



The challenge of the highly gifted/special needs child.

Meredith Warshaw

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Parents of highly gifted children are often concerned that everything comes too easily to their children. These children learn that they can do everything academic without trying. Parents worry that the children will fall apart the first time they hit an academic task they cannot do effortlessly (and this worry often has a foundation in reality). This is often a large part of the impetus for grade skips or other methods of providing adequate academic challenge.

The problem for twice-exceptional children – that is, children who are gifted but also have learning disabilities or other special needs – is that they learn an even more damaging lesson: that if they cannot do a task right away, they won't be able to do it at all. Everything in school is either too difficult or too easy – nothing is "just right." This is exacerbated by the frequently occurring problem of under-identification; that is, because highly gifted children are so good at compensating for their special needs, their problems often go undetected until they finally "hit the wall." By this time, a great deal of emotional and academic damage may have been done.

Teachers and parents often are unaware that children with special needs may be able to do a task sometimes, but not always. Their coping skills may fall apart when they are tired or ill. They may be able to muster the extra mental/physical/emotional energy to do a difficult task if the subject is one that engages them and they are fresh and rested, but not at the end of the day on a topic they dislike. They may also learn that it is dangerous to perform well, because they will then be held to a standard that they can't maintain consistently ("I know you can do it, because I've seen you") – in other words, they get punished for sometimes succeeding.

Children with special needs can tire quickly when doing non-physical tasks, because they are so much harder for them than for kids without the special needs. For example, imagine spending the day in school with earmuffs on, so that you had trouble hearing – you would be pretty tired! It would take you longer to figure out what was being said, and by the time you figured it out, the class would have moved on. You would be spending so much mental energy decoding what was said that you would have less left for actually thinking about it. If you have ever learned a foreign language, remember how much work it was to carry on a conversation when you had not yet become fluent. This is what school is like for children with auditory processing problems.

There are no easy answers for helping our twice-exceptional kids learn to tolerate difficulty, especially after they have been burned. It certainly helps if you can recognize when a task is hard for them and let them know that you understand. Starting easy and gradually easing them into more difficult work can help. Doing a task together (for example, co-writing a story with the adult acting as "scribe") can be a great way to start. One of the most important parts is being aware that there is a basis for the sometimes seemingly irrational over-reactions of twice-exceptional kids.

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