents, and adults for over 20 years, and truly believes she has the best job in the world: Identifying, understanding, and helping others understand, educate, and parent these intense, sensitive and unique thinkers. Welcome to the podcast, Fiona. Very good to have you on.

Fiona: Thank you. It's really good to be here with both of you.

Chris: Thanks so much for joining us, Fiona. I'm very excited to talk with you today.

Fiona: I'm fascinated to hear what you guys are going to ask me. It's going to be a bit of a journey, I think.

Chris: No doubt. Well, the first thing I want to know is how you first learned about Dąbrowski's theory.

Fiona: Yeah, we have to go a long way back, but not quite as far back as 1938. Thank goodness. I'm not that old. Though I'm feeling elderly compared to you two. So, I guess the journey goes back to the birth of my oldest daughter, really. But that was before I knew about Dąbrowski. But she, from the time she was born, was an incredibly intense, sensitive child. So I was looking for answers from her birth. She's now 36. She was a tantrum throwing, head banging, super sensitive infant. She banged her head on the ground in frustration at the age of 9 months.

So, my husband's a psychologist and I'm a psychologist. At age four, we took her to a psychologist because we could not work out what was going on with her. She was the beginning

really of looking at intensity and sensitivity. I've always been looking for why and how to manage this. I mean, I tried everything with temper tantrums. I tried sticking her feet in a bucket of cold water. I tried chanting mantras to her. I tried everything, all that would stop her tantrums was holding her, and she would just fling her arms around and scream, I cannot help it. I cannot help it. I cannot help it. It's all too much. And that is actually what it's all about too, too much. It's all too much.

She was assessed at the age of four and found to be extremely smart. And that sort of gave us a bit of a window into why she was having the tantrums. And that was to do with frustration. Literally, every time she was frustrated, she threw a tantrum. So that's the very beginning. So then we sold it on, and it took me five years to even think of having another child. And then I had my son who was chill to the point of being horizontal. So I had this intense first child, this extremely chill second child. So then I thought I could start doing something I was very interested in, which was a master's degree, which was major in gifted education. And it was through the University of New South Wales, the GERRIC Unit.

So anyway, I got to listen to fantastic teachers from all over the world because Miraca Gross, who was the professor there at GERRIC brought in speakers and helped us not just through the Masters of Gifted education, but also through something called Coach, which is a certificate of gifted education to learn more about how to educate gifted children. Now, my background was psychology, so I was coming through with a psychology degree, not an education degree. So I wasn't so much interested in teaching. I wanted to know what was going on in the heads, especially the heads of my children who are extremely weird.

I did the master's, and through Miraca Gross and Katherine Hookman, I was introduced to the concept probably first of all in those dark ages of overexcitability, because that's what they were, cherry picking out of Dąbrowski at that stage. So we're talking 92 through to 94. And yeah, I just was instantly—as probably a lot of parents still are—attracted to this idea of yes, that is my child. My child exhibits all of these things in different intensities frequencies and durations, but yet the start was big.

Chris: So many people come to this field because of their children that it really is amazing to me. And me, too. That's how I came to it, too, trying to figure out my own kid.

Fiona: It was a huge relief to know that, yeah, this is the experience that children had. But also, I didn't see her as broken or anything wrong with her. I saw her as difficult. She was certainly difficult and intense, but I wasn't prepared to take her to a psychiatrist. I didn't think she had anything that indicated any problem. What I found from very early on was boredom and frustration increased all symptoms or reactions. And so I learned that this is a child that I had to sit literally, we put her in a car seat, she screamed. She hated being restrained. The only way to stop her screaming when we were traveling in a car was to play games. We play games like, what rhymes with this? What rhymes with that? We used to play the doctors game—what's the doctor that treats feet? What's the doctor that treats bones?

She was two. So we had to keep her mind going all the time. Then there was the emotional intensity. I mean, when her brother was born, when she was five, her immediate reaction was,

can we take him back? No, thank you. He's boring. I don't want to have anything to do with him. So by the time I lived through her and then done the masters, I was in a very privileged position, I think GERRIC wanted to open up an assessment part to the center. And I did not at that stage have registration as a psychologist, but Miraca and Katherine told me if I could get the registration, I could start on board with the assessment of gifted children at GERRIC. And this was a dream, like literally I would be working with children that I just found absolutely mind-blowingly fascinating and had had experience with.

So yeah, I got my registration through, I joined the Australian Psych Society and I started working at GERRIC. And that's when I really, really expanded and learned a lot more about Dąbrowski and also about the whole theory of positive disintegration and embraced it within my whole framework of work.

Chris: So, tell us about your work with gifted children, now that we've had the lead up to it.

Fiona: Yeah. Okay. So, it was a dream job. I started working with GERRIC in 1998, and I adored the time identifying the kids. Now, I loved the time with the children, but I did not like the assessment tools. I was doing IQ tests. I started using the WISC-III. And I don't know how much all our audience knows about psychometric tests, but basically, they are not designed to test gifted children. They are basically diagnostic tools and were used for looking at abnormal behaviors and things like that. Yes, we can say a child has a high level of ability using an IQ test, but again, they're not ideal.

