

Tips for Parents: Worry and the Gifted - How Much is Too Much?

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This article by Edward Amend discusses worry and stress as related to gifted children. The author explains that some worry is good and is a motivator, but that it is important to distinguish between a normal amount of worry and an amount that will cause problems for the child. The article provides tips for parents on things to look for and ways to help.

As a clinical psychologist, I see my share of worry and anxiety in gifted children, especially with terrorism and war permeating the news. Although this is not always the presenting concern of parents coming to my office, it often underlies the behavior problems, school conflicts, or social difficulties. Worry and anxiety are experienced in different ways and, in general, people that suffer from anxiety experience, to a varying degree, fear and nervousness that are excessive, chronic, unremitting, and often irrational. Symptoms can grow progressively worse and may include physical symptoms. Worry in a gifted child can be related to just about anything, from global issues like environmental changes and world peace to personal issues like their homework or "bad hair."

There are three key aspects that help determine the severity of worry or anxiety, and these are:

1. Frequency: How often do the problems arise? Are the symptoms of worry and anxiety experienced daily, weekly, monthly, or several times a day, for example?
2. Intensity: On a scale of 1 to 10, how bad are the problems?
3. Duration: This refers to two things. First, how long do the symptoms last when they appear? Do you worry for a few minutes and get back to work or do you worry for hours on end. Second, how long have you been experiencing these problems? Is this a new phenomenon or something that's been around for years?

When it comes to the association between worry and the gifted, the research is unfortunately contradictory. Basically there is some evidence to suggest that gifted individuals are both more and less vulnerable to internalized distress (which includes worry and anxiety). We can safely say that worry and anxiety, like most other adjustment concerns, are an issue for gifted children at least as much as they are for the general population. However, common sense would suggest that gifted individuals might experience more worry just because of the way their brains work--being able to see more possible problems and more possible outcomes or solutions. Research also suggests that the gifted may have buffering traits (e.g., high self-efficacy, sensitivity, and effective coping strategies) that help reduce the negative impact of stressors and anxiety provoking events. (NAGC, 2002). And, once trained, the gifted child's mind can be an ally in combating worry even if it helped create the problems by thinking or over-thinking possible solutions or problems or outcomes in the first place.

Of course worry and anxiety have negative effects on many people, and these effects are often very obvious. However, it is important to keep in mind that some moderate

level of anxiety is a mobilizing force for us to get things done. If we weren't somewhat nervous about our work or performance, for example, we wouldn't spend so much time making sure we do a good job. If a kid doesn't worry a bit about his or her homework or the consequence of not doing it, he or she likely won't do it. When one cares about their products and others' perceptions of them, he or she will worry about the possibility of negative criticisms. Some of this worrying is motivating and pushes one to get work done and do a good job. However, too much worrying raises the level of anxiety too high and actually prevents a person from getting things done. If there is too little anxiety or worry, we DON'T do, but when there is too much, we CAN'T do.

What can we do to help our gifted children manage their worries in a healthy way? Here are some suggestions accumulated over the years from a variety of sources. Some come from research, some from clinical experience, and some from parents like you.

"Men are not worried by things, but their ideas about things," said philosopher Epictetus. He would argue, for example, that it is not the war, but what and how we think about the war that would affect our behavior and emotions. Albert Ellis is a noted psychologist who developed this idea into what is called Rational Emotive Therapy, a way of thinking that helps one avoid falling prey to irrational beliefs and the negative feelings that go with them. These irrational beliefs, such as "You must be unfailingly competent and almost perfect in all you undertake" and "You should feel fear and anxiety about anything that is unknown, uncertain, or potentially dangerous," contribute to worry and anxiety. Managing these negative thoughts and the "thinking errors" (like catastrophizing and all-or-none thinking) that go with them can help a gifted child get a handle on worry. Helping kids identify these thoughts and recognize their negative consequences on moods and behaviors is a good way to work on decreasing worry, anxiety, and depression. Although the gifted child's battle with this type of negative self-talk is certainly frustrating for parents, especially when they don't let you know it is going on internally, using this type of cognitive approach can be helpful.

With younger children, you cannot always use these cognitive techniques because they have difficulty thinking about thinking. In those cases, you can try other options. With all children, it is important to provide opportunities to express feelings, whatever they may be. Remember that feelings are never "wrong," but actions based on those feelings can be. Accept the feelings, reflect the feelings (e.g., "Sounds like you're pretty worried about..."), and work to identify positive outlets for them. For younger children, drawing or writing are safe ways of expression. Consider having your kids develop a worry jar or worry jail (either on paper or a physical object) where kids can "store" those worries in a "safe" place for a while. The physical act of drawing a worry and locking it up is sometimes enough to help a child "put it away" for a while.

Relaxation techniques are a concrete way to decrease stress. For those kids that love control, this can be a fun way to help them learn to control breathing and tension. On the topic of control, you can also help your child develop some feelings of control over the worry by being proactive. For example, if the worry is about pollution or world hunger, help your child acknowledge that those global problems can begin to be

addressed at a local level. Participate in local causes or create new ones. Volunteer at a shelter or community agency or organize a city park clean up. There are many ways to make a difference locally that allow a child to feel some control and see the rewards of his or her work.

Fearing increased worries, many parents struggle to decide how much information about world events they should give their gifted children. Try to maintain a balance of information that fits within your family values and does not serve to increase worry. In general, accurate information can help gifted kids better understand, not jump to false (and more worrisome) conclusions, and keep emotions in check. If worry persists, perhaps more information--rather than less--is needed. Consider digging deep and doing some research on or related to the topic creating the worries.

Many parents have found success in reassuring kids through reading. Especially with younger kids, it can be difficult to talk directly about a worrisome subject like death for an extended time. But, you can read a book, even a picture or children's book, with a theme that surrounds death, and discuss the feelings of the characters, their reactions, and their behaviors without ever relating it directly to the child or situation. Stories about yourself and others can be told in the same way (i.e., you tell a story about you or another and never relate it to the child). In this way, you let them draw the links and learn the lesson in a safe, non-threatening way. You validate feelings without directly confronting or exploring the issue on a personal level.

As always, support, involvement, and communication are the keys to healthy relationships with children. A strong relationship will help moderate negative feelings and events of all types. This won't, of course, prevent all problems and lead to stress free life, but it will certainly help.

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