

Parenting Twice-Exceptional Children

Nothing has ever been easy with David. Nothing. Ever.

David is a nice kid. He is smart and quiet. He blends in well enough that not many people, including teachers, notice the learning difficulties he has. He does not usually draw attention to himself; he does not get into trouble; he gets by OK. David, who is highly gifted, also has been diagnosed with severe Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD – no “H”), is highly gifted, has an Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD – Tricotillomania), and a learning disability (LD – dysgraphia and dyslexia).

Like many parents of twice-exceptional children, I always knew that David was different from other children. The differences were not subtle ones. As an infant, he began screaming before opening his eyes upon awakening. As a toddler and through adolescence, he would routinely and calmly break into a cold sweat and faint for reasons caused by stress, but not apparent to others. At nearly eighteen, he is still not driving because he forgets to practice so that he can take the driving test. It is better this way.

Transitions have always been very difficult for David. A painful reminder occurs with the evolution of every new day – the most consistent, but physically and mentally drastic transition we face. Bright lights, loud sounds and other external stimuli barely noticeable to others cause David physical and emotional pain. The obvious solution is to stay away from situations where these may transpire. However, staying away from people and life is not only not an option, but is unhealthy. Although his social interactions have been limited to a few individuals, I have noticed that David responds well to those few people. Perhaps it is because those few people have been a constant throughout his life; perhaps because of the empathy or acceptance he feels from those few individuals; perhaps because those feelings of acceptance are so rare, they mean more.

Children like David, with extreme sensitivities, are unusual. Because of the sometimes-intense reactions that they may display, they are commonly seen as sources of their own supposed digressions from ‘normal behavior.’ But these behaviors are normal for them. How does one inform and convince another that what he perceives to be normal is not? All of this can be understood and accepted by parents of these uniquely gifted children. Yet, to teachers and other adults, we still find ourselves defending them, saying, “No one would choose to impose this upon herself.” Neither the behaviors nor the diagnoses are choices. They are real, and are generally physiologically based. We need to help teach the children how to develop coping and managing strategies so they can build on their strengths and pursue their talents. And we need to help others understand this need.

The Davids of the world commonly follow similar paths. If the youth has no support system – a close family member or mentor – who seeks out assistance and resources, the child may likely drop out of school, whether in high school or in college. On the other hand, the twice-exceptional child who has an active advocate can develop his or her strengths like other gifted individuals. It takes perseverance.

The journey is as challenging as can be the child’s behaviors: it is trying and can be exhausting for parents. Parents fight a lifetime of emotions in any given day. Over time, and to some degree, parents may experience desperation, feel a strong need to protect their child, feel self-doubt, and self-blame. But we always have hope and love. With some effort and some luck, we find support and acceptance from others who care for, educate, and counsel uniquely gifted children.

We learn to accept, because we know that despite what others may believe, we have committed ourselves to guiding these misunderstood individuals. We accept that the challenges the child faces will continue, and for this reason, we must continue with our efforts, even when it reaches beyond our own children. We must continue to seek advice when needed, and must continue to educate others: parents, teachers, school administrators, school

counselors, and other caring professionals who work with children.

We must also understand our role. We cannot blame others for not understanding. Unless you have lived with and loved a child with dual-exceptionalities, you cannot have the full picture. It is our role to help educate others, to be the gentle reminder that not all gifted children have the ability to pursue their strengths and talents to the same degree, and to provide information that will guide others.

Because David is smart, he generally gets by in school. However, with each year in school, getting by has become increasingly, and understandably, more difficult. Elementary school teachers receive pre-service training in child development, special education, and other coursework that helps them to understand how children learn. Armed with this training, most elementary education teachers naturally create nurturing environments that are accepting of differences. A shift in teachers' mind-sets occurs in the transition through the middle school to high school years. We typically find that middle school teachers begin to make fewer accommodations for diverse learners. Middle school teachers come to expect certain behaviors from adolescents seized by hormones. Some may assume that all the students' behaviors are based upon choices students are intentionally making. This attitude results in the teachers' decreased effort to recognize the source of the behaviors being portrayed in the classroom, and to then seek ways to work with the child. It was at this grade level that I obtained a Section 504 Accommodation Plan for my son. I realized that he would need it going into high school.

I was both right and wrong. David did need the plan, and ideally, it would serve him well. A Section 504 Accommodation Plan* is a legally binding document that spells out the specific accommodations teachers need to make as determined by the disabling factor(s) the child experiences based on a specific diagnosis. 504 Plans are not given lightly. The parent or guardian must show that the disabling factor(s) prevent the student from learning in the classroom without modifications and/or accommodations made to the curriculum and instruction. I was wrong in believing that the plan would be the answer to the instructional modifications David needed. It was an attempt made so that David could survive in the accelerated and Advanced Placement classes he qualified to take.

High school teachers are content area specialists. Their training is in their domain – English, History, Chemistry, etc. Therein lies the problem for twice-exceptional students. The teachers oftentimes do not know that twice-exceptional students might not learn the content in the same way others students learn. High school teachers may see one to two hundred students a day. It is very difficult to keep track of the special learning needs of students in a large high school setting. The teachers have learned that they must treat students “equally,” so that they are “fair” and “consistent” in their expectations and grading. (Ouch.) However, we cannot blame the teachers; this is what they know; this is what is supported by their school administration. Schools are created in a very linear sequential way; twice-exceptional children are not. The traditional high school may not be the best fit for the twice-exceptional child. For those students and parents who select this model, there will most likely be challenges.

Our children did not seek out the exceptionalities they have. We know that no one would choose the pain and confusion that a twice-exceptional person endures. I have spent decades seeking answers to unanswerable questions. My efforts to guide others have directed my own life. As I have struggled along this journey, I have found explanations and understanding. I found relief in the recognition that I am not alone. For those of you struggling along this journey with me, I invite you to join the SENG community. At SENG's summer gifted conferences, and through their online Community Forums, parents, children, educators and mental health professionals interact and learn with others who share similar concerns. You may also wish to support SENG's mission by offering financial donations to this non-profit organization. I encourage you to explore the SENG website to discover the myriad of ways you can join others who seek to support the emotional needs of the gifted.

Recommended reading:

- *Learning Outside the Lines*, by Jonathon Mooney
- *Uniquely Gifted*, edited by Kiesa Kay

- *The Visual-Spatial Learner*, by Linda Silverman
- *Guiding the Gifted Child*, by James T. Webb, Elizabeth Meckstroth, and Stephanie Tolan
- *Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnoses of Gifted Children and Adults*, by Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchak

*A student eligible for Section 504 is defined as:

An individual who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, has a record of such impairment or is regarded as having such an impairment. The law sets no list of specific diseases and conditions that constitute physical or mental impairments forth. The criteria are tied to whether the disability substantially limits a major life activity, such as learning.

Dina Brulles is the Gifted Education Coordinator for the Glendale Elementary School District, a Faculty Associate at Arizona State University, and President of the Arizona Association for Gifted and Talented. This is her second year coordinating the SENG Children's Program and her first year on the SENG Board.