

GATE MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELING RESOURCE NEWSLETTER

December 2018 Edition: Handling Stress and Anxiety at Home

Julia Melodci, School Counselor



AS the GATE middle school counselor, I am sending a monthly newsletter with tips, resources, strategies, and interventions to support GT students. This month's newsletter topic provides some tools to parents and educators for helping their students better cope with stress and anxiety during the Holidays and beyond.

Research suggests that gifted children are more susceptible to anxiety due to their heightened sensitivity, asynchronous development, and tendency toward perfectionism. Dr. Dan Peters illustrates this by stating: "While their minds come up with elaborate and creative ideas, their minds also come up with creative ways things can go wrong at home, school, socially, and in the world. They often think about advanced things that their young minds don't have the life experience to draw upon, such as death, homelessness, and cruelty to people and animals." Dr. Peters states that educating students about "the fear response in their brain and body (i.e., fight or flight), along with some simple cognitive techniques to become aware of how their thoughts impact their emotions and behavior" can help children and teens combat anxiety, worry, and fear.

Featured Resources (attached):

1. **10 Steps for Parents and Kids to Tame the Worry Monster** – short article by Dr. Dan Peters with simple strategies for parents, teachers and counselors.
2. **Management of Anxiety Begins at Home** – this article by Sal Mendaglio identifies sources of anxiety in gifted children, and helpful strategies parents can implement to reduce “unnecessary anxiety” at home.
3. **Guiding Anxious Children Toward Achievement and Confidence** – article by Dr. Sylvia Rimm.
4. **5 Steps to Managing Stress During the Holidays** – short article by Dr. Dan Peters.

Featured Books:

1. **Make Your Worrier a Warrior: A Guide to Conquering Your Child's Fears** – by Dan Peters, PhD. This book provides practical strategies parents and teachers can implement to help children and teens understand and overcome anxiety and fear.
2. **From Worrier to Warrior: A Guide to Conquering Your Fears** by Dan Peters, PhD. This book provides children and teens with valuable information and easy-to-use strategies to help them understand and manage anxiety, worry, and fear.
3. **The Warrior Workbook: A Guide to Conquering Your Worry Monster** by Dan Peters, PhD. This book provides practical exercises/strategies to foster self-awareness and self-confidence in children and teens. Students are encouraged to create a “toolbox” of resources and supports to overcome anxiety, worry, and fear.

**THE BLOG** 12/11/2013 06:53 pm ET | Updated Dec 06, 2017

10 Steps for Parents and Kids to Tame the Worry Monster



By Daniel B. Peters, Ph.D.

Anxiety has become a regular part of our society and daily lives for our children (and ourselves). Worry and fear cause our children to feel bad, often cause parent-child conflict and stress, keep our children from fully experiencing life, and fully reaching their potential. As a psychologist, parent of worriers, and a pretty good worrier myself, I have learned that there are simple and effective strategies that kids (and parents) can learn to drive the Worry Monster away. Teaching kids about how fear and worry work in their bodies, and specific thinking and doing strategies to fight the Worry Monster, empowers them to take a stand against this bully.

It's time for us to take the Worry Monster down once and for all and turn our worriers into warriors.

Here are the 10 steps to do it:

Step 1: Teach How Our Brain and Body Work When We Are Scared

We all have a "fight or flight" survival response that is designed to keep us alive. We have a tiny ball of neurons called the amygdala (ah-mig-da-la), known as our fear center, that runs our in-body security system. When it senses danger, it sends adrenaline through our bodies to make us run fast and fight with one goal, survival!

Step 2: Identify Body Feelings

When your amygdala gets activated, you will feel the physical sensations of worry and fear in your body, especially your head, chest, stomach, and throat. This is because your heart has to beat super fast to get extra blood from your brain and stomach to your arms and legs so you can fight and run fast. The blood leaving our brain and stomach makes us feel light headed, have headaches, have stomachaches,



Step 3: Externalize the Problem

Label your worries and fears as the “Worry Monster” who is a bully who is responsible for making you (and all of us) think worrisome and scary thoughts. The Worry Monster’s job is to keep us from enjoying life. He gets joy from picking on children (and adults) and making them worried and scared. The more you talk about the Worry Monster and gang up on him with your allies, the weaker he will get and the sooner he will go away.

Step 4: Make a Worry List

Make a list of everything your child (and you) worries about. The Worry Monster doesn’t like us to talk about him or how he works, so the more things you put on the list, the better. Once you have done this, put the worries and fears in order starting with the most powerful (severe) at the top and least powerful (mild) at the bottom of the list.

Step 5: Make a Success Ladder

Choose a behavior from the worry list and make a success ladder by breaking it down into baby steps, or rungs, with the ultimate fear or goal at the top of the ladder and the least scary behavior at the bottom. You will need to decide whether you can start with a single fear like swimming or whether the task needs to be broken into parts (looking at a pool) so that you can gain confidence by becoming used to each baby step along the way to conquering your fear.

Step 6: Identify Worrisome and Fearful Thinking

Think about what the Worry Monster tells you to make you feel worried and scared. Take out your worry list, and expose the Worry Monster’s secrets by writing down what he tells you to make you feel scared and worried. For example, next to the worry “being left alone,” you may write, “I might get left at school.” Uncover what he tells you for all your worries and fears — you are exposing him.

