



Cynthia Z. Hansen, M.Ed.
Certificated Gifted and Talented Educator

Academic Skills & Executive Functions Assessment
Strategy Development * Academic Enrichment * Family Support

“Amplified Ways of Being” and the Gifted Child:

It is clear that the term “gifted” seems to imply that folks with high talents feel blessed to have them. But this is not always true. The highly gifted artist is often keenly aware of the emotions of other people and the colors that these emotions convey; those who are over sensitive to touch or smell have difficulty wearing clothes or eating many foods; those who are keenly aware of the world are often overwhelmed by the suffering that they cannot control; and those who are highly imaginative get tired of being called “space cadet”!

Paula Wilkes and Mark Szymanski call these intensities “amplified ways of being¹.” Typically these traits have a higher correlation with higher intelligence. But these same characteristics are also common sensitivities in the 1% of the people at the lower end of the intellectual spectrum.

Psychomotor: Children with heightened psychomotor intensity are often miss-diagnosed with ADHD. Due to their heightened neural functioning and physical activity, these students may be more prone to “reactive hypoglycemia” which also mimics ADHD, but can be regulated by a diet high in protein, and low in sugar and simple carbohydrates, delivered in 4 to 6 meals a day.² They are often restless and constantly in need of activity. Babies who never sleep, the child who needs to manipulate an object while working, the adult who can work 14 hours a day without exhaustion, are a few examples.

Sensual: These children experience a heightened sense of smell, touch, sight, and sound. They can experience intense frustration from sensory overload. These are the students who hear the light bulb about to go out; refuse to dip their hands in finger-paint; are bothered by perfume and other odors; must have cotton shirts with the tags cut out; notice, and find treasures when walking; and often have allergies and asthma (due to increased neural sensitivities).

Intellectual: Insatiable curiosity describes this intensity. Children are driven by wide and deep interests. They search for truth, seek the unmentioned sidebar, probe the unknown, and are constantly plagued with the need to understand “why.” These students may have difficulty understanding traditional roles and arbitrary social rules because they do not fit into their sense of logic and order.

Imaginational:

Calvin and Hobbes, imaginary friends, the discovered shell which has a complete travel history, and our favorite fantasy writers, all reflect imaginational intensities. Children may have such a full internal life that they blend truth as observed with truth that could be. They may not understand the concept of lying because they have created a reality that is true to their vision.

¹ Paula Wilkes, Mark Szymanski, “Positive Identity Development Process” 2008 Paulawilkes.wordpress.com; teachwithintention.net

² James Webb, “Stress, Perfectionism and Depression,” California Association of the Gifted Conference, Anaheim 2009.

These are our dancers, musicians, authors, artists and those who must have creative outlets to feed their souls.

Emotional: Intense feelings may manifest in complex ways. Some are able to feel another's pain as their own (empathic), which may be misinterpreted as a feeling directed *at* them. These children interpret gestures, intonation, and expressions, and may react to them intensely. They may become so overwhelmed with social concerns that they are unable to sleep and can become easily depressed. Understanding and embracing these sensitivities becomes crucial for a happy child or adult. Learning a feeling vocabulary, relaxation techniques, developing coping strategies, and anticipating changes that may require rehearsing responses, are highly beneficial to these students. They may also thrive when involved in causes where they can make a positive difference in the world.

A Guide to Understanding and Supporting our Intense Children (and adults)

- * Reassure them that they are not alone.
- * Discuss the positive aspects of the amplified traits.
- * Provide opportunities for delighting in the intensity.
- * Help them think about their thinking to gain *Metacognition*.
- * Foster control and acknowledgement in the gifts inherent in the sensitivity.
- * Discuss the reasons why *circumstance* may affect their acceptance by others and the possible reasons why they may decide to learn how to modulate their intensity.
- * Discuss ways to modulate the intensity, without denying the inherent gifts.
- * Teach students how to stop their negative "self-talk" and assist them to transform their thoughts into positive "self-talk."
- * Discuss and acknowledge their "bad bookkeeping"³—the process of letting one bad moment ruin a perfectly good day due to excessive "looping" of negative thoughts.
- * Refocus the child on what is attainable by getting them involved in solving real-world problems.
- * Acknowledge the power of human contact to allay depression. A "high-five", shoulder squeeze, or hooking pinkies with another can bring the warmth needed to make the day more tolerable. Touch helps to burn off loneliness.
- * Encourage effort over intelligence; recognize process vs. speed; mistakes as opportunities.
- * Ask your child if they asked any good *questions* in school.
- * Give students time to ponder. Help them create "Wonder Books": a place where they can write questions, theories, ideas, side stories, and epitaphs.
- * Help them cope and adapt by using their sensitivities as gifts and strengths.

Recommended Text: *Living with Intensity*, (2009) Daniels, S., PhD and Piechowski, M.M., PhD. Great Potential Press, Scottsdale, AZ,

Ms Cynthia Hansen, M.Ed., works privately to mentor students of all abilities who need specific, systematic support with sustained focus, organization, and study strategies, in addition to working with gifted populations at multiple schools. Ms Hansen presents workshops for GATE communities, and for the Tri-County GATE Council's Best Practices series. **She will be presenting her program on Executive Functions at the National Association of Gifted Children (NAGC) National Convention in November, 2012.**

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³ Ibid.