

# The Gifted Learner And Mental Health

In Ontario, the Ministry of Education defines a gifted learner as *one who has an unusually advanced degree of general intellectual ability that requires differentiated learning experiences of a depth and breadth beyond those normally provided in the regular school program to satisfy the level of educational potential indicated* (Education). This means that students who are found to be intellectually ‘Gifted’ generally understand concepts at a more advanced level, and learn new material faster, than same aged peers. Although students with a gifted learner profile often perform well academically, an advanced level of general intellectual ability is not always evident by just looking at a student’s academic achievements.

Intellectual skills are only part of what contributes to any child's overall development and well-being. Like all individuals, each child and teen with highly advanced intellectual skills is unique, and has individual areas of interest, and a distinct profile of strengths and weaknesses. Uneven (asynchronous) patterns of development commonly experienced by many children and teens can appear more pronounced among children with highly advanced development in one domain such as intellectual functioning (National Association for Gifted Children). For example, a child who may be able to read material several years above grade level, may have motor skills that fall in an age typical (average) range, resulting in typically developing motor skills presenting as an unexpected weakness. However, this is a relative weakness only when compared to the child's other exceptional skills (but not a weakness in comparison with what is expected based on age).

Learning at an advance pace can impact gifted individuals; although this does not necessarily put them at increased risk for mental health struggles, their experience of the world may place them at a *unique* risk for challenges such as anxiety, depression and perfectionism (Cross, 2015).

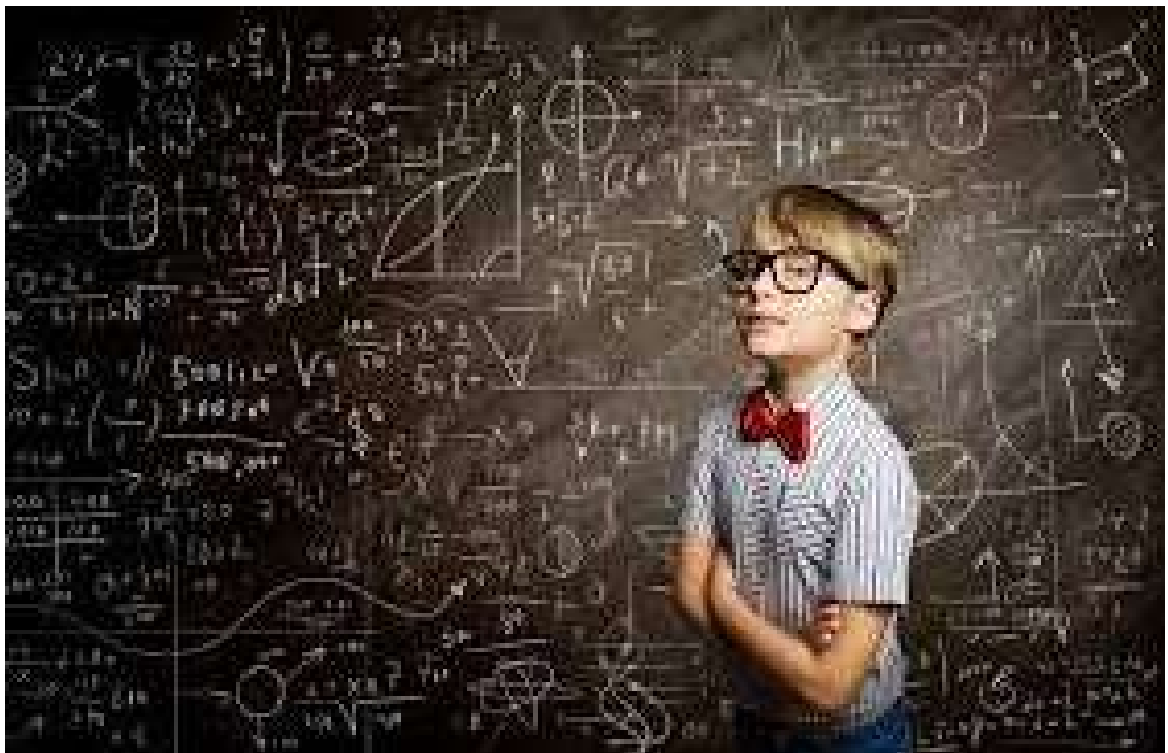
Factors that may lead children and teens with highly developed intellectual skills at a unique risk or increased sensitivity to stress may include the following:

- Although intellectually gifted children and teens may cognitively seek out (research) and understand difficult concepts, they **may not have the life experience and/or emotional understanding or emotional development to cope with these concepts** (such as death or social injustice as examples). That is, they may not be ready *emotionally* for the depth of their own intellectual thoughts, potentially leaving them feeling overwhelmed and distressed. This is particularly challenging when grappling with questions or concepts that cannot be explained by logic or fact.
- As intellectually gifted children and teens begin to explore and seek out information and learn new things, this can become overwhelming as they **may become discouraged**, feeling that the more they learn, the more there is to learn, and the less they feel they actually know (threatening their sense of confidence and self-worth). Likewise, as children learn more, they may begin to feel that there is also more to worry about.
- Intellectually gifted children and teens often have an acute awareness and increased cognitive understanding of global issues, such as injustices and threats to our environment, and **may become overwhelmed by fears** of potential threats not only to themselves, but also to their family,