Step 7: Change and Modify Thinking

Next to the list of what the Worry Monster tells you, write down new thoughts that are healthier and more realistic. Ask yourself, “What am I thinking? How can I think about this differently?” For example, “I might get left at school,” gets changed to, “I have never been left before” and “Something bad might happen to my mom,” gets changed to, “My mom is strong and can take care of herself.”

Step 8: Practice, Practice, Practice!

Choose behavioral practice activities to tackle the Worry Monster head on. Go to your Success Ladder and start doing the first thing on the bottom of the list until you are bored of it. For example, if you are afraid of dogs, look at a book about dogs until it is not scary and then go to the next rung on the ladder (looking at

Step 9: Develop a Coping Toolbox

Make a personalized toolbox to help you take on the Worry Monster when he shows up. This toolbox usually consists of strategies like deep breathing, understanding where in your body you feel the worry and fear, knowing what makes you start worrying or feeling scared, questions to ask yourself to challenge your thinking ("Is it true?"), statements to use against the Worry Monster ("I can do this!"; "Take a hike, you cowardly bully!"; "So what?"), exercise, and activities that distract you and help you relax.

Step 10 — Don't Give Up!

Like all bullies, the Worry Monster does not give up easily. It takes a ton of courage and persistence to drive him away. You have talents to show the world and lots of life experiences to enjoy. By using these strategies, and working as a team, the Worry Monster doesn't stand a chance. It is time for him to pick on somebody else. Don't give up. You are a warrior. You can do this!



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Daniel B. Peters, Ph.D.

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10 Steps for Parents and Kids to Tame the Worry Monster

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Management of ANXIETY Begins at Home

By Dr. Sal Mendaglio

Parents of gifted children are often concerned about their children's anxiety, and with good reason. Research indicates that 12% to 20% of all children experience anxiety severe enough to refer them for treatment, and approximately 3% to 5% of all children are diagnosed with a variety of anxiety disorders.¹

Regrettably, children do not always express their anxiety in the form of "Mom, I am anxious," or "Dad, I am afraid." Their expression of anxiety—or lack of expression—depends largely on the child's makeup, and is often expressed in different ways. Some children cry or behave aggressively, while others withdraw from the situation.

Though research on anxiety does not indicate the number of gifted children included in studies, it's reasonable to assume that representative samples include children who are gifted.

While the experience of anxiety is disturbing enough, if untreated, anxiety can cause serious consequences such as academic underachievement, substance abuse, and increased risk of other psychiatric disorders.²

Sources of Anxiety in Children

Researchers have identified several general sources of anxiety in children. These sources include genetics,³ child temperament,⁴ parent-child early attachment, parental disapproval and/or criticism, and parental anxiety.⁵ There are countless other sources of anxiety, such as a child being rejected or bullied

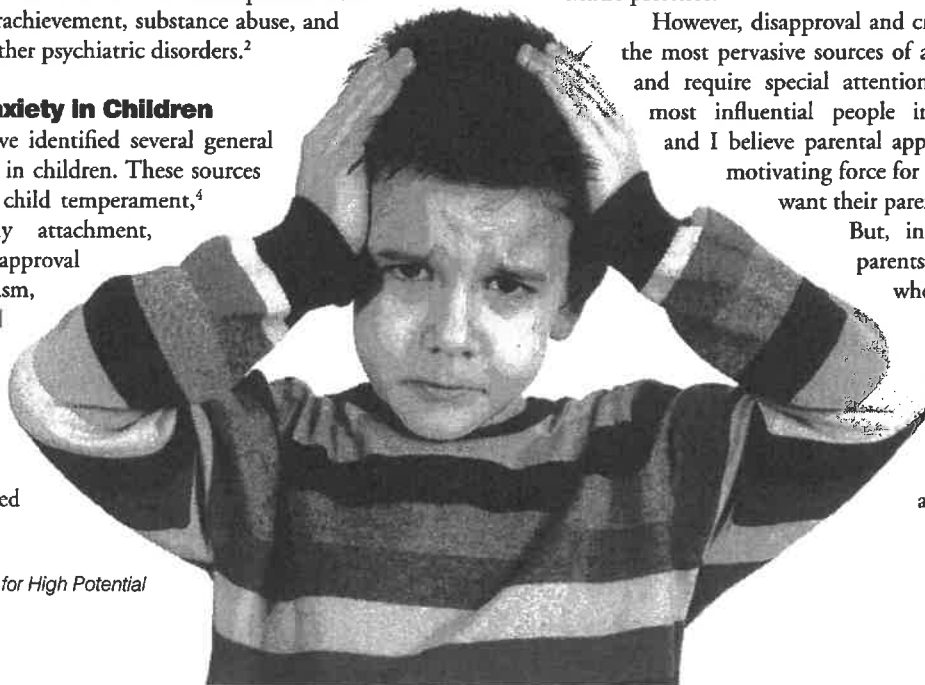
by age mates, night terrors, and various phobias, but these are not addressed here.

