

# Parents' stories

A group of parents belonging to the Christchurch branch of the NZAGC have put together this guide to raising twice-exceptional (2E) children.

## 'Seeking child development supporter: lifelong contract.'

So, you want to apply for the job as parent of a 2E child? Good choice. You are in for a bit of a challenge, but we think you will find the rewards are well worth it. Here, have a look at the application form.'

## Major objectives of your role

You will be entrusted with a brand-new human being who has a world of potential ahead of him or her. This child may be faced with some significant challenges along the way. It is your challenge and opportunity to nurture the child and help him/her develop into the amazing person they can become.

## Rewards of this role

- An opportunity to join the world of an interesting and exciting child and take a fresh look at everything around you
- A fresh perspective on just about everything (if you can listen to how they think about things and challenge your own pre-existing ideas)
- A more compassionate outlook on life, which can begin to encompass more than just your own child.

## Specific challenges of this role

- Identifying what challenges your child faces. It will not always be obvious that your child has a learning challenge, and this often may not be identified until after he/she has had many years of schooling.
- Helping to maintain your child's self-confidence and meeting their social and emotional needs
- Managing your own frustration about the complexity that such a child can add to your life, and the anxiety you feel about the hardships that he/she may have to deal with.

## Personal qualities of a 2E parent

### Desirable:

- Willingness to learn (if your child has challenges that you don't personally experience, it is a big help if you can try and find out some more about those challenges and how you can best help your child)
- Confidence – to remember that you know your child and are his/her best advocate

- Courage – sometimes you might have to take a stand when your child really needs your support
- Patience – gifted kids are exciting and invigorating, but some days they can be hard work. Add in the frustrations of a 2E child and some days will call on all of your reserves.
- The ability to recognise that you need support. Remember, it takes a village to raise a child. Work out where to look for supportive people to help you in your role. This could be mentors for your child, a supportive friend for you, or a local club where both you and your child can find others like you to talk about the joys and hurdles of being a 2E parent.

### Essential:

- An ability to listen – really listen – to your child. Sometimes they just want someone to hear how they feel about things, and to agree to be available to talk some more when they are ready.
- A sense of humour.

## STORY 1

We always thought our son was such good company and so interesting to be around, and he always wanted to be around us and other adults; he was very social indeed from a young age! He always had such insightful opinions; we were constantly in awe! We figured we were just your usual doting parents of a bright first child.

During his early primary years, this bright, social child started to change and experienced a lot of self-doubt. His achievements at school didn't seem to match what we thought he was capable of, but worst of all, his self-esteem was taking a nose dive. This was when we knew something had to change.

We had cognitive and psychometric tests done with a child psychologist. We discovered some very interesting things about our son and for the first time heard the term 'twice exceptional'. So, not only was he gifted (which is hard enough to accept as a label), but twice exceptional! I must admit that when I heard the term I was a bit uncomfortable – not just exceptional once, but twice!!

We started reading more about 2E and visual spatial learners, and the light bulb went on for us and him! We now felt better equipped to set him up to achieve at school. Also, our son had a better

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We aren't interested in the competitive sport of child-rearing

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understanding of the answers to some of his questions about himself, such as: 'Why is it that the things I am so good at don't matter at school, and all the things that I can't do are so important at school?'

Translated, this meant that because of low scores in coding, anything that involved handwriting or copying was going to be very slow and laborious. It's so hard to remember all those words you want to get down if your fingers won't form the letters quickly enough (it's much easier and faster to spell simple words than the longer words on your mind!). But at home he could produce a detailed house design from scratch, before breakfast, on his architectural designer suite software. Unfortunately, there was not much call for that at school!

A major part of this process was the decision to find a school that better suited our son's needs. We found a school that is quite accommodating when it comes to computer use. Their attitude to preparing the children for life as adults seemed an important focus, along with their philosophy that everyone has different strengths that just need to be channelled. These aspects of the school appealed to us.

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A year and a half on from our initial contact with the child psychologist, we have a son who is very aware of how to get the best from his time at school. We are lucky that although he must handwrite, he also has the opportunity to learn touch typing and can write on a computer in class, too. He knows that sitting at the front of the class where there are fewer distractions is better. He also knows that his strength lies in verbal communication – speech and drama is the highlight of the week. He can now see that he has abilities he couldn't recognise before and is so much happier for it. And so are we.

We are so proud of what our son has achieved and are pleased that we trusted ourselves as parents to seek the advice we needed.

