



Twice Exceptional: When Gifts and Deficits Meet

By Linda C. Neumann

When you get a group of parents together who are raising twice-exceptional (2e) kids, the conversation is bound to turn to the little quirks that so many of these children share. Their up-and-down grades, their disorganization, their discomfort with itchy tags in clothing and lumpy seams in socks – any of these can be part of the “2e package” and can add to the challenges parents face in understanding and meeting their children’s needs.

What’s in the 2e Package?

In the past, bright children with learning problems were referred to as *gifted/learning disabled*. Today, the term *twice exceptional* is more common. It has a broader scope, incorporating high-ability children who have been formally diagnosed with a learning disability – such as dyslexia, central audi-

tory processing disorder, visual processing disorder, or Asperger syndrome – along with children who have attention deficit disorder, sensory processing disorder, or other learning styles or differences that make it hard to learn in a traditional classroom using conventional means.

No one can say with certainty just how many children are twice exceptional. Estimates vary greatly, anywhere from 2 to 5 percent of all gifted children to as high as 20 percent. The uncertainty stems from the many different ways in which children can be gifted and the many variations in learning disabilities or differences that they can have.

Despite the many varieties of twice exceptionality that may exist, we can give a general description of the ways in which 2e kids are

like other gifted children and the ways in which their characteristics set them apart. Like other gifted children, those who are twice exceptional tend to display many of these traits:

- ❖ Intensity and sensitivity
- ❖ Greater asynchrony than average children (that is, a bigger gap between mental age and physical age)
- ❖ Highly developed curiosity
- ❖ Precocious development and use of language
- ❖ Early interest in mathematics
- ❖ Tendency toward divergent (creative and unusual) thinking

- ❖ Keen observation skills
- ❖ Ability, from an early age, to remember large amounts of information
- ❖ Unusual sense of humor
- ❖ Advanced moral reasoning about issues related to fairness and justice

However, unlike other gifted children, those who are twice exceptional have deficits that can make it difficult to learn and perform well in the classroom. These deficits, which may not be easy to identify, can do the following:

- ❖ Interfere with a child's ability to make sense of visual or auditory information
- ❖ Make it hard to correctly interpret social cues, such as facial expressions and tone of voice
- ❖ Limit the functioning of short-term memory, making it hard to carry out multi-step instructions and complete sequential tasks
- ❖ Take the form of language-based disorders that make reading, writing, mathematics, or verbal expression difficult
- ❖ Appear as a mood disorder because the child is often anxious or depressed
- ❖ Appear as an attention deficit because it is hard for the child to sit still, focus, and organize thoughts and materials
- ❖ Hamper fine motor skills, making handwriting laborious and difficult
- ❖ Hamper gross motor skills, making movement awkward and sports difficult

- ❖ Interfere with the brain's ability to process sensory information, causing these children to react to the world quite differently from others

Of course, it's unlikely that any one child will display all of these characteristics. After all, 2e children are a diverse group, and their gifts and deficits can combine in many different ways.

Gifts + Deficits = Challenge

Being 2e leads kids to behaviors that can be puzzling and sometimes maddening to others. It leaves them wondering why they are often unable to meet the expectations that parents and teachers have for them and that they might have for themselves.

The challenges these children face result from the ways in which their extreme gifts combine with their extreme deficits, often canceling each other out. The result can be a student who appears to be smart but just not trying, or a learning-disabled student who seems to have no exceptional abilities, or a student who looks to be just average. Complicating matters further is the uneven academic performance typical of these children. They might excel at something today and do poorly at it tomorrow. They might be able to master the complex – such as advanced math concepts – but toil with the simple – such as learning their math facts. Their struggles and uncertainties can leave 2e children with little enthusiasm or energy for schoolwork. Their self-esteem can suffer, and they can easily become frustrated, anxious, and depressed.

