

# Emotional Intensity

in Gifted Students

Helping Kids Cope With Explosive Feelings

by

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# INTRODUCTION

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## WHY THIS BOOK

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Parenting is a difficult job. You aren't given a manual when you have a child and there's no survival guide to tell you what to do. Things complicate further if your child is lucky enough to be gifted. People tell you it'll be easy raising a bright child, leaving you frustrated when your child begins to act a little . . . intense.

Fortunately there are parenting books to help—too many parenting books.

Most of these books don't address the unique needs of gifted children. In fact, as you attempt the strategies typically found in them, things often get worse. You're left feeling angry with your own inability to execute the strategies that are *supposed* to work so well.

Frustrated and resentful, you turn to other family members, friends, and the school looking for help. But the same misguided assumptions about giftedness abound, leaving you feeling even more inadequate.

As the negative feelings build, your child increases the intensity of her behaviors, adding fuel to the fire. The result? A chaotic household with few resources available to help.

That's where this book comes in. Designed to provide support for the difficult job of parenting gifted children, *Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students: Helping Kids Cope With Explosive Feelings* provides the resource you need to not only understand why gifted children are so

extreme in their behavior, but also learn specific strategies to teach your children how to live with their intensity. Presented in a readable and practical format, I use case studies and role-playing techniques to make the information come to life and provide you with the tools needed to make a positive lasting impact on your child.

This book addresses:

- ◆ the assumptions most people make about giftedness;
- ◆ the cognitive, social, and emotional characteristics of being gifted and the problems created by those attributes;
- ◆ the emotional development and the intense nature of gifted children;
- ◆ the specific problems most gifted children face and strategies parents and educators can use to teach children to how to cope;
- ◆ the unique issues faced by dually exceptional children, including those who are gifted and diagnosed with learning disabilities or mental illness;
- ◆ how to utilize coaching techniques that minimize the negative attributes of giftedness; and
- ◆ how to collaborate with schools and mental health professionals.

## HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

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*Emotional Intensity in Gifted Students* was designed to be a reference guide for parents and educators. After reading and understanding the first section of the book, parents and educators can rely on Parts II and III to provide specific strategies found to be highly effective in working with gifted children. Part II provides a detailed explanation of various strategies for use at home and at school, including checklists to refer

back to in times of crisis and many tips for handling specific types of problems. Part III explains how to switch from authoritative parenting and teaching strategies to a more “coaching” oriented approach. Specific role-plays are given to further teach the use of the strategies within the model of coaching and provide a way to check your own techniques.

As you begin to implement these strategies, different problems may arise. The detailed Recommended Resources section at the end of the book provides additional resources for many of the areas discussed throughout the book. Several worksheets, checklists, and tip sheets also are provided to help you implement the strategies I suggest throughout the book.

I wish you much success in being the coach your children need as they progress through their years and embrace everything it means to be gifted. My wish is that this book will provide a source of comfort and connection when things become too intense.

## A WORD TO EDUCATORS

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Although this book is designed for parents, many of the strategies can be easily adopted for use in the classroom. Teaching gifted children can be every bit as difficult as raising them. The intensity of their thinking, while a delight in the academic context, can be difficult with regard to their emotional development. This book is designed to address that difficulty.

Look for the “Notes to the Teacher” sections throughout the book for specific advice and strategies that can be utilized with gifted children. By working in collaboration with each other, educators and parents can make positive and meaningful impact on the lives of our gifted children.

# CHAPTER I

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT GIFTEDNESS

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*Your 10-year-old child is easy to raise—most days. The rest of the time she is a handful. A big handful. A bit of an enigma, she possesses qualities of being both highly intelligent and completely ignorant when it comes to the mundane. She can be funny and make everyone laugh while also being serious to the point of critical. Her empathy runs high, as she cries at commercials about global warming. Yet she criticizes her friends who don't hold her worldview and often insists to you that her way is always the better way.*

*Her grades in school are good. But, her teachers complain that she often is sloppy in her work, makes careless errors on the simplest of math problems, and misspells basic words. She often chooses the road less traveled in all aspects of her life, wondering why others don't see that it is—at least to her—the easier way. Often a joy to be around, your child's moods can swing from one extreme to the other. The unbalanced nature of these mood swings causes you to question her emotional stability—and your own.*

*If you had to summarize her in one word, you would call her intense.*

*Parenting your child often leaves you frustrated as you vacillate between feeling lucky to have such a great kid and cursed for having to deal with her emotions.*

*Is she crazy? Are you?*

*Neither is true. You've just stumbled into the emotional world of gifted children and the drama of parenting and teaching them.*

Assumptions are common with gifted children. People often assume that raising a highly curious, bright child is an easy task—something parents should be happy about all of the time. These same people feel that bright children do not fall prey to many of the problems that other children encounter, including poor academic achievement, bullying, or risky behaviors.

Although it is true that there are many rewards to being the parent of a gifted child, believing that a gifted child will be easy to raise only negates the very real challenges inherent in parenting this population. Furthermore, the emotional roller coaster that can accompany giftedness makes parenting a true challenge.

