



Tips for Parents: Meeting the Needs of Twice-Exceptional Children

Warshaw, M.
Davidson Institute for Talent Development
2002

Source: Davidson Young Scholar Seminar

This article by Meredith Warshaw caters to the many highly gifted children that have additional special needs such as learning disabilities, ADHD, Asperger Syndrome, sensory integration disorder, etc. These needs can be very challenging, both in terms of identification, and in terms of finding ways to address both the gifted and special needs sides of the child adequately. The author offers advice on a number of issues (i.e. assessment, schooling, siblings) as well as a number of resources for parents.

Many highly gifted children have other special needs -- learning disabilities, ADHD, Asperger Syndrome, sensory integration disorder, etc. This can be very challenging, both in terms of identification (since gifted children can often use the giftedness to partially compensate for the special need, making it both giftedness and special needs harder to discover), and in terms of finding ways to address both the gifted and special needs sides of the child adequately. This online seminar focused on a few topics that are useful for anyone trying to navigate the maze of educating a twice-exceptional child.

The challenge of the highly gifted/special needs child
 Parents of high 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 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.

The Wechsler Intelligence Test (WISC III) as an assessment tool

The WISC III is probably the most commonly used IQ test for children. Although it cannot be used to make diagnoses, certain patterns of results combined with observations made by the tester can suggest that a child receive further assessment for possible special needs.

Here are a few things to note:

1. The Arithmetic subscale is in the verbal section - it requires the ability to understand word problems and keep the information in memory while solving the problems (i.e., it is not a paper and pencil test)
2. The Comprehension subscale is based on understanding social situations.
3. Digit Span is a measure of auditory memory.
4. A child with hearing or auditory processing problems may have trouble with the verbal subscales (some won't, since some will do fine in a quiet, one-on-one setting, especially if they can see the tester's mouth and lip-read).
5. The performance scales all have time limits, and almost all give bonuses for speed. This penalizes children who are either slow processors, have fine motor problems (i.e., take longer to manipulate objects even when they understand the relationships involved) or who are perfectionists and want to be sure they are right before moving on.
6. The performance scales all require visual processing and/or fine motor skills. A child with poor vision or motor problems will do poorly on these tests.

There are multiple reasons a child may do poorly on a given scale. This is why the WISC cannot be used for diagnosis. For example, doing worse on the PIQ (performance IQ) than the VIQ (verbal IQ) could be due to a child having trouble understanding spatial relationships due to a learning disability, having vision problems, being a slow processor, having fine-motor or visual/motor coordination problems, or being a perfectionist. This is why it is so important to get a thorough written report, not just numbers. The report should include the tester's observations about the child's behaviors during testing and, if relevant, the types of errors made. For example, knowing that a child did poorly on block design because she could not figure out how the pieces fit together and therefore did not solve the puzzles tells you something very different than knowing that the child did poorly on block design because she solved all the puzzles but did it slowly and methodically and therefore did not get the speed bonuses.

The article, [Tests and Measurements for the Parent, Teacher, Advocate & Attorney](#) is a useful starting point for understanding more about assessment.

Working with schools

Before starting to advocate for your child, I highly recommend a visit to the web page: [Wrightslaw - Special Education](#). Read the article [EMERGENCY! CRISIS! HELP! First Steps for the Parent Attorney or Advocate](#) before doing anything else. Once you have read that, it's worth browsing the rest of the site. Wrightslaw was created by Pete Wright and Pam Darr Wright. Pete understands what it means to be twice-exceptional; he is a special education lawyer who has argued and won a special education case in front of the U.S. Supreme Court, and has ADHD and dyslexia.

One problem people often run into when advocating for twice-exceptional children is that the children use their giftedness to compensate for their special needs so well that they perform at grade level. This can make it difficult to persuade schools that they should provide remediation or accommodations. The "Lillie/Felton Letter" is a widely cited policy letter from the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) clearly stating that children do not have to fail classes in order to qualify for special education services. In this letter, the U.S. Department of Education, in a written response to questions from the Learning Disabilities Association of North Carolina, stated that "...each child who is evaluated for a suspected learning disability must be measured against his or her own expected performance, and not against some arbitrary general standard." For more information, see [Passing Grades, IQ Scores & Evaluations of Students with Learning Disabilities: Letter to Lillie/Felton](#).

Pete and Pam Wright (of Wrightslaw) make a very important point about semantics -- it is crucial that you never use the word "best" in a meeting with the school. Children are legally entitled to a "Free Appropriate Public Education", not the "best" education. Therefore, you must always argue that your child needs particular remediation or accommodations in order to get an appropriate education. Eliminate the word "best" from your vocabulary when dealing with schools.

IEPs (Individualized Education Plans) must have objective, measurable goals. Unfortunately, schools often want to use a child's satisfactory grades as proof that the child is making progress. This is not acceptable -- grades are subjective and using them to measure progress puts teachers under pressure to inflate grades to show that a child does not need special education. The Wrightslaw site has an excellent section on [IEPs](#). I highly recommend reading it before going into an IEP meeting. The articles provide clear instructions on what should be contained in a quality IEP, as well as information on tactics and strategy for achieving it. The following articles in that section are particularly helpful:

- The chapter on SMART IEPs from the Wrights' book "Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy - The Special Education Survival Guide (FETA)"
- Your Child's IEP: Practical and Legal Guidance for Parents
http://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/iep_guidance.html
- [Wrightslaw Game Plan: Writing Good IEP Goals and Objectives](#)

Wrightslaw also has a list of recommended books on IEPs.