In my work, I have found that parental anxiety is a strong predictor of children's anxiety.⁶ This means that if a child is faced with an anxious mother or father, the child will most likely experience anxiety. In addition to parental anxiety, I contend that there are parenting situations that may contribute to a child experiencing anxiety. These include:

- Inconsistent parenting, which creates unpredictability for children.
- A child not knowing whether or not a behavior is acceptable.
- Parental conflict in the presence of children, which includes both arguments unrelated to children and disagreements regarding parenting.
- Discussion of adult matters, such as issues related to other family members, medical issues, and current events, in the child's presence.

However, disapproval and criticism are among the most pervasive sources of anxiety in children and require special attention. Parents are the most influential people in children's lives, and I believe parental approval is a primary motivating force for children: Children want their parents' approval 24/7.

But, in raising children, parents find occasions when they must communicate disapproval of their children's choices and behaviors. Even if done in a gentle, loving



manner, behavior correction is a form of disapproval, and may create anxiety in the child. This means that normal parenting in itself can create a certain amount of anxiety in children. I call this *necessary anxiety*, which cannot be avoided. However, parents can avoid *unnecessary anxiety*, caused by their own feelings of intense frustration and anger in parent-child interactions.

To appreciate my perspective on children's anxiety, it is important to take into account two factors: intensity and expression. Children's experience of anxiety may be of low or high intensity depending on the home psychological environment. For example, gentle parental correction of misbehavior leads to rather low intensity anxiety; rough parental correction leads to high intensity.

While some sources of anxiety are common to all children, parents, teachers, and caregivers of gifted children need to know that gifted kids also may have unique sources of anxiety. These include:

- Social coping, where gifted children feel different, leading to their experience of social rejection.⁷
- "Big-Fish-Little-Pond (BFLP) Effect," which refers to the deflated self-concept gifted children might feel when moving from a mixed ability to similar ability programming.⁸
- "Hitting the wall,"⁹ the first encounter gifted children have that requires they put forth more effort than in the past.¹⁰

Anxiety and Gifted Children

In counseling parents of gifted children, I have found that *giftedness* in itself can be another source of anxiety. The social-emotional characteristics often contributing to anxiety in gifted individuals include:¹¹

- **Heightened sensitivity, which indicates a greater awareness of the physical, social, and intrapersonal environments.** Heightened sensitivity enables children to vicariously experience the emotions and moods of others, including parents, teachers, mentors, and other adults. Through this characteristic, children are keenly aware of when parents are happy, anxious, or stressed out, so much so, at times, they can feel what their parents are feeling. They are also keenly aware of disapproval or lack of approval, and may feel responsible for when parents are unhappy. Essentially, gifted children feel what all children feel, but some have more intense feelings because they can see and sense more the nuances of their parents' communication and demeanor.
- **Analytical attitude is a gifted individual's propensity to question, evaluate, and judge everything and everyone they encounter.** However, gifted children may face disapproval and criticism when they question or challenge people in authority, such as parents and teachers. For example, when a gifted child corrects a teacher's error, the initial reaction may not be gratitude, but rather defensiveness and disapproval. Society and its agents (parents and educators) generally expect conformity

and compliance. Questioning may be perceived as resistance and defiance. The analytic attitude predisposes gifted children to conflict with society, creating an external source of conflict.

- **Self-criticism may also be a source of anxiety.** Whereas the analytic attitude scrutinizes the external environment, self-criticism evaluates the intrapersonal environment. When gifted individuals turn their intelligence onto themselves, the tendency is to focus on deficits rather than accomplishments. Viewing oneself through a critical lens can result in disapproval of self and cause internal conflict and anxiety.

What Should Parents Do?

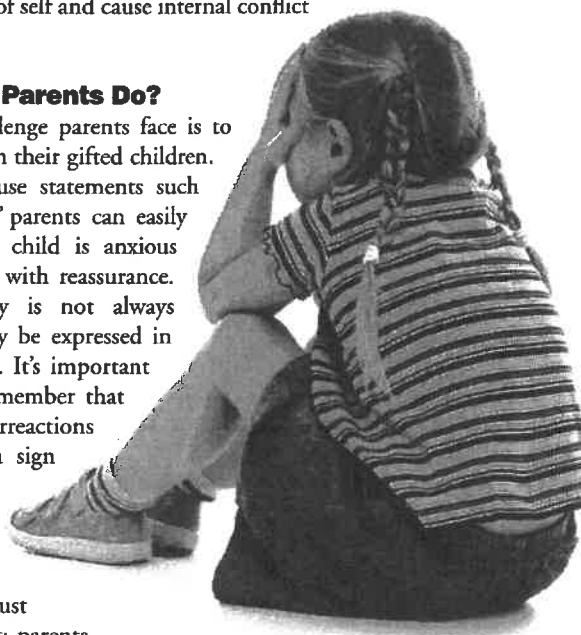
The first challenge parents face is to identify anxiety in their gifted children.

When children use statements such as "*I am afraid*," parents can easily understand their child is anxious and can respond with reassurance. However, anxiety is not always obvious, and may be expressed in a variety of ways. It's important for parents to remember that outbursts or overreactions are not always a sign of bad behavior, but may be a sign of anxiety or distress.

