



Fintan O'Regan

Behaviour Management & Consultancy

HE'S CLEVER BUT HE CAN'T SIT STILL



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Most parents would be thrilled to find out that their child was gifted but when this is accompanied by a diagnosis of ADHD, the road to academic success and a worthwhile career suddenly seems like a twisting, pot-holed track rather than a fast and straight motorway. For teachers as well, the issues surrounding this 'dual exceptionality' are challenging. First and foremost is the accuracy of diagnosis: is this a child with ADHD, or a very able student who may be able to complete certain tasks very easily, becomes bored, loses interest and perhaps behaves badly as a result. The divisions between giftedness and ADHD can often be blurred, with research indicating that when a child has been diagnosed with ADHD he may actually be gifted and simply reacting to an inappropriate curriculum (Webb & Latimer, 1993).

ADHD facts

The child with ADHD is referred to as male in this article simply for ease of reading. It is the case however, that more boys than girls are diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (approximately 3:1). Also G/T stands for Gifted and Talented and not Gin and Tonic...(Xmas is over)

Like all developmental disabilities, such as learning disorders and intellectual disability, ADHD appears to have multiple causal components. Evidence suggests that neurological, genetic and environmental factors contribute to the condition.

The disorder occurs in 3-9% of school-age children, develops in childhood, often by three to five years of age, if not sooner, and is highly persistent across development in most, though not all, cases. Research suggests that 80% of children diagnosed in childhood continue to be impaired by the disorder in adolescence, and that up to 67% continue to have symptoms producing impairment into adulthood.

The key to distinguishing between the two is the pervasiveness of the 'acting out' behaviours: for example, if the acting out is specific to certain situations, the child's behaviour is more likely to be related to giftedness; whereas, if the behaviour is consistent across all situations, it is more likely to be related to ADHD. It is also possible of course for a child to be gifted **and** have ADHD. The lists in TABLE 1 highlight the similarities between giftedness and ADHD. (Cline, 1999; Webb & Latimer, 1993)

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TABLE 1	
Characteristics of gifted students who are bored	Characteristics of students with ADHD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor attention and daydreaming when bored • Low tolerance for persistence on tasks that seem irrelevant • Begin many projects, see few to completion • Development of judgment lags behind intellectual growth • Intensity may lead to power struggles with authorities • High activity level; may need less sleep • Difficulty restraining desire to talk; may be disruptive • Question rules, customs, and traditions • Lose work, forget homework, are disorganized • May appear careless • Highly sensitive to criticism • Do not exhibit problem behaviours in all situations • More consistent levels of performance at a fairly consistent pace 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poorly sustained attention • Diminished persistence on tasks not having immediate consequences • Often shift from one uncompleted activity to another • Impulsivity, poor delay of gratification • Impaired adherence to commands to regulate or inhibit behaviour in social contexts • More active, restless than other children • Often talk excessively • Often interrupt or intrude on others (e.g., butt into games) • Difficulty adhering to rules and regulations • Often lose things necessary for tasks or activities at home or school • May appear inattentive to details • Highly sensitive to criticism • Problem behaviours exist in all settings, but in some are more severe • Variability in task performance and time used to accomplish tasks.

One characteristic of ADHD that does not have a counterpart in children who are gifted is variability of task performance. In almost every setting, children with ADHD tend to be highly inconsistent in the quality of their performance (i.e. assessed activities, practical tasks, chores at home) and the amount of time used to accomplish tasks (Barkley, 1990). They are consistently inconsistent. Children who are gifted however, may often maintain consistent efforts and high grades in classes when they like the teacher and are intellectually challenged, although they may resist some aspects of the work, perceived as dull. One quote from Barkley sums it up:

'Children with ADHD do not have a problem knowing what to do but they do have a problem in doing what they know'.



Identification

Determining whether a child has ADHD can be particularly difficult when that child is also gifted. The use of many instruments, including intelligence tests administered by qualified professionals, achievement and personality tests, as well as parent and teacher rating scales, can help the professional determine the subtle differences between ADHD and giftedness. Questions that could be asked include those below (Colleen Willard-Holt, 1999)

- Could the behaviours be responses to inappropriate placement, insufficient challenge, or lack of intellectual peers?
- Is the child able to concentrate when interested in the activity?
- Have any curricular modifications been made in an attempt to change inappropriate behaviours?
- Has the child been interviewed? What are his/her feelings about the behaviours?
- Does the child feel out of control? Do the parents perceive the child as being out of control?
- Do the behaviours occur at certain times of the day, during certain activities, with certain teachers or in certain environments?

