

Gifted Overexcitabilities

A Cheatsheet for Teachers and Parents

{What is an Overexcitability?}

In the most basic sense, having an overexcitability (OE) means that some people tend to experience the world with a heightened sense of awareness, and that their brains react more strongly to these stimuli than a typical brain. This phenomenon seems to occur somewhat commonly in the gifted population.

Intellectual OE

The child with intellectual overexcitability is deeply curious, an avid reader, loves problem solving, has an insatiable desire for knowledge, an ability to concentrate for extended periods of time on one task, is not satisfied with surface-level answers to questions, is analytical, able to synthesize information readily, asks a seemingly infinite amount of questions, and has a strong moral compass.

The emotional OE is characterized by "heightened, intense feelings, extremes of complex emotions, identification with others' feelings, and strong affective expression (Piechowski, 1991)". In a nutshell, these people experience emotions and relationships to people, places, or things very deeply. They might be deeply empathetic toward other people or animals, they have a strong desire to love and be loved. They are very, very aware of their own feelings, can be harshly self-critical, immensely joyful or tragically sad, and they can experience all of these emotions in a relatively short period of time.

Emotional OE

Sensual OE

People who have sensual overexcitabilities experience these the five senses in ways that are much, much, more intense than the average person experiences them. They can express an deep and profound appreciation for gourmet food, the great beauty and wonders found in nature, and musical expression early on in their lives. Experiencing these things brings stimulation to the body's pleasure centers. It makes them feel happy, excited, and exhilarated even! On the downside, having sensual overexcitability may lead to the seeking out of things that cause the same sensations that provide those happy feelings, and they may do it to an extreme. Think: binge eating, binge shopping, overindulging. You might find that they get so absorbed in smells, sounds, or sights, that they are hyper-focused on those things, instead of the lesson, activity, or process in which they're supposed to be participating.

Psychomotor OE

Children with psychomotor intensity have an overabundance of energy--constant movement, anxiety, difficulty with impulse control, high energy, rapid speech. They need action. They can become workaholics. They can be competitive. They can have nervous tics, even trouble sleeping. It seems like they have an internal motor that is constantly running. Some gifted children with psychomotor intensity have been labeled "ADHD." And while there are some children who most definitely have attention problems, there is this other group of people with the psychomotor OE who have been misdiagnosed. It's important to understand the differences and seek out professional help, if necessary.

Imaginational OE

The imaginational OE "...reflects a heightened play of the imagination with rich association of images and impressions, frequent use of image and metaphor, facility for invention and fantasy, detailed visualization, and elaborate dreams (Dabrowski & Piechowski, 1977; Piechowski, 1979, 1991)." Students with Imaginational intensity can often be found daydreaming, doodling, and engaging in dramatic play, sometimes creating entire imaginary worlds and living in them for long periods of time. As you can imagine, people with a strong Imaginational OE can grow to become some of the most prolific creative minds of humanity.



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{How can I help a child with OEs?}

Intellectual OE

- Show them that you understand! Acknowledge their intensity--validate this very real thirst for knowledge, and help them focus on the positive aspects of this OE
- Help them answer their own questions when you can't. Teach intellectual OE kids how to research, and then provide time for them to do it.
- Help them use their precepts to make a difference!
- Help kids to monitor and filter their reactions towards other people when they find others' ideas frustrating or silly.
- Help the child set up a system of setting and tracking progress toward learning goals.

- LISTEN to them--validate their feelings instead of trying to minimize them
- Help them to recognize (and avoid, if possible and when appropriate) things that are known to trigger strong emotional reactions
- If known triggers are unavoidable, work on rehearsing appropriate reactions and coping strategies.
- Work with children to recognize signs that they're starting to feel an intense reaction to something (sweaty palms, shaking, pit in stomach, general unease) and work on teaching them ways to cope with their feelings.
- Focus on the positive aspects of the deep connections and empathy that they're capable of!

Emotional OE

Sensual OE

- *Whenever possible, create an environment which limits offensive stimuli and provides comfort.
- *Provide appropriate opportunities for being in the limelight by giving unexpected attention, or facilitating creative and dramatic productions that have an audience. These individuals literally feel the recognition that comes from being in the limelight.
- *Provide time to dwell in the delight of the sensual *Provided by SENG*

- Let them fidget with something.
- Allow them to stand and work.
- Provide opportunities for breaks and serious movement, if needed.. Think gross motor movement.
- Consider allowing students to chew gum.
- Try to build in some time for spontaneity in your classroom. This is something that will not only benefit your psychomotor OE kid, but the rest of the students in your classroom as well.

Psychomotor OE

Imaginational OE

- Help the child to see that the imaginational intensity is not a negative thing!
- Provide opportunities in your home or classroom for which the child to USE their Imaginational OE in a meaningful and productive way.
- Help children understand when it's okay to daydream and imagine, and when there are times they need to focus on tasks.
- Use the strength of their imagination to help them help themselves.
- Additionally, an article found on the Davidson Gifted website suggests, "Help individuals to differentiate between their imagination and the real world by having them place a stop sign in their mental videotape, or write down or draw the factual account before they embellish it."
- And, "Help people use their imagination to function in the real world...Encourage them to use their path to promote learning and productivity--instead of the conventional school organized notebook, have children create their own organizational system."

There are other places you can find more specific information. I recommend SENG (Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted) www.senggifted.org; Daniels, Susan and Michael M. Piechowski. Living With Intensity: Understanding the Sensitivity, Excitability, and the Emotional Development of Gifted Children, Adolescents, and Adults. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press, Inc., 2009; and Piechowski, Michael. "Mellow Out," They Say. If Only I Could: Intensities and Sensitivities of the Young and Bright. Madison, WI: Yunasa Books, 2010