However, not just children overreact; parents can overreact, too. Parent overreactions commonly occur when a parent communicates a request to a child and the child does not respond. This may occur in trivial situations where for example, a parent asks a child to place dishes in the dishwasher and the child responds with "*in a minute*." A parent may patiently wait, with no emotional response, and, when the child continues to resist, the parent repeats the request. With repetitions, irritation turns to frustration and anger. Parents should monitor their reactions to children's behaviors—and minimize emotional overreactions whenever possible.

Parents also need to accept that they or other adults may be a source of anxiety for their children. They can help alleviate anxiety in the home by teaching and modeling mindful and intentional practice. When another adult outside the family creates anxiety, parents may need to educate the adult that their actions cause stress for their child, and teach older children to self-advocate by calmly and clearly articulating what is causing their anxiety.

Lastly, parents of gifted children have another dimension to consider: How they respond to the emotions their gifted child exhibits resulting from a heightened sensitivity, analytical



perspective, and self-criticism. When gifted children express negative emotions appropriately, the natural reaction is for parents to want to reduce expression of emotions, reduce the pain, or problem-solve.

For example, a child enters the home after school stating what a horrible day it was because she was ignored by her friends. There may or may not be tears. In such situations, I have heard parents describe a pattern that includes a combination of sympathy and problem solving: *"That's terrible. I'm sorry that happened to you. Now, let's talk about how to handle/prevent it."* When parents attempt to reason with the child, solve the problem, or convince the child that the situation she experienced was not that bad—they minimize the importance of her experience. Parents must remember that emotions cannot be "fixed" through reasoning.

When children are in distress, I recommend that parents *avoid denial and practice acceptance*. When parents say, *"Why are you so upset about that?"* or *"Don't worry things will get better,"* it trivializes their child's experience, likely intensifying their negative emotions. Such an approach can actually prolong the emotions and may intensify the child's experience.

Also, parents shouldn't add fuel to the fire. An attitude of acceptance tends to remove oxygen from emotionally charged situations: By encouraging expression, the fire will extinguish on its own. I suggest that parents encourage their children's emotion expression and then walk away, permitting children the opportunity to calm themselves.

There are numerous sources of children's anxiety. However, parents are the most influential in their children's lives and, unlike external sources, parents can control the anxiety that they may be unwittingly creating in their children. By reducing the anxiety at home, there will be a significant positive change in their children's sense of personal security. In addition, parents of gifted children, who tend to be gifted themselves, can draw on their own experiences to help children understand how giftedness itself may cause anxiety. When parents engage in honest self-analysis and increase their understanding of giftedness, gifted children are the beneficiaries.

Resources

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Author's Note

Dr. Sal Mendaglio is a professor in the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, and a licensed psychologist. In his long career with the university, he taught counseling

psychology and was a co-founder of the Centre for Gifted Education, which has supported the gifted education community for 20 years. Currently, he coordinates and teaches courses in a certificate program in gifted education and his primary research interest focuses on psychology of giftedness, which underlies his area of passion: counselling gifted individuals. The author thanks Dr. Gabrielle Wilcox for her assistance with the literature review. Contact him at mendagli@ucalgary.ca.

Endnotes

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Gifted students have a great many positive characteristics that enhance the likelihood for their achieving well in school and in life. Many researchers have catalogued long lists of typical characteristics and while positive characteristics predominate, studies always include a fair number of problematic characteristics which can interfere with achievement and psycho-social adjustment. Pollack (2000) reminded us that we "cannot separate our students' emotional report cards from their academic report cards".

Dabrowski's *Theory of Positive Disintegration* (1967) has attracted much attention in the field of gifted education. His concepts of overexcitabilities and supersensitivities have helped many parents and educators to better understand and accept gifted children. Figure 1 includes an abbreviated list of intellectual, psychomotor, sensual, imaginal and emotional characteristics of gifted children researched by Dabrowski. The reader who reviews these characteristics easily recognizes that not all are positive and that some might cause children to have difficulties adjusting at home or in the classroom.

Abbreviated Summary of Overexcitabilities and Supersensitivities of Gifted Persons as Described by Dabrowski

| | |
|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Intellectual</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deep curiosity • Love of knowledge and learning • Love of problem solving • Avid reading • Asking of probing questions • Independent thinking | <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Psychomotor</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rapid speech • Impulsive behavior • Competitiveness • Compulsive talking • Nervous habits and tics • Sleeplessness |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Sensual</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appreciation of beauty in writing, music, art or nature • Craving for pleasure • Need or desire for comfort • Sensitivity to smells, tastes, or textures of foods • Tactile sensitivity (bothered by materials on the skin) | <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Imaginational</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vivid dreams • Good sense of humor • Magical thinking • Daydreaming • Imaginary friends |
| <p style="text-align: center;"><u>Emotional</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extremes of emotion • Anxiety • Feelings of guilt and sense of responsibility • Feelings of inadequacy and inferiority • Timidity and shyness • Loneliness | |