I'm still waiting for someone to design something that looks more broadly, not just IQ, but more broadly. But at the moment, we still don't have that. Apart from the Annemarie Roeper type of assessment, which is an entirely different way of looking at a child and takes about 10 years of learning. I would love to have done it, but A, we're in Sydney and B, you have to be in America, and it takes years. So yeah, I found that what happened with doing the WISC-III is that the first question that I asked the child was—and I'm pointing to my nose, because you won't be able to see this. What is this? What is this? I'd ask a gifted child, what is their nose? And they would be flabbergasted.

They would be patronized from the minute they started. Now, assessing gifted children and assessing any child, to be honest, is all about building respect and making the rapport strong enough that the child feels that they can trust you. It's very easy to underachieve on an IQ test. I mean, you can simply not give what you know. You can very rarely overachieve on an IQ test because you can't give what you don't know. But the child that doesn't feel trustful of the examiner is not going to give what they know. So, I was very aware of this very soon. I swapped from using the WISC to the Stanford-Binet at this stage because you could test in on the Stanford, you could do two routing tests and then go into the age level that they got. You know, albeit they had to do well on those two routing tests, but it meant that a six year old could enter the test at an eight year old or a 10 years old level, which made a huge difference.

Remember, I'm coming from a background where I saw extreme boredom and frustration in my own children and what that did to working with children of all levels of ability, gifted and beyond. Now, that's the main thing. I was working at Gifted Resource Center. So, I saw gifted

children. They were generally going to be gifted. I very rarely saw a child of average, even high average ability. So, I had to, within the protocol of the psychometric testing, I had to work with the child to get the best responses. And that's where my interest in empathy came on because it was all about empathizing with the child, and picking up every single nuance, and increasing the pace when they were bored, and decreasing the pace when they were absorbed and knowing what the difference was.

And not asking patronizing questions that shut them down. And using humor as well, too, because these kids responded to humor and treating them as a mature person, not someone who was there outside their will or their control. Because what I was finding was that these kids have a lot of experience where things are outside their control. They feel helpless and hopeless a lot, especially within the school environment. I wanted to provide a safe space where I accepted them as who they were. I didn't see them as broken. I didn't see them as anything but that person. And so, yeah, I think that's where the empathy came in. Also the fact that I began to be seen as a bit of a maverick.

This is where it became difficult because you have to stay within protocol, but you also have to know your client. And that's when I become very interested in Linda Silverman's work and what she was doing with her clientele. And that's where I got my wrist slapped at GERRIC, basically because I was doing things that Linda suggested doing. And, of course, she was another psychologist working with the gifted population. I worked with that population at GERRIC until 2004. So I was there from 1998 to 2004. Then I went entirely private and worked from home.

I did find the main thing was the difference between bringing a child into a university environment where they had to come up in a lift and kind of suffered from white coat syndrome, even though I wasn't wearing a white coat. But working from home, which is child friendly, they weren't anxious, they were not having any problems with that sort of anxiety. And the rapport was easier to build. So from 2004 through to now, I've worked in private practice and eventually in 2008 called this Gifted Minds. And now we have been going since then.

Chris: Well, thank you. That's so interesting to me. I hadn't put together that you worked with Miraca Gross. [Note: Prof. Gross died on January 27, 2022, right before we recorded this episode.]

Fiona: Miraca was a ground breaker and I owe her so much in terms of my interests. But we had some difficulties when we opened up the assessment clinic to include other psychologists especially psychologists with a clinical psychology background and the center actually shut down. I mean, GERRIC continued, but they stopped doing assessments about two years after I left. They began using the clinical basis. They introduced using the child behavior checklist. There was a definite change from giftedness as you know, part and parcel of who you are to pathology. I could not deal with it. I was called out for doing things that Linda did. I had to give reasons as to why I didn't use—in the processing speed part of the WISC-III, I would substitute Symbol Search for Coding as Linda had suggested. And I got called out on that.

And there was a lot of things that in the end it just didn't make it worth it for me because I started to have this inherent cardiology reaction. I was getting SVTs. So basically super ventricular

tachycardia responses. My heart rate would go up to 220 beats a minute, and I would be kind of, well that's very interesting. It's interesting I never panicked about it. It just seemed to be an interesting bodily sensation, but I couldn't control my reaction to it. And so part of the reason to come out and work privately was to sort of get a handle on what was going on inside my own body in terms of the reaction to that sort of stress.

Chris: An interesting thing about your story that I related to way before we ever even met was that problem. I have that same kind of physiological reaction and it's not so bad now for some reason, but when I was younger, I would end up in the emergency room because my heart rate would go over 200 beats a minute.

Fiona: Chris, you know what it feels like then.

Chris: For quite a period of time when I was like between 18 and 21 or so, they were looking for something wrong with my heart because it just didn't make sense. It never occurred to me that it was anything but a problem. But now I look back and I'm like, well, yeah, I mean that's overexcitability to me.

Fiona: It was fascinating. I ended up in emergency one night where they actually said, look, your heart is really strong for it to be able to go at that speed, but we can't let it go because it was like two hours of this. And we're going to have to give you an injection where we stop your heart and restart your heart. Don't worry, we get the defibrillator out and we stand by just in case it doesn't work. But if you have a near death experience, please tell us afterwards because we find them interesting. So I lied on the table, and they do it. Unfortunately, I didn't have a near death experience because I would've really been interested to see what that was like. But then I was an adult working and I wanted to travel overseas and to go to conferences basically in total conferences. And I couldn't travel. I actually was stopped going to the Iowa Wallace Conference in 2004 because of this. The cardiologist said, you cannot travel because you might have one of these episodes in the States and you can't travel. So they wanted me to have an ablation. An ablation is a thing where they laser the circuits in my heart, so it doesn't do that. So I went in and had an ablation, low and behold, I stopped having SVTs, but I have massive blood pressure reactions now instead.

