

Parenting Twice-Exceptional Children Through Frustration to Success

Trail, B.
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Written by Beverly Trail, this article provides parents advice on how to best assist their twice-exceptional children.

Parenting would be so much easier if children came with a book of instructions. Paul's parents thought he would excel in school because in kindergarten, he was performing at the second-grade level in reading and math. He understood complex concepts well beyond his years (like "plate tectonics") and was identified as gifted. Paul continually complained that school was boring and he begged to stay home to learn. It became evident during the intermediate elementary years that he was not progressing as he should. Even though he understood the concept of multiplication in first grade, Paul was not able to pass the timed math facts tests and he could not do long division problems. He would write the correct answer where it belonged, but could not do the step-by-step process of long division. Paul's writing was a mixture of print and cursive writing that was illegible. His fourth-grade teacher gave him two desks and still papers (usually incomplete assignments that should have been handed in) were hanging out of the desks and spilling onto the floor. Paul participated in all classroom discussions, sharing knowledge and demonstrating understanding of concepts beyond his peers. However, his writing was below grade level. Written papers consisted of short sentences, low-level vocabulary, many spelling mistakes, and no elaboration of ideas. Certainly, his written work was not consistent with his verbal ability. Paul's parents began to really worry as his grades dropped and teachers began to comment on behavior issues. Why was this bright child not doing his work? More alarming, he was very frustrated with school and his love of learning was diminishing along with their hopes and dreams for college. What should parents do when their gifted child's lack of achievement results in failing grades?

Sally's parents were equally concerned with her progress in school. During her preschool years she was not as verbal as her brothers and sisters. It was difficult to understand her speech because she mispronounced words. Testing with the *Child Find* project in the local school district at age four showed there were sizable discrepancies among her skills in various areas. She was more than two years ahead in some, and more than two years behind in others. In elementary school, she appeared to her teachers to be an average student. Sally's parents were concerned because they knew how hard she was working to get average grades. Learning basic skills seemed to be so difficult for Sally! She couldn't remember letter sounds and consequently had difficulty sounding out words. Sally could solve really difficult puzzles and demonstrated exceptional skills in problem solving and critical thinking; in those areas, she was superior to her brothers and sisters who had been identified as gifted. Some people suspected a learning disability, but teachers were not concerned because she was doing average work and her composite scores on assessments were average, so she did not qualify for special education services. Sally's attitude was alarming her parents. She used to be very outgoing and now was an unhappy loner. At school she was quiet and compliant, but at home she exhibited severe anxiety and had almost daily emotional "melt downs." She even mentioned a couple of times that she "wanted to go to heaven." Sally's parents became really concerned about their daughter, but they didn't know what to do.

Both of these children demonstrate characteristics of gifted students with disabilities. Their school experience will be challenging because hidden disabilities can make aspects of academic achievement difficult for these gifted learners. Inconsistent performance, incomplete assignments, disorganization, and behavior problems can be indicators of learning problems. Not only does the disability influence their academic performance in school, but it can intensify social/emotional risk factors. In my role as a twice-exceptional consultant, I have become increasingly aware of the interrelationship between academic achievement and social/emotional factors. Behavior problems can result from the frustration of trying to deal with two exceptionalities. Twice-exceptional children can become very depressed when they set unrealistic goals for themselves or feel they are not meeting the expectations of their parents and teachers. Because they have both the characteristics of gifted children and also of children with disabilities, they can have a difficult time relating to peers in either group. Parenting these children can be a challenge!

What Does It Mean To Be Twice Exceptional?

The term twice-exceptional is used to signify the presence of a disability and gifted potential. Twice-exceptional learners have the characteristics of gifted students with potential for high performance, along with the characteristics of students with disabilities who struggle with many aspects of learning. Typically, these students have superior vocabulary, advanced ideas, a wide range of interests and opinions, and are highly creative with a sophisticated sense of humor. At the same time, their academic performance can be inconsistent and the students lack organizational skills. Twice-exceptional children can often appear stubborn, opinionated, and argumentative, yet they can also be highly sensitive to criticism. Combine this with the extreme frustration gifted learners feel when they cannot meet their own and others' expectations, the frustrations of teachers who cannot understand why bright children do not achieve, and the frustrations of parents who are trying to deal with unhappy, angry, often depressed children, and the stage is set for conflict, misunderstandings, and failure in school.

