Building Emotional Courage: Helping Gifted Children Develop Gratitude, Optimism, and Compassion

Presented by:

Michele M. Kane, Ed.D
Professor
Northeastern Illinois University
Chicago, Illinois
Ph: 773.442.5594
Email: m-kane1@neiu.edu

Oak Grove School
October 16, 2017
What is Emotional Courage?

Emotional courage is the ability:

to stand in one’s truth with authenticity

to strive for compassion, empathy, and kindness (for self and others)

to live with respect for the planet and the life that it holds.

(Kane, 2015)
WHY IS EMOTIONAL COURAGE ESSENTIAL?

- Can be overwhelming as a gifted youngster to understand the magnitude of the world’s ills and feel unable to respond in a meaningful and purposeful way.

- To self-advocate and have the courage of personal convictions can be daunting when faced with a solo voice—skills are needed.

- Complexity of the gifted child’s inner world converges with real-life dilemmas and the stressors in their life escalates.

- Asynchronous development may lead to feelings of alienation and isolation.
Our task must be to free ourselves by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.

- Albert Einstein-
Why is This Relevant for Gifted Kids?

- Research by Dabrowski and others suggests that the gifted have greater developmental potential for higher level moral development as well as unique ethical sensitivity.
  - May relate to the complexity of moral issues and the intellectual demands involved in ethical judgments.

- The potential for high level moral development cannot develop in a vacuum.
  - Without help, the gifted are no better equipped to grapple with ethical concerns than they are to solve problems in non-Euclidean geometry.

(Silverman, 1993)
Differentiating Characteristics - Giftedness

- Unusual emotional depth and intensity
  - need to have philosophical discussions; guidance

- Idealism and sense of justice, which appear at an early age
  - need to transcend negative reactions by finding values to which he/she can be committed

- Advanced level of moral judgment
  - need to receive validation for nonaverage morality

- Strongly motivated by self-actualization needs
  - Need to be given opportunities to follow divergent paths and pursue strong interests

(Clarke, 2008)
Stress

A term coined by endocrinologist Hans Selye; his **definition**: “The non-specific response of the body to any demand placed upon it.”

- He also described stress in two ways:
  - Distress (caused by negative situations)
  - Eustress (caused by positive situations)

- **Implications:**
  - Life is filled with change and adaptation
  - Stress is universal and experienced by everyone
  - Stress is physical; however, reactions are unique
  - Awareness of personal reactions is essential
  - Identifying sources of change and resulting stress can be helpful  
    *(Holmes & Rahe, 1967).*
Stressed Out Teens?

According to the American Psychological Association:

Teens are the MOST stressed out group of any group in the US.
Sources of Stress for Gifted People

- SITUATIONAL
- SELF-IMPOSED
- EXISTENTIAL

(Fiedler, nd)
Protective Factors and Tools for Coping

- Gratitude
- Optimism
- Awe
- Mindfulness
In *The How of Happiness* (2007) positive psychology researcher Sonja Lyubomirsky elaborates, describing happiness as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile.”

Source: http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/
6 habits of happiness worth cultivating

**PAY ATTENTION**
Studies show that mindful people have stronger immune systems and are less likely to be hostile or anxious.

**GIVE THANKS**
Research reveals the enormous power of simply counting our blessings. Regular expressions of gratitude promote optimism, better health, and greater satisfaction with life.

**DROP GRUDES**
When we forgive those who have wronged us, we feel better about ourselves, experience more positive emotions, and feel closer to others.

**KEEP FRIENDS CLOSE**
Social connections are key to happiness. Research indicates it's quality more than quantity: Make time for those closest to you.

**GET MOVING**
Regular exercise increases self-esteem, reduces anxiety and stress, and may well be the most effective instant happiness booster of all.

**PRACTICE KINDNESS**
Being kind to others makes us feel good. Altruistic acts light up the same pleasure centers in the brain as food and sex.

[Logo: Greater Good Science Center]
“Gratitude has one of the strongest links to mental health and satisfaction with life of any personality trait—more so than optimism, hope, or compassion.”

(Emmons, 2013, p.9)
Gratitude:
Three Aspects of Appreciation

1. Noting Gratitude to Oneself: Note to oneself things that one can be grateful for (on a weekly basis)

2. Savoring: Note to oneself or others what one appreciates aesthetically, like a beautiful sunset, a good meal; mindfulness

3. Expressing Gratitude to Others: Express appreciation to those people one values

Source: www.dianegehart.com
Activity:
Three-Good-Things Exercise

We instruct the students to write down daily three good things that happened each day for a week. The three things can be small in importance (“I answered a really hard question right in language arts today”) or big (“The guy I’ve liked for months asked me out!!!”).

Next to each positive event, they write about one of the following: “Why did this good thing happen?” “What does this mean to you?” “How can you have more of this good thing in the future?”

Source: http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/newsletter.aspx?id=1551
Optimism

Early work on developing optimism by Martin Seligman

The program includes the cognitive elements of:

- Catching automatic thoughts,
- Evaluating thoughts,
- Challenge automatic thoughts with accurate explanations,
- Decatastrophizing.
Optimistic Explanatory Style

One of the most essential elements in fostering optimism is for children to see models of an optimistic explanatory style.

