

Emotional Sensitivity in Gifted Children

Sal Mendaglio, PhD
Centre for Gifted Education
The University of Calgary

Parents of gifted children can relate to the statement that giftedness is a mixed blessing. One of the better illustrations of this belief is the heightened sensitivity associated with giftedness. On the positive side, this characteristic is reflected in concern for others, their plight, and feelings. Such empathic responses can also extend to all living things. It may also include an appreciation of aesthetic qualities of the environment or visual and performing arts. Such manifestations are normally not a source of concern for parents. The intense feelings expressed by a highly sensitive child when she or he is struck by the pain of another can be very disconcerting to parents. Usually, it is the "dark side" of sensitivity which worries us and often results in seeking psychological assistance. In fact, years of experience with gifted children have convinced me that this heightened sensitivity is often at the root of various problems that bring gifted persons to counselling.

The shadow side of heightened sensitivity can be easily described but coping effectively with it is a different matter. One aspect of the "down side" of this sensitivity is a child's feelings being easily hurt. This includes a low or no tolerance for perceived criticism from others. The operative word here is "perceived" since actual criticism is not necessary to upset a child who is highly sensitive. In counselling sessions, many parents describe various scenarios where they are taken aback by the strength of their children's outbursts to what parents believe to be neutral statements. Experiences of this kind suggest that a primary source of difficulty with heightened sensitivity of gifted children lies in its expression. Children do not say "I am hurting because I strongly believe that you are demonstrating disapproval of me." Instead, we see an intensely angry reaction—an overreaction to our attempts to provide constructive commentary or making an observation.

When gifted children express their heightened sensitivity, sensitivity changes as the quality of it changes. Positive aspects are often expressed directly; negative ones are masked. It is not the hurt that we see, it is frustration and anger. While learning to cope effectively with such outbursts is a lengthy process, the beginning point for parents is the avoidance of overreaction to their children. This, in and of itself, will greatly improve such scenarios. Ultimately, the success of our strategies rests on the development of our ability to identify the source of our children's intense emotional reactions. This is analogous to differentiating the reasons for a young child's crying—is it due to physical or emotional discomfort; is it manipulative? It is difficult to do and to a novice, it seems an impossible task. However, with time and effort parents do succeed in this task. In closing, my suggestion is this: in the face of an angry outburst, stop and think before responding; when responding, be cool (emotionally). As to the positive side of heightened sensitivity, celebrate its expression with your children.

This article originally appeared in *Calgary's Child* and is reproduced with their permission.