

ABILITIES ONLY PARENTS SEE: the DIY guide for parents of the GLD/2e child.

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Contrasting Definitions

Most definitions of giftedness tend to define a surplus of abilities, for example:

“Children and youth with outstanding talent perform or show the potential for performing at remarkably high levels of accomplishment when compared with others of their age, experience or environment.

They exhibit high performance capability in intellectual, creative and/or artistic areas, possess an unusual leadership capacity, or excel in specific academic fields.”

United States Department of Education. (1993:26)

Unfortunately, it has proved to be exceedingly difficult to formulate a precise definition referring to Gifted and Learning Disabled (GLD) or Twice Exceptional (2e) students who are both gifted and also have a specific learning disability. While the definition of giftedness is based on positives, observable abilities, the definition of GLD/2e students is based on deficits, on what the child is unable to do and very few GLD/2e children present exactly the same characteristics.

Characteristics of the GLD/2e Child

The keywords when parenting or teaching a GLD/2e student are "personally meaningful and relevant". This has educational implications, particularly as the child moves through the school system, where much of what is taught in schools is not "personally meaningful and relevant". Therefore parents are more likely to observe gifted characteristics in their child outside of school, where the child is able to pursue interests and pastimes which are meaningful and relevant. Almost immediately the educational stage is set for conflict

between the teacher, who will generally recognize the child's shortcomings and the parents who see gifted abilities at home. While a few GLD/2e children are recognized immediately for their giftedness, many more are recognized for their deficits. Unfortunately many are never identified because they have been able to disguise their deficiencies.

Pre-School

The parents of a preschool GLD/2e student will observe a child who is bright, intelligent, has a wide vocabulary, uses it well to ask perceptive questions, who is a creative divergent thinker, and enjoy toys such as puzzles and jigsaws. Teachers of such a child, on the other hand, will notice that while the child has good visual spatial skills, there are other skill deficits, particularly in phonics which has implications for encoding and decoding language in later years (Stewart: 2003). Preschool teachers will also notice the beginnings of a gap between the potential and performance, in Gagné's (2003) terminology, between the gift and the talent. (Keenan:1996; Rivera, Murdock and Sexton: 1995)

Primary School

Often the school years become a battleground between parents, who see the gifted side of their child, and teachers who see the characteristics engendered by the specific learning disability. Teachers see a child with poor cognitive organisation, a child who finds it difficult to begin written work, who looks helplessly at a blank page, someone with plenty of good ideas but who simply cannot get them down on paper. This is the child who exhibits poor decision making, who when given a choice will select work which is inappropriate for their ability and knowledge level. Students like this also have lower persistence levels, thus they are more likely to give up instead of trying a different strategy. Teachers will say that work is incomplete, careless and inaccurate, that the child takes an inordinate amount of time to complete written work, which is rarely up to standard even after extra time (Kennedy: 2004). Teachers may also note that there is subtle language impairment (due to an incomplete grasp of phonics) and this of course leads to minor comprehension problems. In class, when the teacher asks a question the GLD/2e student thinking that he or she knows the answer, wildly waves his or her hand

in the air, trying to attract the teacher's attention, to be the first with the answer, only to find that he or she has ever so slightly misunderstood the question leading to an incorrect answer. Children being what they are, there may be laughter from other students in the class about the incorrect answer, and this leads the GLD/2e student to be less prepared to try and answer the next question. On an ongoing basis, these problems lead to an eroding sense of self efficacy as a learner. GLD/2e students often display impaired social competence, particularly in primary school; this is because they are less likely to understand body language and social cues, which other students seem to absorb automatically. Within the school, the GLD/2e student is often found in the library, or walking around with the teacher on yard duty because these are safe areas, the student has a chance to talk at an adult level and he or she is able to avoid the loneliness of being excluded from a group because of past poor social decision making. Inevitably this leads to decreasing self-esteem, anxiety about one's place socially and possibly even on to depression (Stewart: 2002).

Parents on the other hand see the child away from the school environment, where the child can enjoy working in areas of strength and avoid areas of weakness. They perceive the child who is: creative, with many ideas and questions; intuitive, able to make great leaps forward in their reasoning around a situation; empathic, someone who understands how others are feeling and responds to that person; altruistic, taking up causes which are personally important, and remaining committed to that cause over long periods of time.

