

The Twice-Exceptional Child

“Twice-exceptional” is a term used to describe a gifted child who simultaneously has other issues which significantly interfere with his or her ability to learn or to produce work which matches his or her true exceptional abilities.

Many people are very surprised to find that a gifted child can have such a problem, and may even refuse to believe the child really is gifted. Yet it is far from unusual. Indeed some very famous people, including Agatha Christie, Winston Churchill, Pablo Picasso, Walt Disney and even Albert Einstein are all known to have been in this category: no-one would deny the label gifted for any of these folk!

But clearly a child in this situation is at risk, not only of major underachievement, but also of experiencing huge frustration, feelings of inadequacy and perhaps of anger in trying to understand and cope with the bewildering mismatch between his or her understanding and ability to express that understanding.

If you suspect your child may fall into this category, or perhaps someone has suggested this to you, then the first step towards helping him or her is to learn more about this topic. We've given you some basic information below, and suggested some places where you might find more detailed help.

Essentially there are three different groups of conditions which fall under this heading:

1. learning disabilities
2. other neurological conditions
3. physical disabilities.

We'll look at each of these in turn.

Learning disabilities

What is a “learning disability”? Basically it involves a neurological malfunction, relating to difficulties in processing information – that is, there's a hiccup in the system which gets information from what the person is seeing, hearing or feeling through the physical senses to the brain so that it can interpret and respond accurately. There are several ways in which this can manifest itself:

- *Dyslexia* primarily affects the skills involved in reading and spelling. Children with dyslexia may find it hard to match sounds to letters or blend sounds into words.
- *Dysgraphia* is associated with difficulty with the physical act of writing. Children may find it hard to organize and express their thoughts and ideas in written form.
- *Dyscalculia* is difficulty in learning or comprehending maths, such as difficulty in understanding numbers, learning how to manipulate numbers, and learning facts in mathematics.
- *Dyspraxia* affects the development of fine and/or gross motor coordination. It can affect the development of writing skills and such activities as ball handling, learning to ride a bicycle, do up shoe-laces, and so on.

Some of the symptoms for each form overlap, and a child may have problems in several or all of these areas.

The big issue with any learning disability for a gifted child is that each can serve to conceal the other, so that the presence of *neither* giftedness *nor* learning disability is actually diagnosed, and no provision is made to deal with either set of needs. The child is often left profoundly confused by the conflict between his or her advanced perceptions on the one

hand and his or her inability to express these on the other, Teachers – still not always taught about these conditions – may assume the child is only of average or even below average ability and treat him or her accordingly, producing more frustration and despair for the child.

Noted American psychologist Linda Silverman has pointed out that trying to cope with such a situation is enormously stressful. It requires a great deal of energy, and effort can break down from sheer unrecognised fatigue, so the child might also be described as lazy and further criticised.

Diagnosis and help

Full accurate diagnosis can only be made by someone qualified to carry out an assessment using a recognised test such as the WISC or the Woodcock Johnson III. This is usually an educational psychologist (not a clinical psychologist), but some counsellors and in New Zealand some Resources Teachers of Learning and Behaviour (RTLb) are so qualified.

- Your local Speld Association should be able to direct you towards a qualified person – www.speld.org.nz or www.auspeld.org.au or in another country check the internet for associations helping with learning disabilities. (In New Zealand, also see our links page).

However, as a parent, you are better placed than almost anyone else to notice discrepancies between ability and what your child can actually do. For example, you're aware that your child seems to have a really large vocabulary, a vivid imagination, and asks the most unexpected and obviously thoughtful questions, but you've also noticed that he or she has some of the following or similar problems:

- has poor co-ordination – has difficulty with buttons, for instance, or regularly fumbles in catching things
 - can get confused between left and right
 - finds it difficult to remember things which occur in sequences
 - quite often reverses letters or numbers
 - gets letters or syllables out of order when writing (eg “balck” for “black”)
 - forgets what she or he has been asked to do
 - seems to have difficulty or confusion in reading despite his or her vocabulary and imagination
 - verbal skills far outstrip written skills.
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It's also important to be aware that symptoms may show in highly erratic ways. The child who writes ‘balck’ one time may correctly write ‘black’ the next time – and be completely unaware of any difference. This characteristic inconsistency is deeply confusing, both for the child and for parents and teacher.

