

Twice Exceptional Students

Bryan Goodman, MA, with Shari Gent, MS

WHILE IT'S A GROUP WITH CONCERNS that are often overshadowed by more pressing issues, children with AD/HD and high IQs often deal with their own unique challenges. Bryan Goodman talks with Shari Gent, MS, about what parents should look for in identifying a child who may be gifted and have AD/HD. Gent talks about some of the challenges these students may face, and provides some helpful tips for parents.



Shari Gent, MS

What do we mean when we say twice exceptional or gifted?

Students who are twice exceptional are generally considered to be those who have both high potential in one or more areas and learning challenges such as a learning disability, AD/HD, autism spectrum disorder, or other learning difference.

Most of us are familiar with the criteria for AD/HD. However, those of us who parent or teach children with special needs may not be familiar with the exact meaning of the term “giftedness.” The Elementary and Secondary Education Act provides an educational definition that consists of two key requirements, high achievement in some area and the need for services: “Students who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, and who need services and activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.”

States are free to develop their own definitions, but many draw from the federal guidelines. Services for gifted children are offered in various ways, from inclusion in the general education classroom to self-contained classrooms specifically dedicated to children identified as gifted.

How do gifted children with AD/HD differ from the gifted population in general and from the typical student with AD/HD?

Most studies about the characteristics of AD/HD

have been done on typical children, but some generalizations can be made.

Gifted children with AD/HD score with greater variability among subtests on standardized tests of cognitive ability than either gifted children without AD/HD or typical children. Typical children with AD/HD may have a wide range of scores, but these are not as likely to be in the high end of the range as the gifted child with AD/HD. Classwork of the gifted child with AD/HD is more variable than the typical child with AD/HD. The gifted child with AD/HD will have more high performing moments. Gifted children with AD/HD are more likely than the typical child with AD/HD to excel in one subject area and to have a greater knowledge of strategies. Unfortunately, though they may be able to verbalize them, they are equally inefficient in their ability to successfully use these strategies. Like typical children with AD/HD, gifted children with AD/HD tend to be unorganized. However, their lack of organization stands out more because more is expected of them.

Gifted children with AD/HD, like gifted children in general, tend to see the overall picture but, unlike other gifted children, have difficulty ferreting out details. This means that they can become overwhelmed by large projects because they have trouble breaking them into steps. Gifted children with AD/HD develop strong personal interests, so they can become easily frustrated when they are unable to organize projects or fail to develop skills that enable them to share their interests. Like other gifted children, those with AD/HD have well-developed reasoning and higher order thinking skills. School performance differs. Gifted children with AD/HD may participate well in class discussions but have difficulty demonstrating mastery of concepts through writing. They complete fewer assignments and tend to rush through their work or take excessive time for completion.

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What does the research say about any correlation between AD/HD and IQ?

The research about AD/HD and IQ varies. Most studies suggest that people with AD/HD have the same distribution of scores as others. And AD/HD can be present in any intellectual range: intellectually disabled, typical, or gifted. A few studies have found that the IQ of people with AD/HD is, on average, slightly below that of the general population.

Is it hard to pick up on the symptoms of AD/HD with students who have high IQs? Are these students able to mask it well?

In children with high IQs, AD/HD may not present a significant problem until they are faced with the increased demands for executive function in middle school. As a result, some authorities feel that AD/HD is overdiagnosed in the gifted population. They have suggested that the school problems of some gifted children are not due to AD/HD but to unstimulating educational environments. Some gifted children do develop behavior problems because of unstimulating classroom instruction. However, most experts feel that AD/HD is probably underdiagnosed in the gifted population. When these students are not properly diagnosed, they may simply disappear into the population of typically performing students, their gifts unopened.

Do students with high IQs have a harder time accessing accommodations than the typical person with AD/HD? If so, why?

Others often view these students as capable but lazy. Most gifted children with AD/HD have a high ability to conceptualize, but poor cognitive efficiency. They are great at understanding ideas or the big picture but have difficulty managing the details and demonstrating their knowledge quickly and accurately. Therefore they seem intelligent but cannot perform.

