

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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