

The Fears and Anxieties of Gifted Learners

Tips for Parents and Educators

Renee T. Lamont, MEd¹

Abstract: Research indicates there may be a relationship between gifted learners and insomnia, fear, and anxiety. This article discusses current research on Dabrowski's overexcitabilities, asynchronous development, perfectionistic tendencies, and common fears of gifted learners. Suggestions for parents and teachers of gifted children are offered to help gifted learners deal with these issues.

Keywords: gifted, fears, anxieties, insomnia, Dabrowski's overexcitabilities, perfectionism, asynchronous development

"Mom, I can't fall asleep." Here we go again. My 9-year-old daughter, Sophia, is standing by my bed at 1:00 in the morning, unable to sleep. When I ask my gifted daughter what's wrong, all she can tell me is that she cannot stop thinking. Her brain just wants to keep going all night long, pondering about what she saw on the news, schoolwork, her favorite book, and where Otis, our beloved dog who died last year, is right now. It was because of Sophia's apparent insomnia that I began to research gifted children and their fears and anxieties. In my research, I discovered gifted students exhibit more heightened fears and anxieties than nongifted students (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). There are many possible reasons for this to occur. In this article, I will discuss current research on the fears and anxieties of gifted students. I will next offer some tips for parents and educators to help gifted learners deal with these fears and anxieties.

Review of Current Research

Recent research on the relationship between fears and anxieties, and gifted learners exist. This article will share a descriptive summary of the results of this research, the researchers' conclusions about why gifted learners tend to be

more anxious than regular students, and practical examples of how these anxieties and fears may, and have been shown to, manifest themselves in a gifted child.

Gifted Students and Insomnia, Anxiety, and Fear of the Unknown

Harrison and Van Haneghan (2011) conducted research on gifted students and insomnia, death anxiety, and fear of the unknown. The study involved 216 middle and high school students who were given a death anxiety questionnaire, a fear of the unknown scale, an insomnia scale, and

the Overexcitabilities Questionnaire II. They found gifted learners to report more insomnia and fear of the unknown than regular education students. Harrison and Van Haneghan linked these fears and anxieties to Dabrowski's overexcitabilities. In his study, Dabrowski found there to be five overexcitabilities that are characteristic of gifted children. These overexcitabilities are psychomotor, sensual, intellectual, imaginal, and emotional (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). Students exhibiting these overexcitabilities were more likely to have issues with insomnia, anxiety, and fear of the unknown.

“STUDENTS
EXHIBITING
EMOTIONAL
OVEREXCITABILITY
PERCEIVE LIFE WITH
INTENSE EMOTIONS AND
REACTIONS.”

Psychomotor overexcitability. Students displaying psychomotor overexcitability show high levels of energy. They are able to remain focused on a particular subject for a long period of time. Students with psychomotor overexcitability need to always be moving on and doing something new (Harrison

DOI: 10.1177/1076217512455479. From ¹The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Address correspondence to: Renee T. Lamont, 7954 Bradford Lane, Denver, NC 28037; email: rlamont@lincoln.k12.nc.us.

For reprints and permissions queries, please visit SAGE's Web site at <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermission.nav>.

Copyright © 2012 The Author(s)

& Van Haneghan, 2011). For example, when Sophia begins reading a new novel, she tends to read the whole book in a day or two. She focuses just on that book until she has finished reading it. When she is done, she turns her focus onto the next novel.

Sensual overexcitability. Students who exhibit sensual overexcitability experience the world with deep and rich senses. They may have heightened sensitivities to taste, touch, sound, sight, and smell. At times, they may have extreme reactions to these senses. Sophia has always been a very picky eater and has shown a heightened sensitivity to taste her entire life. Students who display psychomotor and sensual overexcitabilities tend to suffer more from insomnia, as they are unable to turn off their brains at night and fall asleep (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011).

Intellectual overexcitability. Students displaying intellectual overexcitability feel the need to understand the more complex issues and deeper meanings in life. They may constantly question the meaning or existence of life. Not being able to answer these questions may result in anxiety (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). For example, Sophia was troubled with the loss of her pet Otis, and focused on why he had to die and where he is now for many months after his death. It was hard for her to comprehend never seeing her beloved dog again.

Imaginational overexcitability. Imaginational overexcitability shows a clear connection to creativity. Students exhibiting this type of overexcitability become encompassed in their own worlds of imagination and fantasy. Many famous authors such as Edgar Allen Poe are said to exhibit this type of overexcitability. Imaginational overexcitability allows students to imagine the worst possible outcomes in any situation, which would result in fears and anxieties (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). Sophia displays this overexcitability oftentimes when she plays in her own imaginative world of castles, princesses, and knights with her brother and sister. Her creativity helps her to become consumed in this world of fantasy.

