

## How Giftedness and ADHD Can Mirror Each Other

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### **Myth: Gifted students and those with ADHD have little in common**

Giftedness and ADHD are not often associated with one another. In fact, they are viewed quite differently. While ADHD has more negative stigma associated with it, giftedness is viewed mostly positively. This is true to some degree as ADHD is characterized by challenges with inattention, hyperactivity/impulsivity, and executive functioning which impede on learning. Giftedness is characterized by above average intelligence.

### **Truth: Giftedness and ADHD can look a lot alike; both may need to be considered for some students.**

We now know that individuals that fit into these categories not only have their own unique challenges, but they also share many similarities as well. Not only that, but they can occur together. In fact, about 50% of gifted children also have ADHD which adds complexity and additional challenges. When both are present in a child, they are considered to be 'twice-exceptional.'

#### *Difficulties with Inattention and Hyperactivity*

Such difficulties are a hallmark feature of ADHD. However, some gifted characteristics can be misidentified as those of inattention and hyperactivity. When a child is gifted, they may not be getting enough stimulation in a regular classroom which increases the frequency and likelihood to become distracted, to have difficulty with concentration, and to have difficulty completing tasks. This can consequently impact their academic performance and behaviour in the classroom. A student who is easily distracted and bored is likely to want to chat with peers or engage in other activities that are more interesting.

#### *Difficulties with Self-Esteem and Self-Efficacy*

Self-esteem and self-efficacy are other areas of functioning that are impacted in individuals with ADHD. Due to the difficulties they may face academically (especially in subject areas that are not interesting to them), they may need to use more mental energy than others to attend to that information. This can be tiring especially when an individual is not taking breaks. This quickly leads to reduced self-efficacy (confidence in one's abilities) and avoidant behaviours. This in turn can quickly lead to a very negative view of themselves becoming internalized. Furthermore, children that face these challenges but have not been officially diagnosed may be described by other adults as being "lazy" and "unmotivated" which is further damaging to their self-esteem. This also makes them expect failure, which leads to them putting in less effort, and often shying away from new experiences.

One may assume that a gifted child would not have these challenges. On the contrary, all children, especially those with unique learning needs, benefit tremendously from being taught to be comfortable in making mistakes. A gifted child may be quicker to pick up information or

even retain it. They may find that they do not have to spend as much time studying or completing homework to get good grades, especially during the elementary school years. However, we know that learning is always continuous, despite one's age. When a child who makes minimal errors encounters more challenging problems, they may very likely be shocked and disappointed in themselves. As a result, they may very quickly attempt to avoid tasks that do not come "easily" to them as it threatens their understanding of the learning process thus far. As such, regardless of the challenges faced by these individuals, it is important to foster a "growth mindset" to ensure that students understand the importance of making mistakes and how impactful their self-efficacy is.

### *Social Difficulties*

ADHD and/or giftedness can also impact social life. A student with ADHD can often have difficulties making friends due to lack of attention to nonverbal cues and social mannerisms. Thus, such a student may not engage in reciprocating interests, checking in to ensure that their peer is still engaged in a conversation, or even engaging in small talk. A child with ADHD may demonstrate patterns of interrupting in conversations and talking 'at' people rather than 'with' them. This can be a deterrent to their peers as these behaviours are not reciprocal.

On the other hand, a gifted child may struggle socially in a different manner. They may have interests in areas that their peers may not be able to relate to, or their vocabulary may be too advanced for their same-aged peers. This can quickly make a child feel ostracized, consequently making it difficult to create and maintain friendships.

### *Executive Functioning*

The teaching of strategies to support executive functioning is also an area of growth for both groups of students. Executive functioning skills are developed in the frontal lobe of the brain, and they continue developing into adulthood. These skills include a variety of skills such as planning, organization, task completion, working memory, self-monitoring, and emotion regulation. These skills are especially necessary for higher grades where students are expected to achieve a level of independence. As we know, this development can be somewhat slower for individuals with ADHD, making transitions into junior high especially challenging.

Meanwhile, a gifted student may not feel the need to learn and practice some of these necessary skills, especially if they are flying through the elementary grades without any significant issues. In other cases, their executive functioning skills are just not as developed as their other cognitive abilities (asynchronous development). Nonetheless, being able to manage course loads and plan out when to work on assignments are keys to success in the later grades. Regardless of intelligence, a student will not be successful if they are unable to appropriately manage their time, plan, and use effective study strategies. As such, difficulties with executive functioning can be observed in gifted learners as well as those with ADHD.

It is clear that some behaviours, negative self-esteem, and social challenges can appear as attentional issues on the surface. This is due to the similarities between ADHD and giftedness.

While ADHD is a diagnosis and giftedness is not, individuals that fit into these categories may face significant challenges in the classroom. Thus, their challenges should be recognized regardless of where they fit in. Furthermore, it is important for families and clinicians to understand that challenges with inattention and/or hyperactive/impulsive behaviours can prevent any child from reaching their full potential if left untreated. Having this understanding of the similarities and differences of these learning needs is also important so that parents can know what to advocate for in order to obtain an accurate diagnosis and consequently, appropriate and effective support for their children.

Additional Resources:

1. Giftedness & ADHD  
<https://chadd.org/attention-article/giftedness-adhd-a-strengths-based-perspective-and-approach/>
2. Smart but Scattered: The Revolutionary “Executive Skills” Approach to Helping Kids Reach Their Potential by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare  
<https://www.smartbutscatteredkids.com/>
3. Gifted and Talented Education Parent Association <https://gatecalgary.ca/>
4. Gifted Children with ADHD  
<https://www.ldonline.org/ld-topics/gifted-ld/gifted-children-attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder>