

Being Mindful of Emotions: CHECKing in on Your Child's Emotional Intelligence

By Emily Mofield and Megan Parker Peters

Emotional intelligence, a term popularized by Daniel Goleman in his book of the same name, is the ability to recognize, understand, and manage our emotions—and to recognize, understand, and influence the emotions of others. According to Goleman, emotions such as self-awareness, self-discipline, and empathy add up to a different way of being “smart,” and that emotional intelligence may be a major predictor for future success, even more so than a high IQ or strong academic skills.¹

While emotions can drive how we learn, they can also paralyze progress toward our goals. Often gifted students will want to avoid unpleasant emotions associated with not doing a task completely right. Indeed, making a mistake, taking a risk in learning, and getting out of one's comfort zone can involve feelings of self-doubt, fear, or anxiety. Gifted students may cope with such emotions through perfectionism, procrastination, and even underachievement.

Children may display perfectionism by trying to overcompensate with perfection to avoid the feeling of shame. We might see a child exhibiting underachievement by avoiding the task altogether, creating an excuse such as, “*If I don't try, I won't fail.*” Other gifted children deal with anxiety to a degree that interferes with achievement: It is estimated that 12-20% of all children experience anxiety symptoms that are severe enough to warrant treatment.² These numbers do not specify the amount of children who are also gifted, but this number undoubtedly includes gifted students. For these reasons, it is important to help children be aware of their emotions as they relate to achieving their pursuits and goals.

We believe it's important to help gifted children recognize the emotions they experience. When they are able to identify their emotions, they can ultimately gain control and regulate them. However, it's not always easy for children to identify or label how they are feeling on their own. They may need guidance to understand their emotions and work through the process.

To help parents and educators work with gifted children to strengthen their emotional intelligence by recognizing

and managing their emotions, we've developed the CHECK framework (*See pages 12-13*), based on our years of research in the areas of mindset, perfectionism, and underachievement. When parents and teachers use CHECK, they can help gifted children approach and manage the stress and emotions associated with difficult academic, performance, or social situations.



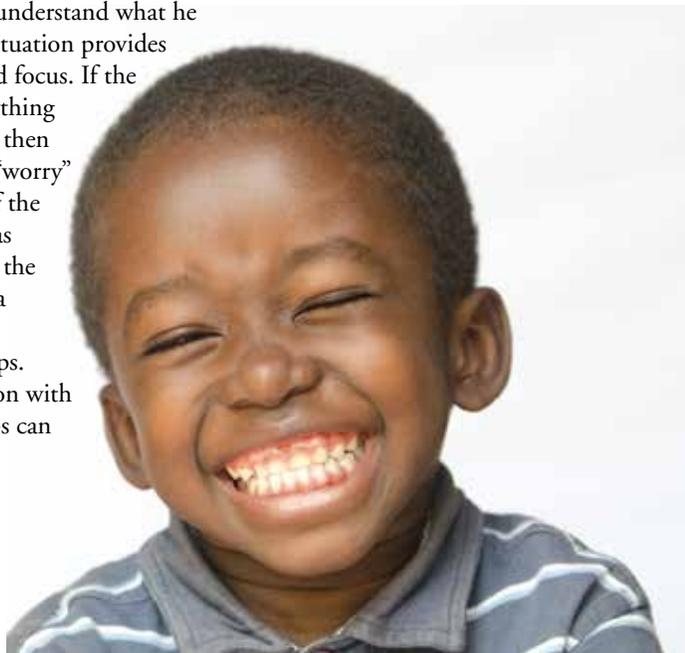


Control vs. Not Control

Given any situation, such as getting ready for an important performance, handling a conflict with a friend, or tackling a difficult assignment, a child may respond in a number of ways. This may include playing the “blame game” or spiraling thoughts into what-if negative scenarios: *What if I don’t make the team? What if people laugh at me? What if she won’t be my friend?* In these situations, we can teach children to ask: *What is in my control? What is out of my control?*

To explain this to children, have the child list various worries or situations on different pieces of paper and place all the separate pieces of paper listing each worry on a dinner plate. Then ask, *“What can be taken off the plate because you have no control over the situation?”* This might be another child’s response to a small argument or the order the child is chosen to perform in a musical contest. Then ask, *“What do you have some control over?”* This may include determining how your child will respond to a peer, allocating time to practice before the performance, or finding the performance room ahead of time.

