

When Your Child Goes Overboard: Fears and Compassionate Concerns

"I first learned about this strange, new, 'gifted world' through SENG, and it was at a SENG conference that I first met people who felt like me, people who seemed to understand me and with whom I connected in a whole, new way." ~ Joseph Hughes, teen program attendee

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by Nancy M. Robinson, PhD

When Johnny was 5, he was greatly disturbed by the accounts of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan. Not only was he deeply sympathetic to the orphaned children and their uprooted families, but desperately fearful of an earthquake and radiation dangers happening here at home. Living in Seattle, as we do, I didn't regard this as particularly unreasonable. But why does he experience distant and unlikely events in this way when his schoolmates are blissfully unaware? What can I do to help?

Bright kids not only experience different fears than their age-mates, they encounter them earlier than expected. These differences are in part because some bright children endure greater intensities of feeling every day than other children do. They feel emotions keenly, have a hard time getting past them, and suffer for others with a remarkable sense of injustice.

Second, their high intelligence creates asynchrony of unusually mature understanding coupled with inevitably limited experience. The greater their ability, the greater the gap. They can grasp beyond their years the scary implications of events and ideas but haven't lived through enough of them to acquire the calluses that ordinarily come gradually with growing up.

Even as babies, gifted youngsters show fears more typical of older children. Stranger anxiety comes early, for example, as does the knowledge that death is irreversible. They absorb the news that now comes to us 24/7—the uprisings, atrocities, and losses—but they do so without context of distance and scale and naturally fear that those same events might happen to their family. We adults have—at least vicariously—been through assassinations, wars, floods, and terrorist explosions, and we know that even these awful events will end and that (most of) life goes on no matter how horrific things are. Our children don't have this optimism; they can't just put things aside. That's what I mean about their lacking calluses.

What's a Parent to Do?

Your job isn't to make the feelings go away; it's to help your children experience their genuine feelings without being overwhelmed. Assist with the growing process; don't squelch it.

Here are some ideas:

Keep your own perspective

- Share their concerns with equanimity; model your calm and compassion about what's troubling them.
- Don't expect them to put a damper on the feelings too soon.
- Don't tell them that these things can't happen to them unless they really can't. Rather, teach them about very low probabilities. Math to the rescue!

Do some judicious censoring

- Limit how much news you watch while they're awake and refrain from making the day's catastrophes the frequent subject of dinner table conversation.
- Don't, however, eliminate all exposure. Oppressive censorship just sends the fears underground, and, furthermore, you do want to let those calluses develop in due time!

Use information to put a fearful situation in perspective

- Investigate factual information about the situation. If it's an earthquake, for example, then this is a good time to study earthquakes. Why do they happen? Different kinds? How do we measure them? Are they typical in your area? How do well-built buildings survive and why? Want to build a model earthquake? You can use a similar strategy with almost any kind of threat.
- By converting information to "science" or "history," help those calluses along. Take advantage of your children's drive to learn. Indeed, valuable knowledge gained in this way may be retained better because of the emotion that drove the inquiry. And, until the fears become manageable, here's an important strategy: Keep up the flood of facts until your children say, "OK, enough! This is getting boring!"

Prepare strategically

This is a good time for positive preparation for emergencies. Lay in supplies. Practice what to do in case an event happens. Explore what the community is doing. These are useful things to do anyway, and they can provide a calming sense of efficacy, of being able to take action and count on others even when things seem out of control.

Practice helping behaviors

Even quite young children can contribute, such as helping you volunteer with a food bank or animal shelter, or collecting money for a child-related cause. Doing for others reduces the feeling of helplessness and has intrinsic ethical value as well. In summary, giftedness makes children vulnerable to fears and passions beyond their years. Make patience, respect, and teaching your allies as they develop into strong, caring, activist adults.

Nancy M. Robinson is professor emerita of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Washington and former director of what is now known as the Halbert and Nancy Robinson Center for Young Scholars, established in 1975 by her late husband. The Center is best known for its two pioneering programs of early entrance to college but offers summer and other opportunities as well. Engaged previously in a 30-year career in mental retardation, her research interests in giftedness have focused on marked academic acceleration to college, adjustment issues of gifted children, intellectual assessment, and verbal and mathematical precocity in very young children. She has consulted for more than 25 years with the U.S. State Department's Office of Overseas Schools. She received the 1998 National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) Distinguished Scholar Award and the 2007 NAGC Ann Isaacs Founders Memorial Award.