So, it was almost like my heart was going, hahaha, you think you've stopped me? No, no, no. So now instead of beating really fast, it pounds really hard, and I get blood pressure reactions that are like 190 on 120 and stuff like that. So again, the cardiologists are like, yeah, your heart is fine, it's strong, it's beautiful, but that could affect your brain. We have to stop that, you could have a stroke. So, that was a part of the problem with my empathy was the reaction of my heart. And because I can't control it and I still can't control it. And I'd rather have the SVTs personally because they were few and far behind, but the heart blood pressure stuff is ongoing, unfortunately.

I've stopped doing a lot of counseling because it was worse with counseling than it is with assessment, obviously. But I keep some clients on that I just can't leave. But yeah, I pass the counseling over to the counselor here at Gifted Minds basically because of that. But it's a very

interesting physiological reaction, which was why I wrote that paper for the advanced development journal.

Chris: It was on my radar in 2016 because we were at the Congress at the same time in Calgary. And I remember reading it and thinking, like filing away for myself, okay, here's somebody else who has this intense physiological reaction, although yours is much worse than mine was, or that's quite a challenge that you've had to deal with.

Fiona: Yes and no. It's also been an interesting way of curtailing some of the things that I want to do. I think maybe it saved my life in some ways because I've actually had to step back, and I've actually had to take more control over myself. So I started doing a lot more yoga. I started looking at mindfulness. Now the other thing that's a personal, not difficulty, and again I refuse to pathologize this because I don't see it as a disability in any way and you know about this Chris, it's that I am what I proudly call an image-free thinker, which other people call aphantasia. So I don't like the term aphantasia because of the A because once again, it means not, whereas I see myself as image-free, I simply don't make images.

However, I do dream, and I have incredibly vivid and lucid dreams at night. So it's not like my brain can't make images, it's just that I don't know, I don't understand it. But part of the reason also though I was very interested in the initial overexcitability stuff, especially the OE questionnaires that Frank designed, was that they talk about visualization and not everybody visualizes. So I had to have a look at those and think about it and understand that thinking is unique. Okay. So thinking is very different for each person. So I've found it useful in myself to know that physiologically and cognitively I'm very different in a lot of ways, but that's probably not unusual. I think most people are different. Neurodiversity is a fascinating thing that's become more and more talked about these days and that's part of it. But also physiological diversity is also very interesting as well. And the way we react, and our intensity and our sensitivity of course come brings me back to Dąbrowski. So, it just was perfect, was a perfect fit.

Emma: It's interesting you talk about psychological responses because in Dąbrowski's framework, particularly when we look at unilevel disintegration, there's a lot of talk about those somatic responses. So, do you sort of see part of your journey, particularly with your heart and the stresses you are under fitting into that part of the framework?

Fiona: Okay, now here, this is where you get me on Dąbrowski's life. So, I have read copiously. I know about dynamisms, I know about multilevel and unilevel, but I don't know whether it's blank out on myself. I find it very difficult to fit my own experiences in within where I am and what I'm doing and also using that with clients. When I was counseling, I was very much focused on the fact that positive disintegration was a good thing. It might not be fun, but certainly going to be painful. But it was something that we could actually get through. And I was working with kids that had the disintegration that didn't necessarily reintegrate at a higher level, would come back to the same level over and over again. And I like that it's fluid and I like the flow as well.

And I like the fact that we don't necessarily step up consistently. And also there are very few people who reach the highest levels. Just like with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. We don't get a lot of self-actualizers at the end. I like the process. But when you ask me that specific

question, I can't give you a clear answer because I don't know. And I guess this is why I said it's a journey. I'm still on that journey and I think I keep cycling back and forth doing various things, and of course I retreated from the counseling because of the reaction. And I don't know that that's a good thing either. Sorry, Emma, the answer to that question is, I don't know.

Emma: I actually think that's not such a bad thing for people to hear that because not everybody wants to hear a bunch of people saying, yes, I've got my shit together. Because most people don't have their shit together. So it makes more sense to hear other people say, look, I'm going through a continuous cycle, and particularly as life develops and throws new challenges at you, you're going to keep going through that because something new pops up and it's going to trigger something else.

Fiona: Yeah. And this is where I wanted to regroup about empathy because as I get older and I am worried about this, my empathy levels, though they're still physiologically extremely intense. I find I have a lot less empathy for the human race itself. And I know this is going to sound weird, but I think we're making such a mess of our planet that I kind of like thinking I've had huge empathy. I was one of those children that picked bees out of the swimming pool so that they didn't drown, that won't hurt a spider, that believe that trees are living and are very interested in forests and bushlands. And my favorite place is in a tree, climbing a tree, feeling the tree around me. So I had this incredible empathy with nature, but my empathy with humanity seems to be decreasing and I am worried about that.

And I think it might have a lot to do with the consistent lockdowns and the pandemic. And I'm hoping that I will be able to feel that again. Having said that, I don't mean that I don't empathize with the children because I think the children are the ones that we have really screwed, basically. We have a lot of adults out there floundering around, still doing the things they were doing years ago, still using plastic, still doing all the things that are just making this a whole lot worse for our children. And my empathy is with the children and with the planet, but I need to get my empathy back for adults, I'm afraid. So yeah, that's what I'm thinking about when you read that article, I'm thinking, ooh, I'm not really that Empathy Goddess, I wish I was. And I would like to get that back.