A wide range of hidden disabilities can influence the school performance of twice-exceptional learners. Auditory processing deficits can cause difficulty in decoding words, spelling, and sentence structure. These learners have a hard time following oral direction and learning from lectures. Visual processing problems can affect reading comprehension and students' ability to copy information from the board. Deficits in visual/motor coordination and sequential processing can cause problems with handwriting. Sequential processing weakness influences reading speed and fluency along with ability to sound out words or remember formulas and steps. Executive functioning involves the learner's ability to plan, organize, and prioritize; learners with difficulties in this area struggle to coordinate multiple tasks simultaneously. Slower processing speed results in short-term memory and long-term memory retrieval problems when time pressures are in place. Cognitive disabilities diminish the brain's ability to process information. These hidden disabilities can cause children to struggle when learning to read, write, or memorize math facts, and can limit their ability to sustain attention or remember verbal instructions.

Twice-exceptional students are difficult to identify for a number of reasons. The student's strengths can mask their weaknesses and the weaknesses can mask the strengths, creating a unique learner profile that is atypical of either a gifted student or a student with disabilities. Twice-exceptional students do not want anyone to know they have problems with some aspect of learning and they use their gifted characteristics to hide their learning problems. It is not uncommon for the disability and the potential to go unnoticed. Gifted students can underachieve for years before their performance falls below grade level expectations and their disability is recognized. Some students are never identified for either gifted or special education programming. Stereotypical notions about learning disabilities and giftedness can impede identification and programming for both their disability and their giftedness. Parents and teachers need to be alert to hidden disabilities and the influence it can have on learning.

What Do We Need to Understand?

When gifted students' achievement fall below expectations, teachers and parents often attribute it to lack of effort. Expectations that gifted learners have similar abilities in all content area can result in the assumption that these students are not putting forward a reasonable amount of effort. Twice-exceptional learners can appear unmotivated and lazy, or even defiant and oppositional, as they make minimal progress on assignments. Reactions toward students perceived as lazy are quite different from the more empathetic approach students with disabilities usually receive. What twice-exceptional students need most is encouragement. These high-potential students have a strong desire to be successful, but they lack the skills they need to achieve that success. Telling twice-exceptional learners they could get good grades, if only they would try harder, often heightens their anxiety level and only makes the situation worse.

Social or emotional issues resulting from dealing with the two exceptionalities can have a greater influence on achievement than the disability. Twice-exceptional students can be caught in a cycle of perfectionism, avoidance, and procrastination. Perfectionism can be a positive trait when it challenges the children to achieve higher goals. Dysfunctional perfectionism can result in paralyzing anxiety, self-criticism, and fear of failure; in that situation, students do not see mistakes as part of the learning process. An example of this is Paula who received an A- on her report card in writing. For two weeks she did not hand in a writing assignment, she worked for hours trying to write sentences for her spelling words, but none of her sentences were good enough. She cried every morning on her way to school and complained that her teacher hated her. It was not until her teacher told her that she had given her an A- to leave room for growth that Paula was able to write with confidence again. John received a failing grade on a homework assignment for not following directions. For months he completed all the required homework but never

handed in a single assignment. He was afraid of getting another failing grade for not following directions. In his mind it was better to not hand it in than to risk getting a low grade.

How Parents Can Empower their Children

As parents, you can empower your twice-exceptional children to overcome their disability, or through your actions, you can foster learned helplessness. Twice-exceptional children have high potential, but that potential will not be realized unless you support their social and emotional development and help them learn to cope with their mixed abilities. It is difficult to watch your children struggle and some parents will rush in to rescue their children from failure. However, rescuing children decreases their self-esteem because it supports their feelings that they are incapable of meeting the challenges of school without their parents' help. Conversely, self-esteem increases when children learn to deal with their disability and frustrations. If twice-exceptional children realize they can successfully overcome their challenges, they will grow up to become successful adults. Avoid the temptation to focus on your child's challenge areas. Instead, use the following strategies to promote positive social and emotional development.