Helping a child understand what he can control in the situation provides a sense of clarity and focus. If the child cannot do anything about the situation, then there is no need to “worry” over it, so take it off the plate. If the child has some control, allow the child to “worry” in a constructive way by thinking of next steps. Tackling the situation with a plan and next steps can subdue anxiety.



Hear What Your Child is Saying

When your gifted child seems to have irrational fears or thoughts, it’s important not to dismiss their emotions by saying things like, *“That’s silly. You have no reason to be nervous”* or *“You always do well, you don’t have anything to worry about.”* Though statements like those are meant to be reassuring and encouraging, they do not necessarily validate the child’s thoughts or emotions.

Parents and teachers can use active listening to acknowledge what the child is feeling and to empathize with them. For example, you might say, *“It sounds like you are really nervous about what’s about to happen. It can really be scary to give a speech in front of so many people. It’s normal to feel nervous.”* Such empathetic listening builds trust and connection. From here, you can set the stage to problem-solve with your child about approaching the situation and help your child help himself.



Emotional Awareness

It’s essential that adults help children identify the emotions they are feeling—and that’s not always easy. Even adults are sometimes unaware of what they are feeling, and may numb negative emotions through avoidance behavior, such as eating too much ice cream, lashing out in an argument, or binge-watching TV. But when emotions are not dealt with directly, they are likely to resurface later in other ways. By bringing emotions into awareness, people have the capacity to consider why they are experiencing a specific emotion and to reflect on what the emotion is moving them to do.

Starting at a very early age, parents can help their gifted children build emotional vocabularies. Building this vocabulary is critical to emotional intelligence. Help your child identify differences between anxiety and eagerness, understand mixtures of emotion (*“Jealousy is a combination of sadness, fear, and anger”*), and appreciate the duality of emotion (*“You can feel both joyful and sad at the same time.”*). If a child or adult is not able to identify an emotion, or if it feels unpleasant, this may lead to numbing the emotion or avoiding it (e.g., through distraction or procrastination) rather than the more positive coping response of dealing with the emotion head on. In addition, it’s important to give permission to “feel” a negative emotion—to allow the child to “own it”—before it owns them.³

We call this *lean in and push through*. By embracing the unpleasant sting and knowing that it will not last forever, this awareness allows a child to reflect on the need behind the emotion and move through the discomfort rather than avoid it altogether. For example, the emotion of anger protects us from exploitation. The emotion of fear tells us to get ready for a challenge. Disappointment moves us to seek improvement. Reflecting on the emotion’s purpose can develop emotional awareness, management, and regulation.



Challenge the Thoughts

It's also important that parents and educators help gifted children understand their emotion-thought connections. Everyone has a point of view about a situation with assumptions, values, and beliefs they are taking for granted. "Assumptions" may be a big word for young children, but with some explanation, your gifted child will appreciate this facet of critical thinking. More simply, assumptions are the stories we tell ourselves about a given situation. For example, two very different assumptions about a test score might be: *I got a B because I'm not as smart as people think I am*, versus *I got a B because I was not prepared to answer some of the questions on the test*.

In the classroom, we have taught this concept using different sunglasses or "lenses" to demonstrate the variety of perceptions or assumptions that might be used to interpret a given situation. Once the assumptions are identified, the assumptions should be questioned. For example, *Did I really get a B because I'm not smart? Or, Was it because I didn't think I needed to study, and I didn't spend time going over that material?* You can help your child identify assumptions, how those assumptions affect emotions, and then put those assumptions "on trial" or provide counter-evidence. This awareness also helps children understand others' points of view and that *perspectives* of reality are not always the reality of a situation.



Know a Plan

In helping children think about next steps, it's important for adults to help them problem-solve through the issue. We recommend using the PACT (Problem, Alternatives, Consequences, Try One) acronym to help children identify alternatives and choose a course of action.

