

# Twice-Exceptional: Demystifying the Bright Yet Struggling Student

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Intellectually gifted students with learning, attention, and temperament problems often have a rough time in school. Their gifts mask their special needs, and those needs hide their academic ability. As a result, they can appear to be “lazy”

or “unmotivated.” They run the risk of being misunderstood or not identified and grossly under served. Students with this profile frequently confound parents, teachers, and counselors. These children are most successful in well-versed learning environments designed to meet the needs of their intellectual ability while also supporting their individual learning. The confusing “twice-exceptional” child profile requires a deeper study that allows parents, teachers and counselors to help them find success.

A twice-exceptional child has an IQ in the gifted range while also possessing a learning challenge such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, ADHD, or asperger’s. They have a significant discrepancy between their potential and their output. Teachers, school counselors, and even parents often overlook the signs of intellectual giftedness and focus primarily on weakness. High ability students often learn compensation strategies on their own, so their giftedness may mask the learning issues. Conversely, the learning issues tend to depress ability and achievement test scores, thus making the identification of giftedness tricky. Students with dual exceptionalities tend to fall into two categories: (a) those with mild disabilities whose gifts generally mask their disabilities and (b) those whose disabilities are so severe that they mask the gift. Oftentimes, these children possess high verbal expressive ability and conceptual understanding co-existing with significant academic underachievement and frustration (Crawford & Snart 1994). The most prevalent diagnosis identified as co-occurring with giftedness is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) (Neihart, 2003; Webb et al., 2005). Gifted students with learning disabilities tend to lag two to three years behind their age peers in social and emotional maturity. This, too, has significant implications for identification of these students for gifted services. (Baum & Owen, 2004).

These children are frequently rated by teachers as most disruptive at school. They are frequently off task and act out. Somatic complaints are common as is a low frustration tolerance. These

characteristics often lead to diagnoses of emotional or attention difficulties (Webb et al., 2005). Socially, twice-exceptional students feel more isolated than either their gifted peers or those with learning disabilities. They struggle with feelings of isolation and the stigma of being different. These children need more targeted interventions than other children. Both the gift and the disability need attention at home and in school. Teachers and parents need to work together to provide a rich and supportive environment that nurtures the child’s giftedness while also addressing their challenges. These children benefit from programs that respect the student’s intellectual level while also providing active, multisensory learning experiences.

At home, parents can work to provide abundant opportunities for the child to explore their interests deeply. Gifted children need depth of experience that feeds their intellectual curiosities. Parents may also help the child cope with frustrations through teaching resilience. These children need to learn how to bounce back from mistakes and frustrations in learning in the academic and social realms. This should be taught explicitly in the form of coping strategies. Building awareness of self in relation to others, (i.e. siblings, neighbors), and doing so explicitly, can be very powerful. To address the learning challenges of their child, parents may provide external structures that help with success, including lists, organized study spaces, and a homework mentor. To lessen the potential for feelings of inadequacy related to learning struggles, parents should also commit to a home environment that places a premium on kindness, respect, and cooperation. These children have often been humiliated in both school and home and parents have the opportunity to eliminate this in the home.

In school, teachers should differentiate lessons that will engage the child and that consider both the intellect and learning issues. Goal setting should be part of the curriculum and teachers should encourage children to ask for help. Teachers can teach concepts before teaching content by providing clear frameworks for learning new material. Sharing the “big idea” first helps learners ground new information. Lessons should, whenever possible, be hands on to increase student engagement. Science labs, history debates, study groups, foreign language lunches, and multisensory math lessons are examples. To accommodate the child’s gifts, teachers may use compacting. Compacting is the process of allowing

students to demonstrate their knowledge before the unit begins. This provides the child with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of the topic instead of repeating their learning. This also helps the teacher see where the class is on any given topic. If they have mastered the topic, the student may serve as an expert for that day, assisting the teacher with the lesson or running an in class study group. Concepts should be presented with increased complexity that is thoughtfully scaffolded. The scaffold provides the blueprint from the introduction of the new content to the more comprehensive understanding. Teachers should provide organizational tools for learning. These tools might include note taking materials, check lists, organized study spaces and digital note cards. Finally, schools and teachers must work tirelessly to place a premium on respect, compassion and encouragement for all students. Clear guidelines for behavior in and out of the classroom are crucial. Children with this profile may be misunderstood and marginalized in dysfunctional school environments.

Regarding the social realm, children identified as twice exceptional need support maintaining social relationships. While they may display the appropriate social skills and are more sensitive to nonverbal cues than other children with learning issues, they still may have trouble exhibiting the appropriate social skills when with their peers. They tend to interact better with adults than their peers. Teachers can encourage them to use the same skills with their classmates. Teachers may also place twice-exceptional students in leadership positions in classes where they excel.

By taking a deeper look into children who are twice exceptional, we may better tap their true potential. Parent and teacher education are crucial to helping children flourish. A partnership must exist between school and home. This partnership should value the child's intellectual ability while also addressing learning challenges. Thoughtful consideration should be given to ensure time allocated for both exceptionalities. As the educational field strives to improve the school experience, reframing our understandings about giftedness and how we can build better learning experiences for children will be key.

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Notes:

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Neihart, M. (2003) *Gifted children with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)*. Reston, VA: ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC Digest ED482344).

Webb, J.T., Amend, E.R., Webb, N.E., Goerss, J., Beljiiian, P., Olenchak, F.R. (2005), *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis of gifted children and adults*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

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