Create a Safe Home Environment

Twice-exceptional children need a safe, nurturing home environment because school can be such a frustrating experience. Home must be a place where children can regroup and recharge. A friendly greeting at the door, a favorite snack, a note in a lunch box telling the child how special they are can reassure children. Spending time together working on a favorite project can make children feel loved and valued. Some twice-exceptional students are able to control their frustration at school, but their frustration becomes very apparent when they arrive home. Participating in a sport after school like swimming or going on a bike ride can give these children an opportunity to release built-up anger and frustrations. Children learn more from their parent's example than their words. If you value the unique characteristics of family members, your children will learn to value their own individual characteristics and those of others. Children need to share in family responsibilities and be included in family planning and decision making. Each family member must feel that they contribute to the family and their contribution is valued.

Nurture Strengths and Interests

Nurturing children's strengths and interests increases their confidence and resilience. As children experience success in their strength area, they become more confident in their abilities. Encouraging children to explore their interests will excite their inner passions and motivate them to become lifelong learners. Children are more likely to persist through difficult times in school if they have acknowledged strengths to counterbalance the challenges. You can nurture your children's strengths and interest in four ways. First, support your children's exploration by planning trips to the library, museum, planetarium, etc. Second, provide the material and resources the children need for their exploration. Third, search out groups, organizations, or other children with whom your children can share their interests. Finally, nurture your own passions and share your interests with your children; be a model of lifelong learning.

Foster a "Yes, I Can" Attitude

Helping children to understand that success is achieved as a result of effort and that failure is likely to result from lack of effort, can promote the development of a "Yes, I can" attitude. Children who learn that they can be successful if they put forth reasonable amount of effort will learn to persist through the difficult times. Children who learn to equate success with effort will become achievers. Those who attribute success to luck and failure to lack of ability will become underachievers. Help your children make the connection between hard work and success by praising their efforts, not their ability. When children engage in negative self-talk, ask them to stop, to take three deep breaths and to visualize a specific time when they were successful. Children must understand that making mistakes is part of the learning process. You can become positive role models for your children in dealing with perfectionism. Help your children understand that you, too, sometime fail when learning a new skill.

Support the Development of Compensatory Strategies

Successful twice-exceptional students develop strategies to compensate for their areas of challenge. Use graphic organizers to help children organize their thoughts, homework assignments, and projects. Many graphic organizers are available in books, or to download free from the Internet. Encourage the use of technology to increase productivity. Word processing programs make it easier for students to edit their work

and produce an impressive finished product. Software programs like *Inspiration* can help students create their own graphic organizers to plan for projects and written assignments. The graphic organizers can be converted to a linear outline with the click of a button. Spell checkers and grammar checkers are useful tools when editing papers. PDA/handheld devices and computer programs like Microsoft's *Outlook* can help students organize their time and projects.

Help your children learn to organize homework by showing them how to create a "To Do List" and helping them prioritize what needs to be done. Show children how to break the work into shorter segments. Having children estimate how long each segment will take, and then using a timer to document how long it actually took, will help them learn time management. Crossing off each task as it is completed helps children develop a sense of accomplishment. At the end of a homework session, be certain that the child puts the completed homework in a folder in the backpack, and places the backpack in a convenient location for the morning departure. Allowing your children to do an activity of their choice for fun when their homework is finished can also motivate them to be more focused in their work.

Promote Positive Coping Strategies

Twice-exceptional children can become very adept at manipulating situations to avoid failure. They can take on the persona of a 'rebel who is "too smart" to complete the assignment that is "too boring" or "too stupid." Others may become the class clown because it is better to be asked to leave the class for clowning around than to fail in front of peers. Avoidance, distancing, and learned helplessness are negative coping strategies. You can empower your children by encouraging the development of positive coping strategies such as accepting responsibility for their actions instead of blaming others. Through conversations with your children, you can help them reappraise a situation and deal with unrealistic expectations. Encourage children to seek the support they need and help them to become self-advocates.

Cultivate Resiliency

Risk and resiliency factors are variables that can affect outcomes in a positive or negative way. A learning disability and social/emotional issues are risk factors, while strong family ties, friendships with peers, and relationships with a caring adult help children become more resilient. The home can be a protective setting, helping to reduce the impact of other risk factors. On the other hand, unsupportive home environments can compound the risk factors for students. A home environment that provides opportunities for children to develop their strengths and independence cultivates resilience. Seek opportunities for your children to connect with peers of similar ability and interests. Use humor to help children realize that defeat sometimes provides opportunities to cultivate resilience.