Chris: It's understandable. We're being tested right now at the societal level for sure.

Emma: To use a Dąbrowski term, we're kind of like trashing the planet, knowing it's not what we ought to be. We've got all this science and data telling us that we are making a mess of things and we are just choosing the lower choice continually, which is frustrating to witness.

Fiona: And it's like a temper tantrum, like humanity as a whole is having a temper tantrum because we can't have everything we want all the time and do it the way we want to do it. And this idea that we have dominion over the earth, it just stuns me. No other mammal has decided that they have dominion over the earth. It's our home. We can't trash our home and expect to get away with it. We don't have another planet, the trope there is no planet B. It's true.

Chris: I think that it would be great to hear more about how you use Dąbrowski's theory as a framework both personally and professionally, you know, how it has served you in your own development and how it has served you as a psychologist in your work.

Fiona: Okay. Well, Chris, let's just dial back a bit because as I said, I've been burned a couple of times and that has had repercussions. So, the first time was within the GERRIC framework, and then the second time was when I was in private practice. I was trying to work it out probably about four or five years ago now when there was that massive attack on the idea of Dąbrowski's theory and the overexcitabilities, and there were people literally saying, no, no, no, no, that's all not right. And so what happened through the master's, and my interest in the beginnings of understanding Dąbrowski, was that I did a number of projects for my master's using the overexcitabilities in different ways. Now because I was fumbling around in the dark. I had some fun using checklists.

And I actually sat in kindergarten once and tried to work out on checklists that I was looking at duration, intensity, and frequency as well as just ticking it off. So I was sitting there trying to work out how often it happened, how intense it was, and how frequent, and I couldn't because children are ephemeral and like goldfish and this is what it's like in the testing. I can't take notes while I'm testing because the brains of the kids I work with work so fast that literally there's no time. If I'm going to wait and take notes, then I've lost them again. So I started these projects and then I decided that I wanted to look at adult creatives. Now in your experience as you've gone around with this theory and you've grown up, you guys, you will have realized that people have baggage with the term gifted.

So it's not a term a lot of people like, but we could spend years just trying to define giftedness. Generally I go with the Columbus group definition of giftedness, which is basically asynchronous development. I decided that the best way to hook into a gifted population of adults would be to look at authors, because at least I'm going to get creative giftedness, even if it's not intellectual giftedness. But published authors are going to have a level of giftedness. So my daughter, the tantrum-throwing one was going between the ages of about 5 and 10 while I was doing this. And I started to look at children's books and became passionate about children's books because she could read voraciously, and I wanted to stay a step ahead of her. So, I read everything that she read, and she was into all of Lord of the Rings.

She read the whole Lord of the Rings, the Dune series, all of these, before she was 10. So I came across a project, and I decided that I would contact a whole lot of [29:58 inaudible] and children's authors and asked them about whether or not, first of all they considered themselves to be gifted, what a gifted reader was. I looked at it through the lens of their own writing. So I wrote them all, and this was in the days that we used our hand. I wrote them all letters and I've got all these glorious letters back from these children's authors that were so interested in the idea. I also sent them out a little tiny sort of overexcitability thing, but I didn't actually give them the whole lot. I gave them some questionnaires that kind of were a little bit different.

I asked them about their own experience of overexcitabilities as a child and as an adult. Oh my God, the answers I got from these writers—because this was their area—were unbelievable. So literally going back over this just today, and I haven't looked at it for a long, long time. The

intensity and the sensitivity of these authors and in terms of especially their emotional overexcitability, their imaginal overexcitability and even the sensory overexcitability was unbelievable. I came at it through my own construction of how you would use this.

So even before I was working with children, I was looking at overexcitabilities, and also the pathologizing of difference was occurring within different populations, and why these celebrated authors wouldn't embrace the idea of being gifted. So again, Dąbrowski provided the lens with which to integrate all of this because these people who are very, very different in the way they think, feel, understand the world. But they're not broken yet. So many of them would say, I'm weird. I'm really come from a different, I'm odd or I didn't have any friends as a kid, or I was hyperactive as a kid, or I did this. And most of them would say I was bored. I was bored. And reading was my passion and things like that. So yeah, I guess the way it interacts in my own life is not just through understanding gifted adults and gifted children, but also within the school.

Unfortunately, I was finding the kids that I was seeing. So, going back to just IQ testing, that was only a part of it. So I decided really early, an IQ test is only a very small part. So I was giving them, unfortunately not the OE questionnaire that Frank designed, but just a very subjective checklist of different intensities and sensitivities that their kids might display. And I said to the parents, this was literally subjective. It's not a specific or objective measure, but I wanted it as part of how their kids behaved outside the testing environment within the school environment, within the community, because there was so much more involved than just an IQ score. I was getting back lots and lots of information on how these kids were perceived by others because remember they're not filling it in, this was their parents filling it in about them unless the child was 15 or over.

And I also did some work with adults. So they'd fill in their own checklist as well too. I asked them to check off various things, but I also asked them to elaborate. So I got lots of interesting elaboration on all of this that was going on within them. So yeah, that became part of my report. I would go through the IQ test. I'd also go through a profile of sensitivity and intensity, like I didn't call it overexcitability, I wasn't allowed to call it overexcitability. But it was very much part of the whole nature of the child.

