

What's Wrong with Me?

By Dr. Joanna Haase, Ph.D., MFT, and Sharon Duncan, Gifted Education Consultant

Far too often, parents of twice-exceptional children are faced with answering this question: "What's wrong with me?" The pain experienced by both parents and their children when it's difficult for the youngsters to express the full potential of their abilities is rarely soothed by the standard responses of "everyone has their strengths and weaknesses" or "everyone has challenges." How can it? The reality of multiple therapies sends a less-than-positive message to a gifted child who already feels different from other children.

While it's inarguable that 2e children benefit from therapeutic intervention, it's also inarguable that many children start to feel that the focus of their lives is on what's wrong with them as compared to what they do well. Like individuals undergoing major medical treatment, 2e children can begin to feel like their second exceptionality defines them rather than being just a piece of who they are. For some children, the result can be secondary emotional concerns such as depression, anxiety, and poor self-concept. Many parents are torn between wanting to provide everything they can to help their child and hating how the pursuit of interventions negatively affects their child's self-esteem and invades the peace of family life.

What if there was a way to help 2e children work on their exceptionalities that didn't feel like "therapy"? What if there were things that could be done to help

children overcome obstacles while focusing on their strengths? We frequently do these very things.

The Need for a Plan

The two of us work with multi-disciplinary teams to develop education plans that address children's challenges indirectly. In other words, we look for "real-life" alternatives that can accomplish therapy goals. While not a substitute for professional treatment, changing the focus of a child's education plan not only helps build self-esteem, it often increases a youngster's willingness to engage in challenges that are necessary for growth in all areas.

An important part of developing an individualized education plan is for parents to step back and ask themselves these very important questions:

1. Exactly what challenges is my child facing?
 2. When and how are these challenges a problem?
 3. Under what circumstances do these challenges arise?
 4. For each challenge, is it really a priority to work on right now? If so, for whom is it a priority and why?
- In thinking through the answers to these ques-

tions, it's vital that parents focus on their child as a person rather than as a collection of exceptionalities. Parents should also ask themselves how many of these concerns are a problem in life versus a problem in school. For example, while it's important for children to understand math facts, only in school and academic testing is it important for a child to be able to do them lightning fast.



What's Wrong with Me, continued

Parents often become so overwhelmed with all the different ways in which exceptionalities affect their children that they lose sight of the bigger picture. At this point, it's essential to consider two additional questions:

- How does my child see himself or herself?
- What matters most to my child?

For example, children with slow processing speed might go through their school day feeling like they never get to do the things that are interesting to them — playing and making friends, for example — because it takes them so long to finish all the required work. While adults might think that giving the child more time to complete schoolwork is a great idea, the child may actually benefit more from being allowed a less burdensome way to show mastery of the subject matter.

The Need for Creativity

Once a family has narrowed down and prioritized the issues to be worked on, the next step should be bringing together a Student Success Team. Team members should include the relevant professionals in the child's life, and their aim should be to come up with the best ways to address the child's exceptionalities. The goal here is to be as creative as possible.

Take for example a student who has challenges reading and responding to social cues, difficulty taking another person's perspective, and a strong need for physical contact. A traditional approach to addressing this child's challenges would be to put the youngster in a social skills group and provide speech therapy for social pragmatic language. However, alternative, and

perhaps more creative, ways to address these issues might include the following:

1. Enroll the child in Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ).

BJJ is different from other martial arts in that a child has full-body contact with others who are both smaller and bigger. Children are supposed to signal by tapping (as opposed to using words) when their sparring partner is hurting them. In this manner, they learn how to manage physical contact while meeting their need for physical contact. It also helps them focus on where their body is in relationship to others.

2. Have the child take American Sign Language (ASL).

American Sign Language requires a child to closely

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— DH & SD

look at another person's facial expressions and body movements while not speaking. In this manner, children can learn to read social cues before responding to others. In addition, ASL has the bonus of fulfilling a standard high school foreign language requirement.

3. Integrate theory of mind into assignments.

Educators can weave theory of mind into the child's literature or social studies curriculum. For example, they might give student assignments that focus on writ-

ing or discussing from different points of view or that explore themes that would help the child understand and express complex relationships. Another idea is to have the child develop a movie or play script. Creating scripts not only requires the child to learn creative writing, it focuses on the development of dialog. The child must think through how characters would respond verbally to each other, thereby building conversational awareness.

4. Capitalize on the child's passion.

Consider using the child's area of passion as an opportunity to join a group or a team. Even children who may resist being part of a group are often motivated to join if they can find others who share their passion. A child may take an acting class, for example, or join a robotics team, or even get a job. These opportunities can offer opportunities to develop leadership skills as well as have fun.

While none of these types of interventions is a stand-alone solution, when combined they offer children ways to work on remediating several exceptionalities in real time without feeling like they are in therapy *all* the time. Sometimes the best thing we can do for our children is to give them the gift of being a child, not a child who needs to be fixed. When we use a creative education plan to support children's second exceptionality, they not only make gains in their areas of weakness, unburdened by feelings of "brokenness," they are freed to soar in their areas of strength.



What's Wrong with Me, continued

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Haase is a regular presenter at state and national conferences on various topics about giftedness. She is the president and co-founder of the California Gifted Network (www.cagiftednetwork.com), an online forum where California's gifted community can find resources, information, and support. She is also a co-founder and active board member of Gifted Research and Outreach (www.gro-gifted.org), a non-profit organization promoting a comprehensive and accurate understanding of giftedness.

Sharon Duncan consults with parents and educators to help them understand and meet the social, emotional, and educational needs of gifted children and also consults on homeschooling. In addition, she conducts research, most recently a study on identity formation in the parents of gifted children.



Duncan is co-founder of both Gifted Identity (www.giftedidentity.com) and Gifted Research and Outreach (www.gro-gifted.org). She is also a SENG Model Parent Group facilitator, a member of the advisory board of a private school for highly gifted children, and past member of the Mensa Youth Programming Committee. In addition, she is a regular presenter at state and national conferences on various topics concerning gifted children. 2e

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