One other really important aspect to consider is that of personal organisation. Able children with ADHD are often poorly organised and the inability to complete and hand in assignments on time can in itself, result in failure in today's school environment.

Improving organisational skill

Teachers and parents can help children to be better organised by implementing some simple support strategies e.g:

- Implementing a reward system for maintaining organisational tools, such as assignment notebooks.
- Teaching the child how to create and use a time-management schedule.
- Involving the child in establishing motivators for positive behaviours
- Pointing out the positive behaviours that are exhibited and explicitly highlighting the benefits of studying and obtaining good grades
- Providing some structure for 'unstructured' time e.g. working with a peer or TA to plan an essay or research project; playing board games or attempting a 'challenge task'.
- Encouraging the child to break up his homework into small chunks where he is rewarded with a 10 – 15 minute break after working for a set period. Use a timer or a digital watch so that the pupil can self-monitor the situation.



For older students the key is not to expect that organisational skills will have been learnt and to support students rather than penalising them for not being well-organised.

Motivation

Gifted students with ADHD have a particularly low boredom tolerance and so it's important to reduce the chance of them being bored and increase their motivation. Motivation has many forms but successful strategies include:

1. Introducing new ideas and challenges

Often when a child lacks motivation it's because he hasn't yet been exposed to what might become a life passion. A child whose true passion is destined to be music may never really 'find himself' if he never has access to instruments and a range of musical experiences. It's also important to keep an open mind about what might motivate children and young people, introducing boys to traditionally female activities, like dance and gymnastics and introducing girls to engineering and construction.

2. Using short-term goals and rewards

Sometimes a child gets overwhelmed by a large task. It's not that the task is difficult, but the child may not be able to see the light at the end of the tunnel. Help the child to see the task as a series of small steps, making each small task a goal, sometimes with its own small reward.

3. Praising the child's efforts

G&T children with ADHD often have trouble connecting personal effort to achievement. Much of what they do and learn comes easily to them, so they can achieve with little effort. To help a child succeed, use praise that is specific to effort and perseverance. For example, instead of saying 'Great work', say something like 'The three hours of research you spent working on your science project really earned that B+.' However, avoid the reverse and don't say, 'If you worked even harder, you would do better'.

4. Helping the child to take control

Gifted pupils with ADHD sometimes see achievement as something beyond their control. If they succeed, it is due to luck or some other external factor. This attitude can make them feel that effort is pointless. Praising their efforts can help, but these children also need to understand the role that personal responsibility plays in success. They need to understand that they are responsible for both success and failure and that both can be learning experiences. Blaming someone or something when things don't go well can impede the learning process.

5. Making connections between schoolwork and pupils' interests

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Sometimes children lack motivation because they don't see a connection between the work they are being asked to do and their own goals and interests. So for example, a child who wants to be a pilot needs to know that maths and science are important in those jobs. Get to know their interests and ambitions so that you can help them to make appropriate links. (Remember however, that gifted pupils with ADHD generally focus very much on the 'here and now', even two weeks in the future is hard for some of them to imagine.)

6. Being creative with homework

These twice-exceptional children love challenges, so try turning dullish homework activities into more challenging projects using different forms of technology and social media.

We often equate motivation and success with school achievement. However, it's important to note that some children are highly motivated to achieve goals that are unrelated to school. A gifted teenager with ADHD may be more interested in his chosen sport, chess, music, creating an animal sanctuary or working on a voluntary community program.

Social skills

Gifted children with ADHD may sometimes have difficulties socialising with children of their own age who can find them geeky and/or annoying. It's important to help them to recognise what is an appropriate response to different situations and to adapt their social interaction to suit various groups. Opportunities to socialise with, and work alongside students of similar ability and with shared interest may be more important at times, than being of similar age.

Finally but crucially, it is important to remember that each child is unique. General guidelines and suggestions are helpful, but teachers must focus on the specific personality and needs of the individual child in understanding how best to meet his needs.

References and further reading

Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder: Third Edition: A Handbook for Diagnosis and Treatment by Russell A. Barkley (12 Jan 2006)

Cline S and Schwartz D , 1999 Diverse Populations of Gifted children NJ Merrill

Colleen Willard-Holt May Gifted students with learning difficulties 1999 ERIC EC Digest #E574)