Coach Realistic Goal Setting

To sustain motivation, children must believe their efforts will result in success. Learning to set realistic goals can influence achievement positively and reduce frustration. You can be instrumental in coaching your child to select realistic short-term and long-term goals.

- Start with a goal the child will be able to achieve in a short period of time. Together plan the steps necessary to attain the goal and map those steps on a flow chart. When the goal is achieved, celebrate success and appraise the steps used to accomplish the results.
- As your child becomes comfortable with short-term goals, help him or her take a long-term goal and divide it into several short-term goals. Likewise, learning to break down long-term projects into shorter segments will increase the chances the projects will be completed on time and will decrease the probability children will become overwhelmed. When children integrate academic goals into their life goals, this will increase their intrinsic motivation.
- Begin career exploration during late elementary and early middle school. Encourage your high schooler to investigate educational requirements for his or her main career interests and visit university web sites to determine entrance requirements. Teenagers who have a defined career goal and know the requirement to get into the college of their choice will be more likely to persist through difficult assignments and courses.

Encourage Children to Become Independent Learners

Preparing children for the future is an important part of your role as a parent. Make efforts to foster a love for learning and cultivate independence in your children so they will develop the skills needed to become successful adults. Instead of trying to protect your children from negative experiences, help them develop confidence in their abilities by learning how to handle difficult situations. Do not over-protect children or accept responsibility for their problems. Allow children to learn from natural consequences early in their life so they develop the skills they need to make decisions in later years. As children mature, step back and give them more control. Support your children actively during their struggles and celebrate their successes.

How Can Parents Advocate For Their Children?

Twice-exceptional children need parents to advocate for them, but you must do it with great care. It is so much easier to advocate for your children if you have a good working relationship with teachers before there is a problem. Teachers appreciate the help of parents to improve educational opportunities for all students. Become actively involved in the school by participating in PTA and school committees. Volunteer your time to assist with activities or help in the computer lab, classroom, or media center. Work with other parents to support the efforts of teachers and school staff with thank you notes, flowers, or teacher appreciation luncheons or breakfasts. It is easier for you to advocate for your children when you have a good relationship with teachers and staff.

When you become aware of a developing problem, follow these simple steps:

- Always approach problems as an opportunity to learn and model for your children positive ways of dealing with difficult situations. Clarify the issues and try to get a sense of the real problem by discussing it thoroughly with your children. This is easier said than done because our children sometimes do not understand their feelings. It is best to be non-judgmental, rephrasing and repeating back what your child is telling you. Both you and your child will gain a clearer understanding of the problem (and your feelings) through this process.
- When you are convinced that you have all the facts, approach the teacher with care and sensitivity to schedule a meeting at a time that is convenient for both of you. Do not just drop by school and begin this conversation. Be sure to arrive at the scheduled meeting on time with the intent of keeping the conversation a positive learning exchange.
- At the meeting start with positive comments about the school and the teacher. Communicate your concern as clearly as possible without blame. Keep the focus on your children's academic and social/emotional needs. Come prepared to share specific examples related to your concerns.
- Be sure to express a willingness to help resolve the problem and work collaboratively toward a positive solution. Plan together to determine the responsibilities for you, your child, and the teacher. Determine a reasonable timeline for evaluating progress. After the conference, keep the lines of communication open and schedule a follow-up meeting.

Conclusion

School can be a very frustrating experience for gifted students with disabilities, their parents, and their teachers. As parents, you can play an important role in helping your children understand and learn to cope with their mixed abilities, to understand their own unique set of individual strengths, challenges, and interests, and to learn and apply strategies to build resilience. Through your actions, you can empower your children to overcome their disabilities and to persist through their frustration. Advocate for your child by working collaboratively with the school. In these ways, you can parent your twice-exceptional child through frustration to success.

Author Note. Beverly Trail is an independent consultant for the Colorado Department of Education, working in the area of Twice-Exceptional Students. Beverly is on leave from her position with Jefferson County Public Schools while completing the doctoral program at the University of Northern Colorado in Special Education Administration.

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