

HIGH LEARNING POTENTIAL AND ACTIVE (PSYCHOMOTOR OVEREXCITABILITY)

Summary

High learning potential children, especially those who display Psychomotor Overexcitability, are highly energetic, always on the go and want to be constantly engaged in an activity. Many parents of high learning potential children who are very active despair that their child won't sit still at the dinner table, eagerly rush into things before they've heard all the instructions and never seem to get tired. Teachers often complain that these children fidget a lot, shout out in class and don't seem to be listening (their minds tend to wander when not fully engaged). This advice sheet explores the topic and suggests ways of dealing with this high level of activity.

Introduction

Understanding why a child is so active is the first step to handling this kind of behaviour, as it is important that the child feels accepted and understood. For some children it can actually be very uncomfortable to have to sit still or for their physical activity to be restricted. With this understanding should come a more positive viewpoint of the behaviour and less criticism for it; leading to greater self esteem for the child. Once it is understood that some high learning potential children are like this and about the different aspects of this characteristic, many adults are better able to tolerate and account for it.

High Learning Potential and Active Children

High learning potential children who are very active often seem ready to burst when they are forced to be still for a set period of time. They are almost always on the move and fidget even when seated. They seem to need to use their whole body to feel involved and at peace. Often they are uncomfortable sitting at the dinner table or on a seat at school and have a need to move. Long car journeys can become a problem without frequent stops to release some energy. Children like this were born with high energy levels and may need help to channel this activity in positive directions.

Psychomotor Overexcitability

Psychomotor overexcitability is one of the five overexcitabilities or hypersensitivities described by Kazimierz Dabrowski in his Theory of Positive Disintegration¹ that have in recent years been applied to high learning potential children. Please refer to our advice sheet PA610 Hypersensitivity (Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities) for more information on this.

Overexcitability is described as surplus energy due to enhanced excitability of the neuromuscular system. If a high learning potential child has psychomotor overexcitability they are likely to have:

- Excess physical energy
- Rapid speech and/or compulsive talking
- Nervous habits

¹ Source: Bailey, C. L. (2010). Overexcitabilities and sensitivities: Implications of Dabrowski's Theory of Positive Disintegration for counselling the high learning potential. Retrieved from http://counselingoutfitters.com/vistas/vistas10/Article_10.pdf

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- Impulsive actions
- Marked competitiveness
- Restlessness and/or constant fidgeting

Sleep and Active Children

In addition, to the above traits, people with psychomotor overexcitability have also been cited as suffering from sleeplessness and having a preference for fast action and sports. For more information about support in this area, read our advice sheet PA605 Sleep and High Learning Potential Children.

Very Active Children and ADHD

Children who are very active are at risk of being misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) because of their need to move around. However, it is not the amount of activity or energy that is the primary concern with ADHD, rather whether the child can focus their attention while on the move.

How to Support a Child who is Very Active

Plan for their energy

A child who is very active needs to move. Don't fight it and don't feel that they are doing something wrong by needing to move; otherwise you are setting your child up to fail. Plan for this need by incorporating opportunities for movement into their day, in order to use their energy for a positive purpose. Think about specific activities that would offer a welcome release of their high levels of energy. After participating in such physically engaging activities, your child should feel calmer and happier.

Recognise the underlying reasons

Children who have a lot of energy react to emotional stimulation physically. When they are excited or stressed they may be jumping off the sofa or zooming around the room. Instead of just assuming they're being naughty, consider the situation and what is happening around them and whether this could be affecting them emotionally. Talk to them calmly about how they are feeling and why. Give them positive affirmations that give their emotion a 'name' and purpose. This helps them to understand why they are feeling certain emotions rather than simply rushing round in frenzy.

Value their energy

It is important to give your child the message that it is alright to move around so that they do not feel guilty or that there is something wrong with them because of this need. The messages you give your child should be positive ones along the lines of being able to express themselves using their whole body – they put lots of energy into tasks, they'll make a great sportsperson or dancer, they learn by using their body, you wish you had half the energy they had.

