Recognizing the Signs and Symptoms of ADHD in Gifted Children

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ADHD in Gifted Children

Although many people overlook the possibility of two competing learning personalities, some children experience a learning difficulty alongside above-average intelligence. ADHD in gifted children is known as “twice exceptional”, or 2e, and it can go unnoticed for a long time, since high intellect can hide ADHD symptoms, and ADHD can hide academic ability.

The similarities between ADHD and giftedness can interfere with diagnosis and treatment: gifted children are sometimes mistakenly diagnosed as ADHD, or those who are deemed gifted are exempted from the ADHD diagnosis, even if symptoms begin to interfere with learning. Even fewer are recognized as “twice exceptional”, so 2e children can have problems in school because their needs are often ignored.

Signs and Symptoms in Gifted ADHD Children

Impulsiveness, emotional intensity and the need to focus on a lot of things at once are common in both ADHD children and gifted children. This overlap in “twice exceptional” children tends to show up in certain character traits and approaches to learning:

- **Problems with organization**. Many 2e kids have a hard time organizing their thoughts. They may have trouble writing legibly, answering comprehensively and following step-by-step instructions. Problems with organization could be more visible, too, like an untidy desk area or misplaced workbooks at school, or disorder at home.
- **Frustration**. In most learning environments, repetitive tasks are used to help children internalize a new idea, rule, or skill. Those with ADHD tend to already have a hard time focusing attention on the same thing for too long, but when they can also master an exercise faster than the rest of the group, they can quickly become frustrated.
- **Lack of motivation**. Many gifted students with ADHD fall into the “inattentive” rather than “hyperactive” category of the condition. In turn, their ADHD symptoms may be misinterpreted as laziness, when in fact the lack of motivation could be explained by ADHD neurological issues combined with a lack of intellectual challenge.

Brighter and academically-inclined children with ADHD might encounter challenges later than other kids with ADHD, when social and school structure shifts dramatically. Middle school or high school can be the tipping point, where issues with attention, organization and memory can no longer be silently and secretly controlled.

Attending to the Gifted ADHD Child

For children to reach their full potential, they need to learn and grow in an appropriate and nurturing atmosphere. Unfortunately, that particular atmosphere can be difficult to manage for 2e children: the gifted classroom can be too demanding in social expectations and organization, and a program designed specifically for ADHD children

will likely ignore the extra stimulus that a gifted student may need. The answer could be a more fluid curriculum, with more options in content and lesson structure. It’s important to discuss possibilities with the academic experts in your child’s current school, and investigate new learning spaces that might be more functional for your child.

As a parent, it’s important to acknowledge both conditions. Don’t ignore the talent and try to fix the ADHD, and don’t ignore the ADHD while you cater to their gifted intellect – there will be emotional fallout in either case. Instead, try to work within their comfort zone, and promote self-understanding. If they don’t realize their strengths and weaknesses, they may become overwhelmed or confused, but knowing how their ADHD and intellectual gifts can be used can make a huge difference in ambition and commitment.