

Is there an 'ideal solution' for the gifted child with learning disability? - One Mother's Thoughts

Article by Carol Barnes

Perhaps your gifted child has been also diagnosed with a learning disability or with just 'something else going on' which can sometimes interfere with school achievement and/or with social/emotional well-being.

Readers concerned about such a child often wonder if there exists an ideal solution to what sometimes seems to be an insurmountable challenge. They ask more specifically and immediately, whether there is a 'recipe' or a plan of action to adopt in order to most expeditiously respond to the child's many and varying needs.

"There seems to be so much 'wrong' with my child. What should I do first? How do I know who is trustworthy and who is trying to sell me a 'product' which may or may not 'work'?"

Before considering some answers to these questions, let's look briefly at some of the children who fall within this special population of gifted children.

Children of high intellectual potential who also have one or more developmental differences or additional educational needs are described as 'gifted with learning disability' (**GLD**).

However the term GLD is not restricted to those who have a formally diagnosed specific 'learning disability' such as dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyspraxia, auditory processing disorder or a visual/perceptual problem. Indeed the term also encompasses gifted children who have other special needs, such as medical conditions (eg, ADHD), developmental differences (eg, ASD), physical disability or emotional concerns such as maladaptive perfectionism or anxiety or depression.

GLD children may be gifted in understanding and identifying complex relationships and using advanced vocabulary. They may have wide general knowledge and be good at difficult, abstract problems. Indeed they may be intellectually astonishing.

At the same time, however, the mechanics involved in writing, reading, basic computation and ostensibly simple academic tasks, particularly timed tests, often present seemingly insurmountable difficulties. GLD children frequently have poor time

management and organisational abilities, and/or inconsistent attention issues. They may appear vague or preoccupied or just plain 'virtually absent'.

Being GLD is somewhat akin to being the rope in a tug-of-war: the GLD child is being pulled in one direction by their high IQ and their intense desire to pursue their intellectual interests, but at the same time they are being pulled in the opposite direction by a crippling disability or special need which may impede their progress in developing their gifts into talents – in transforming their high potential into high performance.

How can parents help their child to do that?

Having worked with the parents of GLD children for over a decade, I have come to understand that because GLD children are not a homogeneous group, there is no one single solution or formula. It's not simply a case of doing XYZ and the child is forever 'fixed'.

Rather the process is somewhat more akin to slowly renovating the child – a bit like peeling an onion: after each layer you note improvements, and this then allows you to see another issue - and another layer which needs investigating....until you finally get down to the core of the problem.

Of all the **DOs** and **DON'Ts** which have been suggested to me along the way, here are a few I would recommend:

DO:

1. start by having the child **IQ tested** by a **specialist Educational and Developmental Psychologist** who regularly assesses gifted, and who knows how to deal with gifted children, including their possible perfectionistic tendencies, and how to interpret unusual sub-test scatters. Choose a psychologist who will administer an **achievement test** as well as an IQ test, since both are needed to identify GLD. Avoid psychologists who advertise that they do not identify or treat disabilities or disorders. If the child turns out not only to be gifted but also to have a disability, make sure that the psychologist provides a detailed report for the school recommending disability adjustments for classroom activities and for tests and exams.

2. take the IQ and achievement test reports to a **developmental paediatrician (not a regular**

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paediatrician) to have a thorough screening of your child, and insist on two reports, one for the referring GP and yourself, and another for the school or for any relevant testing authority (eg, the QSA for NAPLAN). If disability is diagnosed, the report for the latter must contain recommendations regarding disability adjustments for classroom activities and for tests and exams. The report must also use the word 'disability' with respect to what has been diagnosed, because any report couched in terms of 'relative weakness', 'learning difficulty', 'learning difference', 'learning style', 'overexcitability' or other nebulous descriptor will be useless when it comes time to apply for disability adjustments.

Ask the developmental paediatrician for referrals to other professionals as necessary (eg, language pathologists, occupational therapists, audiologists, behavioural optometrists, educational consultants, etc) and consult as many as you can afford.

Consider asking these professionals to accompany you to school meetings to discuss your child, and make sure that all their reports similarly use the word 'disability' and are fully explained to you in advance so that you can readily answer teachers' questions about their contents.

3. set up a good filing system for all the bits of paper you collect in steps 1 and 2 above, so that you'll have it all handy and **organised** for school meetings.

4. make sure that the school, despite the disabilities, continues to **feed** the child's **gift** – keeping the child in a large cluster of their IQ peers with appropriately stimulating, challenging and interesting work with minimal repetition (even if they are not achieving good grades).

5. provide **therapies and adjustments** - both out-of-class specialist remediation AND classroom adjustments to address auditory, visual, motor and/or sensory perceptual disabilities - measures such as sitting near the board, using assistive technology, wearing tinted lenses, writing on a laptop, etc – whatever it takes to help the child to take in enough information and process it.

6. obtain approval for each of the **disability adjustments** recommended in your professionals'

reports for tests and exams so that your child can participate in their tests and exams on the same basis as a child without disability – measures such as extra time, coloured paper, separate supervision, rest breaks, permission to type on a laptop or to use a scribe, etc, to allow the child to accurately show what they have learned and what they can do. Your child with disability is legislatively entitled to such adjustments – they are not a favour or a privilege or an advantage.

7. join your local **gifted association** AND your local **learning disabilities association** (because you need to address the issue from both angles), and read every syllable they print, and attend every workshop, seminar, conference and course they hold. Join parent support groups and electronic discussion groups, and take every opportunity to reassure other parents of GLD children that they are doing the right thing by not ignoring the issue.

8. send to the school a **one-page summary** of your child's documented strengths and weaknesses, including recommended disability adjustments, and offer to send in the supporting professionals' reports if the school cares to see them. Most teachers don't have either the time to read more than a one-page summary, or the expertise to decipher the professionals' reports in any case.

9. advocate for your child with teachers and other school personnel as fervently as required to ensure that your child's needs are being met from day to day. In particular, sound an alarm as soon as you discover that your child is being **punished** at school for anything to do with schoolwork or homework. The goal here is not to improve grades, but rather to intervene before the child begins to hate school.

10. if you have time during the day, be sure to also **'get known' at the school for something other than advocating** for your child, for example volunteer for tuck shop duty, reading helper, fete planning, parent association, etc. Whenever something goes **well** at school, immediately send a short email complimenting the teacher with a copy to the principal. Whenever something goes **'wrong'**, send an email to the teacher explaining why whatever has happened is contraindicated for a child with disability – but this time without the copy to the principal.

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11. talk to your child about the meaning of GLD and the number of GLD who turn out to be 'late bloomers', and encourage and help your child to **self-advocate** as soon as they feel confident enough. The advocacy which you model today will be remembered tomorrow. Your child will one day thank you for having always been their greatest and most tenacious supporter.

12. whenever you look at your child, remember that this is the future adult who will one day decide when it is time for you to go into a nursing home so, before uttering a syllable of criticism, disappointment or disapproval, consider directing your remarks to that **future decision maker**, rather than to the little child you see in front of you clutching their miserable school report. Remember also that despite today's issues, your child is a gorgeous young person, soon to become a gorgeous adult, with huge strengths and a lot to contribute to the world. The world needs our different thinkers.

And also, DON'T:

1. assume that all **learning disabilities** will be **identified** at school, or that silence equals no problems.
2. carry on interminably about the critical, life-and-death importance of good **grades** and a high OP, but instead emphasize that there are many ways for a student to gain entry to university – and going directly from Year 12 to uni with a high OP is but one of them. A child who hates school has little interest in achieving good grades to get accepted into another institution which looks, sounds, or smells like even more 'school'.
3. move in social circles with **other parents** who regularly blabber on about grades and OPs, or who invariably attribute other children's lack of academic success to some moral failing on the part of the child or their parents.
4. lose time worrying that you may be regarded by teachers, administrators or other parents as an overly ambitious and overly anxious '**pushy parent**', and instead reassure yourself that once your child leaves that school, most of those judgmental people will no longer be on your radar and you'll walk past them in the tinned soup aisle without a flicker of recognition. Your child, however, will be in your life

forever.

5. attempt to **motivate** your child to achieve academically by means of threats, rewards, punishments, humiliation, ridicule or the prospect of 'beating' other children.

6. try to **console** your child by telling them that others are doing worse and struggling more (because the child probably won't care), or that one day they'll 'grow out of it' (because the child probably won't).

7. ever, ever **give up!**

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Carol Barnes is vice-president of the Gold Coast QAGTC Branch, and convenor of that Branch's parent support group. She is also the Australian national coordinator and Sydney meeting convenor for GLD Australia, an independent online learning community and support group for parents and teachers of gifted children with learning disability. Most importantly, Carol is the mother of two gifted university students with multiple learning disabilities. To learn more about GLD children or to join GLD Australia, contact Carol at carol@bartink.com.au

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