Identifying a Child as Twice Exceptional

Many twice-exceptional children go unidentified in their early years. At home, they often appear to be bright, with intense or precocious interests and advanced vocabularies, although parents may also describe them as “quirky.” Quirks might include an unusual sense of humor; extreme sensitivity to sights, sounds, tastes, textures, and other sensory input; and emotional intensity.

School is often the place where problems first appear. Among early indications that a child might be twice exceptional can be social difficulties, such as an inability to make or keep friends and a lack of true peers – children who share the child's interests and sense of humor. School transitions are common times for a child to be identified as 2e, such as entering third grade, middle school, high school, or even college. At these points in their education, work demands increase along with the need to have strong reading, writing, and organization skills – all potential problem areas for twice-exceptional children.

Clues to a child's twice exceptionality that might appear at these difficult transition points can include one or more of the following:

- ❖ Assignments that are inadequate, late, or missing
- ❖ Inability to sit still and work quietly
- ❖ Disruptive behavior, such as playing the class clown, having emotional “meltdowns,” or having difficulty controlling anger or frustration

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- ❖ Withdrawn behavior, such as showing reluctance to speak out or take other risks in class

The problem for many twice-exceptional children is that these clues are easy to misinterpret. To the parents, teachers, and others who observe them, these kids may seem to be careless, lazy, distracted, or disruptive. It can be easy to assume that they could do better if they wanted to or if they tried harder. In reality, however, twice-exceptional children are often working as hard or even harder than others in class but with fewer results to show for it.

What Parents Can Do

Perhaps the greatest challenge for parents of twice-exceptional children is figuring out what's really going on with their child. Is it laziness, is it defiance, or are there underlying causes for their child's behaviors? Answering these questions involves getting a clear picture of a child's areas of strength and weakness. That picture is formed using the results of both a physical examination, including hearing and vision testing, and psychoeducational assessment. The latter includes testing to measure intelligence, achievement, and ability to perform various tasks involved in learning. The assessment may be done either through the school or by independent professionals, and, in either case, parents should ensure that the professionals chosen are knowledgeable about giftedness. This requirement is important because some characteristics of giftedness can look very much like those

Examples of Accommodations and Compensation Strategies

Classroom Accommodations for 2e Students

- ❖ More time to complete schoolwork and tests
- ❖ Reduced homework
- ❖ Preferred seating
- ❖ Guided notes or a note-taker
- ❖ Allowing keyboarding in place of handwriting
- ❖ Use of assistive technology such as electronic spellers, scanning and reading software, and reading pens

Compensation Strategies to Teach 2e Students

- ❖ Problem-solving approaches
- ❖ Time-management skills
- ❖ Organizational techniques
- ❖ Note-taking and study skills
- ❖ Social skills training

of a learning disability or disorder. As a result, gifted children may be incorrectly diagnosed.

Once the results are in, it should be possible to identify the cause of the learning difficulties. It may be that the child is gifted and needs more challenge, or has a disorder or learning disability that needs treatment, or has both giftedness and learning problems. Assessment results should provide direction on how to build on the strengths and to compensate for the identified weaknesses – information that parents can use to determine the right learning environment.

Educating 2e Children

Finding the right learning environment for twice-exceptional children may not be easy. Some school districts offer programs especially designed to meet the needs of this population, but most do not. Frequently, parents must work closely with the school, helping teachers and administrators to understand their child's needs.

2e students flourish in a learning environment where their giftedness is recognized first, not their disability. Despite the difficulties they may have in reading, writing, or attending to the task at hand, these children do best when they're engaged in work that challenges them. Teachers often find that their 2e students thrive when given work that engages multiple senses and offers the chance for hands-on learning. Success often comes from project-based assignments that build on the students' interests and give them an outlet for their creative abilities.

When setting the level of challenge for 2e students, caution is essential. The challenge needs to be appropriate – high enough so that they must stretch to meet it, but not so high that they will fail. Here's where *support* becomes important.