Emotional overexcitability. The most significant type of overexcitability in regard to fears and anxieties is emotional. Students exhibiting emotional overexcitability perceive life with intense emotions and reactions. On the topic of emotional overexcitability, Tucker and Haferstein (1997) reported, "Emotional overexcitability is indicated by a concern for others, timidity, shyness, fear and anxiety, difficulty of adjustment to new environments, and intensity of feeling" (p. 71). I believe my daughter Sophia also exhibits emotional overexcitability. She has also always been quite shy and had difficulty adjusting to new situations.

Perfectionism, Depression, and Anxiety

A study conducted by Christopher and Shewmaker provides additional insights into the relationship between perfectionism,

depression, and anxiety in gifted students. This 2-week study involved 240 gifted children between the ages of 7 and 11 years. Christopher and Shewmaker focused on a range of perfectionism in students and how it affected them emotionally. The participants in this study who showed a tendency for socially prescribed perfectionism also showed a tendency for characteristics of depression. Socially prescribed perfectionism is described as when an individual perceives other people hold exaggerated expectations of them. "Students who evidence this type of perfectionism (SPP) should be encouraged to be aware of their moods and to monitor their expectations" (Christopher & Shewmaker, 2010). As a parent of a gifted child, the results of this study do not surprise me. If Sophia perceived her teacher's or my husband's and my expectations of her to be out of reach, then I would expect her to be upset and depressed.

Asynchronous Development

Another link between gifted learners, and higher levels of fears and anxiety may be their asynchronous development. The term *asynchronous development* refers to uneven levels of cognitive and social maturity that tend to be found in gifted students. Gifted students may be able to cognitively understand difficult concepts such as death and other mysteries of life, but may not be ready to handle these concepts emotionally. "Gifted children have been shown to be different than their peers in social and emotional development. For example, there may be a higher risk for anxiety and depression because of attributes such as asynchronous developmental patterns" (Tippey & Burnham, 2009, p. 331). I have found Sophia to suffer from asynchronous development as well. In reflecting on the death of our pet Otis, for instance, Sophia took the news the hardest of all three children. She knew immediately we would never see him again and cried every night. It took my other two children longer for this revelation to occur.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence determines how we understand and express ourselves, understand and relate with others, and cope with daily demands. In his research, Bar-On (2007) found that the ability to manage one's emotions strongly influences a gifted child's cognitive functioning. There are several key factors to emotional intelligence. They are the ability to solve problems, validate feelings, manage emotions, express feelings, be optimistic, and be motivated to do their best (Bar-On, 2007). "Emotional intelligence does impact cognitive intelligence and the potential to perform academically as well as to do one's best to solve problems and be resilient" (Bar-On, p. 130). Students who have difficulties managing their emotional intelligence, in other words, may have difficulties coping with fears and anxieties.

Fear and Gifted Students

Tippey and Burnham (2009) conducted research on specific fears of gifted students. They found different groups of gifted

students tended to fear the same thing. In their study, gifted girls tended to fear the dark, strange sights and sounds, being kidnapped, dirt, and animals. Sophia, for instance, had a terrible fear of the dark that often led to anxiety at bedtime. Gifted boys tended to be fearful of bodily injury, school failure, nightmares, and imaginary creatures. The researchers postulated that the differences in fears were possibly due to societal expectations for girls and boys (Tippey & Burnham, 2009).

Fear and Gifted-Versus-Nongifted Students

Research shows gifted students exhibit fear more than their nongifted counterparts (Derevensky & Coleman, 1989). The top fears of gifted students are war, violence, and death and disease (Derevensky & Coleman, 1989). When comparing a group of 70 gifted and nongifted students between the ages of 8 and 13 in their study, Derevensky and Coleman (1989) found the biggest difference between the two groups to be fear of nuclear war. The researchers explained these fears are due to their cognitive ability to understand the world news (Derevensky & Coleman, 1989). Another possible reason why gifted students are more apt to be fearful of nuclear war may be their tendencies toward intellectual and imaginal overexcitabilities. A student with intellectual overexcitabilities may try to grasp the concept of nuclear war and its effects, whereas a student with imaginal overexcitabilities may learn about nuclear war and clearly imagine a postnuclear war world.

Tips for Parents and Educators

There are many different reasons why gifted students may have more anxiety and fear when compared with their nongifted peers or siblings. The next focus of this article will be to offer some tips for parents and educators to help gifted children work through these issues.

Tips for Parents

Thankfully, there are some things parents can do at home to help alleviate their gifted child's fears and anxieties. Although these will be some strategies parents can try, it is important to keep in mind that severe anxieties may require professional intervention.

