Why Do You Worry About That?

Anxiety in Gifted and Twice-exceptional Children and Adolescents

By Megan Foley Nicpon, Ph.D.

This article was adapted by the author, with permission, from one she wrote for the Davidson Institute.

Anxiety is a feeling all children and adolescents encounter, but the quality and quantity varies widely. For example, “I wonder if José will invite me to his birthday party?” is a much different worry than, “Is global warming going to negatively impact my future children’s quality of life?” Worry and anxiety among gifted and twice-exceptional children, as with all children, can become problematic and have a negative impact on their quality of life. Understanding how anxiety manifests in these children can go a long way toward developing solutions that work.

Characteristics

How does anxiety appear in gifted children? This is a tricky question to answer, given the individual differences among all children. I have, however, noticed patterns through my clinical experience, literature review, and research with gifted and twice-exceptional students. Some common characteristics of gifted children who experience anxiety include:

1. **Rigid thinking patterns.** Sometimes things happen that are outside our control, and some children struggle to cope with this. They view the world as “black or white”; for example, they may believe there is one right way to answer a problem or approach a situation. These same children cannot see that answers vary depending on the situation, or “stuff happens” to change the course of the future.

2. **Issues of control.** Sometimes gifted children worry about things that are outside their control, such as dying or the meaning of life. These existential worries are typically too sophisticated for children to consider, but not gifted children. In these situations, children struggle when there are questions that don’t have answers. They want to understand what is not understandable, or have answers to questions that are unanswerable.

3. **Strong need for social justice.** I see several gifted children who are very sensitive to world problems, such as global warming, poverty, or genocide. They work hard to find solutions to these gigantic problems and feel helpless when they don’t see their actions making a difference.

4. **Fortune-telling.** Gifted children with anxiety commonly engage in “predicting the future” and tend to develop the most awful predictions! Common examples include, “I’m never going to get into my top choice for college!” “My science project is going to be a disaster.”

5. **Perfectionism.** It’s hard for twice-exceptional children to not be perceived as “perfect” in their areas of talent, particularly because they are often told how “less than perfect” they are in their areas of difficulty. Almost all perfectionistic people have some level of anxiety. However, it’s unfair to pathologize perfectionism or anxiety; there are some positive manifestations. For example, anxiety can drive people to be good professionals, parents, or neighbors. Yet, too much anxiety or perfectionism can prevent risk-taking due to fear of failure.

Solutions

Now that we have an idea of how anxiety may present in gifted and twice-exceptional children, what can be done about it? This is another tricky question to answer, given the vast number of ways children respond to intervention strategies. Here are some ideas to consider:

1. **Identify “shades of gray.”** Help your child anticipate potential outcomes outside of what he or she expects should happen.

2. **Focus on the process instead of the outcome.** Teach your child to consider the “here and now” instead of predicting the future. This approach gets away from critiquing or analyzing how one “should” feel, but rather helps one accept feelings as a normal part of the human experience. Instead of trying to “get rid of” a feeling, one accepts it. For example, if your child realizes that she is feeling anxious about an upcoming test, she can acknowledge and accept the feeling as a normal reaction. Then she can engage in relaxation techniques to help...
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reduce anxiety to a more comfortable level that will aid performance instead of hinder it.

3. **Take a logical approach.** Help children identify the likelihood of their predictions coming true. If a child is scared of flying, you could say, “Given the evidence, what is the likelihood of our plane crashing? What is the likelihood of other potential outcomes (e.g., we land safely, we have to make an emergency landing, we have a scary landing, we land ahead of schedule, etc.)?” This technique reduces anxiety because it quickly becomes evident that the likelihood of the catastrophic event is less than what the anxiety is telling him or her.

4. **Identify what can be controlled.** For example, I can’t control global warming; but I can control how well we recycle in our own home.

5. **Take small steps.** Successfully overcoming anxiety about smaller situations can transfer into success in larger situations, and even in those that have more global ramifications (e.g., trying something new, taking educational risks, etc.).

