

## “Gifted Intensities: Liability or Asset”

1. Have you heard the word overexcitabilities before? What do you think about Dabrowski's 5 areas of intensity: Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional?
2. Have you seen any of these in your own children or children you have worked with?
3. What do you think about the strategies mentioned at the end of the article? Would you use any of them?
4. Answer the question asked by the title; are gifted intensities a liability or an asset?

Add your own questions:



## **SMPGs: The Heart of SENG Gifted Intensities: Liability or Asset**

By Lori Comallie-Caplan

First Published in The SENG Update Newsletter, May 2010  
[http://www.sengifted.org/SMPG/smpg\\_may10\\_column.shtml](http://www.sengifted.org/SMPG/smpg_may10_column.shtml)

In 1981, SENG established guidelines for SENG Model Parent Support Groups (SMPGs). SMPGs bring together groups of interested parents of gifted and talented children to discuss such topics as motivation, discipline, stress management, and peer relationships. This column offers information and advice based on the experience of trained SMPG facilitators, both to apply in their own parent groups and for other parents to use and learn from. Learn more about the SMPG program at [http://www.sengifted.org/smpg\\_parent\\_groups.shtml](http://www.sengifted.org/smpg_parent_groups.shtml).

Week Five of the SENG Model Parent Group (SMPG) is a discussion around Chapter Six of *A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children: Intensity, Perfectionism and Stress*. These are complex topics that require more than one column. Let's talk about intensities.

Here is a wonderful quote by Pearl S. Buck:

*"The truly creative mind in any field is no more than this: A human creature born abnormally, inhumanly sensitive. To him... a touch is a blow, a sound is a noise, a misfortune is a tragedy, a joy is an ecstasy, a friend is a lover, a lover is a god, and failure is death. Add to this cruelly delicate organism the overpowering necessity to create, create, create -- so that without the creating of music or poetry or books or buildings or something of meaning, his very breath is cut off from him. He must create, must pour out creation. By some strange, unknown, inward urgency he is not really alive unless he is creating."*

What an exquisite description of the gifted mind. The first time I read this, I was touched at how closely this described my own child, reminding me of the joys and sorrows of parenting a child with multiple overexcitabilities.

The theory of positive disintegration and overexcitabilities is attributed to Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski, who studied the characteristics and development of the gifted. His theory on Positive Disintegration viewed psychological tension and anxiety as necessary for growth. His views on overexcitabilities are a way to understand the emotional and intellectual inner workings of gifted children. Sharon Lind explains, "Overexcitabilities are inborn intensities indicating a heightened ability to respond to stimuli. Found to a greater degree in creative and gifted individuals, overexcitabilities are expressed in increased sensitivity, awareness, and intensity, and represent a real difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience. Dabrowski identified five areas of intensity: Psychomotor, Sensual, Intellectual, Imaginational, and Emotional." (Sharon Lind, From The SENG Update Newsletter, 2001, 1(1) 3-6, available [online](#))

Stephanie Tolan gives the best layman's description of overexcitabilities (written for Hoagies' Gifted Education Page, February, 1999):

**Psychomotor:** This is often thought to mean that the person needs lots of movement and athletic activity, but can also refer to the issue of having trouble smoothing out the mind's activities for sleeping. Lots of physical energy and movement, fast talking, lots of gestures, sometimes nervous tics.

**Sensual:** Here's the "cut the label out of the shirt" demand, the child who limps as if with a broken leg when a sock seam is twisted. Also a love for sensory things -- textures, smells, tastes etc. or a powerful reaction to negative sensory input (bad smells, loud sounds, etc.) The kids tend to be sensitive to bright lights (squinting in all the family photographs, etc.), harsh sounds. A baby who cries when the wind blows in his face, for instance; a toddler who cries at the feel of grass on bare legs and feet. Another important aspect of this is aesthetic awareness -- the child who is awed to breathlessness at the sight of a beautiful sunset, or cries hearing Mozart, etc.

