

# Giftedness

## A Strengths-Based



**A**DHD AND GIFTEDNESS are sometimes described as having the same or similar characteristics. However, one diagnosis is considered a disability and one, a gift. Neither assumption is ideal in supporting the child identified with either ADHD, giftedness, or both, often referred to as *twice exceptional* or *2e*. (Twice exceptional or 2e refers to a diagnosis of gifted with a learning disability or learning difference as the second exceptionality; in this article, 2e refers to ADHD as the second exceptionality).

Gifted children suffer when undue expectations exist without consideration of other complex characteristics that define their day-to-day experience. Children identified with ADHD become deficit-focused when their strengths are neither recognized nor celebrated. Twice exceptional children experience a tug-of-war depending on what combination of strengths and challenges they display. Recognizing strengths and supporting the challenges of each diagnosis goes a long way toward helping these children increase their self-esteem and reach their potential.

Self-esteem lays the foundation for success. So it is important to understand and do better for our twice exceptional children whose abundant and limitless potential often is squandered because of a serious lack of understanding of their day-to-day experiences.

Self-esteem is negatively impacted by this lack of understanding, which gets translated into negative reactions and interactions with adults—parents, educators and professionals—who live and work with these children.

# and ADHD

## Perspective and Approach

by Julie Skolnick, MA, JD

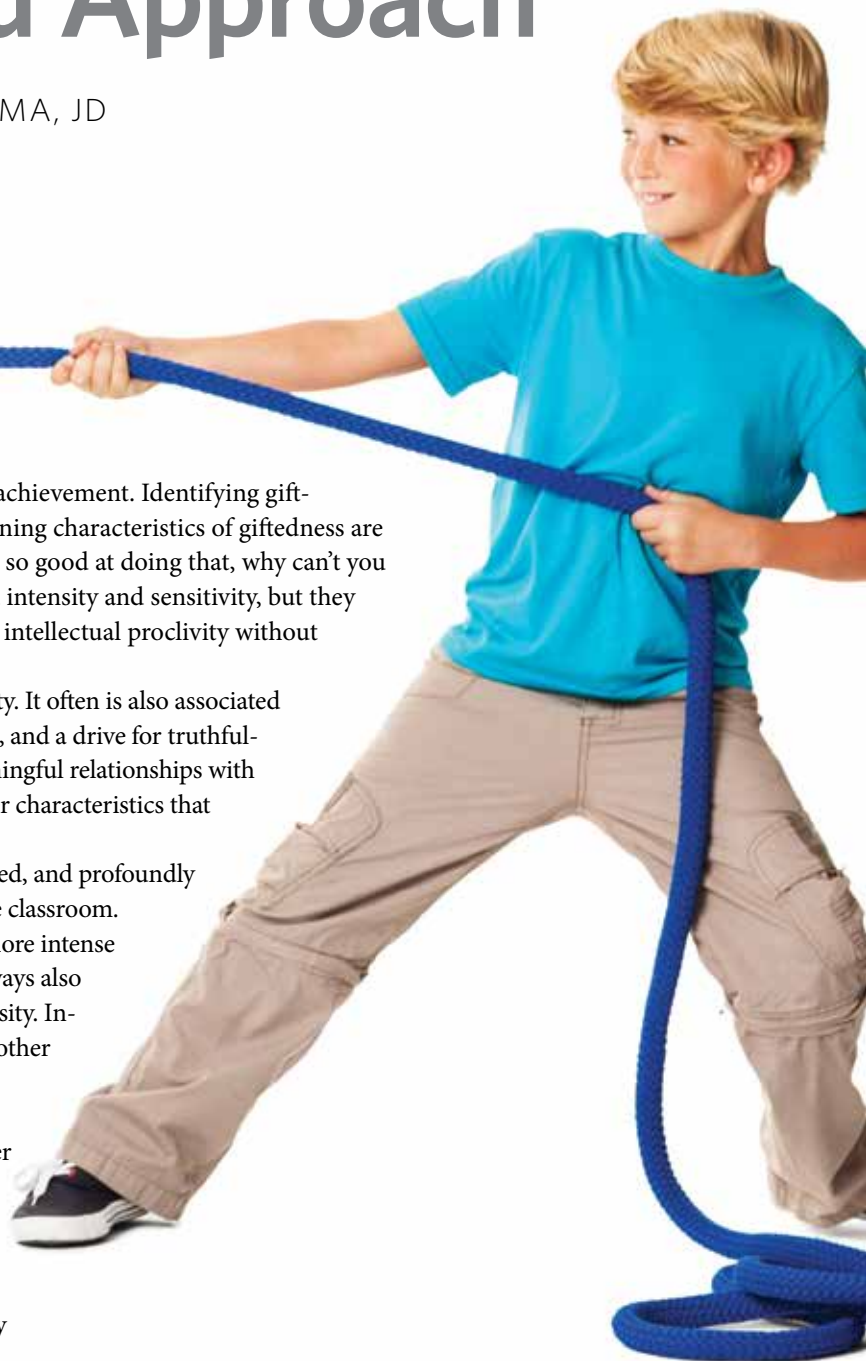
### Characteristics of giftedness

A “gifted” diagnosis is often solely based on intelligence and achievement. Identifying giftedness according to these criteria alone assumes that the defining characteristics of giftedness are ability and intellect. Gifted children often are asked “If you’re so good at doing that, why can’t you do this?” Gifted children with ADHD often show heightened intensity and sensitivity, but they are set up to fail in a system that only recognizes and expects intellectual proclivity without consideration of their emotional needs.

