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# Five Unexpected Intensities of Gifted Students

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We know gifted students are far more complex than their test scores might suggest. And while we expect certain quirks, others blindside us: a strange reaction to sound, a sudden outburst of tears, or a need to stand up at inopportune times.

## Five Overexcitabilities

**Kazimierz Dabrowski** identified five types of “overexcitability” that he believed connected strongly to giftedness: intellectual, psychomotor, imaginative, sensual, and emotional.

However, these same five overexcitabilities also make it difficult for students to work within the confines of the classroom. **Carrie Lynn Bailey** writes:

*“ A challenge for gifted individuals is that they can often be viewed negatively, or pathologically, particularly in educational settings. **Overexcitabilities and Sensitivities**”*

**Mendaglio and Tiller** found, in 2006, the tie between overexcitabilities and giftedness to be somewhat looser than originally thought, but an awareness of overexcitabilities goes a long way towards understanding that kid who seems to defy explanation.

## 1. Intellectual Overexcitability

Curious, questioning, and sharp, a child with intellectual overexcitability asks the questions that flummox you, makes the connections that amaze you, and arrives at understandings that leave your curriculum in the dust.

They will want to go deep into interesting topics, talk about theoretical concepts, and move faster through content than you can handle.

## 2. Imaginational Overexcitability

Fueled by creativity, a love of stories and drawings, and fictional worlds, students with this overexcitability might daydream, doodle, or otherwise occupy their minds while a dull teacher drones on.

## 3. Sensual Overexcitability

Despite the provocative name, we’re talking literally about the five senses here. Students with sensual overexcitability receive more input from their senses than expected. This could show up as a strong reaction to sounds, light, and textures, or tastes. This reaction could be positive, with a desire to continue experiencing a sensation, or negative, driving the student away from the stimulus.

As a child, I loved rubbing a satin blanket on my face. As an adult, I go to sleep easier when I have the pressure of a thick blanket. These odd quirks might be a result of sensual overexcitability.

## 4. Psychomotor Overexcitability

Students with psychomotor overexcitability appear to simply have too much energy. It might manifest as fidgety behavior, rapid, excessive talking, and overactive physical behavior. It sounds an awful lot like ADHD, and might easily be misidentified as such.

## 5. Emotional Overexcitability

Tragedies, injustice, and reminders of mortality might trigger an unexpectedly emotional response from students who experience emotional overexcitability. As a teacher, it might appear that they are over-dramatic or seeking attention. However, these students simply feel emotions more intensely, whether joy or sadness. This sensitivity could show up as strong compassion, empathy, and caring for others.

## Classroom Implications

How does this theory help a teacher up to his neck in the day's work? Identifying these overexcitabilities puts us on the road to alleviating classroom problems:

**Too many detailed questions from a student in the middle of a lesson?** She's exhibiting intellectual overexcitability. Give her ten minutes of computer time to get those questions answered!

**A student is deeply involved in a movie or book's fictional world** He's showing signs of imaginal overexcitability. This kid needs an ongoing, creative outlet for these feelings. Give him an open-ended, creative project as a "what do I when I'm done?" option.

**Fidgety actions causing annoying noises during worktime?** The student might be experiencing psychomotor overexcitabilities. Be sure to offer options for moving around, constructing objects, or otherwise getting that energy out.

**Sobbing rage over a minor recess transgression** Offer a listening, non-judgemental ear and a chance for the student to explain the event. Give some "cool-down" time. Later, discuss **ways to deal with strong emotions** before they become overwhelming.

**Overreaction to a sound in the class, agitated behavior over clothing** Try to get to the root of the problem, identifying what exactly bothers the student so you can help structure the day to avoid those sounds, sights, or textures. You may also attempt to counsel the student with [ways to deal with troublesome sensations](#).

Finally, realize how easily these five traits could overshadow a child's gifts.

## Further Reading

For a deep dive into the overexcitabilities, grab a copy of *Living With Intensity*

And here are a few related articles:

- [OE and the Gifted](#)
- [Types of over-exciteability](#)
- [Mendaglio and Tiller's 2006 Overview of OE Research](#)
- [Ackerman's 1997 Paper](#)
- [Duke's OE Page](#)

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