



No One Said It Was Easy: Challenges of Parenting Twice-Exceptional Children

Linda C. Neumann | FALL/WINTER 2005

Linda C. Neumann is the editor and copublisher of 2e: Twice-Exceptional Newsletter, a bimonthly publication that focuses on twice-exceptional children, those who are gifted and have learning or attention difficulties. The audience includes parents of twice-exceptional children plus educators, advocates, and social service, medical, and mental health professionals who work with these children.

Gifted children who also have one or more learning deficits are an enigma to all those around them. These twice-exceptional (2e) children display many of the characteristics of typical gifted children; but they are hampered by learning deficits that interfere with typical childhood development. Parents of 2e children must first seek professionals who can accurately assess and diagnose their children; come to terms with their child's twice exceptionality; and finally, find the right learning environment for their child.

Many years ago, as a college student, I took an introductory course in psychology. We were required to serve as guinea pigs in experiments that more advanced students conducted. In one, I had to give answers to some fairly simple questions and math problems. With each answer, I found myself completely out of

sync with the four other people in the room. Before too long, I figured out what was probably going on. My reaction to the situation was the focus of the experiment: would I go with what I thought was right, or would I go along with the crowd?

I remember how uncertain and uncomfortable it felt to be in that situation, even when I knew what was going on. As the parent of twice-exceptional (2e) children, I often remember that experiment and the way it made me feel. In raising my children, those feelings have often returned as I ponder: should I do what feels right for my kids, or do I follow conventional thought?

Parents of 2e kids find themselves with a foot in each of two worlds: giftedness and special needs. Straddling these two worlds is what makes our experiences as 2e parents so unique and is often what leaves us so uncertain. Having this combined perspective affects many aspects of our parenting, in particular what we ask for and expect of our children's teachers, coaches, peers, relatives, and the professionals who work with our children. It often makes us feel that we need to explain their differences to others as well as protect them from the opinions and judgments of those who can't see what's hidden, be it their gifts or their disabilities.

In this article we'll consider some questions that all parents of twice-exceptional children face: What sets our 2e children apart from others and makes our job of parenting them such a challenge? What does it take to meet these challenges?

When Gifts and Deficits Meet: The Challenge of 2e Kids

Twice-exceptional children have two sets of conflicting traits, one related to their high capabilities, the other to their limitations. Like other intellectually gifted children, they are likely to think in different ways from average children and to experience the world differently. Often, they display many of the characteristics typical of gifted children, such as:

- intensity and sensitivity
- greater asynchrony than average children—that is, a bigger gap between their mental age and chronological age

- highly developed curiosity
- precocious development and use of language
- early interest in mathematics
- tendency toward divergent (creative and unusual) thinking
- ability, from an early age, to remember large amounts of information
- unusual sense of humor
- advanced moral reasoning about issues related to fairness and justice (Lovecky, 2005; Silverman, 2005; Webb, Amend, Webb, Goerss, Beljan, & Olenchak, 2005)

Unlike other gifted children, those who are twice exceptional find themselves hampered by deficits that interfere with their ability to perform the tasks that classroom learning requires. The deficits, often invisible to others, can do any of the following:

- interfere with their ability to make sense of visual or auditory information
- make it hard to correctly interpret social cues, like facial expressions and tone of voice
- limit the functioning of short-term memory
- take the form of language-based disorders that make reading, writing, mathematics, or verbal expression difficult
- appear as a mood disorder that leaves the child anxious or depressed or an attention deficit that makes it hard for the child to sit still and focus
- hamper fine or gross motor skills
- interfere with the way the child's brain organizes and interprets information taken in through the sensory experiences of touch, taste, smell, sight, and sound, as well as body placement and movement. (With deficits of this type, in sensory processing, a child experiences the world quite differently from others. For example, the lights, sounds, and smells of the classroom might be painfully intense for the child, making concentration on lessons difficult.)

As a result of deficits like these, twice-exceptional students may display behaviors and characteristics that can be baffling, annoying, or even infuriating to the adults around them. For instance, these students might:

- forget to do or follow through with tasks
- display an uneven academic pattern, with a typical profile being strengths in math and content areas and weaknesses in language arts, especially written language
- require more time to process language and respond than would be expected of someone with high intelligence
- have a poor sense of time and difficulty estimating the time needed to complete tasks
- have difficulty with personal organization and lose their possessions
- be unable to stay on task and stick to a schedule
- have difficulty with multistep instructions and tasks to be done sequentially
- find it hard to employ systematic strategies for solving problems
- have poor handwriting and spelling

(Birely, 1995; Seay, 2005; Maker & Udall, 1985)

Such a combination of strengths and limitations leads to children with unique, and often quirky, profiles. They can have difficulty finding peers and, as a result, may have a small number of friends or no friends at all. Coping with their deficits can take a toll on their stamina, leaving these children exhausted from the strain after a day at school. Furthermore, having to confront these deficits day in and day out in the classroom can take a toll on the 2e child's self-esteem. As psychologist and author Linda Silverman (2003) states, "It's emotionally damaging to be unacceptable in the place you spend six hours of every day for thirteen critical years."