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Recognise times when they are likely to be very active

There will be times when your child is likely to be more active than others. They will need to release more energy after sitting still for a length of time, such as watching a film, reading a book or playing a computer game. They may find it even more difficult to calm down if they are hungry, thirsty, tired or stressed. Excitement may also provoke more energy than at other times. These are the times when you may need to step in and point out that a walk/bike ride/run around the garden might do them good to help them clear their mind.

Calm over-stimulation

Sometimes children who are active get over-stimulated and find it difficult to calm down, and no amount of activity will wear them out. In this case, they may need help to express their feelings as well as help to calm down through a more soothing activity such as reading a book or having a bath.

Help direct their attention

Children who are highly energetic can be distractible and difficult to get through to. Their attention seems to be taken by other things and calm voices do not penetrate their consciousness. To direct their attention, you may need to make eye contact or choose the right moment to touch them gently on the shoulder before speaking.

Support their learning style

High learning potential children who are energetic will learn best when they are able to be physically involved in the learning and/or able to move around while learning. They fit well into the kinaesthetic learner profile, but this is not the only way they learn. They will need to fidget and fiddle while concentrating and may like background noise (such as the radio on) as well.

Plan mealtimes

It is important to teach your child to sit while eating for safety and social acceptability. However, there are things you can do to make this more bearable for an active child. Make sure your child has had some exercise before they come to the table to avoid a build-up of energy. Involve them in conversation or bring a book or puzzle to the table if you think you are going to be there for a long time.

Teach them to enter social situations calmly

Active children often enter social situations with their whole bodies, enjoying the excitement and becoming intense. They can become too loud, too close to others, too fast moving and others struggle to cope with this intensity. This is especially the case with younger active children. Teach your child to stop as they enter by showing them with your body (stamp your foot in a halt and slap your sides with both arms). Encourage them to look at what is going on in the group and where they might fit into it appropriately.

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Teach them awareness in social situations

Often high-energy children are overbearing, invading others' personal space and being too loud. They need to cultivate an awareness of personal space and you can help them by asking your child to look if their hand or feet are touching someone so they can see when they are standing too close. Commenting positively when they are at an appropriate distance will also reinforce the message. Similarly, when they are using a raised voice, point out how others are reacting; how they back away, flinch and how it hurts their ears. Encourage them to listen to their voice and model the level of volume you'd like to hear. Again, comment positively when they are using a more comfortable voice so they understand what it feels like.

Give yourself a break

Looking after yourself is important to help you keep up with an active child. It can be difficult finding the right person who is prepared or equipped to look after a young active child, as older family members may struggle to keep up and you may worry that young babysitters may not be able to keep them safe. However, persevere to ensure you get a break from time to time, look after yourself and rest well for the benefit of both yourself and your child.

Help others to understand

Take time to explain to others, such as teachers and activity leaders, what your child is like and what helps at home. Carefully choose language that conveys the fact that your child needs opportunities to move around. Make sure they understand that you deal with this positively and value their energy so that this can be a consistent message for your child.

Finally...

High activity in high learning potential children can be difficult and tiring for parents to deal with, and is often misunderstood by others. Valuing their energy, planning for it and using it constructively will ensure your child's self esteem will remain intact and help them to understand themselves and put their abilities to good use in the future.

Further Information Books and resources can be ordered from our website shop:

www.potentialplusuk.org

PA610 Hypersensitivity (Dabrowski's Overexcitabilities)	Advice Sheet on the kinds of hypersensitivity often displayed by high learning potential children.
PA605 Sleep and High Learning Potential Children	Advice Sheet on sleep and high learning potential children.
http://borntoexplore.org	Born to Explore Website about children who have high learning potential and have high energy.
<i>Raising Your Spirited Child</i> by Mary Sheedy Kurcinka	An excellent resource for parents of strong-willed children in understanding and guiding their child.

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Just Two More Bites! Helping Picky Eaters Say Yes to Food by Linda Piette

Offers 'concrete help for frustrated parents'.

Potential Plus UK Date of Issue: November 2012

Potential Plus UK Planned Review Date: November 2015

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