



# The Road LESS Travelled

GIFTEDNESS AND LEARNING DISABILITIES, ATTENTION  
DISORDERS AND ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

## Twice-exceptional

Some children who are gifted also have learning difficulties. The learning challenges that children who are gifted experience most commonly are learning disabilities, Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) and Asperger's Syndrome. These twice-exceptional children sometimes have difficulty reaching an academic level that matches their measured potential, and may go unidentified for several reasons.

Their exceptionalities often mask each other, resulting in neither being diagnosed. Other times, schools may stop looking for exceptional abilities once a learning disability has been identified, and therefore giftedness may go unidentified. In other instances, the child's giftedness may be identified but their disability may go undetected and the child may be labelled as an underachiever, unmotivated or uncooperative.

Children who are simultaneously gifted and have a disability can pose special challenges for parents and educators. As parents, you need to understand your child's dual exceptionalities and work with the school and community to ensure your child can learn to the best of his or her ability. Children, too, need to understand their dual exceptionalities, so they can use their strengths and abilities to compensate for their learning difficulties.

## Learning disabilities

Students with learning disabilities have diverse, complex and interrelated difficulties, although they are often hidden or subtle. While there is great variability among students with learning disabilities, they are generally described as individuals of at least average intelligence who have difficulties processing information and who experience unexpected problems in some academic areas, or who have to exert unusual effort in order to achieve and maintain expected levels of performance.

These difficulties cannot be explained by other conditions or environmental influences. Students with learning disabilities exhibit an uneven pattern of strength and difficulties and thus experience strength and success in some areas while experiencing difficulties in other areas. Learning disabilities are lifelong. However, they may be affected by the demands of the environment, so their impact often varies at different ages and stages in life.

Like other children who are gifted, a child who also has a learning disability may:

- Have an intellectual level at or approaching the gifted range. However, some children who are twice-exceptional may not demonstrate their true cognitive abilities on standardized measures. It is important to consider assessment information beyond a standardized measure of intelligence when determining

whether the child meets the criteria for a learning disability. In some cases academic achievement, in-class daily performance, family background, and observations may also be necessary in order to gather the information needed to determine that a child is gifted and has a learning disability.

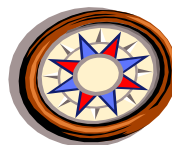
- Have more interest and ability in pursuing broad, thematic topics than in remembering and working with details. Linda Silverman describes this tendency as “the harder the task, the better they do; it’s the easy work they can’t master.”
- Be more of an intuitive “dreamer” than a practically oriented thinker. Creativity or problem-solving abilities may be exhibited in a specific area of interest.
- Prefer fact-based information such as facts, dates and formulas.
- Do well in areas requiring the ability to visualize; e.g., mathematics (especially geometry), art.
- Have a great interest in learning when topics are of interest or are meaningful to them.

Like children of average ability with learning disabilities, a child who is gifted and has a learning disability may:

- Have an uneven academic profile. For example, they may have strengths in mathematics or content areas and weaknesses in the language arts areas.
- Have written language difficulties. This could include poor handwriting, poor mechanics and difficulty in organizing content.
- Need remedial help with some skills. They will often respond better to teaching in context than to isolated skill building.
- Have difficulty organizing time and materials. They often forget homework or need extra time to complete it.
- Need more time to process language and to gather responses than would be expected of someone with high intellectual capabilities.
- Lack some social skills and common-sense decision-making ability.
- Have unusual sensitivity to light, sound and touch.

- Be less successful than expected when dealing with input from multiple sources or with tasks that require the integration of multiple skills.
- Be unclear or confused about their abilities. They may lack awareness and understanding of their own learning strengths and needs.
- Develop behaviours that hide their disability. This could include strategies such as avoidance, passivity or overcompensation.
- Experience underlying anxiety. They may worry unnecessarily about school-related tasks.
- Perceive themselves to be incapable of learning. They may generalize their disability to all areas of school.
- Be overly critical of themselves. They may have difficulty accepting compliments or constructive criticism.
- Experience conflict between their sense of independence in thinking and possible dependence on supports related to their disability.

In spite of their ability to perform in the superior or gifted range on individual intelligence tests, their brains sometimes appear to function differently and less efficiently than other students of similar intellectual ability.



