
Does This Sound Like Anyone You Know? Identifying GLD Children at School – One Mother’s Experience¹

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Parents of gifted children with learning disabilities (GLD) often look back over their child-rearing years and bemoan the fact that their now adult children were not identified as either gifted or learning impaired when they were little – before the window of remediation was closed, and before the serious self-esteem issues had set in. They invariably claim to see in retrospect that the signs had always been there, but “no one noticed”!

Like other parents of GLD children, I too reflect upon a list of counter-intuitive and enigmatic ‘early warning signs’ which for years mystified me (and sadly too, my child, who was not identified as GLD till around age 13). I suppose I always knew that there was an issue – but I didn’t know what it was. I didn’t even know that it was worth wondering about.

With the permission of my GLD child (now a successful young adult), I’d like to revisit some of those early warning signs for the benefit of parents who may know or suspect that their child is gifted, but who are also haunted by a vague feeling that there may be something which is not quite right.

But first some GLD context.

Gifted children with learning disabilities are those who possess a high IQ and are capable of excellent academic performance, but who also have a learning disability (such as dyslexia, dysgraphia or auditory processing disorder), or a medical condition (such as ADHD), or an emotional issue (such as anxiety or perfectionism) or simply ‘something else going on’ which makes some aspects of academic achievement exceedingly difficult.

GLD learners are neurologically ‘screwed’ together in a way which is different to other children. They may excel in understanding and identifying complex relationships, advanced vocabulary, abstract reasoning (including mathematical

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reasoning), creativity, wide general knowledge, and observational skills. At the same time, the mechanics involved in writing, reading, basic computation and completing academic tasks, particularly timed tests, often present greater difficulties for GLD than for 'neuro-typicals'.

GLD children form a very heterogeneous group. If you've met one GLD, then you've met one. Accordingly, GLD children are hard to identify. The higher the IQ, the greater the difficulty. Research tells us that their high intelligence may compensate for their learning disabilities, and their disabilities may mask their intelligence, so that they present in a classroom as generally 'average'.

Gifted children with purely inattentive ADHD (the vague, dreamy, pre-occupied "invisible" sub-type of ADHD which is not accompanied by hyperactivity, defiance, impulsiveness or bad behaviour) may be especially hard to spot. They can just sit quietly and underachieve for years and years. Despite being perhaps highly gifted, such children do not present as 'academic', 'scholarly' or 'precocious'. Possibly because they are generally behaviourally compliant and otherwise 'non-squeaky wheels', they seem, to the casual observer, to fit the profile of 'plain average'. This situation is not the same as the highly gifted child who intentionally 'dumbs down' at school to gain peer acceptance or to defy the authority of parents and teachers. Inattentive ADHD children are not intentionally trying to pass for anything other than what they are: dreamy 'pixie-land dwellers'.

Worse than appearing to be consistently 'average' is the GLD child who occasionally 'pulls a rabbit out of a hat' and performs to his or her true potential. These are the children whom some experts call 'their own worst enemy'. Their uncharacteristically brilliant achievement on one test or assignment causes teachers to exclaim, "You see, you can do it when you try! This work shows that you are really smart! If you're not working like this all the time, it must be because you're just lazy."

Unidentified gifted children with disabilities certainly don't feel 'really smart'. Nor do they suspect that they are the victim of something sinister called 'learning disabilities'. All they know is that they are capable of extraordinary things – but some of the simplest tasks seem to be quite beyond them. They begin to wonder if they really are 'lazy'. They search in vain for a way to make themselves 'not lazy' anymore. In a frenzy of frustration, they acknowledge that it's a huge mystery why some days they do exceptionally good schoolwork and other days they don't. Sadly, they also learn quite rapidly that on the days when they perform brilliantly, they are more likely to get the 'lazy' lecture at school. They reluctantly conclude that it's less stressful to be seen as just plain average.

Despite difficulties in identifying GLD children, the professionals who have been advising us with respect to our child tell us that there are a number of well-recognised, research-based early warning signs which signal that a student may be both gifted and learning disabled. Paediatricians, language pathologists, psychologists, occupational therapists and behavioural optometrists all agree that these are the 'flashing red lights' which should prompt attentive and thoughtful educators to say, "Wait a minute. What's with this curious child who seems to march to his or her own beat? This learner's school performance just doesn't make sense. Let's take a closer look."