That's when I got hit again. Basically, I had a situation where I'd been doing this for years and years and years ever since I was at GERRIC. And I had a parent actually, who I had assessed not only the children, but also herself, came at me with a clinical psychologist and basically sat me down, came into my home and sat me down and said I was not allowed to do that anymore and could I remove that section from my report? Because there was no research basis for it. And it was very, very damaging to people who had exceptionalities. So she was letting me know that she thought I was damaging twice-exceptional population. Now, okay I had to have a big think about that. She also said that this had damaged her own children. The fact that I hadn't identified them as having twice-exceptionalities way back 10 years ago.

What happened was that I realized that I was never coming at it from that angle. I'm not a clinical psychologist and I was very clear about that. I was very clear that I was not trained to look for that sort of exceptionality. So I didn't use the child behavior checklist, I didn't use the ADHD check site list. I used nothing of that partially, and mainly because none of that stuff has been

normed on gifted children or gifted adults. So when the clinicians came into GERRIC, they started handing these out. Everybody—doesn't matter whether they were your average gifted child or twice exceptional or whatever, but they were coming in with huge scores on these checklists because these have never been normed on the gifted population. So you have intense sensitive parents who are check-listing on intense sensitive children.

You are going to get intense scores and they were. So I was very much aware of the fact that yes, I do believe that there is ADHD. Yes, I do believe that there is autism. And yes, I do believe gifted children can be on these spectrums of various things. But I was also extremely aware of the potential to misdiagnose these kids or to overdiagnose these kids. So within my practice, and if you look at my website, I'm very clear that I don't diagnose, that is not my area of expertise. But if within an IQ test and within an overall look at intensity and sensitivity, I see something that puts my feelers up, I'll be, yes, this child needs further assessment. And when you do get a gifted kid that really does have ADHD or autism, you know they are very, very different.

And they have, twice, multi-exceptionalities that will impact on their life. But a lot of the gifted kids that were showing high levels of frustration and are high levels of symptomology either at home or at school were often the bored gifted kid. Overexcitabilities in lots of areas were firing because they were bored, really, really bored. And this is what I'd seen in my own daughter. So my main thing then was okay, if you take your gifted kid and you expose them to sufficient challenge at school, then a lot of this symptomology, this reactivity is not going to be as difficult. You may not see it as much. The negative parts of it may disappear, the positive parts of it may become more intense. But the first thing that I was asking the parents to do, was to get the child the challenge they needed.

One of the joys of IQ testing, guys, is the fact that the child doesn't know the level at which you're taking them. So there's no fear then as long as I've done my job and the rapport is built, the trust is there. We have a good sense of humor. We just keep going up in levels until they are doing stuff that adults will do. So I could see how far these kids could stretch and they could stretch phenomenally. There were kids who come in at 6 that could do things that 12- and 14-year-olds could do. So I knew how bored they were at school, and I don't want to teacher bash, and I don't want to bash the education system, but these kids are doing the same stuff. They're doing it day in, day out at school. They're not getting challenge.

It's not the teachers, it's the curriculum. The curriculum is not designed for kids who are outliers. It's basically designed and it works really well for your low average to high average ability kid, especially within a mixability classroom. But you've got your kid that's one or two or three standard deviations above the mean, it's not going to work for them. They are going to experience boredom and this boredom is going to come out and it comes out in all sorts of different ways. And it can be misinterpreted as ADHD, as autism, as oppositional defiance disorder, as all the different ABC labels that you've got because any stimulation is better than nothing. And if you can't get stimulation, you're going to react in some way or another. So yeah, I became very, very cautious in terms of being very clear about what I was seeing and what that could mean. And the fact that I'm not anti any labels, I'm just very concerned that they're correct.

Chris: It's a real tough issue. This is something that I'm so interested in because it's not easy to tell the difference between what is a disorder and what is giftedness. And the theory gives us an alternative to the mainstream. And that's what's so appealing about it to so many people. And that's your story is that the theory appealed to you because it wasn't pathologizing. It was not a deficit perspective on these kids. But for me, when I came to this stuff, I was coming from the lens of pathology, and I was very comfortable with it. And it was off putting to me when I first discovered overexcitability because I thought, this is just euphemistic bullshit. I have ADHD and I did not take kindly to the idea that this was some alternative perspective. And so I've been just fascinated to see the changes in my own thinking and my own understanding of myself, not thinking of myself from that deficit lens anymore and how it's opened up my horizons in so many ways to not box myself to this idea that I have a disorder.

Unfortunately, my story is that I came to this from pathologizing my kid. We went straight to medication and diagnosis with him instead of trying to really understand the underlying reasons why he was having such a hard time sitting still and producing in the classroom. And I wish I could go back in time and not start him on medication as a six-year-old and put him on that path.

Fiona: Yeah. And again, I'm not teacher bashing because I think teachers have a massive job being counselors of all different things within the classroom. But it's the teachers that often propel the parents along that line because they don't know why the child is behaving in that certain way. And kids bouncing off walls in the classroom, it's going to be seen as a problem. And it's not going to be like, the teacher's not going to say, oh, he's bored because she doesn't know. The highly gifted kids that I've work with they're the ones, their reactions will be either that intense so that they are really, I had kids that lay under the table in the classroom, and I had kids that literally ran out of the room. And I had kids that the class clown, is a particularly common one because they want humor, they want fun, they want high-level reasoning, they want to revoke things. And once you put that kid into an environment where that's happening every day anyway, a lot of those reactions go down. So I totally get where you're coming from.