Teachers also notice poor behavioral inhibition, where the child can't wait for his or her turn and simply has to interrupt, disrupting the class. They see a child who is impulsive, displays less insight into possible consequences, cannot link action with consequence (in the later years of schooling this also has implications for essay writing, where ideas have to be linked together in a logical and orderly sequence) and therefore seems to be in trouble far more often than other members of the class (Stewart: 2002). This social intrusiveness and lack of social awareness also contributes to rejection by peers who resent such activities. Many teachers will complain of physical or mental hyperactivity in the child, and some will misdiagnose Attention Deficit Disorder (Sousa: 2006). One very

important characteristic that teachers will notice is an impaired sense of time or sequence. This is not the child to send outside for a certain number of minutes and expect a prompt return on time!

Once again parents see a different side to all of this activity and movement. They see a child who is: enterprising, able to make their own way through busy or crowded conditions; mercurial and energetic, with a can-do attitude to getting things done; and entrepreneurial, someone who can see an idea that is about to happen, and turns it into a product which is appreciated by others.

Identification Signposts for Parents

Both teachers and parents will be in agreement however that without educational success, the stage is set for social and economic problems in adulthood. Therefore the earlier that the GLD/2e child can be identified, the earlier educational provisions can be set in place to assist development. As the child works his or her way through the school system, non-identification can result in frustration, increasingly lower self esteem and poor mental health (Stewart: 2002). The later the child is identified as GLD/2e, the more difficult it is for the child to change entrenched avoidance behaviors. It could also be argued that society benefits when the gifts and creative abilities of these students are recognized and developed into talents. Failure to identify becomes an accusation against the educational system and the society which produces it, as all children should have the opportunity to maximize their potential.

There are some signposts which parents can use to assist to ascertain if their child is both gifted and has a specific learning disability. Specific learning disabilities as a common occurrence are a fairly recent phenomenon. Knowledge of a genetic (familial) contribution is even more recent (Jensen: 2007). Academic recording of dyslexia has been noted for well over 100 years; however it was only in the 1960s that this information began to reach schools. Therefore, prior to the 1960s, parents are unlikely to be able to accurately track whether family members in previous generations were

diagnosed with a specific learning disability. The best that they can rely on would be anecdotal stories about someone in the family who was obviously very intelligent but left school as soon as he or she could because they were not "academically inclined". After the 1960s it should be much easier to trace a family history of specific learning disability combined with high intelligence, although the formal idea of a student who is both gifted and has a specific learning disability of some sort is even more recent, as can be seen by the dearth of information on this condition available in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Fortunately the amount of information available has grown exponentially and is easily available to both parents and teachers.

In general, for the first four years of a child's life, parents will probably notice few problems. It is likely they will simply think they have a bright intelligent child who is verbally very able and asks perceptive, divergent questions. Normally it is not until the child enters the school system and teachers begin to voice their concerns that parents begin to realise there is more to their child than they thought.

Warning Signs from Teachers

In addition to characteristics mentioned previously, teachers may identify the GLD/2e child because of behavioural problems resulting from inefficiencies as a learner and the subsequent under achievement (Kennedy: 2004). Many GLD/2e students will use their undoubted verbal ability and well-developed sense of humour to become the class clown, an attempt to hide what they perceive as their weaknesses and gain social acceptance. Obviously some GLD/2e students will be identified because of their observable high ability which successfully camouflages the specific learning disability. Where the specific learning disability camouflages the giftedness, the student will be identified as a target for remediation. Sadly, there will also be a large of GLD/2e students in the middle, who are never identified and are seen by the teachers as "average" (Kennedy: 2004). Some GLD/2e students will only be discovered after having worked their way successfully through many years of schooling, when their original coping strategies become less effective as educational demands increase.

Essential Knowledge for Parents

This is where parents must do their homework! It is vital that parents understand the language and vocabulary of psychologists and educators.

Know about the range of tests

Why test? Testing is performed to find out information about the child, so it is absolutely vital that the test used will supply the specific information required. Therefore parents must know about the many different tests used and they must know exactly what information the testing is expected to provide. There is a battery of tests available so parents should be aware that the type of assessment dictates which test will be used.

Parents should know which tests provide what information, in order to be fully informed about the decisions they must make with regard to their child's education.