- Heightened sense of right and wrong

Dabrowski urged adults to accept the negative intensities as transitions in development and not to view them as symptoms of dysfunction or as disorders. There is, however, also great risk that some parents and educators of gifted children may misinterpret Dabrowski's theory and assume that negative manifestations of overexcitabilities should be accepted in gifted children because they are part of defining these children as gifted. Concluding that children with compulsive talking, impulsive actions, cravings for pleasure or heightened anxiety should be allowed to work these problems out on their own or should be assured they are appropriate parts of their giftedness, can and does sometimes lead to serious problems and disorders. Although many gifted young people resolve their problems with time, too many do not. They may struggle socially or underachieve dramatically. It is an important goal of educators to develop children's giftedness, but parents and educators require strategies for guiding children toward coping with, and in many cases, correcting problem behaviors. This paper will focus on practical strategies for redirecting intensity, impulsivity, oversensitivity and anxiety to productivity, fulfillment and confidence.

Anxiety

There is obviously a component of sensitivity and anxiety that is attributable to genetics. Some children are born with temperaments that cause them to be fearful or hesitant and less willing to take risks. As with all human characteristics, environment, experiences, and parenting all contribute to either worsening anxiety or overcoming much of it.

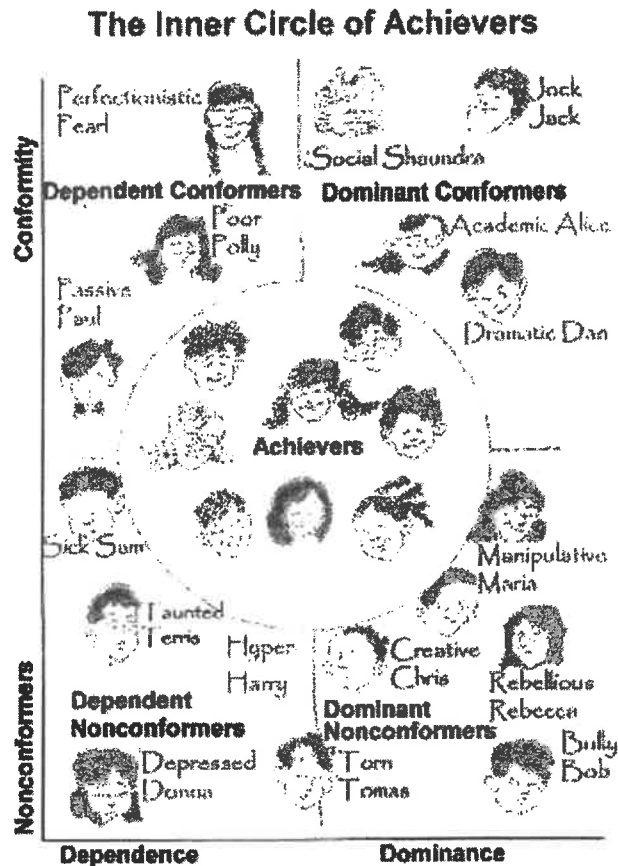
Stress is not healthy for children or adults. Robert Sapolsky, in his book *Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers* (2004), pointed out how anxiety can lead to both mental and physical difficulties including depression, ulcers, colitis, heart disease and more. He also established that people feel less stress when they have made full effort and are reasonably optimistic about their reaching goals. They may recognize that there is a small chance of not being successful, but have a plan for dealing with that possibility and don't consider failure to be catastrophic. Thus, if we are going to guide gifted children to helpful coping with stress, they must both internalize the relationship between effort and outcome and set reasonable goals. (Rimm, 2008)

There are some components in the development of giftedness in children that can contribute to the pressures they internalize. The encouragement and enrichment that families provide is usually accompanied by significant love, attention and praise, from parents, grandparents, and often, even strangers on the street. The praise words that match the gifted child's early and sometimes extremely precocious accomplishments can become too much of a good thing. Brilliant, extraordinary, smartest and other superlatives paired with actual high success in early schooling, can encourage gifted children to feel highly competitive and internalize extremely high expectations for themselves that is often referred to as "perfectionism". (Rimm, 2007)

When children internalize the relationship between effort and outcomes and learn to work hard to achieve their goals, we refer to that as motivation. Gifted children are more likely to be achievers if they learn to put forth effort and set reasonably high, but not unrealistically high, expectations for themselves. If their expectations are too high and they put forth good effort, they will be disappointed in themselves if they can't achieve what they had hoped for. If they make little effort and their results are excellent anyway, they often assume that giftedness should be effortless. When challenge is presented, they may avoid it for fear that working hard infers they are not gifted. That avoidance of challenge causes them anxiety which worsens with continued avoidance.

Gifted children who are fearful or sensitive and who have too high expectations and/or too little effort can become so anxious that they habitually either ask for more help than they actually need or attempt to avoid activities that cause them to be fearful. How they cope with their anxieties will either encourage them to become more courageous, reduce their anxieties and build their confidence, or

increase their avoidance behaviors, make them more fearful and cause them to temporarily or permanently become underachievers.