What I see is that the kids that I was assessing in 1998 and 2000 and their parents, and if they have gone through the clinical psychology background, and they have been diagnosed with ADHD or whatever, and ADHD is one of the few of the psychological disorders. I'll go with that. Even though I don't like the idea that we medicate, is that those parents are bringing their children back already with diagnosis because they were diagnosed. So yeah, I mean I totally get that's what happens. And it's a cycle and a circle that goes on and on. So when I say, is he getting the challenge he needs at school? They don't even see it as part of the issue. They're like, but he should be able to see, he should be able to sit still in class. It's the real world. He has to be able to function in the real world. And I said, yeah, but he's bored. I can see how far that child can stretch, and this is a child that can do algebra, and he's doing letter recognition [at school], he's going to be bored, he's going to react. It's a reasonable reaction to behave like that. And the parents are already brainwashed by that point that to think no, he needs to be able to survive.

And look, I'm not saying that we all should run wild as adults or whatever, but I am saying at least within the classroom, surely, we should be able to look at a child. We are all about meeting the needs of children, but we refuse, especially if you've got a child who can stretch that far because it's hard, it's hard to cater for those kids' needs. The teachers don't know what to do

along of the time with these kids. What if you've got a six-year-old who can read like a 12-year-old, what do you do? You can't put them in year 12. It's a difficult issue, but it doesn't mean, and I don't think it's forgives what we are doing to these kids.

Emma: I was unfortunately one of those children that got way too bored, and I was the class clown stereotype unfortunately. And also the chatter, the one that would get up and go and talk to everybody else because I had nothing to do and disrupt them and then get in trouble for disturbing everybody else. And I totally get what you're saying about you can't just pick a kid up and throw them into year 12. And I think the difference, so between kids and adults is there's one curriculum in school. There's not one vocation out there for adults. We have a certain amount of choice over our stuff. So if you are dead bored with your job, you can go out and seek further training, you can look for advancement, you can try and do other things. And you can do a whole host of stuff outside of work. And there's only so many extracurricular stuff available for kids and they're stuck with that one set of things that they've gotta learn. So it is a little different. And I think when adults are then looking back at kids and saying, oh, well you've gotta learn to adapt. It's like, if I was like that in my job, I would quit.

Fiona: Look, that's what I say, what you don't get is try and think what it would be like for you, for me to sit you in a year six classroom, not just once, but for a whole week so six hours a day and expect you to do the year six work or maybe year three or maybe down further and not react because this is what your kid is doing every day. Now schools don't like me. They don't like that sort of thing being said. So I've learned some hard lessons along the way. One is not to go into schools and advocate for children because, and again, I do respect the schools and I do respect the teachers because they are fighting a battle that has been predetermined for them a lot of the time. But you know, when you get a school where the principal gets it or has gifted children of their own, or you get a situation where there's a gifted and talented coordinator who knows what to do, or even a teacher who's gifted or has gifted children of their own, that time the child gets that person, it's going to be a year they remember.

I don't know about you. If you think back to your schooling days, you'll remember the teachers that got you and they're the ones that you remember the class lesson. There are teachers that I remember from way back when I was educated. The main thing was their anecdotes, not their lessons, but what they told me about the world. That's what was interesting. There were things they did on the weekend, but I mean, for the children who are going through it day after day, this lockdown learning has either been an absolute joy or an absolute horror. Now, if it's been a joy, it's because the parents have let the children basically condense it into a tiny amount of work and then do whatever they like, learning wise during the day. So as long as they show that they have the outcomes. The ones that have had horror in the gifted realm are the ones that have had to do the boring every day same stuff at school where they actually had some release by whatever, being class clown or their friends because we go for our tribes and they'd made friends that were similar and they were stuck in a lockdown situation where it was painfully boring and this is where the parents were just losing it because gifted kids just doesn't pop out of nowhere.

The parents are generally gifted as well too. And they were reliving their own pain as well. Not only their pain, their current pain of being in lockdown and pandemic and their fears, but also having to teach their children and watch their children go through the same things they did. So

I'm not surprised that I've been feeling as negative as I have been feeling, but I'm never negative regarding the kids. I mean, I'm the biggest advocate. I just feel that there's a certain amount of banging your head against a brick wall that you can do. And with parents, it's just excruciating to have the child come home if they're at school or to be here. And learning has become, as my daughter used to say, like walking through molasses. Well, that's what it is. I remember from Michael when he was over in Australia talking, he was saying that these kids are quiveringly alive and that is what I experience these quiveringly alive children. And so when they're doing the IQ test and they're going way, way beyond level, and I'm like, wow, that was amazing. They're just like blossoms. They're like lotus flowers. They just open up.

And the parents will say to me afterwards, that was the best day they have had, they were so excited in the car. Trouble is they have to go back to school tomorrow and sit in the year two classroom and do the stuff. And it's devastating for them. Yeah. That's why I'm so passionate about it. It's the kids and I'm still seeing them, so it doesn't go away.