Twice-exceptional students need plenty of support. In addition to generous amounts of encouragement, they benefit from receiving accommodations and learning compensation strategies. (See page 17 for accommodations and comparison strategies.) These may be offered on an as-needed basis or formalized in an Individual Education Program (IEP) or a 504 Plan,

two types of plans available to students with disabilities under federal law. In either case, accommodations and compensation strategies help minimize the effects of the children's deficits and move them toward independence.

Meeting the Challenge

Parents of twice-exceptional children find themselves in a unique situation. They straddle two rather different worlds, the world of giftedness and the world of special education. Having to operate with this dual perspective can leave parents feeling uncertain of what path to take. Some suggestions to help navigate a path between the two worlds are:

Learn everything you can about these topics:

- ❖ How gifts and talents shape these children
- ❖ How learning disabilities and deficits affect them
- ❖ How the blending of strengths and weaknesses affects a child

Also become knowledgeable about:

- ❖ Professionals who can provide the medical, therapeutic, educational, and other types of services your twice-exceptional child might need
- ❖ Laws that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities (e.g., Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Americans with Disabilities Act)
- ❖ Educational alternatives available to your child (i.e., enrichment opportunities outside of school, private school, or homeschooling)

A good way to gain information, in addition to reading, is to join organizations or online groups that focus directly on the needs of twice-exceptional children. Here you can find information and resources as well as the support of other families.

Trust your instincts. Be skeptical of those who are quick to give a child a label such as troublemaker, lazy, or underachiever. Parents know their child best and can rely on that knowledge to question the cause of problematic behavior.

Be flexible. When searching for answers, it's important to seek the opinions and advice of professionals

when necessary, and to listen carefully to what they have to say. Keep an open mind and consider various options. What's right for many gifted children or many learning disabled children may not work for your twice-exceptional child.

All twice-exceptional children have their unique blend of gifts and deficits. Our challenge and privilege as parents is to help them identify those strengths, build on them, and help our children succeed, despite their deficits. ♦

Linda C. Neumann is the editor and co-publisher of *2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter* (www.2eNewsletter.com), a bi-monthly publication that focuses on twice-exceptional children.

Resources for Parents of 2e Kids

Books

- Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and other Learning Deficits* by D. Lovecky
- The Highly Sensitive Person and The Highly Sensitive Child* by E. Aron
- The Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders* by J.T. Webb, et al.
- The Myth of Laziness* by M. Levine
- Smart Kids with Learning Difficulties* by R. Weinfeld
- To Be Gifted & Learning Disabled: Strategies for Helping Bright Students with LD, ADHD, and More* by S. Baum & S. Owen
- Upside-Down Brilliance* by Larry Silverman

Publications

- 2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter*, www.2eNewsletter.com
- Teaching Exceptional Children, http://journals.sped.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=tec_toc (See Vol. 38, No.1, Sept/Oct 2005: issue devoted to twice-exceptional topics.)
- Understanding our Gifted, <http://www.our-gifted.com/welcome.htm> (See Volume 14-2 on twice-exceptional children.)

Articles

- Baum, S. Gifted but learning disabled: A puzzling paradox. www.hoagiesgifted.org/eric/e479.html
- Maker, C.J., & Udall, A.J. Giftedness and learning disabilities. www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/gt_ld/eric_digest427.html
- Brody, L., & Mills, C. Gifted children with learning disabilities: A review of the issues. www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/gt_ld/jld_gtld.html

Organizations

- AEGUS (Association for the Education of Gifted Underachieving Students), www.AEGUS1.org
- SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted), www.sengifted.org

E-mail Discussion Lists

- Hoagies Gifted (online support), www.hoagiesgifted.org/on-line_support.htm

Websites

- Hoagies Gifted (twice-exceptional topics), www.hoagiesgifted.org/twice_exceptional.htm
- Uniquely Gifted, www.uniquelygifted.org