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While gifted children and adults are *not* necessarily more prone to mental health problems, they still experience emotional and interpersonal challenges as a result of their heightened sensitivities, overactive minds, and differences from many of their peers. (Gail Post, 2018)

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community, and country. This can also bring about frustrations and disappointments that others, particularly same-aged peers, do not share the same awareness or concerns on a more global scale, or more generally, others do not share their same interests or advanced level of comprehension.

- Similarly, children with a high level of intellect may be ready for a more mature friendship at an earlier age as compared to same aged peers who may just be interested in finding someone to play with. **Feeling disconnected or out of sync with same aged peers can significantly impact on overall mental health and well being.**
- Although a child or teen may have a highly advanced intellectual understanding of something, they may find it **frustrating** when their body cannot keep up with their advanced mind, or their advanced thinking has surpassed their academic setting. For example, they may understand the sequence or required movements to complete a complex basketball layout, but they do not have the physical development yet to balance and jump on one leg. Similarly, a child may not have the fine motor skills to manipulate Lego pieces to bring an elaborate design or vision to life and become extremely frustrated with their self-perceived lack of skill.



- With highly developed intellectual skills, children and teens tend to **easily experience success** in many things, particularly in relation to academic tasks. This often then creates a desire to maintain high performance and high personal expectations (i.e., perfectionism). As a result, children and teens can become anxious about potentially not being able to succeed, particularly as tasks become more complex. This can lead to avoiding challenges or avoiding situations where there is a risk of not succeeding.
- It is important to also consider that children with gifted learning profiles are **children first** and foremost, and although they may be grappling with some of these challenges, they are also experiencing typical developmental challenges. It is essential for others to always keep appropriate age-based expectations.

Distress or frustrations may be turned inward, presenting as low mood or anxiety, or may be expressed outwardly through tantrums, outbursts, or irritability. This can result in unfair judgements from adults as these outbursts may appear to be *immature* or *unreasonable* even though they may be age typical, because the child appears older and more mature in so many other ways.

# Strategies to help reduce the effects of stress

There are many ways that parents can provide support. Here are a few ideas:

## Validate Feelings (listen and acknowledge)

- Validation is not problem-solving, rather it is **active listening**. When your child is feeling stressed, address the feeling they are experiencing and not the event/action that brought about the feeling. This approach is meant to build the relationship with your child by letting them know that you listening to them without judgement.
- Validation is about empathy. By validating your child's feelings, you are sending a message to your child that although you may not necessarily agree/accept what they are saying or doing, you recognize that this is true *to them*.
- It is important to not minimize or dismiss their struggles, for example, comments or blanket statements such as "don't worry about that," or "this won't matter a year from now," will make your child feel that their feelings are not important or valid.
- Don't try to fix or to talk your child out of their feelings – remember their feelings are real to them, no matter your opinion.
- Stay positive and use "and" instead of "but." For example, "I know you are worried about your test today, and that means that you want to do well. And I know that your studying has prepared you well."
- Rephrasing or paraphrasing what your child has said is helpful. Say things like: "no wonder you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_ (emotional pain word), because \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_."
- When children and teens feel validated, they will be better able to hear you and change their own behaviours.

## Normalize Feelings

- Let your child know that you understand it can be hard to focus, make decisions, or complete a task when they are feeling discouraged or anxious – and assure them that it will be easier to do what they need to do once they are again feeling calm and focused.
- Encourage your child to use detective-like thinking to challenge worried thoughts or 'negative thinking'. For example, challenge them to think about:
  - What is the evidence?
  - What else could happen?
  - What is the chance it could actually happen?
  - If the worst possible thing happened, how would you cope?
- By looking at the evidence, it can help your child think more realistically about something that is causing them distress and help recognize when their fears or worries may not be realistic or accurate. It can also help them to do some problem solving ahead of time to help feel more prepared if they do encounter obstacles.
- Encourage children to **share their questions and thoughts** with supportive adults. Helping children and teens recognize what is within their control and what is not in their control can help reduce feeling overwhelmed.



- If your child or teen struggles to accept constructive criticism, remind them that everyone receives feedback and that is how we learn and grow. Normalizing feedback can move them from taking the comments personally.

### Build a Support System:

- **Connection with others** is a highly protective factor that helps reduce the negative impact of stress.
- Opportunities for children and teens to connect with like-minded peers will help increase the feeling of being *understood* and in sync with others.
- Children and teens with a range of skills and interests may require multiple peer groups to feel connected. For example, one group of peers may share similar interests (like a club or team), while another group of peers may be more similar in cognitive ability.
- A match in ability or interest may be more meaningful than a chronological age match.
- Parents benefit from connecting with other parents who have children facing similar challenges.