Emma: I noticed in your empathy article you talked about being able to achieve empathy through reading books and fiction which is a passion area of mine. Do you think some of that ability for gifted kids to empathize with those characters and sort of get into those books is because they're seeing themselves in a way on the page and they're seeing characters that are described not only in terms of maybe being different or even possibly being gifted but it's described in a way that also engages them. Because I know Hermione in particular, in the Potter series, is one that a lot of kids will say, "Yes, I see myself on the page, finally."

Fiona: As I was saying before, reading and books were a passion and I've become very interested in how much they gave gifted kids because of my own daughter's experience. And now she's a published author, so finally she got to do what she loves the most, which is writing. I think the trouble for me is that these kids need access to much higher-level writing much earlier. So if you've got avid readers holding them back and the reading books that they do at school with a very low-level abstract content is going to cause huge problems. So these are the kids that want free access to the library. They want to read way above their age level. They're Hermione, they want to be, they want to read about Hermione because they relate to her at age 11.

They get where she's coming from. Also, she gives them permission. My favorite, Prisoner of Azkaban, where she can do multiple subjects because she's got a time turner. So imagine how much fun that would be as long as the subjects were interesting. But of course at Hogwarts the subjects are interesting because you're learning how to be a wizard. How cool would that be? But yeah, I think Frodo and Sam and the Lord of the Rings, I used it in the article as a classic example of empathy, what they did in terms of Gollum, the fact that they spared his life. That's the whole linchpin of the story because Gollum was the one that got rid of the ring in the end. Yeah, I'm a nerd. I know. I remember all of this. But they actually what I love so much is that there's research to show that kids who do read, they are empathizing, and they are learning empathy from the characters.

So yeah, even though as a non-visualizer, as an image-free thinker, I can't put myself into the characters and I don't have the experience of that sort of role play. The words and the descriptions of what they're doing are still so intense. It doesn't stop my reading. I'm an

absolutely addicted reader. The only problem reading has for me is I can't—and this is interesting because I can't visualize it—but I can't read scenes of torture or cruelty to animals. And I will not go to the movies, or I won't watch TV shows or anything where there is torture or cruelty. Because that will trigger the physiological reactions. Also, it's just horrible and I don't want to see it. So yeah, I think another part of being image-free thinker is that for me, cinemas, movies, going to the movies is absolutely unbelievable.

I just love it because not having the images myself, I love to be surrounded by other people's images. And that's one of the actual reasons I worked out that I didn't have images is because I don't care how a person portrays characters from a book in a movie because I don't have an image of that child. So, people who were outraged by the characters chosen for Lord of the Rings or the Harry Potter series, or various other Marvel comics or things like that because of their own perceptions of those characters. I don't have that. I just take on board whatever the character is that's thrown at me, but it's the words. And so going back to the books and reading the Harry Potter series again is I love language. I adore words. I like how they feel in my mouth. So in some sort of thing it's maybe even a synesthesia type of thing, rewiring of how words feel. So yeah, language is very important. Children will put themselves and feel like those characters. So yeah, Hermione is quintessential. And also just drawing from television on The Simpsons, Lisa used to take that role as well too.

Chris: That's right. Oh my gosh. It's very relatable. I want to ask you a question, but I'm not sure how to ask, but I want to ask you about being image-free and imaginal overexcitability. Because see, I am the opposite where I have hyper imagery. So, when I think of my imaginal overexcitability, it's very much these images in my mind and I had an imaginal world, but even though I had images, it was so much more about my feelings than it was even at times my imagery. But anyway, my point is I want to ask you. And when you're answering it, maybe we could work together somehow to produce questions for a future overexcitability instrument that will reach somebody who doesn't have.

Fiona: We need to, because there are more of us out there than they thought in all sorts of different fields. But look, I think the interesting thing about imaginal overexcitabilities is that imagination doesn't just mean image making. So imagination is, I can think of it as creativity. So I don't make images that doesn't stop me writing. I write poetry and as I said language is extremely important to me. And also as a child, I didn't have an imaginary friend, but I built worlds. I actually used to collect, the things they put in cereal boxes. So they put in the Little Mermaid characters. So I would have the whole array of Little Mermaid characters and I would go down the bush because I lived in the bush, and I would create worlds for these characters.

Literally I would get gummed up blossoms and I'd dress them, and I'd put them in little places under a tree and I'd set up little fairy kingdoms and things like that. So yeah, I expect that's highly part of the imaginal overexcitability. But it was real like I was doing it. So even though I don't see the images, I will script things, even if it's not as a child when I was doing it realistically, I will also script. So if I want to say fantasize about something, I will have a script about it. So I will say, I want to think about traveling. Instead of seeing a picture I'll say, right

Paris. Well, yeah. Okay. So I want to walk down the streets in Paris again. I want to go to Notre Dame. I want to see the river flowing in that incredible weird color that it has.

And then I will think about it in all different century ways, and I'll be able to bring that back to me, but I will never see the picture. So there's no image there. But I can recreate that for myself in a language sort of way. Look, you're hyper visual, what they call hyperphantasic, Chris and so is my son. So, Dom works as the counselor here at Gifted Mind. He's hyperphantasic and I am aphantasic entirely. And we have such an interesting bounce off about different children seen from different perspectives. I really embarrassed him once when he was 14 or 15 years old. All three of my children had imaginary friends. So I thought it was normal. I didn't have them cause I couldn't see them. But I thought everybody did. So when he was about 14, his friends were hanging out here and I came bouncing down the stairs one day and I said, oh, hey guys, I'm just really interested in my work. Can you tell me about your imaginary friends?

