

ADHD...And Gifted? Twice-Exceptional Students

Many parents and teachers don't realize that a child can be gifted and have learning disabilities, a combination called "twice exceptional," or 2e. Debra Hori, an education therapist, didn't. Her son, Ben, was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADD/ADHD) at age eight, but it took three years to learn that his verbal skills and IQ were well above average. "He was tested, and he scored in the gifted range," says Hori. "I decided to enroll him in a different school that accommodated all of his needs," she explains. "It made a world of difference."

Intellectually gifted children with special needs often have a rough time in school. Their gifts mask their special needs, and their special needs hide their academic ability. As a result, they are usually labeled "lazy," "unmotivated," or "slackers."

Several factors contribute to the delayed diagnosis of gifted students. Inattention and other ADD/ADHD symptoms may result in lower scores on tests used to determine eligibility for gifted programs. Also, teachers are less likely to notice ADD/ADHD symptoms in students who are not disruptive. Parents are likely to be skeptical of an ADD/ADHD diagnosis when they know their child is bright. Remember, though, that a high IQ alone is not enough to be successful in school. Working memory, say experts, is a better predictor than any test result.

How to Meet the Learning Needs of Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities

"Unlike mainstream students, twice-exceptional students -- gifted students who have ADD/ADHD and learning disabilities -- struggle with getting their thoughts down on paper, writing legibly, doing calculations accurately, staying organized, and following step-by-step instructions," says Linda Neumann, editor and co-publisher of 2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter. "They appear distracted or lazy, but they are trying very hard."

As a result, many so-called 2e students feel “dumb” and wind up hating school. “It can be devastating when a student knows he’s smart, but is not able to reach his potential,” says Chris Dendy, who developed a DVD, Real Life ADHD, for children and teens.

Placing a gifted ADD/ADHD child with other gifted students is an automatic but, sometimes, misguided strategy. Without schoolwork that meets their cognitive needs, gifted children with ADD/ADHD find it hard to sustain attention and often develop poor work habits. On the other hand, some gifted students avoid 2e students because of their lack of organizational skills and social skills.

Twice-exceptional students need a program that nurtures their talents while accommodating their weaknesses, says Susan Baum, Ph.D., an educator, researcher, and author of *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled*. Gifted children with ADD/ADHD need accelerated learning, even while they are working on the cognitive skills that will support the faster pace. They should have a “differentiated curriculum” -- with options in what they learn and how they learn it.

Teachers and parents should ensure that a 2e student has the support skills to manage his tasks and to compensate for his weaker executive function.

Work with the school to secure services for your child. Some gifted students need more time to complete tasks than other students. They often benefit from using assistive technology, such as a portable word processor or a calculator.

“All of Ben’s problems didn’t disappear when he attended a new school, but his outlook on life improved significantly,” says Debra Hori. “I had my son again, and that was good enough for me.”

Five Tips for Parents of Gifted ADD/ADHD Children

Trust your instincts. You know your child better than anyone else. Don’t assume that professionals know better because they have credentials.

Trust your child. If he says he can't do something, don't assume that he's being lazy or obstinate, and don't believe anyone who says he is.

Don't ignore the gifts while trying to fix the disabilities. Gifted children get depressed when they aren't able to learn new things.

Don't ignore the disabilities while nurturing the gifts. Children get frustrated and depressed if they are constantly required to do things they can't do.

Know that your child can be in a gifted program and also have an IEP or a 504 Plan. Gifted students with ADD/ADHD may be eligible for IDEA services, in certain circumstances, under the Other Health Impairment or Specific Learning Disability category.

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