

ADHD and Giftedness

It is not unusual for children to meet the criteria for both Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and Giftedness. This presents a special challenge to both teachers and parents. Giftedness is frequently overlooked in children with ADHD. Consequently, these children's gifted needs go unsupported, leaving them at risk for chronic underachievement. Conversely, sometimes ADHD is not evident in Gifted children and can be overlooked. Therefore, untreated ADHD can have serious, long-term negative impact on self-esteem, peer relationships, and may lead to anxiety and/or depression. Because the characteristics of Giftedness and ADHD overlap, evaluators should be qualified in assessing both areas of Giftedness and ADHD.

In assessing for Giftedness in children already diagnosed with ADHD, a few important factors should be considered. Because students with ADHD are typically impulsive and unable to sustain attention, the results of cognitive assessments may be an underestimate of the student's true cognitive ability. Unfortunately, the focus may be on the child's disruptive behaviors; the indicators of the child's high ability may be overlooked. Thus, tests should be administered in a manner free from bias based on disability.

In assessing for ADHD in children who already meet the criteria for Giftedness, other factors should be considered. Gifted children frequently score well in tests that assess sustained attention, such as the Digit Span subtest on the Weschler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Edition (WISC-IV), whereby attentional needs are masked. Thus, evaluators should not merely rely on the Working Memory and Processing Speed Index scores on the WISC-IV to determine whether a student meets the requirements of ADHD.

There are important program implementation implications related to children with both ADHD and Giftedness. Gifted ADHD children differ from average-functioning ADHD peers in several ways. Gifted ADHD students tend to be much more aware of their disabilities and how they impact their education, as well as other areas of life. These students are more likely to perceive him/herself as inadequate. This often leads to poor self-esteem, increased frustration, depression, and anxiety. Thus, counseling in order to strengthen the understanding of how their ADHD impacts their education should be considered. Gifted ADHD children tend to prefer complexity and challenging tasks, where average-functioning ADHD students may prefer less complex tasks. Therefore, it is important to provide challenging, complex tasks that are interesting to the child, as well as provide opportunities for choices of project topics.

Gifted ADHD children tend to be more sensitive in awareness of the external environment, internal states and feelings, projective identification with aspects of their fields and interests, in empathy and compassion for others and in passionate feelings for people and causes. Accordingly, counseling and opportunities to discuss feelings, opportunities to discuss serious social issues, and for projects to address social concerns should be considered.

Gifted ADHD children differ from Gifted non-disabled peers as well. Both gifted ADHD children and gifted non-disabled peers tend to enjoy challenging tasks, however, gifted ADHD children often have poor frustration tolerance and ability to delay gratification, and, thus, may become overly frustrated when they do not immediately meet with success. Therefore, it is important to utilize accommodations for the child when he/she is frustrated, such as kindly and individually offering, or suggesting to student that they could take a break, perhaps go for a walk to the water fountain, or work on an alternative task. While both gifted ADHD students and non-disabled gifted students tend to be very observant of what is going on around them, Gifted ADHD children may become overwhelmed by external stimuli. Thus, Gifted ADHD children may require a classroom setting with minimal external stimuli, may require smaller student-teacher ratio, and may require a smaller class size.

While both Gifted ADHD children and non-disabled Gifted students tend to become so engrossed in their work, particularly work that interests an ADHD child, they may block out everything else, however, a Gifted student with ADHD may have significant difficulty transitioning to a new task or activity. Accordingly, transition planning in between tasks - such as providing the student with several verbal reminders that he/she will need to transition to a



new task soon and allowing the student an opportunity to finish the task they are engrossed in at a later time are important accommodations to consider.

Forgetfulness and organizational, planning, and time management difficulties are typical characteristics demonstrated in Gifted ADHD children. Thus, direct instruction in organization, study skills, and time management, and accommodations to allow student to retrieve forgotten items without repercussion are important programmatic considerations for Gifted ADHD children.

Gifted students with ADHD will likely drift off more readily than non-disabled Gifted peers when the topic involves material mastered by the student - this often leads to failure to attend to or hear material not mastered, as the student is not likely to be aware of when the discussion will change topics. Necessary accommodations may include providing handouts of important material, clear teacher indication of when the topic of discussion is changing, and “checking in” on the student by placing a hand on his/her shoulder.


Gifted students with ADHD may be able to perform exceptionally well on projects, etc., but they tend to have difficulties following multi-step directions. Therefore, directions may need to be broken down into smaller tasks.

Gifted students with ADHD may procrastinate on tasks, waiting until the last minute to complete something. Thus, for long-term projects, the student should be given shorter time frames, the task broken into smaller components, and due dates for components of project.

Gifted students with ADHD tend to lag two to three years behind their same-aged peers in social and emotional maturity. However, Gifted non-disabled students tend to be more similar cognitively, socially, and emotionally to children two to four years older than them. Consequently, it is wise to have clear rules in the Gifted classroom to treat everyone with the same respect they would like to receive, and social skills training/group to develop social skills of students with those needs.

While the development of one single Individualized Education Plan (IEP) document addressing both Giftedness and ADHD (or other disabilities) is not required by law, it makes sense to do so. These are not two separate, distinct issues, but rather the student’s Giftedness and ADHD will impact each other. Teachers will need to address the student’s unique needs, related to both Giftedness and ADHD, as well as how these two impact each other related to the student. From a practical perspective, it is much easier for Gifted teachers, as well as special education and regular education teachers, to implement a single program, rather than refer to two separate programs. Also, with one single IEP addressing both Giftedness and ADHD, Gifted teachers are sure to have information concerning the students’ special education needs. Likewise, special education and regular education teachers are sure to have information related to the student’s Giftedness.

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