

The Exceptionality of Being Twice-Exceptional

A Teacher's View

- The start to the school year has already proved quite challenging. I have a new student that shows high interest and ability in math and science. Her level of understanding and problem-solving capabilities are off the charts. So, why the challenge? This student has extreme difficulty with any work that requires writing and reading. So much so that homework, note-taking, and assigned reading are very hard for her to complete. Does she have a learning disability?
- I wish there was an answer for what is going on with one of my students this year. "Jim" is a bright, highly motivated 10-year-old who enjoys the STEM problems we cover in class. He's a walking encyclopedia on the planet Mars and recent missions; he's even designed his own plans for a new Mars rover. Despite this, Jim is extremely quiet and withdrawn, does not seem to have any friends, and rarely looks me in the eye when I try to talk with him about Mars or other subjects.

A Parent's View

- Each night, homework ends in frustration, tears, and meltdowns for my middle schooler. It takes her hours each night to complete her homework, when other classmates seem to complete assignments in a fraction of the time. It takes her a long time to get started, she often seems disorganized or clueless about what needs to be done, and her backpack is a mess. She's very creative and enjoys delving into deep, complex content—but is having major difficulties when it comes to language arts and math.
- I've been receiving complaints from the teacher about my son, who is concerned about him distracting and annoying his classmates. She described him as interruptive and rude, often not paying attention. He has a high IQ, but is viewed as a "behavior problem." He has deep interests outside of school, and can engage for hours in topics he cares about. Normally outgoing with a great sense of humor, he is becoming withdrawn and hates school. I wish for more than negative phone calls and emails from the school.

What's not often well-known or well-understood is that students who are gifted may also have a special need or disability—just as students with disabilities may also be gifted. The term "twice-exceptional," also referred to as "2e," is used to describe gifted children who, according to the [Joint Commission on Twice-Exceptional Students \(2009\)](#), have the characteristics of gifted students with the potential for high achievement in specific academics, general intellectual ability, creativity, leadership, and/or visual, spatial, or performing arts, **and** give evidence of one or more disabilities as defined by federal or state eligibility criteria. These disabilities may include specific learning disabilities (SpLD), speech and language disorders, emotional/behavioral disorders, physical disabilities, autism spectrum, or other impairments such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).



Like other gifted learners, 2e students are highly knowledgeable and talented in at least one particular domain. However, their giftedness is often overshadowed by their disabilities, or these students may be able to mask or hide their learning deficits by using their talents to compensate. Sometimes a twice-exceptional child's special education needs are overlooked until adolescence or later, or are never identified throughout his or her life.

Twice-exceptional children often find difficulty in the school environment, where organization, participation, and long-term planning play a role. They can be highly creative, verbal, imaginative, curious, with strong problem-solving ability, and a wide range of interests or a single, all-consuming expertise. However, at school, they may have difficulty keeping up with course rigor, volume, and demands—resulting in inconsistent academic performance, frustration, difficulties with written expression, and labels such as *lazy*, *unmotivated*, and *underachiever*. All this may hinder their excitement for school and be detrimental to their self-efficacy, self-confidence, and motivation.

In order to fully support twice-exceptional children, both in school and at home, accommodations must be made to recognize the child's strengths and nurture their abilities, while supporting their challenges and needs. A multi-pronged approach should focus on their **intellectual**, **physical**, and **social/emotional environments**.

1. THE INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

AT SCHOOL

Because this population has a conflicting set of needs, it often takes creativity and an open mind to dually differentiate in maximizing intellectual challenge while minimizing the effects of their difficulties.

It's important to start by acknowledging the student's strengths and build in scaffolding to support their weaknesses when developing instructional strategies.

Differentiating the curriculum, product type, or content focus to a 2e student's interests and strengths is essential.

Twice-exceptional (and all students) benefit from having choices in demonstrating their knowledge.

Allow students to demonstrate their knowledge and ideas with alternate work products (videos, Minecraft, Legos, art, song). Simulations, role-playing activities, hands-on activities, problem-based learning, and integrating the arts are all ways to appeal to the child's intellectual side.

Eliminating rote or repetitive work where possible is important in supporting a 2e student. This includes eliminating or modifying common requirements (handwriting, traditional quizzes and tests, class participation); reducing the volume of work (number of math problems, length of written assignment, length of

AT HOME

Parents can serve as advocates for their 2e child by knowing their child's strengths, weaknesses, and learning style. In an ideal world, a child's learning style matches the classroom experience, so it's important to be well-versed in your child's profile to help inform the teacher and school.

It's important to take a collaborative—not combative—approach in helping the school understand your child and to obtain the appropriate interventions or accommodations required for him to succeed. Establishing a team approach, with positive, open communications and ongoing dialogue, is essential.

Sharing observations from home regarding your child's strengths and suggesting alternate ways for your 2e child to demonstrate subject mastery beyond written papers and tests may be helpful.

Often 2e students need formalized support to be successful. Children with disabilities are protected under the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), so if the school hasn't suggested it, you might want to investigate whether an Individualized Education Program (IEP) might be appropriate.

CONTINUE >

AT SCHOOL (CONT'D)

tests); and mixing up independent and small group work. Using visual aids, such as charts and graphs also helps.

A collaborative approach with both parents and other faculty members is essential. Seek help from your gifted education coordinator, school psychologist, and principal to ensure the appropriate supports and/or IEP/504 accommodations are in place.

AT HOME (CONT'D)

Look for out-of-school enrichment activities to nurture your child's interests and self-confidence, and remediation supports to bolster their weaknesses.

2. THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

AT SCHOOL

Traditional classroom environments often do not work for 2e students, and require setting modifications.