Siblings of twice-exceptional children

The book *It can be difficult for parents to enable siblings of special needs children to understand that parents are not favoring the special needs child, that he or she truly has severe learning issues, yet at the same time letting the NT (neuro-typical -- a term often used to denote people who do not have special needs) children know that we empathize with their frustration.*

It can seem unfair to a child when parents have different expectations for different children. There are no easy answers. One thing that sometimes helps is for parents to explain that they expect the same amount of difficulty for each child where difficulty is measured by Here are a few things that can be helpful:

1. Let the NT child know that you realize how frustrating this is and that it can seem that you have different standards for the special-needs child.
2. Have the NT child try writing a 1-page essay using his non-dominant hand, being told it will be evaluated for content and spelling and neatness, and see how tired he is at the end, then explain that this is how his sibling feels after many academic tasks that would be easy if he didn't have his learning disabilities.
3. Let the child tell you if any of the expectations you have for her seem unreasonable -- not in comparison with your expectations of her sibling, but on their own merits. If she thinks something is unreasonable, listen to her argument and see if there is any room for compromise.
4. Children with special needs often need extra attention from their parents, which can be hard on the NT siblings. If possible, try to schedule some special time for the NT child with one of his parents -- he may feel that his sibling gets all the attention and he only gets attention when he's in trouble.
5. Be sure that you are not expecting the NT child to hide her achievements in order to keep her sibling from feeling badly.
6. Make sure that you recognize the NT child's achievements, not just his short-comings. Otherwise, he can feel that he is in a double-bind -- he gets in trouble if he is not perfect, but does not get praise for doing well because that is what's expected of him.

Additional Resources

Websites

The website [Uniquely Gifted](#) is my collection of online resources relevant to twice-exceptional children. It includes sections on specific special needs, online support groups, advocacy, homeschooling, dealing with bullying, and resources for professionals.

[LD Online](#) is always a good starting point for learning more about specific special needs.

[Wrightslaw](#) has a wealth of information on advocacy and special needs law. If you do nothing else, follow their advice on keeping a paper trail and on how to write letters that will help rather than hurting your cause.

Email lists

Visit the website [GT-World](#) for access to an email list for families with gifted/special needs children.

[GT-Spec-Home](#) is an email list for families homeschooling gifted/special needs kids.

The [Uniquely Gifted](#) website has a section on online support groups that includes email lists focused on specific special needs.

Video

There is an excellent video available from LD Online called [How Difficult Can This Be -- The F.A.T. City Workshop](#). The website description says: "In this workshop, Richard Lavoie ... leads a group of parents, educators, psychologists, and children through a series of exercises that cause Frustration, Anxiety, and Tension...feelings all too familiar to children with learning disabilities. By dramatizing the classroom experience so vividly, Lavoie lets us see the world through the eyes of a child. At the end of the workshop, participants discuss strategies for working effectively with learning disabled children." The workshop vividly illustrates what it is like for a child with a processing problem/LD in the usual classroom setting. You may be able to borrow it from the library.

[Dr. Mel Levine](#) has a book called [Educational Care](#), which discusses strategies for dealing with various learning difficulties. Levine uses what he refers to as a "phenomenological" approach -- that is, he takes the useful tack of looking at particular types of difficulties, rather than diagnoses, and making suggestions of how to work with them (i.e., he has sections addressing problems with memory, writing, etc., that can be applied to any child with those problems, not just those with formal diagnoses of LDs). This means that when you use his book, you don't have to worry about whether your child meets exact criteria for a specific special need, but can instead investigate his suggestions for particular problem areas.

Dr. Levine has some interesting perspectives on special needs. There is an article posted on his website called: [Motivation: The Key to Academic Success](#). The article makes some very good points that can be applicable to homeschooling as well as working with children in school, even though he writes in terms of grades.

For example, Levine says: "While it's true that almost everybody would love to get good grades, there's more to motivation than simply wanting them. You get motivated only if you think you really have a chance of getting what you want (like good grades). If you think you have no chance of getting what you want, even if you try, you lose your motivation. Another part of motivation has to do with how hard it would be to get something. If you think that you could possibly get good grades but that it would take superhuman effort- too many very hard long hours for you to get those good grades -- you might lose your motivation because all that effort would not be worth it to you."

Levine has also written two books directed at children with special needs: *Keeping a Head in School : A Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders* (for children ages 11 and up) and *All Kinds of Minds : A Young Student's Book About Learning Abilities and Learning Disorders* (for children under 11 years old), Educators Pub Service. Many people appreciate Dr. Levine's approach to children with learning differences, and his way of explaining them to kids.

Books for Kids

Some useful books for our special-needs children include:

[Fighting Invisible Tigers: A Stress Management Guide for Teens](#) by Earl Hipp. Free Spirit Publishing.

[The School Survival Guide for Kids With LD](#) by Rhoda Woods Cumming, Gary L. Fisher, Pamela Espeland. Free Spirit Press.

[Perfectionism: What's Bad About Being Too Good?](#) By Miriam Adderholdt-Elliot and Jan Goldberg. Free Spirit Press.

[Putting on the Brakes : Young People's Guide to Understanding Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder](#) by Patricia O. Quinn & Judith M. Stern. Magination.

[When Nothing Matters Anymore : A Survival Guide for Depressed Teens](#) by Beverly Cobain. Free Spirit Publishing.

[Eli, the Boy Who Hated to Write: Understanding Dysgraphia](#) by Regina Richards and Eli Richards. RET Center Press. This book, written by a mother and son, is aimed at elementary and middle school students and presents a student's experience of dysgraphia.

Views from Our Shoes: Growing Up With a Brother or Sister With Special Needs edited by Donald Meyer. Woodbine House. It can be difficult having a special needs sibling. This book can lesson the isolation, as well as helping parents understand what it's like for their children.

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