First, it's essential to help the child identify the problem. Then, encourage the child to think about three or four alternatives to solve the problem.⁴ With each alternative, guide your child to think about the consequences. Then, they must try one of the alternatives.

Though this process may sound simple, sometimes students with "all or none" thinking perceive that a problem or situation can be solved only one way. But, it's important to guide children to see that there are multiple ways to handle issues, whether academic or social. This, in essence, teaches hope and that there are multiple options even if one does not work out. This process also arms your child with skills of resilience, as she can continue to try one approach, then another, even when obstacles arise.

CHECK in by Using These Prompts

Parents and educators can use these prompts to CHECK in and help nurture their gifted children's emotional intelligence.

Control vs. Not Control

Ask, "What can you control and what can you not control? What's your next step?"

Hear What Your Child is Saying

Say, "It sounds like you are feeling _____. That's understandable since _____. It must be difficult when _____."

Emotional Awareness

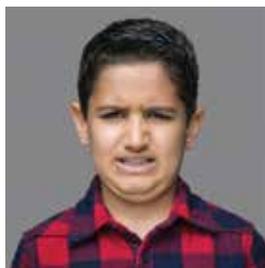
Ask, "What are you feeling? What is this emotion telling you?"

Challenge Thoughts

Ask, "What are you assuming? How does that make you feel? Is that what's really happening? What are others assuming?"

Know a Plan

Ask, "What is the problem? What are the different ways you can approach this? What are the consequences of each of these ideas? Which one will be your plan?"





Your Modeling Matters

While there may be other strategies, the CHECK framework offers an easy-to-remember approach for parents and teachers to help their gifted children build emotional strength and perseverance through challenging situations. Adults play an essential role in helping children navigate the difficult space of unpleasant emotion, empowering them to understand themselves, and building skills of resilience.

Furthermore, children mimic what they see, so it's essential to practice self-compassion and verbalize your own thoughts as you practice adaptive approaches to stress and difficult emotions. When parents model the acceptance of the uncomfortable, anxious, sticky feelings of a situation, and allow themselves to feel, reflect, endure, and move through them, they are paving a path to help gifted children develop emotional courage and strength. ♡

Resources

Web

The Gottman Institute,
www.gottman.com/parents

Books

Richey, M. A., & Forgan, J. W. (2017). *Stressed out: Solutions to help your child manage and overcome stress*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Siegel, D. (2018). *The yes brain: How to cultivate courage, curiosity, and resilience in your child*. New York, NY: Random House.

Authors' Note

Emily Mofield, Ph.D., is an assistant professor at Lipscomb University and has 15 years' experience teaching and leading gifted programs. She and Dr. Megan Parker Peters received the 2016 NAGC Hollingworth Award for their research on mindsets, perfectionism, and underachievement, and are co-authors of *Teaching Tenacity, Resilience, and a Drive for Excellence: Lessons for Social-Emotional Learning for Grades 4-8* (2018). She

serves as the current chair for the NAGC Curriculum Studies Network.

Megan Parker Peters, Ph.D., is an associate professor and the director of teacher education and assessment at Lipscomb University. She is a licensed psychologist and licensed school psychologist, specializing in researching and assessing gifted and twice-exceptional learners. She has published numerous articles related to the social-emotional needs of gifted learners and serves on NAGC's Parent Editorial Content and Advisory Board. She has been recognized by the Tennessee Association for the Gifted for long-term service and advocacy for gifted students.

Endnotes

- ¹ Goleman, D. (2005). *Emotional intelligence: Why it can matter more than IQ*. New York, NY: Bantam Books.
- ² Mendaglio, S. (2016). Management of anxiety begins at home. *Parenting for High Potential*, 5, 14-16.
- ³ Bradberry, T., & Greaves, J. (2009). *Emotional intelligence 2.0*. San Diego, CA: TalentSmart.
- ⁴ Mofield, E., & Parker Peters, M. (2018). *Teaching tenacity, resilience, and a drive for excellence. Lessons for social-emotional learning for grades 4-8*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

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