Structure and routine. Incorporating structure and routine into your gifted child's life tends to decrease anxieties. Fewer unexpected changes in your child's life may help reduce daily stress (Amend, 2010). For example, provide the same after-school and night-time routines for your child. You may have your child eat a snack and then work on homework every day right after school. After dinner, you might have your child read a book, take a shower, and then go to bed. Establishing the same routine day in and day out will help reduce anxiety.

Flexibility. Teach your gifted child how to be flexible. To do this, discuss different possible outcomes in various

situations. Determine which outcomes are more positive and which are more negative (Amend, 2010). For example, students need to be flexible in school when choosing partners for a project. Before a big project, have your child choose who they would like to work with, and if that person already has a partner, discuss who else would be a good partner. Parents can also provide time for spontaneity and open-ended activities (Lind, 2001).

Meditation. Teach your child how to calm his or her emotions by using meditation. "Relaxation techniques and meditation could address the actual physiological aspects involved in insomnia, death anxiety, and fear of the unknown as well as emotional overexcitability" (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011, p. 690). If you cannot take your child to a yoga class to learn meditation, Wii Fit has a fantastic yoga and meditation program you can do together and in the comfort of your own home.

Determine realistic expectations. Many gifted students feel that because they are gifted, they should not have to ever work hard in school. Students need to be taught that giftedness does not mean instant mastery. Parents should help students set realistic expectations for themselves and choose appropriate goals (Kaplan, 1990). I remember when Sophia first began memorizing her multiplication facts. She was very upset when she did not know all the facts immediately. We had to teach her that even though she is gifted, she still needs to work hard and memorize facts like everyone else. Her brain did not come pre-programmed with multiplication facts.

Model positive thinking. Parents can set a good example for their gifted children by modeling positive thinking at home. They can show life events as opportunities rather than hurdles (Amend, 2010). For example, instead of being upset about not having a specific ingredient needed to cook dinner, a parent can use that time as an opportunity to try cooking with new ingredients. This kind of positive thinking and flexibility role modeling will help a gifted child learn to overcome obstacles on his or her own.

Focus on the present. Parents can also teach their gifted child to focus more on the present and not worry about what has already happened or what might happen in the future. It is easier to breathe when you are focusing on what is happening right now (Amend, 2010). For example, when Sophia began to worry about the upcoming standardized testing in her school, we taught her to take a deep breath and not think about it. We asked her, "What worrying about it was going to do for her right now?" It was only making her feel horrible, and she was not enjoying the moment.

Provide opportunities to express feelings. Gifted children need to know that feelings are never wrong. A good idea may be to create a worry jar where children can "store" their worries (Amend, 2010). With a worry jar, students can physically put their worries away and move on to focus on something positive.

Be available for guidance and advice. A common result of gifted children's advanced vocabulary is some parents forgetting to treat them as children. I find myself in this predicament often with Sophia. She speaks like an adult so often that many times I forget she is only 9-year-old. Gifted children need to be treated like children and still taught rules, values, and proper behavior (Kaplan, 1990). Setting clear behavior expectations for all children (gifted and nongifted) within the household may help alleviate anxiety.

Use humor. Many gifted students have an advanced sense of humor. Laughter from positive humor (humor that does not belittle, exclude, or lower self-esteem of someone) can provide a happy and secure environment for a gifted child. Laughter releases endorphins and is nature's antidepressant medicine (Holt, 2007).

Community service. To help your children who is struggling with moral or ethical issues provide them with opportunities to volunteer in their community. They can collect food for the needy or write letters to soldier overseas (Lind, 2001).

Bibliotherapy. There are many books parents can have their gifted child read to help them alleviate stress and fears. Some great novels that may help gifted students handle stress are *The Nature of Jade* by Deb Caletti, *What Erika Wants* by Bruce Clements, and *Say Yes* by Audrey Coloumbis. Some books that parents may want to have their gifted children read to help alleviate fears and death anxiety are *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst and *Freak the Mighty* by Rodman Philbrick. *Freak the Mighty* is an especially powerful book for gifted students to read because it is about a gifted boy with a severe disability and how he handles his own imminent death.

Tips for Teachers

There are also many strategies teachers can implement to help reduce anxieties and fears in their gifted students. In this final section, I will highlight a few of them for you.

Become more aware of the characteristics and needs of gifted children. Gifted learners need help in being different. Highly gifted students can fall prey to personal beliefs that they are not OK. Teachers should not only show gifted learners it is OK to be different but also should celebrate their differences (Schuler, 2003).

Mentors. Studies show that providing either adult or peer mentors for gifted children may help reduce their anxieties (Benson, 2009). Benson (2009), a middle school teacher, found his students to be very anxious over their future transition to high school. As a result, he provided discussion panels and mentors for his students so that they could ask appropriate questions. The mentors were a group of gifted high school

students from the school the middle school students will be attending. Allowing his gifted middle school students an opportunity to speak with mentors about how to achieve success in high school, Benson was able to reduce the anxieties of his gifted students.

