

Gifted Children
with
Special Needs:

The twice exceptional child

Dr Melrona Kirrane
Registered Psychologist

- Asynchronous development is the defining characteristic of gifted children
- They develop in an uneven manner, ... they are more complex and intense than their age-mates and feel out-of-sync with them
- Twice exceptional children experience this more extremely
 - In addition to having asynchrony between their intellectual and physical development, they have extreme asynchrony between intellectual development and the ability to express or use that intellect

- Children who are both gifted and have special needs can be grouped into three categories
- (1) identified gifted students who have subtle special needs
- (2) unidentified students whose gifts and special needs may be masked by average achievement
- (3) identified special needs students who are also gifted

- **1. Identified gifted students who have subtle special needs**
- high IQ scores
- With age, discrepancies widen between expected and actual performance
 - may be forgetful, sloppy and disorganized.
- “if they would only try harder, they could succeed”

- the real issue is that they simply do not know how - they are likely to be overlooked for screening procedures necessary to identify a subtle learning disability
 - Many other reasons why bright children may be underachieving:
 - Expectations are unrealistic
 - Motivation and interest in subject area
 - Social or emotional problems
 - Results are simply unimportant
 - May not have learned how to study because, during early school days, school was easy and success required minimal effort.

- **2. Unidentified students**
- their superior intellectual ability is working overtime to help compensate for weaknesses caused by an undiagnosed special need
- their gift masks the need and the need masks the gift
- The special need is frequently discovered in college or adulthood when the student happens to read about dyslexia or hears peers describe their learning difficulties.

- **3. Identified special needs students who are also gifted**
- first noticed because of what they cannot do which must be fixed before anything else can happen - little attention, if any, is paid to the student's strengths and interests, other than to use them to remediate weaknesses
- often have high-level interests at home
- Because these students are bright and sensitive, they are more acutely aware of their difficulty in learning and generalize their feelings of academic failure to an overall sense of inadequacy
- often rated by teachers as most disruptive at school
 - found to be off task; they may daydream, or complain of headaches and stomach aches, easily frustrated

- **Specific Special Needs**

- For a child who is gifted and mildly dyslexic, it means being bored to tears in maths and science classes because they are too easy, while struggling to read class-level books.
- It means not being able to read books that discuss science and other topics at his level of understanding.
- It means finding reading class books challenging, but the classroom discussions excruciatingly boring.

- For a child, who is gifted and has dysgraphia (extreme difficulties with writing), this means having his hands get cramped and tired after only one page of writing.
- It means being unable to write and think at the same time, so that his written work doesn't come anywhere near reflecting the depth of his thoughts.
- It means he is thinking about maths concepts that his teachers don't understand, but having trouble writing them down.

- For a child who is gifted and has ADHD, it means getting assignments wrong because he missed some of the instructions and therefore did the wrong thing correctly.
- It means getting into trouble for not paying attention because he is incapable of focusing on multi-step oral instructions, but seems too smart to not understand what he is supposed to do.
- It means getting in trouble for losing control at the end of the day, when he is tired and his medication has worn off because "you're too smart to forget the rules".

- For such children, being gifted is not enough to compensate for the combined effects of dyslexia and the ADHD-caused auditory processing problems, which make it nearly impossible to learn a foreign language.
- Dyslexia makes it hard to associate written and spoken words in a foreign language.
- The inability to consistently attend to auditory stimuli makes it almost impossible to associate the sounds of a foreign language with their meaning.
- So, being "many times gifted" means feeling hopeless and stupid in language class.

- Having a child who is "many times gifted" means trying to find a school that can accommodate a highly gifted child with special needs
- It means trying to convince schools that the child needs special education services even though he is working at class-relevant level, because that is still far below his intellectual capacity.
- It means having a child who is simultaneously under- and over-challenged, who spends each day alternating between extreme frustration and extreme boredom, who is miserably unhappy at school and begs for home-schooling.