If you are seeing this combination of clear signs of ability in some areas and puzzling difficulties in other areas, like those described above, ***don't be put off*** by teachers who dismiss your concerns, say your child is lazy, or tell you your child is just a normal child of perfectly ordinary ability. Remember many teachers have not had these conditions included in their own training, and remember, your child can't change the situation – but you can, and your child needs you to do so, before too much time is lost.

Once your child has been formally identified as having a learning disability, your local Speld Association again should be able to point you in the direction of people trained in helping such children. Some physiotherapists also are able and willing to help. Unfortunately, money can be an issue in accessing this kind of help, but there are also some things you can do at

home.

- For instance, if left and right are confused, you can use colours or other markers to help your child distinguish between them – some parents have used this tip to help children sort out which shoe to put on what foot and other similar small but important actions.
- If co-ordination is a problem, you can encourage your child to become interested in activities such as jigsaws and construction kits and making models from card, all of which help develop co-ordination and fine motor skills without exposing the child to ridicule from others.

Many children with these problems find using a computer relieves a lot of tension and enables them to produce work. This is becoming more and more acceptable in schools today – indeed, one wonders if writing by hand will soon disappear altogether! But you may need to persuade your child's teacher to allow homework also to be done on the computer.

- Computers are not the only answer. Be inventive! A child might be able to tape rather than write a story, or might use an art form rather than written words – one boy in this situation used his cartooning skills to produce brilliant project work. He cautiously began to add captions and eventually became more confident in focussing more on writing rather than cartooning – much to the disappointment of his teacher, who had thoroughly enjoyed his cartoons!

We tell teachers that encouraging the child to talk with them about his or her ideas is intensely valuable. For parents of gifted children, getting the child to talk is almost *never* a problem, but encouraging oneself to listen can sometimes be quite a challenge! However it's worth it, since in such discussion, the child can express and work through ideas at a level he or she may be unable to share with anyone else. That's a good basis too for creating an environment in which a child also feels safe about expressing some of the anxieties he or she is feeling about school.

Where teachers are aware of this issue, they will hopefully be willing to make some of the same small changes in the classroom which can make a big difference for the child.

One interesting point it's worth mentioning here. Where one member of a family has a learning disability, there appears to be a strong probability that another family member will too. Being aware of this can help you look out for symptoms in younger children. For some parents, it has also retrospectively made sense of their own difficulties in school. Incidentally, learning disabilities do occur in both sexes, but seem to be more prevalent in boys.

Lastly, remember all those well-known people who overcame difficulties of this kind. With your support and understanding, so can your child.

Other neurological conditions

There are a number of other conditions such as ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, and so on which can considerably affect a child's ability to learn and flourish. They differ from each other, but there can be some overlap of symptoms. Some children will have more than one of these conditions.

- **ADHD:** The three primary characteristics of ADHD are inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity. These behaviours seriously interfere with a child's ability to stay focussed, be organised, keep emotions in check and take on board what is being said to them. Fidgeting, talking excessively, interrupting others and so on make for poor relationships with others.
 - While the most common form of ADHD involves all three characteristics, some

ADHD children will be inattentive but *not* hyperactive or impulsive, while others will be both hyperactive and impulsive, but still able to pay attention.

- ADHD children who are inattentive but not hyperactive or impulsive may be overlooked because they're not being disruptive, but lack of attention can still cause major problems.

A good website for more detailed information is www.helpguide.org/articles/add-adhd/attention-deficit-disorder-adhd-in-children.htm

- *Aspergers Syndrome*: This is a condition which affects the development of social skills, meaning the child can find it extremely difficult to make friends and may appear to lack any empathy towards others. For instance, such a child:
 - may not pick up on social cues
 - dislike and resist changes in routine
 - be unable to recognise differences in speech tone and pitch and so misunderstand others, eg taking a sarcastic remark literally; his or her own speech may seem very flat or monotone
 - avoid eye contact or stare at other people
 - have unusual facial expressions
 - have delayed motor development
 - have a strong interest in one specific subject and be very knowledgeable about it.