There are certain questions which parents should ask about the testing. Will the testing be individual or group? It stands to reason that group testing is not as accurate as individual testing. Will the testing be by electronic means, oral or written? If electronic, will it be online, or a software program owned by the school? If computers are used in testing, will your child be disadvantaged if he or she does not have adequate keyboarding skills? If the testing is online, will your child be disadvantaged if he or she has slower keyboarding skills, or slower reading speed? If the testing is oral, has the child had a chance to practise this type of testing before it is administered? Without adequate preparation and practice, a student may be disadvantaged simply because it is all so new. If the testing is written, is there a vocabulary that your child should have or will your child be disadvantaged by poor decoding skills? What age group does the test in question cover? It is important to know what the optimum age for testing is where a particular test is administered, as there may be a glass ceiling if your child is at the top end of the age scale. Lastly, it is worth while knowing whether the person administering the test is a psychologist, a special or gifted education teacher or simply a teacher. Psychologists and special/gifted education teachers should have experience in administering tests and therefore will be aware of inadvertently providing information to the child through body language or inappropriate comments. It would be hoped that any other teacher

administering testing would have had some formal training, however it is worth ascertaining this, as part of the information you require as a parent, before giving informed consent.

Some testing is objective, that is, it is research based and has been normed under Australian conditions. Objective tests are normally administered by psychologists or special/gifted education teachers.

It would be impossible to fully explain every one of these tests in one article of limited length. A useful resource is the Australian Quality Teacher Program in Gifted and Talented Education (2005). Core Module 2 provides an overview of objective and subjective tests available to identify gifted students, and the limitations of these tests.

However, as the Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children – 3rd edition (WISC III) and Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Children – 4th edition (WISC – IV) released in 2004, appear to be the most common tests in use by psychologists, it would be helpful to examine them a little more closely. Research has indicated that GLD/2e students who were tested using the WISC - R displayed a particular profile, a strong discrepancy between the overall level of ability and at least one sub-test result. As the WISC – R and the WISC – III which replaced it, are similar, anecdotal and personal evidence indicates that the pattern appears to hold. Weaknesses were clearly obvious in sequencing skills and short term memory. In general sub test results indicated that spatial skills scored more highly than conceptual skills, which scored more highly than sequential skills. Strengths were obvious in Vocabulary, Similarities, Block Design, Abstract Reasoning and Spatial reasoning. It is interesting to note that this pattern is not replicated in the assessment of students with average intelligence who also have a specific learning disability. (Brown: 1984; Barnett, Clarizio and Payette, 1996).

There are some concerns about intelligence testing: a lack of attention by the child may cause of false score; high levels of creativity and leadership may go undetected; and the freedom from distractibility factor is not always considered to be a reliable indicator of

Attention Deficiency Disorder. There is always the fear that a GLD/2e student might fall through the assessment cracks and go undiagnosed.

The WISC IV is a relatively new test with an increased IQ ceiling and less emphasis on timing. It is generally accepted that a high score in Verbal Comprehension Index and the Perceptual Reasoning Index is a good indicator of giftedness (Majkut and Rogers: 2005). On the other hand, low scores in Working Memory Index and Processing Speed Index, indicate a possible Specific Learning Disability. Where there is a significant discrepancy between the former and the latter, it is likely that the child is GLD/2e.

Whichever tests are used, parents need to have an understanding of why these particular tests were used and what information was expected to be gained by using them. Parents should also be sure that any teachers who read the results of this testing are also aware of the purpose of the test and the information gleaned. It is definitely worthwhile checking that any teachers who receive the test results have had some training in gifted education.

Always ask for the results of any testing performed to be provided in written form. This information should be actual scores and provide the educational context in which these scores will be used. Ensure that individualised recommendations are made which are specific to your child. (Be alert for test results which mention the wrong child's name! Not only is this sloppy editing, it is an indication that the report is generic.)

Know Your Child

There are many tests available, either in printed form or online, which will give parent and child more information about the child's particular learning style. Once parents have this sort of information, it is worthwhile passing it on to the child's teacher. It is useful to find out whether the child learns by listening, by looking, or by manipulating something (visual, aural or kinaesthetic style of learning). Another informal but surprisingly accurate test for secondary aged students, and their parents, can be found in Sean Covey's (1998) book "Seven Habits of Highly Efficient Teenagers". Other tests will indicate whether a child is right brain or left brain dominant. Few of these tests are fully backed

up by research, however there is a germ of truth in them, and they make for an interesting discussion between parent and child. Once a child has identified the way in which he or she learn best, and where there may be a weakness, there will be implications for effective learning and the possibility of negotiating with the teacher to ensure that the child demonstrates mastery in an area of strength rather than an area of weakness.

Interest inventories are another useful source of information and once again, there are many online or printed variations. It can be very valuable for parent and child to each fill out such an inventory, not only because it gives both an opportunity for discussion, but because it also gives the parent more information to provide to the child's teacher so that when an assignment has to be completed, there is a chance that by negotiation, it could be linked to an area of interest to the child. Remember the keywords "personally meaningful and relevant"! When an assignment is genuinely of interest, it is always a little easier to put in the extra effort which gains higher marks. All parents of GLD/2e students should have this information and make it available to the teacher so that the educational needs of their child can be better met.