Giftedness, of course, does include a strong intellectual ability. It often is also associated with a strong sense of right versus wrong, existential reflection, and a drive for truthfulness. It is important for gifted children to feel fulfilled by meaningful relationships with parents, teachers and professionals who understand these other characteristics that accompany the high IQ scores.

There are at least three levels of giftedness: gifted, highly gifted, and profoundly gifted, all of which may require differentiation within the same classroom. The higher the IQ score on the bell curve of intelligence, the more intense the giftedness characteristics. The gifted experience almost always also includes asynchronous development, perfectionism, and intensity. Interestingly, when children receive their gifted diagnosis, these other characteristics often are not addressed.

Asynchronous development is when someone demonstrates strength in one area and relative deficit in another. The stronger the strength, the more disparate the asynchrony and when some areas of accomplishment come easily and others do not, the result is confusion and frustration for both the child and everyone around him. A child who can solve high-level mathematical equations, but needs to pace while doing so, may



be chastised for this need to move. A child who reads several grade levels above his own, but cannot write a coherent essay, may be considered for a remedial classroom. The result for the child is self-deprecation and doubt.

Social challenges can result from the child's giftedness, too. A child fascinated by war, curing disease, astronomy, marine biology, etc. often has difficulty relating to similarly aged peers. He may become frustrated, impatient or bored with "age-appropriate" conversation and banter.

Perfectionism, another characteristic of the gifted experience, often comes with anxiety. Perfectionists may set expectations for themselves that are nearly impossible to meet. Gifted children are often told how smart they are from an early age. This type of praise can set perfectionists up to fail as they worry about letting others down. Whether their concern is for their classmates in a group project, their parents' hope or their teachers' praise, perfectionists may persevere to the point of paralysis. They simply cannot see their way through the work they've given themselves to meet the standard they themselves set. Without appropriate support these children fall farther behind and eventually give up.

Anxiety is often found in gifted and twice exceptional children, as well as in children with ADHD. Because these children are frequently misunderstood, challenged to control emotions and impulses, frustrated over executive functioning challenges, regularly chastised for behavior and need for movement, they fear their next reprisal, their next *failure*, their next out-of-sync move. Providing a safe home and classroom atmosphere is imperative to encouraging these children to take risks. A safe atmosphere includes understanding triggers, working through problems and discussing ethical dilemmas.

Intensity is another shared characteristic. Frequently referred to as *overexcitabilities* in gifted literature, gifted folks tend to experience emotional, intellectual, imaginal, sensory, and psychomotor realms in big, bold, all-encompassing ways. So the gifted child who exhibits psychomotor overexcitability (abundant energy and need for movement) may look identical to a child with ADHD who is described as hyperactive. A child with ADHD who has a hard time regulating emotions due to executive functioning deficits looks a lot like an emotionally overexcitable gifted child.

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### **Overlapping characteristics**

One could create a Venn diagram for "ADHD" and "gifted" using shared characteristics—which may include creativity, energy, divergent thinking, empathy, enthusiasm, unique problem solving as well as anxiety, social challenges, perfectionism, intensity, and emotionality. So, what do these similarities and overlap mean? It is far more important to *understand* the individual gifted

and ADHD experience than to point to behavior as proving that a child is either gifted or ADHD or both.

Once you've met one twice-exceptional child, you've met one twice-exceptional child. The important thing is to create a personal connection with this child in order to understand what underlies behavior, to celebrate strengths, and to address and support challenges. Behavior is communication. Success and strong self-esteem are more likely to occur when the true experience of giftedness and ADHD are understood and honored by parents, teachers, and professionals.

The best way to create safe spaces for these children is to set up systems in homes and classrooms that structure activities, account for potential social difficulties, dial down possible sensory challenges, and in effect, plan for potential pitfalls. Understanding that less preferred behaviors are not intentional and are not aimed at the adult personally is a necessary first step toward success. Once this understanding comes about, strengths suddenly become abundantly clear. Not only do these children exhibit super abilities, they do so while monitoring and modulating their challenges. Highlighting strengths and catching these children doing well cushions their missteps. Most important, knowing that these children desperately want to succeed and need an adult's help to do so, is imperative for strengthening self-esteem and realizing potential. 🗨️

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**Julie Skolnick**, the mother of three twice exceptional children, is the founder of *With Understanding Comes Calm*. She supports parents of twice exceptional children through education, tailor-made strategies, and advocacy training. Skolnick also conducts teacher workshops and supports gifted and twice exceptional adults in navigating their relationships. She frequently speaks to professionals and parent groups about the true meaning of giftedness and twice exceptionality. Learn more and find her blog on her website, [www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com](http://www.withunderstandingcomescalm.com).