



# Double Trouble

Navigating  
Life as a  
Gifted Kid  
with ADHD

René Brooks

**M**AKE JOKES ALL THE TIME about how being an adult is a scam. It's funny how we long for the day when we become the masters of our own destinies, only to discover that being the master of your own destiny is NOT as fun as it looks from the outside. Being a grownup is the ultimate Ponzi scheme. But growing up a gifted kid with undiagnosed ADHD is a super close second. In the race for which is worse, it is a photo finish with being an adult leading by a hair.

### **What's wrong with being gifted with untreated ADHD?**

On the face of it all, nothing. Being gifted would seem to equip you with skills to work around the ADHD whether it was treated or not, right? Unfortunately, that hasn't been the case in my experience. All

being gifted ever did was set me up for statements like these to be constantly thrown at me:

- You're smarter than this.
- If you would just apply yourself.
- You're not working up to your full potential.
- If you would just pay attention.

- You're able to do so much more when you want to.
- If you could just focus.
- What do I have to do to make you care?
- If you would just stop being lazy.

Needless to say, statements like these not only erode a child's ego, you also have the fact that they're being gaslit. If a child is trying as hard as they possibly can and they're being told they aren't applying themselves and it isn't good enough, where does that leave the child? For me, it led to years of feeling that no matter what I did it was never good enough. To needing someone else to tell me I did well instead of feeling that I could accurately gauge my own efforts. It led to me feeling like I had failed no matter how hard I worked. The issues that I had were not rooted in a moral failing, but in a disorder I needed treatment for.

### The curse of being gifted

Can we talk about the curse of being a "gifted" kid while having undiagnosed ADHD? Has anyone else survived this specially crafted hell?

For those of you who don't know the story of my ADHD diagnosis, I was diagnosed three times: once at 7, once at 11, and then at 25. I began treatment and five years later started a blog and now we're all here. That means for my entire school career I was the kid who never paid attention. I was a daydreamer, but I was clearly smart because they tested me and knew I was more than capable of meeting any challenge they threw at me.

Unfortunately, my grades often didn't reflect this. My lack of homework turned in never reflected it. All of those things we think make good students (but really are just an ongoing test of the executive functions) were things I failed at. That made me a bad student. They had to figure out what was making me a bad student so that I could get good grades and make something out of myself blah-blah-blah. Without a lack of intelligence to blame, they set their sights on what they considered the true blockade: me.

### Gifted kid, why won't you try?

As you can imagine, it wasn't fun being the center of all this attention. Imagine constantly being analyzed and coming up lacking. To be constantly told that you had the capabilities but didn't care enough to follow through. Well, you don't really have to imagine, I'll just give you these tweets where I've already said it:

*When I got to high school we changed school districts and they gave me the option to NOT be a gifted kid. And I took that option. I took that option like a shot.*

*Unfortunately, they still discovered I was "capable of more" if I would "apply" myself.*

*Which brings the eternal "why won't you try" chorus from your parents.*

*And you sit there in shame because you know you're better than your performance too. But you don't know why you can't perform. So you just assume you're awful and lazy and say goodbye to your self-esteem.*

Shame and ADHD go hand in hand already. We are consistently told that we aren't doing enough (which makes us try harder—still we don't measure up). Adding in the gifted part only means that they no longer SUSPECT you could do better. They now know for sure that you can and for whatever reason, you just won't. Or at least that's what they THINK they know.

### The impact on your self-esteem

I am not the only one who has had this experience. There are whole generations of gifted kids who have been hung out to dry by the lack of support they receive. It may sound like a humblebrag, a "woe is me, I am too smart and it made me sad," but actually it isn't. When you are repeatedly subjected to being gaslit and told that your perception of who you are and what effort you are or are not exerting is incorrect, you are setting the stage for years of depression, anxiety, indecisiveness, and more.