The following are some of these 'flashing red lights'.

1. A child who consistently scores in the 99th and 98th percentiles on the UNSW Maths, English and Science Competitions (now called 'ICAS'), and yet performs in a generally mediocre or wildly erratic way on regular school assessments.
2. A child who tops the year and scores a perfect mark on a cross-grade exam when tested in a room alone, and yet fails an exam of equal difficulty when the class is retested on the very same material a week later – and, is completely mystified and unable to account for the difference, except to say, “Well, for the first exam they put me in a room all by myself because I was absent when the others wrote the exam. The room was so empty and boring, and there was absolutely nothing to look at, so I just wrote the exam. In the second exam, the one they made me do in the classroom, the kid next to me was clicking their pen and I couldn't listen to the clicking and write the exam at the same time, so I just listened to the clicking”
3. A child who can talk about the content of the schoolwork insightfully with the teacher and can make positive and pertinent contributions to class discussion, who claims that the work is interesting and even sometimes 'fun', and yet who inexplicably fails the end-of-unit test on that same work.
4. A child who appears to be absorbing and delighting in every syllable of a lecture in class one day, and then in the same subject, mindlessly twists a protractor round a pencil with a dopey look on his face the next, or seems to be so sleepy that he can barely sit up straight.
5. A child who gets top marks in some subjects and fails other subjects and who, when asked why, replies, “Well in the subjects where I get HDs, I like the teachers and they are nice to me. In the subjects I fail, the teachers are mean and they yell – not at me, but at other kids – and I can't do good work for teachers I'm afraid of.”
6. A child who climbs into the car day after day and bursts into tears because some other child has been unjustifiably punished for something that he allegedly didn't do, or has had his work ripped up in front of the class.
7. A child who has difficulty persisting with and completing tasks, even those which they may have begun with great enthusiasm and whose subject matter is of great interest to them.
8. A child who claims that they open their exam papers and think, “Oh good! I know all this work – I know all the answers!” and then proceeds to fail the exam, and can offer no explanation for the discrepancy.
9. A child who consistently performs better on multiple-choice or short-answer exams than on exams requiring longer essay-type answers.

10. A child who gets a perfect or near-perfect score on the first few questions in an exam, but still fails the exam because they work so slowly that they leave large portions untouched.
11. A child who confidently comes out of an exam room claiming that they've 'aced' it, but then fails because they have arrived at all the correct answers but have not shown their 'working out', or because they have read the question too quickly and have written a perfect answer to the (usually more difficult) question which they thought they had read.
12. A child who can effortlessly produce long sophisticated engaging compositions when allowed to use a keyboard or a scribe, but can manage almost nothing at all when required to handwrite a story.
13. A child who never masters cursive handwriting, and yet manages to just print very quickly, but whose class notebooks still contain about a third as many notes as other students'.
14. A child who claims to be unable to see any causal connection between effort expended and results achieved: "Whether I study or not makes no difference – some days I just 'feel like' writing the exam, and other days my head is so full of 'thoughts', I just can't make myself think about writing the exam," or "Sometimes I don't study for a test because I don't hear when the teacher tells us about it, and then I get to school and find out that we're having a test and I'm surprised and I worry that I haven't studied, but for some reason I just feel like doing a test that day anyway, and I end up topping the grade" or "I always try the same amount for all my subjects and all my exams – but some days I can get the answers out of my head, down my arm, and onto my answer paper – and other days I just can't."
15. A child who claims to sense that they learn new work faster, easier and better than most other children, and yet whose exam marks are almost always lower than those students'.
16. A child who complains that often the work is too easy, that the teacher repeats the same new work over and over until the very last child understands it, and that sometimes school can be achingly boring, and yet who fails an exam on that very same 'easy' work.
17. A child who reports that they like school best on days when they are allowed to actually do things (e.g., practical science experiments) instead of just listening to the teacher talk or copying off the board.
18. A child who regularly fails to do homework which they claim that they didn't hear being assigned or who actually does do the correct homework, but then doesn't hand it in because they don't hear when the teacher asks for it.