The Challenges That Parents of Twice-Exceptional Children Face

Perhaps the greatest challenge that parents of 2e children face is trying to make sense of what they're seeing—the uneven performance at school, the low self-esteem, the difficult behavior. These children are easy to label and pigeonhole. People do it all the time with statements such as: “They're just lazy; they're just troublemakers; they're disabled and we can't expect too much from them.”

It can take a long time, plenty of money, and a great deal of frustration to get a more accurate picture of what's really going on with a 2e child. Parents often face a daunting task searching for professionals with the skills, experience, and insight needed to accurately assess and diagnose their children and then give parents the help they need. Oftentimes, the search doesn't end until children are in middle school, high school, or even college.

Another of the challenges that parents face is coming to terms with their child's twice-exceptionality. It's often a matter of letting go of the child you *thought* you had and learning to celebrate the child you *do* have. For instance, parents may see from early on that their child is very bright and creative. They might imagine what the school years will bring—the outstanding report cards, the honors and awards, the full scholarship. However, few 2e kids match that stereotypical image of a gifted child; and for parents, it may be hard to give up that traditional view of success. It may be even harder to continually answer the question that puzzled relatives and others in their lives often ask: “If that child is so smart, then why . . . ?” It is the same type of question that most parents of 2e kids probably ask themselves from time to time. There can be difficult emotions for parents to deal with as well—grief from knowing that their child has a disability and guilt that comes from not seeing it sooner or, on the other hand, from not recognizing the child's gifts sooner.

A third challenge for parents is finding the right learning environment for their children. According to the book *To Be Gifted and Learning Disabled* (Baum & Owen, 2004), this environment is one that provides “educational experiences that assure appropriate challenge, while offering instruction, accommodations, and compensation strategies that minimize the effects of the learning disability.”

Some parents may be fortunate to live in districts with programs that meet this description, specifically designed for twice-exceptional students. Most

parents are not. For those in the latter group, finding the right learning environment can be an elusive dream. Some years the mix of teachers, administrators, classmates, curriculum, and services work better for their child than others. For some children, it never works at all. When the blend is right, the child is happy, the parents are grateful, and the year goes well. When it isn't, grades can plummet along with the child's self-esteem, and stress can plague the family.

Ways to Meet the Challenges

Unfortunately, there is no handbook on the market titled *Successfully Raising Your Twice-Exceptional Child*. However, following some general guidelines can help parents meet the challenges they face.

1. Follow your instincts. You know your child better than anyone, as the old saying goes. Be skeptical of those who are quick to label him or her as lazy. Use your own knowledge of your child to question what might underlie problematic behavior. Keep in mind, however, that seeking the opinions and advice of professionals is often necessary; and listening to what they have to say with an open mind is essential.

2. Be willing to deviate from the accepted path. What's right for many gifted children may not work for your twice-exceptional child. Consider alternatives, despite the raised eyebrows or doubtful comments that others might offer. For example, you may find that you need to do some of the following:

- Consider leaving the public school system for a private school if your child's learning or emotional needs are not being met.
- Come up with different options for your nonathletic child to compete and excel, such as science and math competitions or chess tournaments.
- Abandon the pressures of structured schedules and homework for the more relaxed pace of homeschooling.
- Seek out alternative means of learning—virtual (online) schools, tutoring, mentorships, Talent Search classes, and specialty summer camps.

- Forget about traditional school timelines. Your child may need to take longer to finish high school or college; or, on the other hand, your child may benefit from acceleration, given the proper support and accommodations.

3. Educate yourself. One way to make difficult or unorthodox decisions concerning your child and feel comfortable about them is to learn as much as you can about who your child is, what he or she needs, who can help, and what options are available to you. Armed with a solid understanding of these factors, you'll be better equipped to take the steps that are right for your child.

4. Find support. Sharing with other parents of 2e children is perhaps the most important thing you can do for yourself and your child. Just as our 2e children need true peers, so do we as their parents. Joining groups that focus just on the gifted or just on learning disabilities probably won't provide the needed support. Parents of 2e children are likely to feel isolated in such groups because the gifted parents don't want to talk about accommodations, for instance, and the LD parents aren't concerned with issues like acceleration. Parent support groups and online discussion groups exist that focus directly on the needs of twice-exceptional children. Sharing with other 2e parents will open up possibilities for your child that you never considered before. When you learn about other parents who have veered off the traditional path of educating their children—and found success—you may feel less trepidation about doing the same.

As mentioned before, there is no handbook for raising a twice-exceptional child. You're writing your own as you go. You're bound to feel uneasy and doubtful at times, but having confidence in your instincts and judgment and the knowledge and support to back your decisions will bolster you for doing what you think is right for your twice-exceptional child rather than feeling pressured to go along with the crowd.

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