

HYPERSENSITIVITY (DABROWSKI'S OVEREXCITABILITIES)

Summary

In the 1960's, Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dabrowski observed various kinds of intensities and hypersensitivity in high learning potential (HLP) people. He researched and studied these and developed his Theory of Positive Disintegration to explain them. Part of this theory was about the five kinds of overexcitabilities, or hypersensitivities, that high learning potential people often have. This advice sheet gives an overview of psychomotor, intellectual, sensual, emotional and imaginal overexcitabilities, or hypersensitivities.

Introduction

Does your child complain about the seams in his socks? Does your daughter put her hands over her ears when she hears loud noises? Does your son have trouble sitting still? Is your daughter moved almost to tears when they hear a certain piece of music? These are all signs of the kinds of intensities that can be seen in high learning potential children.

In developing and researching his theory, Dabrowski found that people with advanced emotional development, including advanced moral development, had a set of traits which he termed Overexcitabilities, or hypersensitivities. This is characterised by an innate tendency to respond in an intensified manner to various forms of stimuli, both external and internal. This could also be termed 'spirited'. Having overexcitabilities means that life is experienced in a manner that is deeper, more vivid and more acutely sensed.

Dabrowski identified overexcitabilities, or hypersensitivities in the following five areas: Psychomotor, Intellectual, Sensual, Emotional and Imaginal. HLP children tend to have intensities in several of these areas, although one or two are usually dominant. Parents and professionals can better understand a HLP child's behaviour through considering how the intensities outlined below impact on it.

Psychomotor Overexcitability

Characterised by a surplus of energy (ADHD characteristics are similar, though HLP children without ADHD would have no difficulty with concentration despite exhibiting these). They may have:

- Rapid speech
- Impulsive behaviour
- Competitiveness
- Compulsive talking
- Compulsive organising
- Nervous habits and tics
- Preference for fast action and sports
- Physical expression of emotions
- Sleeplessness

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Intellectual Overexcitability

Characterised by activities of the mind, thought and thinking about thinking, children with this intensity seem to be thinking all the time and want answers to deep thoughts. Sometimes their need for answers will get them in trouble in school when their questioning of the teacher can look like disrespectful challenging. This intensity is the one most recognised in HLP children.

- Deep curiosity
- Love of knowledge and learning
- Love of problem solving
- Avid reading
- Asking of probing questions
- Theoretical thinking
- Analytical thinking
- Independent thinking
- Concentration, ability to maintain intellectual effort

Sensual Overexcitability

Characterised by a heightened awareness of one or all five senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing. Children with a sensual overexcitability can be sick from the smell of certain foods or as toddlers will hate to walk on grass in their bare feet. They may over-react to certain loud noises or dislike certain foods because of the way they feel in their mouths.

- Appreciation of beauty, whether in writing, music, art or nature.
- Love of objects such as jewellery
- Sensitive to smells, tastes, or textures of foods
- Sensitivity to pollution
- Tactile sensitivity (feel of some materials on the skin, clothing tags)
- Craving for pleasure
- Need or desire for comfort

Emotional Overexcitability

Characterised by exceptional emotional sensitivity, children with a strong emotional overexcitability are sometimes mistakenly believed to have bipolar disorder or other emotional problems and disorders. They are often the children about whom people will say, "He's too sensitive for his own good."

- Extremes of emotion
- Anxiety
- Feelings of guilt and sense of responsibility
- Feelings of inadequacy and inferiority
- Timidity and shyness
- Loneliness
- Concern for others
- Heightened sense right and wrong, of injustice and hypocrisy

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- Strong memory for feelings
- Problems adjusting to change
- Depression
- Need for security
- Physical response to emotions (stomach aches caused by anxiety, for example)

Imaginational Overexcitability

Characterised by free play of the imagination, the imaginations of children with this intensity can cause them to visualise the worst possibility in any situation. It can keep them from taking chances or getting involved in new situations.

- Vivid dreams
- Fear of the unknown
- Good sense of humour
- Magical thinking
- Love of poetry, music and drama
- Love of fantasy
- Daydreaming
- Imaginary friends
- Detailed visualisation

Further Information

PA601 Social and Emotional Development of High Learning Potential Children	Raising happy, successful children is the goal of every parent. As social and emotional problems appear often among high learning potential children, this advice sheet looks at the cause of these and offers some advice on dealing with them.
PA611 High Learning Potential and Active (Psychomotor Overexcitability)	High learning potential children, especially those who display Psychomotor Overexcitability, are highly energetic, always on the go and want to be constantly engaged in an activity. This advice sheet explores the topic and suggests ways of dealing with this high level of activity.
www.sengifted.org/articles_social/Lind_OverexcitabilityAndTheGifted.shtml	Article on overexcitability in HLP children on the SENG (Social and Emotional Needs of the Gifted) website.
www.powerwood.org.uk	PowerWood C.I.C is a not-for-profit, community driven, social venture committed to raising awareness and supporting and improving the emotional wellbeing of families and individuals living with intensity, hyper-sensitivity and super-reactivity.
<i>Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults</i> by James T Webb et al	Excellent book exploring all areas of giftedness and comparing it to other conditions. Explores overexcitabilities in depth.
<i>Living with Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability and Emotional Development of Gifted Children Adolescents and Adults</i> by Susan Daniels and Michael Piechowski	A leading book in the field of overexcitabilities with contributions by leading academics in the field.

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