Adults can help by:

- Reframing an experience realistically; acknowledge the unpleasant or negative and balance with positive (not Pollyanna)
- Accept negative reactions and provide alternative explanations
- Help coach or use social stories to provide alternative explanations
Two Things Heard in Schools/Homes

CALM DOWN

PAY ATTENTION

Can we teach our kids to do these things?

Can they learn to find a quiet spot inside and focus?

YES they can!!
They are SO smart! Why doesn’t this come easily like everything else?

- Executive Functions are developmental—they take time to unfold

- The prefrontal cortex is the last part of the brain to come online—some say not fully developed in males around age 25

- Expectations of self and others is that this should be easy but there can be significant struggles

- Confusion about how my mind/body is betraying me---not in synch

- No one talks about it; seems as if everyone else is managing just fine
Executive Function Processes

THE FUNNEL MODEL

- Planning
- Organizing
- Prioritizing
- Shifting
- Memorizing
- Checking

(Meltzer, 2004)
What are Contemplative Practices?

- Contemplative practices quiet the mind in order to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight.

- Contemplative practices have the potential to:
  - to bring different aspects of one’s self into focus,
  - to help develop personal goodness and compassion, and
  - to awaken an awareness of the interconnectedness of all

Source: http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/
Contemplative practice have the potential to:

- help people develop greater empathy and communication skills,
- improve focus and concentration,
- reduce stress, and enhance creativity.

Over time, these practices cultivate insight, inspiration, and a loving and compassionate approach to life.

They are practical, radical, and transformative.

Source: http://www.contemplativemind.org/practices/
Cognitive Science Agrees

“Neuroscience supports the idea that developing the reflective skills of mindsight activates the very circuits that create resilience and well-being and that underlie empathy and compassion.”

(Siegel, p. iv)
Contemplative Practices to Build Emotional Courage

- quiet the mind, focus attention, adopt a receptive attitude
- mind-body connecting; walk the labyrinth
- visualization
- practice imagery/fantasy
- deep breathing, progressive muscle relaxation
- Tai-chi; Brain Gym
- bibliotherapy, cinematherapy
- journaling
- experiences in nature
- time with pet
- artistic practices (calligraphy, mandalas)
Compassion Training: A Skill to Be Learned

Daily Practices for Well-Being at Work

5 Mindfully meditate five minutes each day
3 Identify three good things each evening
1 Extend at least one act of kindness each day

http://investigatinghealthyminds.org/compassion.html
What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is paying attention to your life, here and now, with kindness and curiosity.

Dr. Amy Saltzman
“Being mindful, having mindful awareness, is often defined as a way of intentionally paying attention to the present moment without being swept up by judgments.”

(Mindsight, p.83)
Mindfulness Microbursts: Any time & Anywhere

- Mindful walking
- Three deep breaths (in through the nose and out through the mouth)
- Savor the moment using your senses
- Positive self-talk
- Affirmations directed towards self or others
- Smile inward and/or smile outward with intention
- Listen deeply
- Cloud appreciation/watching rain/ponder shadows
- Sitting still like a statue
- Body scan then tighten and release tension
Fostering Awe

Dacher Keltner, Greater Good Science Center (University of California, Berkeley)

Awe has two parts:
Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world.

Benefits:

- Reduces stress
- Enhances creativity
- Connects self to the social collective
- More inclined to help others
- Centers on balance between self-interest and helping others
Fostering Compassion

"...our main educational aim should be to encourage the growth of competent, caring, loving, and lovable people. This is a morally defensible aim for education in the 21st century." (Noddings, 1992)
Guidelines in Creating Care

Noddings recommends:

1) Be clear and unapologetic about our aim to produce competent, caring, loving, and lovable people;

2) Take care of affiliative needs. Keep teachers and students together (streaming) for several years to give students time to think of the physical space as their own;

3) Relax the impulse to control and give teachers, students and parents greater opportunities to participate and exercise judgment;
4) Get rid of program hierarchies and give students genuine opportunities to explore the questions central to human life;

5) Give at least part of every day to themes of care.
Compassion unfolds in response to suffering, beginning with our recognition of it.

Expanding beyond mindfulness, compassion arises both on the personal level of our individual relationships and on the global level of cultures and nations interacting with one another.

With compassion, our empathy for the suffering of others can give rise to altruism - bringing immediate and long-term happiness and tranquility to our lives.
How can adults help?

- Model emotional courage to myself and for others; participate and practice
- Provide opportunities to experience emotional courage in educational settings
- Foster inner growth by sharing stories/anecdotes of spiritual pathfinders
- Demonstrate to those who are "intense" the many ways to seek peace and inter-connectedness
- Explore the different pathways of experiencing emotional courage with gifted youngsters.
I swear I will not dishonor my soul with hatred, but offer myself humbly as a guardian of nature, as a healer of misery, as a messenger of wonder, as an architect of peace.

DIANE ACKERMAN


Online References

Authentic Happiness
www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu

Mindfulness in Education Network:
www.mindfuled.org

Center for Investigating Healthy Minds
www.investigatinghealthyminds.org

Compassion: Bridging Practice and Science
http://www.compassion-training.org/

The Science of a Meaningful Life
http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/