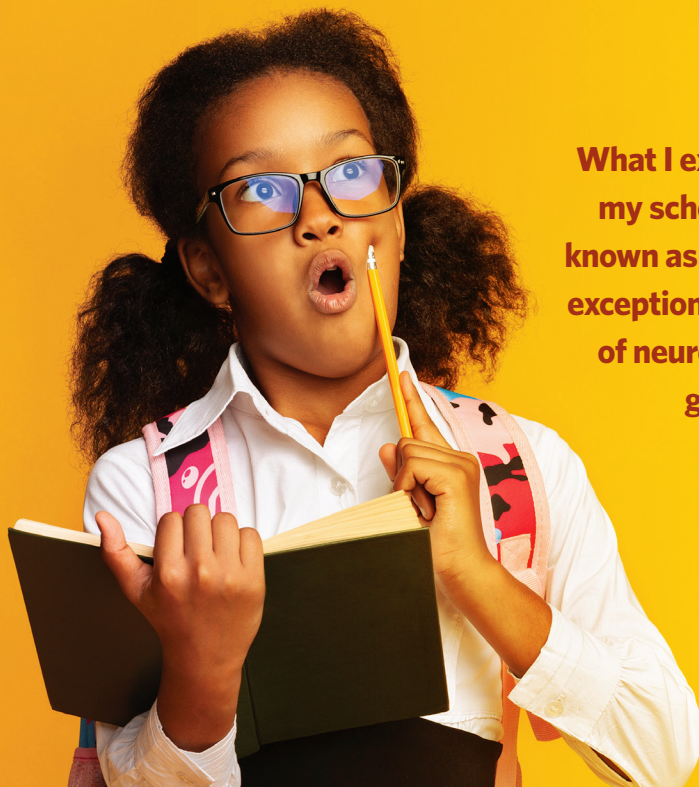
It has taken hard work to get to the point where I could trust myself to make the right decision. Not because I ever lacked the capability, but because I always felt deep down that I make the wrong choices. That even though something seems right to me, it would be wrong. I spent so many of my formative years believing that I was wrong.

Once I learned that it was undiagnosed ADHD causing the problem, it took me years to realize that I have good sense, and that the mistrust I feel for my decisions is rooted in other people's uneducated and ill-informed opinions of me. This is not easy work. It has only been through digging through years of trauma, quite an expensive process, that I have learned to trust myself again. I wish this trust, this confidence in my own capabilities for every little gifted child, and every gifted adult who grew up believing there was something inherently wrong with them.

### Imagine what you could do if you applied yourself

Clearly, the children have a problem, so to the parents and educators of these children, I have a suggestion: Imagine what you could do if you applied yourself. What





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would happen if you would stop assuming that a child would intentionally get bad grades to spite themselves? Just slow down and put some thought into it. What child goes out of their way to get in trouble? Is there a child who would do so who does not have an underlying challenge? Imagine what you could do if you opened your mind and thought outside of tradition in a way that could help the child.

If a child is struggling, why are you asking the child (or anyone who is struggling really) what would help them solve the problem? When they tell you they do not know, it's safe to say there's something that needs to be investigated. If the child had those answers, the child likely wouldn't have that problem. Now, of course, you want to ask the child if the help is helping. Assuming they have some secret solution they just aren't telling you is foolish. They're telling you they don't know because they don't know.

### **What does it mean to be "twice exceptional"?**

As time moves forward, new ideas and terminologies spring up to describe our human experiences. What I experienced during my school years, is now known as being 2e, or twice exceptional—a combination of neurodivergence and giftedness. To learn more about being 2e, please take a look at Aurora Remember's excellent blog, "What Exactly Is Twice Exceptionality?" For an excellent read that gives another perspective on raising a gifted child, take a look at CHADD's strengths-based approach to giftedness.

### **What will keep this from happening to more children?**

I don't want to see this happen to another child. Solution-wise, there are many options. One could be testing more children for ADHD when we suspect they have it. Another could be correctly educating teachers and parents on what kind of language to use with gifted children. But mostly? I think people should listen to their children. Have compassion for their children. Believe their children. That will do more good than anything else could ever do. 🗣️



**René Brooks** has taken a late-life diagnosis and used it to uplift others. After being diagnosed with ADHD three times—at age 7, 11, and 25—at 25 she was finally able to get the treatment she deserved. She is the founder of Black Girl, Lost Keys, a blog that empowers Black women with ADHD and shows them how to live well with the disorder. In addition to writing for Healthline, Brooks has contributed to Kaleidoscope Society, the ADHD Women's Palooza, Mindfully ADD, and ADHD Essentials. She served as a patient contributor to TEVA Pharmaceutical's Life Effects project and spoke at the International Alliance of Patients Organization's 8th Annual Congress. This article originally appeared on her blog, [blackgirllostkeys.com](https://blackgirllostkeys.com).

#### **ADDITIONAL READING**

Aurora Remember Holtzman, "What Exactly Is Twice Exceptionality?" *Aurora Remember*, January 2, 2020. <https://www.auroraremember.com/blog/what-exactly-is-twice-exceptionality>

Julie Skolnick, "Giftedness & ADHD: A Strengths-Based Perspective and Approach," in CHADD's *Attention* magazine, Fall 2017. <https://chadd.org/attention-article/giftedness-adhd-a-strengths-based-perspective-and-approach/>