Gifted children face school challenges, difficulties with peers, and problems with overall emotional development, similar to their nongifted counterparts. However, the nature of giftedness makes these issues significantly more intense. Parents of gifted children often are conflicted in their feelings regarding their children—ranging from delight and marvel related to children's creativity and intellectual prowess, to frustration regarding children's poor stress response, to powerlessness when parents feel inept in their own understanding of how to help this unique breed of children. Educators, too, often feel a sense of powerlessness as they try to help their gifted students maintain emotional balance and control in the classroom and with their friends.

## GIFTED CHILDREN AND SCHOOL

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One of the biggest assumptions made about gifted children involves academic achievement. People assume that these children require little to no discipline or encouragement with regard to learning in the school setting, believing giftedness is the same as being a high-achiev-

ing student (Webb, Gore, Amend, & DeVries, 2007). Furthermore, it is assumed that gifted children will always find an intrinsic way to learn—there is no need for specialized academic programs or teacher education in the field of giftedness. Unfortunately, these assumptions do not reflect an accurate understanding of the nature of giftedness.

Many gifted children do perform well in school, equating school performance with something as fundamental as breathing. They require little to no assistance from teachers or parents.

However, a growing number of these students share a different reality when it comes to traditional learning. They are frustrated by the mundane and repetitive processes found in many classrooms. Driven by boredom, they fall out of sync with school and withdraw from the learning environment. Unlike their high-achieving counterparts, they are not intrinsically motivated by good grades, having already decided that school has nothing of particular value to offer them.

If this pattern is allowed to continue, these gifted children soon will find themselves unable to get by on pure intellect. Having missed important information in class due to the lack of engagement in learning, they struggle—typically for the very first time. By this point, teachers may not see their gifted qualities at all, and often will believe that someone must have “made a mistake” about the gifted label. If they are recognized as being intelligent, teachers will assume that these underachieving gifted children are just being *lazy*. Seldom is the problem recognized as a mismatch between how gifted children learn and what the school so regularly asks them to do: repetitive and routine tasks.

The reality is, at least 5% of gifted children fail or drop out of school (Renzulli & Park, 2000). This is a statistic that should make educators and parents feel uncomfortable. Maybe even outraged. Closer attention needs to be paid to the unique needs of gifted students if we are going to improve student outcomes for this population. Educational strategies including acceleration, differentiation, and grouping are things that



need to be explored in order to help meet the needs of gifted children and improve their emotional and behavior outcomes.

## ANDREW

Andrew is a 12-year-old sixth grader. Having been identified as gifted in second grade, Andrew enjoyed his early childhood school experiences. In third grade, he earned average grades in all classes and indicated that learning was fun. At home, he typically amused himself by taking things apart—his electronic toys, his mother's old PDA, and a broken computer. He needed to understand why things worked the way they did. His early grade school teachers reported that he was a creative and talented student. His parents could not have been more proud.

As time went on and Andrew entered fifth grade, things began to change. The curriculum, no longer new and exciting, had settled into a mixture of routine and rote activities, punctuated with occasional opportunities for enrichment (which, in Andrew's mind, always meant more work). Andrew began to show disinterest in school, avoiding homework and no longer speaking about his day with excitement. His parents became concerned and went to the teacher for help. She suggested a "token economy" to assist with homework completion, rewarding him based on work completion. This helped for a short while, only to have the problem persist.

Andrew continued to withdraw from school, finding little to stimulate his mind. At home he no longer took apart the computer. Now he designed video games, filling any available time with trying to stump his friends with his new games.

Although he completed little to no work in school, Andrew's test scores continued to be high. The teacher reassured his parents that this was just a phase, promising that he would grow out of it eventually.

However, this was not the case. By sixth grade, things had taken a serious turn for the worse. Andrew, no longer in the habit of completing schoolwork, discovered that his intellect alone was not enough to maintain passing grades. He completed no homework, failed most of

his tests, and rarely demonstrated interest in school. He still designed video games at home and won various online contests.

His parents were at a loss as to what to do. Turning to the school, they were again told that it was a homework issue; if he would only do more homework, he would be fine. His standardized scores from statewide assessments continued to demonstrate high potential, so the school felt the problem was nothing more than a matter of laziness and poor parental structure.

Although Andrew is fictional, drawn from a combination of many real cases, his story is one that exemplifies the typical challenges some gifted children and parents face in the school system. We will revisit Andrew throughout the book, as we learn more about the complex challenges facing gifted students with regard to school.

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## GIFTED CHILDREN AND THEIR PEERS

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Another commonly held myth is that gifted children get along fine in the social aspects of their lives, having little problems with bullies or friendships in general. Sometimes the opposite is assumed—that all gifted children are “geeks” or “nerds” by nature. Such stereotypes minimize the nature of the problems faced by these children as they try to build friendships (Webb et al., 2007).

Many gifted children struggle greatly in the social areas of their lives, related in part to the intensity of their behaviors, as well as the unique aspects of their personalities, both of which will be covered in more detail in subsequent chapters. In general, gifted students have a tendency to appear arrogant and unconnected to their peers, often finding interest in things other than the typical interests of their peers. Social relationships often are negatively impacted by their tendency to lose interest with the day-to-day triviality that typifies most relationships during childhood. Instead, these children would prefer to focus on larger world problems, or things that are abstract and complex—most of which is not appealing to typical nongifted peers. The result