Source: Rimm, S.B. (2008). *Why Bright Children Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It* (3rd ed.). Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

The names given to the children in Figure 2 are actually not intended as labels for children, but represent characteristics of underachievers. The conforming characteristics are less extreme than the non-conforming characteristics, but if continued become more extreme over time. Underachievers protect their fragile self-concepts by using defense mechanisms. This paper will only center on the dependent underachievers who are anxious and fearful, avoid effort and request more help than they need. More information on dominant underachievers is available in my book, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It*. (Rimm, 2008)

Students continue to be anxious and dependent as long as adults around them respond to them intuitively by doing too much for them, feeling anxious with them and granting them the inappropriate power to avoid or escape what they fear. The more these children avoid their fears, the more anxious they become and the more worried their parents feel. The children lose confidence in themselves, lower their expectations and their anxiety increases. The pattern can eventually lead to depression unless parent and child receive help, or the child is inspired by a teacher or other adult to gradually move forward to overcome fears and anxieties. Aristotle reminded us that "All adults involved with children either help or thwart children's growth and development whether we like it, intend it or not."

Case Examples of How Avoidance Patterns Increase Anxiety

The following case examples of children and adults are actually combinations of several people so as to protect confidentiality.

Case #1 – Dan Fears Speaking in Front of Class

Dan, a gifted fifth grader, was extremely anxious and was on an Individual Educational Plan (IEP) for his disorder. Students were taking turns reading their reports to the class. His teacher made suggestions or comments to them about each of their talks. She also did that for Dan. He returned home after school and refused to go to school the next day tearfully explaining to his mother that the teacher had embarrassed him by criticizing him in front of the class. Dan's mother was sad and anxious for Dan and angry at the teacher. His mother wanted to have Dan excused from speaking to the class as an IEP accommodation because of his anxiety disorder. If I had encouraged her to do that, Dan would have become even more fearful about speaking in class. Instead I recommended that the teacher make her suggestions privately for the first part of the school year, but that by the second semester, assure Dan that he was able to handle speaking and accepting suggestions openly just as other students do.

Case #2 – Heather Fears Not Being Smart Enough

Heather came to a school for gifted children in third grade after being in a heterogeneous class where she was not challenged. She had been far ahead of her classmates and known as one of the smartest kids in the school in her former school. After only a few days in her new school, she felt shy and anxious. She had stomachaches and headaches and said she missed her friends and the work was too hard. She tried to convince her parents to allow her to go back to her former school. Her teacher observed that although she was quiet in class, other girls were friendly to her and she was actually doing very well academically.

I met with Heather to help her to adjust to not feeling "smartest". I told her how pleased the teacher was with her work and explained to her the long term advantages of being in a gifted school. I asked the teacher to please be sure to give Heather a little extra positive feedback for her work or her thinking. I spoke to her mother about the importance of building her confidence in this challenging environment. Heather soon learned to love her new school and feel more confident. If her mother had returned her to her former school, she would have continued to be fearful in the face of challenge when she entered a larger middle or high school.

Case #3 – Christopher's Tears Empower Him

Christopher's parents were concerned about his unusual fear of new experiences. His mother explained that he was so fearful that he would not only cry frequently, but that she worried that he might actually have a panic attack. Christopher was the middle child in a 3-child family. His sisters were both high achievers. Christopher was a gifted underachiever and often cried at homework time, complaining tearfully that his work was too hard.

The mother shared an example of how she had cancelled plans to take the children to the pool because Christopher tearfully screamed he was afraid to go. The father remarked to the mother referentially that Christopher had gone to the very same pool with him and had enjoyed it immensely and had not been at all fearful. Christopher overheard his parent's conversation and became even more agitated. The family cancelled the fun excursion because of Christopher's intensive, fearful reaction.

I counseled the parents to offer Christopher two choices: they could arrange for a babysitter to stay with him or they could reward him with a sticker if he was brave enough to come and have fun with them. I explained that it was important to go ahead with their planned trip to the pool or Christopher would have been empowered by his tears to control the entire family.

Commenting on Christopher's courage instead of being overly sympathetic were also helpful in causing Christopher's many fears to decrease in number and intensity very quickly. He also learned to do his homework independently when his mother changed her approach to feeling too sorry for him and doing too much for him.

Case #4 – Margaret Opts Out (An Adult Case Study)

Margaret, an executive vice president at an engineering firm was productive and successful for five years. The economy began struggling and the company ran into hard times and found it necessary to cut staff, most of whom were males. Staff were released with comfortable severance packages to provide them with support until they could find alternate employment.

Margaret's supervisor, who had always written excellent yearly evaluations about her made a reversal in her fifth year evaluation and was highly critical of Margaret, commenting specifically on her being too emotional. Margaret became both angry and anxious. She came to me for counseling during what she called an "anxiety crisis" complaining in tears about her boss turning against her. She shared with me that her boss's critical evaluation had caused her so much anxiety that she wished he would lay her off with the severance package given to the men. Her boss who had labeled her as "too emotional" did not ask her to leave, but she felt ready to leave her high powered, well-paid position because of her anxiety.

I encouraged Margaret to recognize that her formerly empathic, supportive boss was under pressure to cut staff and was probably hoping she would resign without a severance package—a very good, but not fair, way to cut costs. I encouraged her to respond in writing to the appropriate Board or CEO to cite earlier excellent evaluations and place on record what she believed was an unjust evaluation. I also encouraged her to continue to move forward to help her employer cut other costs. She should also search for other equal or better positions, but until she found one, opting out would permanently hurt her record, self-esteem and opportunities for other positions.