### Strategies for supporting your child who is gifted and has a learning disability

- *Learn as much as you can about your child’s exceptionalities.* Organizations such as the Learning Disabilities Association of Alberta can provide information and assistance. Web sites can also be a good starting point.
- *Explore programming options.* Be involved with the school in designing an IPP and encourage your child to participate. IPPs for children with dual exceptionalities should focus on using strengths to accommodate difficulties. For example, many children benefit from instruction that emphasizes visual thinking.

- *Participate in the IPP process.* Work with school staff to ensure that the IPP addresses both enrichment in the area that your child is gifted and/or talented, and strategies and accommodations in their areas of challenge.
- *Consider how your children's challenges may be affecting their performance.* Your child may even experience difficulties in areas where they should be excelling. Identify appropriate strategies and accommodations so that your children can reach their potential. For instance, a child who is gifted in mathematics may have a disability that affects his or her ability to complete simple calculations, resulting in below-average performance in an area where they should excel.
- *Do not hesitate to request the involvement of personnel beyond the classroom teacher.* The principal, school counsellor and district psychologist may be resources for parents and teachers on such matters. The most helpful person in your school may vary, so get to know each of them. Parents sometimes go immediately to outside consultants, but the search for assistance should start within the school.
- *Help your child develop self-advocacy skills.* Self-advocacy depends upon the development of self-monitoring skills, a realistic and accurate understanding of strengths and challenges, and appropriate interaction with teachers. Encourage independent thinking by using language that encourages children to problem solve. When appropriate, ask children questions such as "What do you need to do?", rather than telling them what to do.
- *Ensure that you are working with the school team.* Create consistency by reinforcing whatever strategies and approaches are working successfully at school.
- *Set priorities.* When necessary, share these priorities with your child's teachers. Is having an A average worth four or five hours of homework every night and/or giving up extra-curricular activities? It is important to set realistic goals and demands for both yourself and your child. How much stress can everyone tolerate? It is important to spend time together in family and recreational activities.
- *Teach your child strategies to keep track of belongings and activities.* Remembering assignments, getting books and homework between school and home, and generally holding one's life together, are major obstacles for many children who are gifted and have learning difficulties. They need direct instruction and specific strategies to develop these skills. For example, many children benefit using colour coding to organize their school materials. Try identifying subjects in notebooks by different coloured sections or matching coloured tape on closet shelves to the items that should be stored there. In the beginning, adult monitoring may be needed, but eventually these patterns will become routine. Another idea is to have your child carry a small notebook or day planner for recording assignments. If needed, teachers and parents can initial pages to signal that they have checked for accuracy and completeness.
- *Set aside time each night to help your child organize and plan his or her schedule.* Children who are gifted and have learning difficulties often have problems getting tasks completed on time and managing their schedule to allow for recreation as well as study. To avoid wasted time and long homework sessions, you may want to help your child write out a complete daily schedule each evening before going to bed. Building in time for classes, studying and recreation helps the child ensure that these activities occur with predictability and balance.
- *Set up routines for daily activities.* Making sure daily activities occur at the same time and in the same way every day is another way to provide the structure needed by the disorganized child. For example, decide that homework should *always* be placed by the front door in the evening so that the frantic morning search can be avoided. Or that

clothes for the next day should *always* be selected before going to bed so that matching socks are ready for 7 A.M. As parents, your role is to set up the structure, monitor it and reinforce it, until it becomes a routine that children can follow on their own.

- *Look for remedial help from a variety of sources.* If your child falls behind academically, look for alternatives. Peer tutors may be available in the school. Out-of-school volunteers or private tutors may be other sources of assistance. Look for a tutor who understands and responds to your child's particular needs, and who emphasizes teaching basic skills within a meaningful context.
- *Seek out community enrichment activities.* Look for out-of-school programs that support your child's strengths. Explore options available through local museums, libraries, universities and summer recreation programs. This can also be a good way to teach your child social skills that will help him or her both in and out of school.
- *Support and encourage the use of assistive technology.* As adults, many of us freely use devices such as word processors, spell checks and calculators to complete our daily tasks. When used appropriately, these devices can be beneficial to students who are gifted and have learning difficulties. Children should be taught how to use these technologies at an early age. The rapid movement toward including technology in the classroom makes this goal more feasible with every passing year.