Assisting the GLD/2e Child from Home

General Organisation at Home

Parents will already know that their GLD/2e child is disorganised! Schoolwork done at home is often imprecise or vague. The child will display a lack of persistence, an inability to keep going when things get difficult, and a reluctance to get started (Stewart: 2003). There is a decided difficulty with self motivated or self regulated activities, unless they are "personally meaningful and relevant"! Poor problem solving skills contribute to the problem, often there is only one strategy to solving the problem when this does not work, the child gives up. If the child also has poor sequencing skills, this has implications for written work where decisions have to be made about what is most important. There is also an inability often to see the logical sequence between cause and effect, also contributing to problem solving difficulties. With all of these problems, an added complication is that like most gifted children, the GLD/2e child probably tends towards

perfectionism. Thus the work which is not up to the standard the child sees within his or her mind's eye will be abandoned, or possibly worse, left on an ever increasing pile of work waiting to be completed.

Homework Problems

Homework problems begin when the child brings the wrong books home, a part of the pattern of disorganisation. Conscientious parents then notice the child's difficulty getting thoughts down on paper. Time passes and still the sheet of paper remains blank! GLD/2e students have difficulties encoding and/or decoding language, leading to small problems with comprehension. In addition, awkward sentence structure, phonetic spelling and poor grammar are endemic, as is untidy handwriting (Stewart: 2002). Linda Silverman (2002) has used the phrase "chicken scratches" to describe the handwriting of the GLD/2e student. Poor short-term memory often means that if GLD/2e students do not write down the home-work before they leave a lesson, by the end of the next lesson they remember very little of what they should have written down and by the end of the school day they have probably convinced themselves that homework was not set for that particular subject. This allows them to look their parent in the eye and say, quite convincingly "No homework to that subject today Mum!" In addition, poor time management skills mean that these students in all likelihood will underestimate the amount of time required to complete an assignment, resulting in "mass hysteria" the night before the assignment is due.

Concept of self as learner

With all of these problems, it is no wonder that GLD/2e students develop low self esteem! Like most gifted students they have high expectations of themselves, and as they discover that there is a gap between the standard of what they would like to do and the standard of their actual work, their attitude tends towards frustration, negativity and alienation from the school system. It also becomes clear to parents that their child may be having socialisation problems at school, leading to a difficulty in making friends, possible isolation and even lower self-esteem.

Schooling Issues

Parents may receive information from the school that their child is a challenge to authority. GLD/2e students are quite capable of using their higher order thinking skills in negative ways, sometimes displaying a stubborn refusal to comply with requests, or behavior that is attention seeking, disruptive, exploitative, and even hostile, to continually reject set work (Kennedy: 2004). Teachers may mention poor social skills, particularly in the primary years leading to peer alienation, or an absence of self-direction in decision-making. All of these contribute to the student feeling powerless and lacking autonomy.

While some may feel that to label a child with a diagnosis is the wrong thing to do, for many GLD/2e children, a label is not threatening, it is justification! The diagnosis of a specific learning disability means that the child is not dumb, that there is a genuine reason for the problem.

“Self-awareness and understanding, and taking control of the situation, are critical factors in achieving success for those with learning disabilities. Diagnosis is the first step in this process.” (Firth, 2008, page 12)

Cognitive Strengths

GLD students normally have superb oral expression skills, and a large vocabulary which they use well (Stewart: 2003; Sousa: 2006). These students are divergent and creative thinkers whose high energy levels can be focused and directed towards an area of interest. This means that they should excel at arguing! A skill such as this can be positively directed towards a debating team. While spelling and grammar are often poor, other aptitudes such as creativity, computing, musical or technical skills will be stronger (Stewart: 2003; Sousa: 2006).

Metacognitive Strengths

Being gifted, GLD/2e students use higher order thinking skills well in creative problem solving. They are intuitive thinkers, often unable to explain the intellectual leap which provided their answer, and yet the answer is correct, confounding parent or teacher (Stewart: 2003; Sousa: 2006; Piirto: 2007).

These are the children whose minds “see” in 3D, which assists them to visualise systems more easily than many others and they can be relied upon to generate complex ideas in discussion (Sword: 2000; Silverman: 2002).

Affective Strengths

Where the work is “personally relevant and meaningful” GLD children may display motivation and productivity at gifted levels. Other gifted characteristics displayed are a strong sense of fair play and justice, and identification with adults, sharing whimsical and humorous connections (Stewart: 2003; Sousa: 2006).