Students with a high intelligence often cannot learn at their potential, but because they are bright, their achievement may still be within the instructional range for their grade. In many school districts, this limits the opportunity for them to receive accommodations under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The intent of Section 504 is to provide equal access to the curriculum, and a student must be “substantially limited” to be eligible for accommodations. School districts are directed to create their own definition of substantially limited. Many choose to be guided by the Americans with Disabilities Act definition that stipulates the individual is “unable to perform a major life activity that the typical person in the general population can perform.” So, in some school districts, if a student’s performance is within the typical range, regardless of his or her potential, he or she is not eligible for accommodations.

Do students with AD/HD and high intellect ever face difficulty getting into and functioning in gifted programs or accelerated classes?

Depending on the school district, students with AD/HD and high intellect often face difficulty being placed in

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programs for the gifted or in accelerated classes. Again, school districts are free to determine their own eligibility criteria for programs for gifted students. Some districts include a threshold IQ score, often 130 or higher, in their criteria. Because of problems with cognitive efficiency, students with AD/HD may not achieve this score. Many experts suggest that twice exceptional children should be considered if their IQ is in the superior range (greater than 120). In addition, students with AD/HD are often underachievers and so may not meet the criteria for accelerated classes because of average or poor grades.

Can a gifted student's AD/HD impact his or her scores on standardized tests?

Students with AD/HD often do well on tests of reasoning ability but poorly on tests of working memory and processing speed. Timed tasks can be more difficult for gifted children with AD/HD. When an overall IQ score is part of the criteria for placement, their total score may be lower than gifted students without AD/HD.

What are some helpful tips for parents who seek accommodations for their gifted children with AD/HD?

Be informed about your child's rights and learning profile. Start

by understanding your school district's accommodation policies. Contact the district's Section 504 coordinator or other administrator for this information. In addition, check into your district's homework policy. If your child has an IEP or 504 Plan, remember that he or she is automatically eligible for accommodations. Finally, try to work with the school district in providing your child's education. Conflict between families and the school district can undermine your child's learning. Children do best when they understand that both their parents and the school support their learning.

I have heard that gifted students are sometimes referred for an evaluation for AD/HD, and it is later discovered that they do not have the disorder. Is this true?

Gifted students without AD/HD often have some learning and behavioral characteristics in common with students who have AD/HD. This can make distinguishing these groups problematic in educational settings. Both can be easily bored with routine and drill and practice activities, have high energy levels, seem unconventional, and tend to question authority. Each group may have difficulty sustaining attention but for different reasons. The child with AD/HD will have difficulty attending in most academic activities, while the gifted child will have difficulty primarily when the

pace is too slow or the work is too easy. Such commonalities and differences can make identifying and serving twice-exceptional students especially challenging.

Do you find that there's a difference between emotional and intellectual development for students with AD/HD? How long does this last? What are some tips for parents wishing to bridge the gap?

Students with AD/HD in general are delayed socially and emotionally. When these students are also gifted, the gap between their social-emotional development and intellectual development may be even greater. This past fall, the National Institute of Mental Health published a study indicating that in children with AD/HD, the cortex of the brain develops along the same course as it does in others, but matures on average three to five years later. Though this study did not focus on the gifted with AD/HD, some generalizations can be drawn. The frontal cortex may not mature until the late twenties or early thirties. For some, the gap may close at this point.

Can you provide parents with any helpful hints as they advocate for their twice exceptional children?

Help children develop awareness about their strengths and weak-

nesses. Studies show that outcomes are better when parents and teachers recognize effort over ability. Children will be more likely to succeed when adults avoid repeatedly telling them they are “smart” or “brilliant” and instead focus on successful task completion, even when this is completion of shortened assignments. As students move on to secondary school, support them to advocate for themselves. **A**

Helpful Resources

Kiesa Kay, editor, **Uniquely Gifted: Identifying and Meeting the Needs of the Twice-Exceptional Student** (Avocus Publishing Inc, 2007).

Deirdre V. Lovecky, **Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and other Learning Deficits** (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2004).

2e Twice Exceptional Newsletter (Glen Ellyn Media). Available at www.2enewletter.com.