A website with more detailed information is www.webmd.com/brain/autism/tc/aspergers-syndrome-symptoms#1 .

- *Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder* The symptoms of OCD in children involve repetitive thoughts or images called obsessions. Compulsions represent the ritual behaviors that they repeat again and again to banish the thoughts.
 - Examples of obsessive thoughts in OCD children could be excessive preoccupation with germs or illness, excessive worrying about something bad happening, repeatedly checking that an action has actually been taken, and unreasonable attention to detail.
 - Examples of compulsive behaviours in OCD children could include compulsive washing of hands many times a day, rigidly following a self-imposed order for how things are done or arranged, repeatedly asking the same question, excessive counting and re-counting, and so on.

A helpful website to check is www.healthyplace.com/ocd-related-disorders/ocd/ocd-in-children-signs-symptoms-causes-treatments/ .

Comment: the possibility of misdiagnosis

First of all, it's important to say that all children will show some of these various behaviours on occasion. There is no need to panic if your child occasionally shows one or other of the symptoms described above – that's normal. What we are worried about is when such symptoms become a frequent or usual part of a child's behaviour. At that point, it is extremely important to seek a proper diagnosis from a suitably qualified paediatrician or psychologist.

How does this relate to giftedness? Since children of all levels of ability can suffer from one or other of these and related conditions, it follows that some gifted children can also be so affected and are therefore twice-exceptional in possessing both giftedness and one of these forms of disability. It also follows that this dual condition is going to impact on their opportunity to realise their abilities to the full, that they may be highly anxious children and

lack friends, and that their parents may feel considerable worry on their behalf.

However, it is also very important to be aware that some children are wrongly diagnosed as having one of these other conditions when in fact they are gifted and do not have a neurological issue at all. Some have then been given the strong medication used for ADHD which is completely inappropriate for them.

To some extent it is understandable that the question is asked – is this giftedness or ADHD or Aspergers? – because a few of the symptoms do overlap or may appear to do so. Boredom for a gifted children may understandably lead to inattention; intense interest in a subject generating floods of questions and off-the-wall comments may be interpreted as impulsivity; and so on.

However it is clearly very, very necessary to get the diagnosis right. Worried parents, prompted by their own concerns or by feedback from teachers, may turn to a paediatrician for help, but a paediatrician is not usually trained in assessing giftedness and is likely to read the reported symptoms as evidence of a condition such as ADHD or Aspergers. That's exactly how some children have been misdiagnosed. If you have any doubts at all, it is wise to have your child also assessed by an educational psychologist before any final decision is made.

Two helpful articles on the SENG website:

<http://sengifted.org/when-diagnosing-adhd/>

<http://sengifted.org/misdiagnosis-and-dual-diagnosis-of-gifted-children/>

Physical disabilities

From time to time, we find gifted individuals with physical and/or sensory disabilities of varying degrees of severity. The world's best-known example of this is surely Stephen Hawking. Yet all too often the automatic assumption is that someone with a physical disability will also be of limited intelligence.

If you are the parent of such a child, you will already be sadly aware that some people make such an uninformed assumption. You will also realise how intense the frustration is for your child. Once again, detailed and accurate assessment is vital if your child is to learn successfully and find ways to express and develop his or her exceptional abilities.

To achieve this, you will need to find a sympathetic educational psychologist, one who is prepared to take the extra time and be flexible in their assessment techniques. You may find that psychologists who work with Speld to identify gifted children with learning disabilities have the right approach. The resultant report describing your child's abilities and needs should then give you and your child's teachers a basis for developing a programme that will be truly satisfying and effective.

For a helpful article on this topic, go to www.tki.org.nz and type "gifted children with physical disabilities" into the search box in the top right-hand corner. Red through the article which appears to find the section on giftedness with physical disabilities.

Finally.....

For you particularly, joining both your local gifted association and any association bringing together parents of children with the same condition your child has is a sensible move. The support and companionship of others who understand the issues you face is immensely strengthening. Twice-exceptional means you have two lots of challenges to face – and two opportunities to feel proud of your child as he or she overcomes those challenges, with your understanding and love.