Responding Counterintuitively and Strategically to Anxiety

The first 3 cases were examples of parents who responded intuitively to children's fears and anxieties. They had learned that gifted children are sometimes very intense and oversensitive. Because they had read about the frequency of these characteristics in gifted children, they initially assumed that they needed to preserve these sensitivities, because they were part of their children's giftedness. It was only after fears had become extreme that parents cautiously came to counseling for assistance in helping their children cope with their problems. They did not recognize that their "too supportive" approach to helping their children were in fact exacerbating the children's problems. These parents were very sensitive and caring, so they truly feared responding appropriately to their children because a firm, positive response would have felt harsh and inappropriate to them. They were anxious about the possibility of causing their children more stress. Instead they searched for ways to accommodate their children to save them from any struggles or worries, thus enabling them to avoid what they irrationally feared.

In Case #4, the woman herself struggled with extreme anxiety, and instead of strategically planning how to overcome her difficult predicament, she searched for escape to avoid the horrific stress, but without thoughts of how she could serve herself better in the future. Again, her responses were intuitive, but not useful for her future.

The strategy for teaching children or oneself to cope with anxiety is counterintuitive, but strategic and logical. If children are responding with anxiety (or an adult is), the counterintuitive response should use reason to overcome irrational emotions. Thus the adult in charge, whether parent, educator or counselor, needs to respond to anxiety with reassurance and firmness. The adult also needs to help the child set a path toward success and give the child tools for overcoming fears and moving forward. A six-step REASON plan for guiding children and a CHILL plan for children are included in Figures 3 & 4 and are also described in the following sections.

Using REASON for Overcoming Anxiety!

Here is the 6-step strategic plan for parents and teachers to use.

Step 1: **REALISTIC** – Determine appropriate goal for the child (or adult).

Begin with being **REALISTIC** about the goals you set for children and clarifying the expectations they have set for themselves. Gifted, anxious children typically set their own goals too high or too low or assume that parents have set them too high. Here are examples:

- You could get an A if you tried. (Parent - too high)
 - I could never be popular. (Child - too high)
 - I'm too boring when I speak. (Child - too low)
- Realistic versions of the same goals can be set as:
- You could improve your grade if you did that work. (Parent)
 - I could find a few good friends who share my interests. (Child)
 - I could speak to the class about something they're interested in. (Child)

Parents can help children set realistic, moderate goals. The more realistic goals will immediately relieve children of some of the tension they feel. Children can also lower their personal too-high expectations and reduce their anxiety. It will be important that they not give up by lowering them too much.

Step 2: EFFORT - Parents Will Also Want to Help Children Set Small **EFFORT** Steps.

Steps toward speaking in class could be delivering the talk at home to the mirror first, then to parents and considering suggestions from mom and dad. A step toward adjusting to a new school might be setting a playdate with friends who share interests like music, art, science, or Legos®.

Children can also learn to set steps for themselves. The boy in Case #3 could choose to come to watch at the pool and the woman in Case #4 could choose to come up with new money-saving ideas for her company.

Step 3: ASSIST - Devise **ASSIST**ive Tools or Techniques So The Child Can Move Forward.

A child who feels afraid of the dark can use a flashlight (tool) to comfort him or play music (tool) to muffle imagined creaks. The boy who fears speaking could use a mirror (tool) to watch himself. The girl who is adjusting to class can have a friend stay overnight (tool) to assure her that a friend will be in her class. The woman's tools can be a calm, written rebuttal of her criticism and a proposal for cost-cutting. The parents who work with the child on homework daily can help the child write a schedule (tool) for gradually doing homework independently.

Step 4: SMILE - Positive Reinforcement That Encourages Without Pressure Helps Children Move Forward.

Overpraise causes excitement that appears effective, but for underachievers it also causes anxiety and fears that they will disappoint adults and themselves next time. A pat on the back, a SMILE of encouragement that says "hang in there, you're making progress" are the SMILE actions that keep anxious kids on track. For the child or adult, they only need to accept within themselves that they are moving forward instead of avoiding their challenges.

Step 5: OVERHEAR - Children Who **OVERHEAR** Referential Talk of Their Progress Know That Parents and Teachers Are Noticing and Appreciating Their Efforts.

Thoughtless, negative talk can impede progress. Deliberately planned positive discussion can be heard as supportive by children. Even adults who overhear conversations about positive changes can develop more confidence.

Step 6: - NICE! - Small Rewards Selected By Children Can Be Motivating and Are Particularly Effective For Young Children.

Stars and stickers are only effective temporarily, but fearful children need temporary support until they've moved past their fears to build confidence. Adults can also reward themselves with both praise words and activity rewards when they've overcome emotional withdrawals.

CHILL to Cope With Anxiety

Here is a 5-step plan to help children prevent anxiety.

C – CHANGE Bad Habits into Good Ones

If procrastination and play before work have caused you to avoid effort, set and follow a healthy schedule placing work before fun.