Twice-exceptional students often have high sensitivities amplified by fluorescent lighting, uncomfortable furniture, noisy HVAC systems, and compact space. Consideration should be made for lighting, alternative seating options, and availability of "free" space, where students can escape to when feeling overwhelmed.

Teachers may wish to stand physically closer to 2e students when providing directions, have visual cues and private signals for engaging the child, and locate a distraction-free place for test taking.

Allow the student to use assistive technology if necessary, and confer with parents for clues on which tools might work best.

AT HOME

Both physical organization of space and organization of workload is often a challenge for 2e students, and parents serve as an important bridge between home and school. Checklists, frequent reminders of due dates, and duplicate sets of books at home can help a 2e child stay on task.

Parents should partner with the school to help teachers and administrators understand their child's physical, organizational, and other needs. This may include identifying the optimal seat location for general classroom work; finding an alternate, quiet spot for test taking; mirroring the same organizational strategies at home and school; and staying on the lookout for additional scaffolding as needed.

Assistive technology and tools can be of huge help to students with dysgraphia, poor handwriting, and underdeveloped fine motor skills. This may include keyboards, word processing and dictation software, electronic calendars, and graphic organizers.

3. THE SOCIAL/EMOTIONAL ENVIRONMENT

AT SCHOOL

Focusing on a twice-exceptional child's strengths versus weaknesses, and finding peers who share their interests and abilities, is essential for ensuring his or her social-emotional happiness.

A 2e student should never feel that accommodations for the classroom and curriculum are being made because of

AT HOME

Parents need to accept their child for who they are and realize that their child is not "broken." A parent's love, acceptance, and support are essential for ensuring their child does not feel different. While interventions can help shore up weaknesses, it's important for parents to focus on what their child **can** do versus what they **can't**.

CONTINUE >

AT SCHOOL (CONT'D)

his situation. All options for 2e students should be offered to all students, so there is never a focus on just one or two students. In actuality, all students can benefit from these strategies.

Advanced cognitive abilities, poor social skills, and sensitivities can leave 2e students vulnerable to peer bullying. School and classroom environments must feel safe and foster respect for individuals and individual differences. Embedding social-emotional skills training related to self-efficacy, motivation, goal-setting, and relationship management will help ensure that students feel free to be themselves, express their emotions, and handle their difficulties without fear of rejection or negative response.

AT HOME (CONT'D)

Often 2e kids feel like they don't fit in with gifted kids, but they also don't feel like they fit in with those with disabilities. Parents can serve as role models and support their 2e child by: finding peers and helping build friendships; teaching friendship skills; modelling conversations; and providing tips for how to foster relationships. Extra-curricular activities are important avenues for 2e children to pursue their passions, experience success, and build self-confidence.

Many famous scientists, athletes, and world leaders are also twice-exceptional. Using bibliotherapy to find stories about successful people helps children realize that others like them have overcome their challenges to achieve important goals in life.

Parents need self-care and support, too. Look for local or online parent groups to provide resources, tips, and access to others with similar experiences.

IF THERE IS ONE THING TEACHERS AND PARENTS CAN DO TO EMPOWER TWICE-EXCEPTIONAL CHILDREN, IT'S TO HELP IDENTIFY AND NURTURE THEIR TALENTS AND STRENGTHS FIRST. By understanding their own talents, 2e children build self-confidence, create positive identities, and find like-minded friends. These are essential elements for coping with their challenges, finding their path in life, and being able to pursue their dreams.

RESOURCES

BOOKS

Different Minds: Gifted Children with AD/HD, Asperger Syndrome, and Other Learning Deficits
by Deirdre V. Lovecky. 2004. London and Philadelphia, PA: Jessica Kingsley.

Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and Other Disorders
by Jim Webb, Edward Amend, Nadia Webb, Jean Goerss, Paul Beljan, and F. Richard Olechak. 2005. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Twice-Exceptional Gifted Children: Understanding, Teaching and Counseling Gifted Students
by Beverly A. Trail. 2011. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

CONTINUE>

WEB (hyperlinked)

2e: (The Twice-Exceptional) Newsletter

The go-to website for parents, educators, and other professionals. Browse an immense collection of resources focusing on this unique population, including several "Spotlight on 2e Series" how-to manuals for parents, teachers, administrators, and psychologists.

National Association for Gifted Children's White Paper on Twice-Exceptionality

National Association for Gifted Children's Position Statement on Twice-Exceptionality

The Twice-Exceptional Dilemma

A comprehensive report from the National Education Association.

2e: Twice Exceptional

An award-winning film focusing on the issue of twice-exceptionality.

“A nurturing environment...values and respects individual differences. Students are rewarded for what they do well. Options are offered for both acquiring information and communicating what is learned. In such an environment, no child will feel like a second-class citizen, and the gifted students with learning disabilities can excel.”

–Dr. Susan Baum

“Labels are starting points, not destinations—and certainly not destinies.”



–Fernette and Brock Eide

Author's Note: The authors acknowledge Dr. Susan Baum, Mark Bade, and Linda Neumann whose work, guidance, and consultation was invaluable in preparing this issue of Connecting for High Potential.

About CHP

NAGC often receives similar questions from teachers and parents, so *Connecting for High Potential* offers an important forum for exploring how “the other side” might be facing the same issue. Both groups can benefit from the same information even if perhaps seen through a slightly different lens. Feel free to email, copy, print, or post to share with a favorite teacher or parent in your community.

Created and compiled by Jeff Danielian, NAGC Teacher Resource Specialist, and Kathleen Nilles, NAGC Parent Services & Communications Manager. Contact them with input or ideas at jdanielian@nagc.org and knilles@nagc.org.