Teach different philosophies of life. Teachers can directly address the needs of students who are anxious as a result of intellectual overexcitabilities by teaching different philosophies for the meaning of life. It may help gifted learners to learn about how other intellectuals have answered these deep questions (Harrison & Van Haneghan, 2011). For example, there are wonderful quotes from Socrates and Plato that teachers can use to help initiate discussions about the meaning of life and death. Teachers can use these quotes as a basis for implementing Socratic seminars in their classrooms.

Grouping. Grouping gifted learners together throughout the school day may not only help them academically but also help alleviate their anxieties. Grouping gifted students together early on may help with anxieties that are due to feelings of social isolation, boredom, or low self-esteem (Bar-On, 2007). When grouped together, students can also have a chance to share their fears. "Knowledge that other children share similar fears and have similar anxieties may be helpful. Knowledge and recognition of these problems may facilitate a decrease in anxiety and give rise to possible solutions" (Derevensky & Coleman, 1989, p. 68).

Networking. Networking opportunities should be available to gifted students so that they can meet other gifted children from different geographical locations (Bar-On, 2007). Students may be comforted to know there are many students in this world just like them, with common fears and anxieties. Some great places to find networking opportunities online are www.davidsongifted.org and www.hoagiesgifted.org.

Teach problem-solving skills. Preuss and Dubow (2004) researched gifted and nongifted students' coping strategies in regard to different school and peer stressors. They found gifted learners tend to use problem-solving approaches to cope with stress more often than nongifted learners. Teaching problem-solving skills will provide gifted learners practice in dealing with day-to-day stressors and anxieties inside and outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Everyone, at some point in their lives, will experience fears and anxieties. There is research to show gifted students may experience these fears and anxieties more often or more intensely than regular education students. However, there are many strategies parents and teachers can use to help their gifted child deal with these intense emotions. I have found using bibliotherapy and reading in bed at night has helped

Sophia with her insomnia. She is also doing yoga with me this summer to help her work out some anxieties and stress. Another thing I am doing is working on modeling positive thinking for her on a daily basis and trying to use positive humor as often as possible at home. I am finding that the combination of yoga and daily humor this summer has helped Sophia with her anxieties. Working together, parents and teachers can create a comfortable, nonthreatening home and learning environment for gifted children.

Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the authorship and/or publication of this article.

References

- Amend, E. (2010). Tips for parents: Worry and the gifted: How much is too much? *Davidson Institute for Talent Development*. Retrieved from http://davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_print_id_10265.aspx
- Bar-On, R. (2007). The impact of emotional intelligence on giftedness. *Gifted Education International*, 23, 122-137.
- Benson, M. B. (2009). Gifted middle school students transitioning to high school: How one teacher helped his students feel less anxious. *Gifted Child Today*, 32, 29-33.
- Christopher, M. M., & Shewmaker, J. (2010). How does perfectionism relate to gifted and high-ability learners? *Gifted Child Today*, 33, 21-30.
- Derevensky, J., & Coleman, E. B. (1989). Gifted children's fears. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 33, 65-68. doi:10.1177/001698628903300203
- 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, 669-697.
- Holt, D. (2007). Tips for parents: Teaching the use of humor to cope with stress. *Davidson Institute for Talent Development*. Retrieved from http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_print_id_10475.aspx
- Kaplan, L. (1990). Helping gifted students with stress management. *The Eric Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education*. Retrieved from www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=ED321493
- Lind, S. (2001). Overexcitability and the gifted. *Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted*. Available from www.sengifted.org
- Preuss, L. J., & Dubow, E. F. (2004). A comparison between intellectually gifted and typical children in their coping responses to a school and a peer stressor. *Roeper Review*, 26, 105-111.
- Schuler, P. A. (2003). Gifted kids at risk: Who's listening? *Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted*. Available from www.sengifted.org
- Tippey, J. G., & Burnham, J. J. (2009). Examining the fears of gifted children. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 32, 321-339.
- Tucker, B., & Haferstein, N. L. (1997). Psychological intensities in young gifted children. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 41, 66-75. doi:10.1177/001698629704100302

Bio

Renee T. Lamont, MEd, has a bachelor of science degree in elementary education from Mount Saint Mary's College in Frederick, Maryland, and a master's degree in reading with a concentration in the field of reading specialist from Loyola College in Baltimore, Maryland. She is currently working on her Academically and Intellectually Gifted (AIG) Certification at The University of North Carolina at Charlotte. She is also currently the AIG teacher at Rock Springs Elementary School in Lincoln County Schools in North Carolina.