**Imaginational:** These are the dreamers, poets, "space cadets" who are strong visual thinkers, use lots of metaphorical speech. They day dream, remember their dreams at night and often react strongly to them, believe in magic (take a long time to "grow out of" Santa, the tooth fairy, elves and fairies, etc.).

**Intellectual:** Here's the usual definition of "giftedness." Kids with a strong "logical imperative," who love brain teasers and puzzles, enjoy following a line of complex reasoning, figuring things out. A love of things academic, new information, cognitive games, etc.

**Emotional:** This includes being "happier when happy, sadder when sad, angrier when angry," etc. Intensity of emotion. But also a very broad range of emotions. Also, a need for deep connections with other people or animals. Unable to find close and deep friends (Damon and Pythias variety), they invent imaginary friends, make do with pets or stuffed animals, etc. Empathy and compassion. A child who needs a committed relationship will think herself "betrayed" by a child who plays with one child today and another tomorrow yet refers to both as "friends." This is also the overexcitability that makes the kids susceptible to depression.

My own child has sensual, imaginational, and emotional overexcitabilities. He is now 25 living in Los Angeles, and I wish there had been a SENG

Model Parent Group when he was young. I wish I had the wise advice of other professionals and parents when I was actively parenting him.

The best advice for dealing with intensities comes from the book *Living with Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and the Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults*. The following excerpts are reprinted by permission from *Living with Intensity*, edited by Susan Daniels, Ph.D., and Michael M. Piechowski, Ph.D., published by Great Potential Press, 2008, [www.greatpotentialpress.com](http://www.greatpotentialpress.com):

**Children with high psychomotor excitabilities need to hear:**

- "You have wonderful enthusiasm and energy."
- "I wish I had your energy."

**Strategies to encourage modulation of psychomotor OE:**

- Avoid activities that require sitting for a long time.
- Plan for movement opportunities before and after a long period of stillness.
- Teach relaxation techniques

**Children with high sensual excitabilities need to hear:**

- "You take such delight in beautiful sights, sounds, and feelings."
- "I think you know what you like and what feels good to you."

**Strategies to encourage modulation of sensual OE:**

- Provide environments that limit offensive stimuli and maximize comforting stimuli.
- Help the child find comfortable and appropriate clothing.
- Understand that attachments to stuffed animals and favorite blankets may run a tad longer than other less sensually sensitive children.

**Children with high intellectual excitabilities need to hear:**

- "Your curiosity fuels your intelligence."
- "You defend your ideas and are open to learning different information."

**Strategies to encourage modulation of intellectual OE:**

- Honor the need to seek understanding and truth, regardless of the child's age.
- Help children find answers to their own questions.
- Teach inquiry methods and communication skills.

**Children with high imaginal excitabilities need to hear:**

- "You have a rich imagination."
- "You view the world in a different way."

**Strategies to encourage modulation of imaginal OE:**

- Encourage children to share imaginings – tell stories or draw images of imagined friends, pets, buildings, creatures, and worlds.
- Help children to distinguish between the imaginary and the real world.
- Help children use imagination to solve problems and cope with challenges.

**Children with high emotional excitabilities need to hear:**

- "You care very deeply and have deep feelings."
- "You are very loyal to those you care about."

**Strategies to encourage modulation of emotional OE:**

- Teach the child to share his emotions and feelings with others in positive and productive ways – verbally, through movement, art, journaling, or music.
- Teach, model, and share relaxation techniques, including deep breathing, stretching, and two minutes of quiet (a personal time-out).
- Find and choose activities that provide meaningful opportunities for empathy and social concerns. Volunteer at a pet shelter, participate in a community service project, or find some other humanitarian outreach activity to give deep caring some active expression.

When it comes to the topic of intensity, parents can really benefit from reading *Living with Intensity*. Having intensities can be both a blessing and a curse. Gifted children can be empathetic, caring, loyal, and deeply concerned about the welfare of their community and world. On the flip side, their intensities can be misdiagnosed as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Bi-Polar Disorder, Oppositional Defiant Disorder, or Asperger's Syndrome, among others. The most important thing for parents to do is to cherish their child's uniqueness.