19. A child who does the homework which they believe has been assigned, and yet arrives at school and is surprised to find that they have done Exercises 7.8 and 4.3, instead of the assigned 8.7 and 3.4.
20. A child who has trouble following oral instructions of more than two or three steps, and who can be seen watching other children in order to know what to do next.
21. A child who is far worse than their peers at organising themselves and their possessions, who is constantly losing things and 'forgetting' things, and who often packs the wrong books for class.
22. A child whom teachers describe as unerringly behaviourally compliant, and yet who complains at home that some teachers always seem to be mad at him and don't like him.
23. A scatter of eight or more points between the child's highest and lowest scores on the various sub-tests of the WISC III.
24. A particularly low score on the 'Coding' sub-test of the WISC III (when compared to the other sub-test scores).
25. A surprising lack of correlation between the child's scores on the WISC III (ability) and the WIAT (achievement), and a school psychologist's report on the results of those two tests containing numerous observations that the child's results are 'highly unusual', but suggesting no follow-up investigation.

From Years 3 to 8, my child exhibited every single one of the 25 early warning 'flashing red lights' listed above – and yet no one noticed!

School report cards and teachers' scribbled diary notes exhausted us with their predictability: "...must try harder/concentrate more/write faster/write neater/write bigger/write anything at all/learn to pay attention/stop dreaming/learn to listen/participate more in class/stop calling out the answer without being asked/learn to be more consistent/focus faster/learn to control emotions/stop guessing/start working to potential/learn to be more persistent/apply yourself more/learn to study/remember to do homework/learn to keep track of books/stop losing homework/learn to be more motivated/stop making excuses for poor performance...." and of course, the 'market leader' in the blame-the-child department: "Could do better..." Lists and lists of all the child's miserable shortcomings – but no concrete suggestions as to how to identify what was really causing them.

Admittedly almost all children will at some time or other exhibit some of the behaviours listed above to varying degrees. The point is that not all children – or even all gifted children – will exemplify all or even most of these 25 early warning signs consistently over many years. I am advised that two or three of them alone should have been sufficient to prompt most insightful educators to pause and make further enquiries. However, probably because my child was a usually quiet, behaviourally

compliant, non-hyperactive, well liked, generally cheerful and seemingly happy all-rounder, neither a bully nor the victim of bullies, no one paid attention to the fact that my child was for years and years excelling one day and failing the next.

My timid and tentative questions over all this time to various teachers and school officials about my child's alarmingly erratic school performance invariably resulted in the same dismissive and unreliable responses: I was just being an overly-anxious, overly-ambitious mother, or my child was bright and perky and chirpy, but just a bit immature and would probably 'grow out of it', or all the strange inconsistencies must be just a 'fluke', or it was simply my and my husband's fault because we did not punish our child at home for poor grades.

Regularly I was challenged, "At school we punish them for bad grades. You must do that too. What possible motivation would a child have to get high grades at school if nothing bad ever happens to them if they bring home low ones?" I never did formulate a good retort to that question, but my instinct told me that punishment was not the answer. Sadly though, my instinct did not tell me what was.

By the time we began to put the pieces of the puzzle together and, having consulted a myriad of professionals, started to arrive at an accurate diagnosis, our child was finishing (and failing) Year 8. By then, the road to recovery was steeper and rockier. Our child's giftedness and self-concept had already been sacrificed at the altar of their disabilities. Our child had already internalised the school's message that LD stands for 'lazy and dumb' – and our child's resilience meter was stuck on zero.

It took us many years – and much professional support – to recognise that a 'square peg' need not be 'fixed' and rounded off – rather it's simply a matter of increasing the diameter of the hole. The "solution" is not easy and not straightforward, but it does exist – once everyone begins to ask the right questions and stops assigning blame.

Perhaps, if you're a parent, after reading this article you're beginning to have a bit of an anxious feeling or suspicion about your own child. Perhaps, if you're a teacher, you're beginning to think that the child described above reminds you of others in your classes. In either case, glance again through the warning signs listed above.

Does this sound like anyone you know?