## Attention Disorders

Children with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD) range from those who daydream and are chronically inattentive (Primarily Inattentive type), to children who are hyperactive and impulsive (Primarily Hyperactive/Impulsive type), to children who demonstrate both inattention and hyperactivity (Combined type). AD/HD is generally characterized by chronic and pervasive difficulty in more than one environment.

Children with AD/HD—Primarily Inattentive type may:

- be easily distracted and unable to pay attention for reasonable periods of time
- have difficulty listening, following directions, and completing tasks or chores
- daydream a lot
- demonstrate underdeveloped social skills affecting the way they interact with others
- seem unaware of the risks or consequences of their actions and don't appear to learn from consequences
- either pay little or no attention to details *and* make careless mistakes, or overfocus on irrelevant details
- appear disorganized and forgetful; lose things; lack the organizational skills to get homework or notes to and from home and school.

Children with AD/HD—Primarily Hyperactive/Impulsive type may:

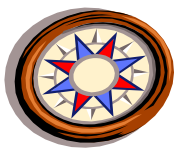
- move about constantly; seem to be always on the go
- talk and interrupt excessively
- have difficulty sharing or waiting their turn
- fidget and squirm
- act without thinking.

Children with AD/HD—Combined type demonstrate characteristics from both of the above categories.

While it is possible for a child to have AD/HD and to be gifted at the same time, many children who are gifted may exhibit characteristics similar to those of children with AD/HD and not have AD/HD. For example, children who are gifted may demonstrate high energy levels or constant internal preoccupation with their thoughts and ideas. These children may benefit from enrichment and independent study within a special interest area to help them constructively channel their energy. However, if your child exhibits behaviours outlined above that consistently interfere with his or her academic, emotional or social success, it may be worthwhile to investigate the possibility of AD/HD with a pediatrician or psychologist who is knowledgeable about giftedness and AD/HD.

If your child receives a medical diagnosis of AD/HD, they may benefit from a variety and combination of interventions, such as strategy instruction, counselling, cognitive behaviour therapy, and/or drug therapy.

Accommodating children's learning styles and teaching them techniques to compensate for their attentional issues is an important component of any intervention and will help children with AD/HD gain self-awareness and self-confidence as a learner.



### Strategies for supporting children who are gifted and experience attention difficulties

- *Provide a purpose for listening before giving verbal information.* “Listen carefully, I’m going to tell you the three things we need to do before we can go to soccer.”
- *Ask children to paraphrase information in their own words.* This ensures that they have received and understood the whole message.
- *Establish clear expectations for behaviour at home and in the community.* Discuss expectations for behaviour in specific situations, such as when the parent is on the phone. Review behavioural expectations for specific settings, such as restaurants and grocery stores, before going on outings.
- *Provide frequent, positive feedback regarding appropriate behaviour.* Often children are noticed when they are noisy or disruptive, but are not reinforced for those times when they are quiet, attentive, or acting appropriately. Rather than making a vague statement such as “You were being good” provide more tangible feedback such as “I like the way you picked up your toys without being told.” Clearly label what is positive about the child’s behaviour to encourage more of this behaviour in the future.
- *Give one task at a time.* As one task is completed, instructions can be given for the next task.
- *Seek any necessary medical intervention early, and maintain it as long as needed.* If medication is part of the treatment plan, continuous monitoring by a physician is necessary to ensure that the proper dosage and desired results are achieved.
- *Be patient—change takes time.* Recognize that occasional errors, excuses and backsliding are inevitable. Help your child to make steady progress through consistent, supportive reminders, but also recognize the benefit of being flexible.
- *Learn about AD/HD.* Consider joining an organization focusing on attentional issues so that you can discuss the issues with those who know.

### Asperger’s Syndrome

Another disorder that may co-exist with giftedness is Asperger’s Syndrome (AS). Children with Asperger’s Syndrome often demonstrate many of the characteristics associated with Autism Spectrum Disorders but have average or above-average cognitive abilities. The children are often labelled as “socially awkward,” “eccentric” or “odd.” The characteristics of Asperger’s Syndrome will often change as an individual matures and develops skills.

Some children with Asperger’s Syndrome may have several characteristics that overlap with typical characteristics of giftedness. These could include:

- verbal fluency
- fascination with letters or numbers and enjoyment of memorizing factual information at an early age
- demonstrating an absorbing interest in a specialized topic and acquiring extraordinary amounts of factual information about it
- hypersensitivity to sensory stimuli

- uneven or asynchronous development
- persistence with work regardless of distractions or problems.