## STORY 2

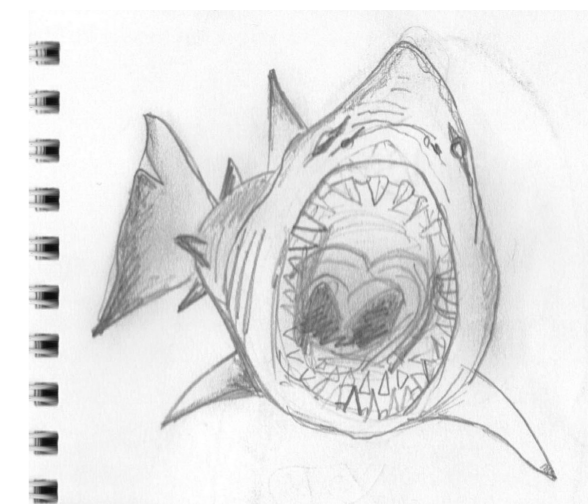
Our journey started when our son was just a toddler. There were subtle differences – for example, being moved to tears by a piece of classical music, and talking early and prolifically before being able to walk.

I had a feeling that something was different, but with a first child you work it all out as you go along. He was plagued with ear infections and had his first lot of grommets at 14 months.

The pre-school years were busy indeed, with our son always asking 'why?!' He would stay on task if it was a subject that interested him for hours, particularly non-fiction.

An intense, almost obsessive interest in fishing and all things marine developed, only to be succeeded by ICT at the age of eight. To his credit, he has turned into a very competent little fisherman.

As a young child, our son always gravitated towards adults for conversation rather than the other kids. He was able to socialise with children, but I think he found adults more interesting to talk to (especially on the subject of fishing). ➤





The first two years of primary school seemed to be fine; he attended Reading Recovery in Yr 1, but once he mastered reading he moved ahead of his peers quickly. He was always a bit clumsy and found skipping and ball sports particularly challenging.

Yr 3 was a big one for him and one of discovery for us. His social development didn't seem to be matching that of his peers and he had his first experience of bullying – and, unfortunately, little support in school. We had a very unhappy boy on our hands, who was suffering physical symptoms of stress. We could no longer just see how things went; this was a real turning point for us all.

A dear friend saw our struggle and gave me a book to read called *The Out Of Sync Child*. She had been down a similar path and recognised similarities. The light bulb went on for me, his mother. My first contact was a member of the Explorers committee, whose advice was fantastic. She put me in touch with an educational psychologist and an occupational therapist.

A year down the road, we now know he has dyspraxia and that he is strongly visual spatial in his learning style. He says he thinks in a series of pictures in his head, a bit like a movie. His visual memory is excellent. He has a real talent for art. He is a big-picture thinker, grasping complex ideas quickly, but still struggles with basic details, like reading measurements.

We made the decision to move him to an independent school, with smaller classes and a more prescriptive teaching style. Academically, he is making good progress, but like many twice-exception children his talents are often masked. After seeing an educational psychologist and being assessed, I guess we do now have a label. But far more importantly, we have an understanding of why there are, at times, challenges. I am a far better advocate for my son now.

The Explorers Club has been the most wonderful support. I was nervous about taking him to the first club day and didn't really know what to expect. We were made to feel part of it right from the start and it struck me how easy it was for our son to fit in. We have all had similar experiences and there is a wealth of knowledge to be found over a cup of tea.

I am so very proud of my son; despite the challenges that face him, he gets on with it and holds his head up high. The traits that I see in him will make him a most wonderful and interesting adult.

### STORY 3

Given the choice, I wouldn't change a thing about my child; well, maybe he could be a bit more organised about getting to school in the morning, but otherwise, he is the incredible child he is because of the sum of his experiences. He is compassionate and caring. He thinks deeply about issues and can have fascinating discussions that make me rethink my perspective quite often. If he sees an injustice he is quite likely to actually do something constructive about it, often to his own detriment – he doesn't just stand on the sidelines,

pontificating. He has learned compassion at a very early age.

Our son is highly intelligent and loves learning about nearly anything in depth. His dyslexia and difficulties with the physical task of writing, however, make it very hard for him to contribute easily in the classroom. He also struggles with sensory issues, which exacerbate his ability to block out the classroom noise and concentrate on his work. His daily lot is to be continually tasked with fairly mundane activities that he cannot perform. This significantly challenges his feeling of self worth. When he first started school, he often told us how 'stupid' he was, because the tasks that he could see were simple for other children, he simply could not do.