Dom sort of looked at me and they went, what are you talking about? We had real friends. We don't have imaginary friends, Fiona. I don't know what you're told me about. So, he's never failed to bring that up about the fact that not everybody has imaginary friends, mom, it's only a few people, but his were really clear. He used to have mud people that lived in the walls. He would see them and talk to them. And my youngest daughter had an imaginary dog. And we'd go to the park and the dog would come with us and she accused my older daughter once of sitting on it and killing it. And that was the end of the dog. So it was an interesting payback. So I think, the journey through Dąbrowski has been fundamental to me because he's given me a way of seeing these children that I've both raised and worked with in such a multifaceted and positive way.

It's been a joy really having the theory there because it's been the only theory, the positive disintegration that has worked for me. I've never found anything else that I can sort of hold onto in such a way. I mean, I've done a lot of work reading different therapists, Carl Rogers, all the different therapists, and I like a lot of things they say, but in terms of the theory of positive disintegration, I like the fact that it is okay to fall apart, and we are going to fall apart, yet we can actually pull ourselves back together like Humpty Dumpty in some way or another. Whether or not it's better or not, I don't know, but we can keep on doing it. It just not going to be one falling apart. There's going to be a number of them and maybe we'll get better at it.

Chris: It's so true that it's not like it's just one time. It happens plenty of times over the lifespan. There's just one more thing that I just thought of while we were meeting that I wanted to bring up Fiona. And I know that at the beginning of the pandemic, roughly, we were supposed to have this conference here in Denver that Linda was going to have, this Child-Centered Symposium. And so I know that you have been meeting with like Maggie and Michele and Willem, or you were, and Ellen, talking about gifted adults. I would love it if you could just take a moment and talk about, what you have talked about with them in terms of gifted adults and this is what we're missing to my mind in the gifted world is that there's been such a focus on gifted children that those of us who are gifted adults have been lost. We don't have community that's enough.

Fiona: Chris, I think the problem, a lot of the problem has been to do with the fact that it's gifted education. So we are only looking at children between the ages of schooling years. So gifted education is all about schooling basically, and what we do with them in school. So yeah, we have

a huge missing chunk because it doesn't go away. It's not like it's measles, you don't get over it, you go on with it, and then you have your own children and the process keeps on going and going and going. I think the joy for me, and I came in late to the group that you're talking about. So I don't feel particularly adept at telling you about what we've been talking about for a long period of time. But the essence of it has been Maggie's PhD and the way in which gifted adults see themselves and don't see themselves.

And that is in tune with my work, which is, I did a lot of talks with seeing, I started with natural lineal lines of gifted and because that went down so well, I then did patrilineal lines of giftedness. And I just became fascinated with the fact that so many moms would say to me after getting our report and talking about it, oh, it comes from my husband, it's not me. I'd be like excuse me, there are a lot of gifted women out there who have no understanding of their own innate giftedness. And it's because of our concept of what success is and how we define success. And it really ate at my soul. I said, look, think about it, go back, think about your mother, your aunts, your great aunts, your grandmother. Think about the things that they did. And I'm sure you're going to find in that lineage of mothers and females all the way back, that these were people that were different in some way or another. And even though they weren't the president, or they weren't a doctor, the women who were in teaching and nursing roles a hundred years ago, those were the gifted women because that's all that was available to them.

So, I started getting into this idea of women embracing their own, who they were. And so then I did one on the men and that was straightforward. But I really was interested in the adults. And how it was seen through grandparents. And I was looking at how the grandparents accepted their grandchildren as well, too, because often you skip the middle generation. Often some grandparents are really good accepting some of the things of their own grandchild that they feel they had themselves, whereas sometimes with the parents too close. So sometimes I had parents who would be after we had our follow up session, who would be so upset and worried and would open this huge can of worms because of their own childhood and what happened or didn't happen to them. But just, having your child identified as gifted is just the very, very beginning because you then go backwards and then you go forward, and you look at who you are in a big way. And so, yeah, I felt responsible for not just saying, oh, your child has a number. I felt responsible for a whole avalanche of feelings and exploring that was then going to go ahead.

But yeah, with the group, we'd talk about basically Maggie's research. And also about that sort of lack of owning who we are and accepting who we are. Not just ourselves, but gifted women and gifted men in general and how everyone's had that journey to a certain degree. So, yeah, I think there is a huge opening for that. There are a lot of adults who are still dealing with that. And I think what you are doing is fantastic because they need somewhere to go. They need somewhere, someone to talk to with them, and they need someone who understands where they're coming from.

Chris: Thank you. I know that it means a lot for people to be able to listen to these episodes and feel seen and mirrored by what we're saying. Thank you so much. This has been really wonderful.

Fiona: It was good to be able to talk to people I knew I felt safe with. There was no worry that you were going to come down hard on me.

Chris: That's right.

Emma: Thank you very much, Fiona, for being on the podcast with us.

Fiona: Thank you both for being there and doing what you're doing and getting Dąbrowski out there because I want more people to understand that it's not a threat, It's not a threat to them, it's just part of more.

Chris: Well said, I love that. Thank you.

Emma: And on that note, thank you as well to our listeners for joining us on the podcasts. It's been great to have you along with us. If you have any questions, feedback, or topics that you'd like us to address, please get in contact with us. You can email us at positivedisintegration.pod@gmail.com or hit us up on Twitter or Instagram. Until next time, keep walking the path to your authentic self.