H – HEAR Parents' and Teachers' Words of Wisdom

Your parents love you and both your parents and teachers want you to succeed. Adults have many years of experience and can give you wise advice. If you hear what they say and try their suggestions you'll feel much better about your progress.

I – INITIATE Small Steps of Effort Toward Reasonable Goals

Be patient and realistic. Expand your work and concentration time gradually. Chart your progress so that you can visually see your improvement.

L – LOWER or Raise Your Goals Appropriately

You can dare to dream of great accomplishments someday, but for now set goals in small steps above what you have accomplished and consider that continued progress will mean success. When roadblocks deter you temporarily, don't give up. Perseverance leads to accomplishment.

L – LEARN What You Can Accomplish With Reason Instead of Anxiety

When you learn to break tasks down to manageable and reasonable chunks instead of feeling overwhelmed by imagining impossible-to-complete projects, your anxious feelings will diminish. You can concentrate on each small step and feel confident in accomplishment.

The Quest for Self-Confidence

Anxious children and adults typically describe themselves as lacking self-confidence. Those feelings lead them to avoiding challenges. They thus also lose the route to gradually building confidence. Children (or adults) cannot build confidence by only completing easy tasks because everyone knows that anyone can solve simple problems. It is only by tackling complex challenges, learning to break those into small parts, accomplishing them one step at a time and achieving goals, that children and adults permit themselves to gradually develop confidence and diminish the anxiety that has paralyzed and plagued them. We can redirect anxiety and oversensitivity to productivity and reasonable kindness.

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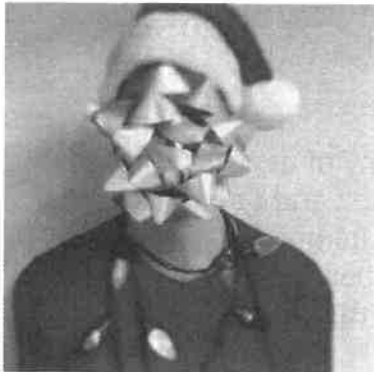
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Posted



Thanksgiving feels like weeks ago. Cities, stores, homes, schools, and entire towns are decorated for the holiday season. Lampposts and stop lights are dressed with red ribbons. Luxury cars sport antlers and Rudolph noses.

And then there are the commercials. Everyone on tv (commercials and most shows) are smiling, celebrating, decorating and playing in the snow.

All of these messages mean this must be the most wonderful time of the year, right?

Well maybe it is and maybe it isn't, and maybe it is both. For many, the holidays signify stress, unrealistic expectations, memories (good and bad ones), commercialism, and thinking others are happier / more organized / better bakers than you and your family.

As a psychologist and the founder of a parenting community focused on making the world better one parent and one child at a time, I'm here to tell you the truth today: the holidays are stressful for most people. But no one wants to admit this! Every week I am on Facebook Live video answering questions from parents and caregivers and our most recent session inspired this post. I created this list of 5 tips to help you get through this holiday season with minimal (or at least a lot less!) stress so that you can focus on the good:

1. Identify what stresses you out – We humans are pretty predictable animals and the old adage – The best predictor of future behavior is past behavior – usually rings true. Think about what stresses you out every year. Awareness of our triggers is key to managing our emotions and behaviors.
2. Make an action plan to reduce your stress – Here's another true adage – The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different outcome. Once you have identified the things that trigger your stress then make a plan to do something different this year. Maybe you start shopping earlier or online. Perhaps you ask your spouse or other family members to help out more. Maybe you don't go to every holiday party. Whatever it is, realize you don't have to do everything this year. Do something different and get a different outcome! Genius!
3. Identify a goal you want for yourself and your family – Think about what is really most important to you for this holiday season. Is it being together? Is it not repeating the last miserable holiday season? Is it about staying home or going away? Is it about giving? Buying less stuff? Letting your kids be instead of making them do stuff that makes everyone miserable? Your goals are your own. Pick one or a few that are important to you and engage in actions that are aligned with your goal.
4. Don't believe the hype – It's fun to receive holiday cards from friends and see how the kids are growing and what everyone is up to, right? Sure it is until you start comparing yourself and your family to all of those beautiful families visiting all those beautiful places and doing amazing things. We all show the best version of ourselves to others on social media and on our holiday cards! No one is perfect so don't compare yourself to perfection! And don't get carried away on Facebook – instead stay connected to your friends in real life too and most of all stay uber focused on your family and what you have and how you can be grateful for it.
5. Be kind to yourself — People, please, please take it easy on yourself. Many of us have crazy high expectations for ourselves and for the holiday experience. Be kind to yourself and do not take yourself so seriously. Laugh at yourself if something doesn't turn out right. Remember that what you remember about the holidays is not necessarily what your kids will remember. Just do the best you can and try to let the rest unfold. Try to focus on the nice moments and let the stressful and annoying ones go.

The holidays are an opportunity to pause and be grateful for family and to reflect on another year coming to an end. By following this plan you will focus on what is most important to you, keep things in perspective, and be good to yourself and your family.

Wishing you all a healthy and happy holiday season!

This article was first published on Huffington Post. Image: PIXABAY, FREE IMAGE, USED WITH PERMISSION.

We can help.