

Dabrowski's Over-excitabilities: A Layman's Explanation

by Stephanie S. Tolan

Written for [Hoagies' Gifted Education Page](#), February, 1999

Dabrowski talked about OE's - over-excitabilities ("superstimulatabilities"), and how the gifted were extremely sensitive in a variety of areas. It's a stimulus-response difference from the norms. It means that in these 5 areas a person reacts more strongly than normal for a longer period than normal to a stimulus that may be very small. It involves not just psychological factors but central nervous system sensitivity.

The five areas are:

Psychomotor

This is often thought to mean that the person needs lots of movement and athletic activity, but can also refer to the issue of having trouble smoothing out the mind's activities for sleeping. Lots of physical energy and movement, fast talking, lots of gestures, sometimes nervous tics.

Sensual

Here's the "cut the label out of the shirt" demand, the child who limps as if with a broken leg when a sock seam is twisted. Also a love for sensory things -- textures, smells, tastes etc. or a powerful reaction to negative sensory input (bad smells, loud sounds, etc.) The kids tend to be sensitive to bright lights (squinting in all the family photographs, etc.), harsh sounds. A baby who cries when the wind blows in his face, for instance; a toddler who cries at the feel of grass on bare legs and feet. Another important aspect of this is aesthetic awareness -- the child who is awed to breathlessness at the sight of a beautiful sunset or cries hearing Mozart, etc.

Imaginational

These are the dreamers, poets, "space cadets" who are strong visual thinkers, use lots of metaphorical speech. They day dream, remember their dreams at night and often react strongly to them, believe in magic (take a long time to "grow out of" Santa, the tooth fairy, elves and fairies, etc.).

Intellectual

Here's the usual definition of "giftedness." Kids with a strong "logical imperative," who love brain teasers and puzzles, enjoy following a line of complex reasoning, figuring things out. A love of things academic, new information, cognitive games, etc.

Emotional

This includes being "happier when happy, sadder when sad, angrier when angry," etc. Intensity of emotion. But also a very broad range of emotions. Also a need for deep connections with other people or animals. Unable to find close and deep friends (Damon and Pythias variety) they invent imaginary friends, make do with pets or stuffed animals, etc. Empathy and compassion. A child who needs a committed relationship will think herself "betrayed" by a child who plays with one child today and another tomorrow and refers to both as "friends." This is also the OE that makes the kids susceptible to depression. Dabrowski believed emotional OE to be central -- the energy center from which the whole constellation of OE's is generated.

Highly gifted people tend to have all 5 of these, but different people lead with different OE's. The engineer types lead with Intellectual, the poets with Emotional and Imaginational, etc. But variations in the levels of the individual OE's explain a great deal about the temperamental differences we see! These five describe the unusual intensity of the gifted as well as the many ways in which they look and behave "oddly" when compared to norms.