- The perfect programme would include
 - occupational therapy for his physical problems with writing, allowing him to dictate all his work until he is physically ready to use a keyboard
 - one-on-one instruction in writing until he is no longer convinced that he "can't write"
 - subject acceleration in maths and science, so that he could be learning the subjects he most loves at his own level
 - finding a maths mentor who can explore advanced maths with him
 - short school days and a light homework load, so that he has time outside of school to decompress and think and explore and just be a child
 - teachers who understand that a child can both be highly gifted and have learning challenges and that inconsistent work is a sign of ADHD rather than of "not trying"

- Four characteristics of effective teachers for gifted learners
 1. Eager support of acceleration options
 2. Capability to modify a curriculum
 3. Adequate training and competence in the content area
 4. Preparation in organizing and managing classroom activities

- Four general guidelines can assist professionals in developing programmes that will meet the needs of these students.
- **1. Focus attention on the development of the gift**
 - a focus on weaknesses at the expense of developing gifts can result in poor self esteem, a lack of motivation, depression and stress
 - Enrichment activities should be designed to circumvent problematic weaknesses and to highlight abstract thinking and creative production

- **2. Provide a nurturing environment that values individual differences**
 - A sense of being valued contributes to performance
 - How valued can a student feel if the curriculum must be continually modified, or assignments watered down, to enable the student to achieve success
 - School environment skills are not the sole purveyors of success in the real world

- **3. Encourage compensation strategies**

- Find other sources of information that are appropriate for students who may have difficulty reading
- Provide advanced organizers to help students receive and communicate information
- use brainstorming and mind-mapping to generate outlines and organize written work.
- Provide management plans in which tasks are listed sequentially with target dates for completion
- Provide a structure or visual format to guide the finished product
- Use technology to promote productivity.
- Offer a variety of options for communication of ideas - writing is not the only way
 - Slides, models, speeches, mime, murals, film productions
- Help students who have problems in short-term memory develop strategies for remembering
 - Mnemonics
 - Visualization techniques

- **4. Encourage awareness of individual strengths and weaknesses**
 - Help them make intelligent choices about their future
 - If a goal that is important to such a student will require extensive reading, and, if reading is a weak area, the student will have to acknowledge the role of effort and the need for assistance to achieve success
 - Mentoring experiences with adults who are gifted and learning disabled will lend validity to the belief that such individuals can succeed.
- In the final analysis, students who are both gifted and have special needs must learn how to be their own advocates.

- **NT children's issues with Special Needs sibling**
- taking away their parents' time and attention,
- the special needs child may be an embarrassment
- NT children may also mourn the loss of the "sibling that might have been"
- NT children may feel guilty for having these negative feelings

- **Parenting issues for siblings of special needs children**
- Send a clear message of not favouring the special needs child but empathizing with sibling's frustration.
- Clarify you expect the same amount of difficulty for each child where difficulty is measured by *how difficult something is for the child*, not the end result.
- schedule some special time for the NT child
- Don't expect the NT child to hide her achievements in order to keep her sibling from feeling badly.
- recognize the NT child's achievements, not just his short-comings so he doesn't feel he is in a double-bind – he gets into trouble if he is not perfect, but does not get praise for doing well because that is what's expected of him.
- Don't expect your NT child to behave more maturely because your special needs child is difficult. The NT child is still a child with the same needs as her peers
- Have the NT child try writing a 1-page essay using his non-dominant hand, being told it will be evaluated for content and spelling and neatness, and see how tired he is at the end, then explain that this is how his sibling feels after many academic tasks that would be easy if he didn't have his learning disabilities.

Tips for parents

- 1. Trust your instincts**
- 2. Trust your child**
- 3. Don't ignore the giftedness while trying to fix the disabilities**
- 4. Don't ignore the disabilities while feeding the giftedness**
- 5. Your child can both be in a gifted program and have a Resource Teacher**
- 6. Don't overwork your child**
- 7. See the good in your child and find time to have fun together**
- 8. Take care of yourself**
- 9. Know when to cut your losses**
- 10. Network**