Self Image

Many GLD/2e students have an inaccurate idea of their own progress at school, tending to say “I already know that!” They err towards “inflation” of their abilities, taking a very positive view of their progress at school which often flies in the face of the teacher's opinion of how the student is doing (Meltzer, Roditi, Houser and Pearlman, 1998).

In the teenage years, where no-one wants to be seen as being different, these students often reject specific skills teaching. Parents and (possibly) teachers will notice demonstrations of emotional frustration as the GLD/2e student struggles to hide any differences and tries to keep up without educational support. Often this results in negative attitudes towards self and peers.

Visual Spatial learners

Linda Silverman (2002) has released many visualisation techniques to assist the visual spatial learner. It is important to remind the teacher to provide hands-on, tactile experiences which assist the kinaesthetic learner. Other useful methodology to help a student with the topic is to emphasise concepts not dates or names and to encourage the teacher to provide a holistic overview of a unit of learning before beginning the topic.

Solutions for a Poor Short Term Memory

Make lists for whatever is required and be sure to put these lists where everyone can see them, the front of a white refrigerator is ideal or perhaps a large whiteboard. Teaching the GLD/2e student to use an organiser or timetable is problematic because it calls for skills

in prioritising, organisation and the ability to actually remember to write up the information, all generally weaker in these students. However, if a pattern can be established and reinforced until it becomes entrenched, it will pay dividends. Also remember that these students prefer a hands-on, concrete approach to learning, so multisensory assistance in this area would be valuable. Finally, provide multiplication and division charts to assist where rote learning has not been successful and it is important to learn a method. Once the actual method has been mastered, allow the use of a calculator.

Some Homework Solutions

It is vital that parents are provided with a copy of any assignments either by e-mail, in the post, sent with a sibling or collected in person. Check the school diary daily and if possible, organise for another student to act as a "diary-buddy" to ensure that all homework is accurately recorded at the end of the school day.

Make use of any after hours of facilities provided by the school which assist students to plan and possibly complete their homework before leaving the school.

Another solution is to select colour coded zip-up folders which hold a text book, an exercise book, a test pad, spare plastic protective sheets and the appropriate stationery for a particular subject. All that is necessary then is to take home the appropriate folder rather than feverishly search for materials scattered throughout the locker.

If folders are not the answer, keep a second set of stationery and any necessary papers at home. If possible, organize to have a second set of text books to be kept at home.

Once homework actually begins, concentrate on quality and accuracy, not quantity and restrict the amount of time spent on home-work to whatever is recommended by the school; if the work has not been completed, a short note to the teacher explaining that the time limit was reached, should suffice.

Try to have the same time set aside each day for homework. Encourage the homework to begin with something easy to get “in the flow” and work towards the progressively more difficult subject areas.

Set up a communication system with teachers. Remember that parents are often the only advocates for the special needs of their child, so communication is essential.

“Successful students and adults who have learning disabilities take charge of their lives, find compensatory strategies, persevere, and call on supportive parents and teachers.”
(Firth, 2008, page 12)

Suggestions for parents

Be positive and value your child for what he/she is rather than what he/she is not. Give your child the gift of time and use this time to focus on his/her strengths. Try to find adult mentors, outside of the family and its stresses, who can validate your child’s talents. Recognize denial, both parental and child, and consider whose needs are being met by this denial. Teach the GLD/2e child to a) learn to ask for help and b) to advocate for his/herself; remembering that these skills take time to develop. When dealing with teachers, keep in mind the three P’s – persistence, patience and politeness. Lastly, remember that parents need their own time to re-charge as well (Abeel: 2008).

Relationships

With the parent to parent relationship, there should be no blame where one parent is better suited to deal with any issues. Nor should parents blame their child for being what he or she is or is not! Parents should advocate on behalf of their child with the teacher but tread gently in providing information. The child to teacher relationship can be improved by increasing the range of responses to a variety of situations using role playing.

Social and emotional needs

All children need guidance, discipline, rules, limits and values. GLD children need support, empathy and understanding, to assist them in coping with peer jealousy, teasing and rejection. They also require assistance to develop the social skills to cope with being

(twice) different. Remember that remediation is boring! Assist your child by relishing and rewarding divergent thinking and creativity, by valuing and appreciating individual abilities, by encouraging but most of all, by loving!

Lastly, change the way that you think about your GLD/2e child. Remove the “at risk of not succeeding educationally” to “shows potential and together we’ll get there!”

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