6. **Teach positive thinking patterns.** There is something to be said about being in situations where one feels success, but dealing with “failure” is also a life lesson. As a parent, you may perceive something as minor that your child thinks is the end of the world. Talking through children’s feelings while they are emotionally activated won’t be helpful; wait until they are emotionally calm. Then, ask questions like, “When X happened, what did you think? How do you feel about it now?” Link thoughts with feelings and behaviors. For example, help your child see that thinking he is a failure causes him to feel bad about himself. If he can replace these negative thoughts with positive ones (e.g., “I did not win this time but I tried my best, and I’ll practice before the next...”)

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**Events**


Please note: For state association conferences relating to giftedness, see Hoagies’ website, www.hoagiesgifted.org. For additional conferences on learning differences, see the website of the Council for Exceptional Children, www.cec.sped.org.
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competition”), he feels better.

7. **Model being vulnerable.** Children benefit from parents sharing their personal experiences with feeling challenged, anxious, or out of place.

8. **Use their intelligence.** With children who have a very rational, intellectualized view of their anxiety, use the facts. It is physiologically impossible to be anxious and relaxed at the same time. I use this with bright children to help them understand the value in learning relaxation and breathing techniques. Deep breathing seems so simple but it is impossible to have a panic attack if one is breathing deeply and his or her heart rate slows.

9. **Discuss motivators.** I sometimes work with children about what worrying does. Does it solve their problem or answer their question? What benefits do they get from worrying? Does it motivate them into action or does it just serve as debilitating? Does it get them attention? If so, is it the attention they really crave?

10. **Work on patience.** It is difficult being a parent of a child with anxiety. When you find yourself frustrated, it may be helpful to give yourself a break from the situation to de-escalate your frustration.

What If I Need More Help?

Parents commonly ask, “When should I seek treatment for my son or daughter?” There is no one, right answer to this question. I would start by asking whether the observed symptoms are having a negative impact on the child’s functioning at home, at school, or with peers. If the answer is yes, then seek treatment. If the answer is no, then it likely is your child’s current state of being, personality trait, or way of looking at the world. Functioning can change throughout the lifespan and commonly does. In fact, I would say change in functioning is the norm rather than the exception.

The most “efficacious” treatment for anxiety is cognitive behavioral therapy, coupled with education about anxiety as well as gradual exposure techniques. These are life-long skills that one can learn to cope with stressors as they develop. Medications also can be effective, especially in conjunction with behavioral or cognitive behavioral intervention. Remember, trying medication does not mean you are making a life-long commitment to this intervention; it simply means that you are exploring all treatment options to see what works best for your child in his or her current situation.

When searching for a clinician to work with your child, remember: fit matters. Research shows that the therapist/client relationship is the best predictor of positive outcomes. Therefore, even if a psychologist comes highly recommended, uses empirically validated treatments, and seemingly understands gifted children, find someone else if you and your child do not feel comfortable.

References

The few references used to create this brief summary are available by contacting me at megan-foley-nicpon@uiowa.edu.

Megan Foley Nicpon is a licensed psychologist at the Belin-Blank Center at the University of Iowa. She is also an assistant professor in the university’s Counseling Psychology Program. Her research and clinical interests include assessment and intervention with twice-exceptional students, particularly gifted students with autism spectrum disorder, AD/HD, and emotional/learning difficulties, and the social and emotional development of talented and diverse students. She has over 30 referred articles and book chapters in the areas of gifted, counseling psychology, and twice-exceptionality, and over 50 presentations at international, national, and state professional meetings.

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**What is Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT)?**

Cognitive behavioral therapy is a general term used to describe a category of therapies that focus on the role our thoughts play in shaping our feelings and behavior. The goal of this therapy is to change an individual’s way of thinking in order to change how the person feels and acts. CBT is often used to treat anxiety and depression.