He is usually a very calm and measured child, and is very loving. He can, however, get over-stimulated and winds up to an uncontrollable level of excitement if not carefully managed; the usual signal that the point of no return has been reached is the high-pitched cackle and fast breathing. His ability to calm himself down is not yet within his control, although he works very hard at it. It is very wrenching as a parent when he clings to you after one of his 'whirling dervish' episodes and begs you to help him, as he really wants to be calm.

We dearly love our child and our goal is for him to be able to fully participate in whatever career or lifestyle he chooses when he reaches adulthood. That isn't always a straightforward outcome for a 2E child. It seems to us that one of the biggest challenges for us as parents will be to maintain his self-esteem. We will also try to ensure that his wonderful enthusiasm for learning is not dampened by the everyday reminders of his learning challenges, and, if possible, make sure that he gets enough opportunities for challenging learning to avoid the pit of 'problem behaviours' that can result from an under-employed mind!

Each 2E child will have his own individual challenges and personality issues, and sometimes as a parent you can question your ability to make the best choices. We aren't perfect and we certainly do not always get it right. I must admit to being 'grumpy mummy' on more occasions than I would like. The important thing is that our son knows we love him, no matter what, and that we will be there for him when it gets tough.

So far, the factors that have helped us most in our particular journey as a family include:

- Identification of the problem(s) as early as possible. In our case, we were uneasy that while his verbal skills were so very strong, he was very reluctant to pick up a pencil. And despite loving to listen to complex stories, he would turn his head away from his early reader books.

We had our child assessed and his high level of potential was identified – as well as some areas where he was likely to face

challenges in demonstrating those abilities in the classroom situation. We have then been able to research his issues and ask for professional help to identify the everyday supports that will help him. Support groups can be useful, as they can cut down on energy spent in re-inventing the wheel; they also let you know you are not alone.

- Letting our child know about his potential – as well as the fact that there were some things that might be more difficult for him than for other children. This really helped him. He already knew that he was different, and being able to understand made him feel much more in charge of himself. His assessment also demonstrated his ability and gave him the confidence to accept that he was in fact a clever child.
- We give him as many opportunities as we can at home to utilise his strengths – and we encourage the school to focus on what he can do well and allow him to demonstrate his knowledge in alternative ways. For example, he is now tested for spelling and maths orally, rather than adding writing into the mix. He is allowed to use a computer for 'writing' his stories. The teacher has added a 'philosophy' discussion into reading time – so he can now freely use his analytical and verbal skills with no impediment once a day. Every little bit counts.
- We encourage effort (good results are an incidental feature, not the goal).
- We have altered, and regularly check, our expectations. We aren't interested in the competitive sport of child-rearing, but you still have to guard against imposing your own expectations onto your child.

Last week he was finally moved up a spelling level. When he was pre-tested on the weekly word list he got two out of 15 right. I breathed in slowly and thought, 'Here it comes, he is going to feel useless all over again.' Instead, he said happily, 'Isn't that great? I will be doing so much better by the end of the week!' The ability to persevere will, we hope, become one of his greatest strengths.

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- We have also tried to work out what it is like to live inside his head. The old saying 'walk a mile in my shoes' has helped us to be a lot more understanding if he doesn't always do things the way that most of the rest of us do. If we all did things the same way, what a boring place the world would become.
- We talk of the future, because the 'now' can some days be hard to deal with. Inside his head is a rich and detailed world that will only become truly apparent when he becomes an adult and has the full freedom to pursue his interests in a way that suits his abilities.
- We laugh whenever we can.

Now I have something to ask you. It doesn't require a huge contribution of your time, energy or money. It is pretty simple, really. But know that it will make my journey – and that of my child – immeasurably easier.

The one thing I would ask of you is to try to be understanding in your interactions with my child and the many others like him.

When my child has become so highly excited he cannot sit still, his arms are flailing and his voice becomes faster and higher, please don't look at him with disdain or decide he is a 'naughty' child. If he finally commits his pencil to paper and scratches out his indecipherable story, please don't lecture him on full stops and capital letters; ask him to tell you more about his story. Maybe even ask him if you could help him write some more down while he talks to you. If at the end of the day (week, month), when he has sat quietly, disturbing no one, but entering not a single thing in any of his textbooks, don't assume he is stupid or lazy – he isn't. Please ask yourself: how can I meet this child's needs? Can you be the one to spark the interest in his eyes?

