

Not Just Lazy – Gifted and Learning Disabled

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Many gifted children have inconsistent skill development and significant discrepancies between their innate cognitive abilities and their actual academic performance. In fact, the majority of gifted children are often referred to as lazy or seen as not trying hard enough. Gifted children deserve support, not criticism, for their efforts to fit into a system that is not designed for their learning style.

Statistically speaking, it is quite unlikely that any child has a single skill beyond the 99th percentile. Now consider the probability that all of a child's skills will lie in this range. Intelligence, according to our evaluations, lies in the mind. In order for a child to show gifts in all areas however, she must not only exhibit gifted processing in abstract reasoning, synthesis, organization and memory but must also demonstrate strength in visual and motor output. For many children their mental age is much higher than their physical age. This has been described to me as the funnel effect. This child wishes to write a thesis on the species of turtle, but what comes out of her hand when asked to quickly write about her ideas is "I have a small, green turtle at my house."

Inappropriate challenge can lead to a learning disability look alike. Learning disabilities are defined by the difference between cognition and learning. Therefore, gifted children who are not provided with curriculum at their level can, over time, develop skill delays relative to their own abilities. On the other side of the coin, children who are gifted and learning disabled may not necessarily fall below average. Many learning disabilities go unnoticed in the gifted population, as most gifted children are able to hide their deficits through their strengths. The ability to compensate also varies with cognitive energy. When rested a gifted child with learning disabilities can perform well. They simply cannot maintain this level of performance all day. "You can do this. I have seen you do this before" is not a fair statement. None of us can perform optimally all of the time. And for these children, it takes tremendous energy to even perform to their ability some of the time.

For the gifted child, high abstract reasoning is at the heart of their talent. However, it is this same gift that often interferes with their success in a traditional school setting. I often tell our parents that their children are the "Super K-Mart shoppers," not corner market kids. What I mean by this is that the highly abstract thinker has many more choices when answering a single question. Choosing one apple in a group of 3 is easy. Choosing that same apple out of 100 apples, choices take time. To make matters worse, high abstract reasoning is the main skill that allows a child to self analyze their abilities. They know what they are capable of, the master's thesis on turtles. They simply can't get their organizational systems, their eyes, and their hands to cooperate. What we see on the outside, we call perfectionism or work refusal. What they feel is anxiety, low self-esteem and the need to try harder despite their previous best efforts.

Typical school settings rely heavily on a child's ability to sit quietly in a desk, listen carefully to an oral presentation or read,

then quickly and efficiently summarize and remember what was learned. The child must then prove that knowledge through either speaking or writing. However, for the abstract thinker, the more information that is processed, the more time the summary will take. This is especially true when the learning style dictates that the information be converted from pictures to words. Despite this, we assume that the gifted child is the child who first raises her hand to answer our questions. Given the question "what is a fire truck," the child who immediately replies "an emergency vehicle that puts out fires" is not necessarily the most gifted child. In fact, the brightest child in the class will often pass right by the answer as far too simple and might tell you about their neighbor who raises Dalmatian puppies.

Children who are gifted and learning disabled are a puzzle to even the most seasoned professional. When referred for testing, these children are frequently misdiagnosed and often misunderstood. They spend their school careers hiding their deficits while using every ounce of their strength to simply get by. Often, they look average and lazy. Underneath, they are under challenged and over stimulated. These kids who are both gifted and learning disabled reveal themselves through their behaviors. They claim boredom but don't want to do anything. When they are calm and alert, they flood with self-deprecation. They can be anxious, avoidant and rigid. They can also look impulsive and distracted. Depression is common, as is fatigue. They are frequently described as being "in their heads or in their bodies." They can't seem to settle. They can be prone to illness and hyper-vigilance. Writing is almost always a challenge, although their ideas are good. Organization is also difficult. Although some are athletic, most have poor physical stamina. Sensory issues for many are a part of life. These kids hear it, feel it and sense it to a higher degree but are often challenged for their "sensitivities." Through it all, we see flashes of brilliance but rarely sustained performance.

It is these gifted / learning disabled children, or twice-exceptionals as we call them, that truly live their lives outside of the box. Neither at the top of the class, nor at the bottom, they are discontent with the middle. They can be withdrawn or they can act out. No matter what the pattern, gifted/learning disabled children confuse us. However, despite their difficulties, twice-exceptional children are inventive and passionate. They problem solve in ways no one else can, and take alternative perspectives in each new situation. It is their unique strengths, not their disabilities that should demand our attention and support. Referring to these children as lazy or underachieving only serves to humiliate them and shut them down. We must instead provide an opportunity for these unique learners to freely share their insights with a world that desperately needs them. It is through our support, patience and understanding that the twice-exceptional child can truly blossom.