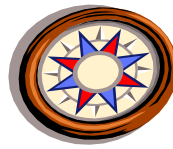
However, compared to children who are gifted but do not have Asperger's, children with this dual exceptionality may:

- have a very low tolerance for change
- have an overly rigid interpretation of rules; appear “black and white” in their thinking
- have pedantic speech or peculiar speech patterns
- desire relationships but have difficulty forming or maintaining friendships
- lack insight and awareness regarding the feelings, needs and interests of other people
- demonstrate a bizarre sense of humour
- be clumsy
- demonstrate emotional reactions that appear inappropriate to the context or event.

These children are at risk for social isolation and rejection by peers.

Asperger's Syndrome is diagnosed through a comprehensive assessment done by an experienced interdisciplinary team. This team could include developmental pediatricians, psychologists and/or psychiatrists. Parents should be involved in the assessment since developmental history is important to confirming or ruling out the diagnosis. The other important element of the assessment is insight into the motivation behind certain behaviours.

The two conditions, giftedness and Asperger's Syndrome, can mask one another, making identification of either more difficult, particularly when professionals are generally trained in either giftedness or Autism Spectrum Disorders, but rarely in both.



## Strategies for supporting your child who is gifted and has Asperger's Syndrome

- *Learn as much as you can about your child's exceptionalities.* Organization such as the Autism Society of Alberta can provide information, assistance and networking opportunities. Web sites can also be a good starting point—for example, [www.tonyattwood.com.au](http://www.tonyattwood.com.au) contains research and resources related to Asperger's Syndrome and giftedness.
- *Respect your child's individual differences.* There are a wide range of acceptable behaviours; not every child should have to display all of these behaviours, all of the time.
- *Recognize and build on your child's strengths.* It is important to see past your child's disorder and recognize the strengths that are undoubtedly there. This may involve identifying some seemingly idiosyncratic skills and unusual interests that can be broadened and shaped into useful knowledge. Special interests often provide the hook that can be used to expand these children's knowledge and skills into broader areas.
- *Find mentors for your child.* These children need direct and individualized support and coaching in their area of special interest. A successful mentorship can contribute greatly to the learning and social development of an individual with Asperger's Syndrome.
- *Use visual supports to manage day-to-day routines and social demands.* As much as possible, organize home life so daily activities occur at similar times and in similar ways in order to provide the structure these children need. Reinforce these routines with visual tools such as calendars and day timers so that children are better able to understand “what will happen next” or what they need to do.

- *Use a neutral tone when giving your child instructions.* Try not to show irritation when talking with these children. For some individuals with Asperger's Syndrome, anger may be the most accessible and easily understood emotion they can evoke in others. This restriction on available emotional sensation may lead them to develop a habit of "pushing people's buttons," leading to a negative interaction pattern.
- *Keep directions or corrections short.* Avoid lengthier explanations that increase the chance that the child will distort the meaning of the message.
- *Modify the sensory environment.* Extreme sensitivity to some kinds of sensory stimuli is common among children with Asperger's Syndrome. Respect these sensitivities and help your child develop coping strategies. Look for low tech solutions such as silicone earplugs to block out noise. Experiment with techniques such as hand massages to help your child calm down.
- *Teach social perception and social skills.* Use concrete visual approaches to model and teach specific social skills. Try practising in a mirror or developing comic strip conversations to develop social understanding. Check Web sites for social stories that can help children with Asperger's Syndrome manage regular and new routines.
- *Take an active role in supporting social relationships.* Look for ways to reduce your child's social differences. Model appropriate behaviour and provide opportunities for positive interactions with peers.
- *Protect your child from bullying and teasing.* Educate siblings and other family members about Asperger's Syndrome. If teasing is a problem at school, talk to teaching staff about proactive strategies for educating and building positive relationships with classmates. This might include social skills training or character education. Deciding to share information with peers is a group decision involving your child, you as a parent, and the teaching staff.
- *Work collaboratively with others.* Keep in close contact with teachers and other school staff and work with them to find solutions that are the best for your child. If you need additional support, there are a variety of resources in the community. Network with other parents of children who are gifted and have Asperger's Syndrome.