### Growth Mindset:

- Create an environment where mistakes are viewed as a natural part of the learning process (having a growth mindset)
- Some children and teens may be reluctant to **take risks** with fear that they may not be able to do something new “perfectly”. Take the emphasis off a grade or finished product, and instead celebrate the courage to try, and the joy of learning.
- Our brain believes what we tell it. Model positive self-talk and **affirmations** for your child (e.g., “I believe in you”; “you are brave and strong”; “this is tough but you are tougher”), and encourage them to repeat positive, coping statements to themselves so the messages to their brain are positive ones!

### Mindful breathing

- Taking deep, slow breaths (**belly breathing**) signals our body to release hormones that cue the brain and body to relax by slowing the heart rate and increasing focus. Breathing is a natural stress-reducer. It is like pressing the reset button, or overriding a fight-flight-freeze response when feeling anxious. This gives control back to the problem-solving parts of the brain to allow for a more planned response, instead of acting on impulse. It also quiets the brain so it can concentrate on



the present moment. The more frequently belly breathing is practiced, the more it will reduce the production of hormones associated with stress (cortisol), and can help change reactions to stress.

- Deep breathing can be used anytime - it is portable and always with you!
- There are many ways to focus on breathing. Begin slowly, and find a technique that your child likes and can do easily. Introduce deep breathing when your child is happy and calm and practice it in different environment and situations. Also, modeling deep breathing is a powerful teaching tool.

### Habits of healthy living

- Keeping a **consistent daily schedule** and following healthy eating and sleeping patterns are highly effective in reducing symptoms of anxiety and stabilizing mood.
- Exercise releases/increases neurotransmitters in the brain that make us feel better physically and emotionally, and can increase the opportunity for social connection with others. Physical activity also becomes a distraction from worried or negative thoughts.
- **Reducing access to news feeds** may also help to reduce your child from becoming flooded with information that they have difficulty processing emotionally.

## When should I be concerned?

Because feeling anxious and changes in mood are common, especially amongst teens, it can be tricky to tell when to be concerned. The level of distress and the duration of symptoms are key in helping to identify if it is time to be concerned. Generally speaking, additional supports may be needed if changes in behaviour and emotions:

- are **out of proportion** with the circumstances – the level of worry, sadness, or irritability does not match the event or child/teen's personality
- **increase** rather than decrease over time
- **interferes** with thoughts, feelings or daily functioning
- causes **distress** to the extent that your child or teen has low energy, less engagement in preferred activities, withdraws from friends or family members

It is this combination of excessive anxiety and disruption in daily activities that occurs most days and for months at a time, that tells us that **anxiety** has become a problem.

It is the combination of intense sadness or irritability, and disruption to daily activities that lasts most of the day, every day and persists for more than a two-week period of time that tells us that **low mood or symptoms of depression** have become a problem.

Some children and teens may need more than what we, as parents or caregivers, can offer. When the intensity, duration and level of disruption in behaviour or mood becomes concerning, it may be time to seek professional help or 'clinical intervention.' This means your child or teen may need to meet with a doctor, psychologist or social worker for additional supports.

If your child has self-harming behavior (cutting or burning themselves, or escalating substance misuse as examples) or if you are concerned that they may be having thoughts of suicide, seek immediate assistance.

## Additional resources and supports

[Contact Hamilton for Children's and Developmental Services](#) – central access service to mental health and/or developmental services in Hamilton

[Anxiety Canada](#)

[Emotion Coaching](#) at HWDSB

Easy and Fun Mental Health Activities to try at home from [School Mental Health Ontario](#)

HWDSB Enrichment and Innovation Centre <https://gifted.commonshwdsb.on.ca/>

The Association for Bright Children of Ontario (ABC Ontario) <https://www.abcontario.ca/>

School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) presents a series of 12 easy and fun mental health activities designed for parents and families to try at home. <https://smho-smso.ca/blog/online-resources/easy-and-fun-mental-health-activities-for-home/>

For additional information about when to be concerned from School Mental Health Ontario:

<https://smho-smso.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Tip-Sheet-How-Do-You-Know-If-You-Should-Be-Concerned.pdf>

**CRISIS:** Call 911 / Visit your local hospital emergency room

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**URGENT:**

**Kids Help Phone** 

24/7 counselling and information for youth:

- 1-800-668-6868
- kidshelpphone.ca

**COAST**

Mental health crisis outreach and support for all ages.

- 905-972-8338
- coasthamilton.ca

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**NON-URGENT:**

**HWDSB Helps.**

Get help or share anonymous tips using...

- Text to 905-963-0066 (standard rates apply)
- The HWDSB Helps app for iOS and Android.
- Web chat - [www.hwdsb.on.ca/wehelp](http://www.hwdsb.on.ca/wehelp)

## References

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Gail Post, P. (2018, May 14). *Giftedness and mental health*. Retrieved from Gifted Challenges:

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