

## Equitable Supports for Gifted and Talented Children: Twice Exceptional Learners

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Students who are classified as Twice-Exceptional Learners are commonly identified as having a documented disability such as a Specific Learning Disability, Autism, ADHD, emotional and/or behavioral or communication disorder, orthopedic, speech, hearing or vision impairment, or other physical or intellectual disability, while simultaneously demonstrating exceptionally high or atypical talent, skills and abilities in one or more academic, artistic or social areas (Davidson Institute, 2021). The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) estimates that approximately 6% of students receiving special education services are also academically gifted, although they may not have been identified.

### **GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS AND OBSERVABLE BEHAVIORS OF TWICE EXCEPTIONAL LEARNERS:**

Exceptional students have variable learning profiles, no student is exactly like another, however the following information may be used as a guide of general characteristics of the twice exceptional student population:

Twice-exceptional students often learn or develop skills “asynchronously,” meaning they may demonstrate advanced abilities in one subject or area but may experience delays or difficulty in other development areas, academics, or executive functioning. Their school experience may be characterized by significant strengths and significant challenges in their learning.

“Twice-exceptional, also known as 2e, students exhibit significant characteristics of both giftedness and disability” (Kaufman, 2018). These students may have difficulty reading but readily share advanced concepts and theories of topics of significant personal interest. For example, they may struggle with reading written text, but can discuss in detail multiple theories about a topic and may be able to show evidence to support their thinking. They may struggle in specific subjects but may demonstrate innovative and creative problem-solving skills or creative ideas or may demonstrate excellent leadership skills in academic or social settings.

Twice Exceptional (2E) Learners may demonstrate a wide range of abilities, therefore, when preparing to meet these students' academic and social needs, it is essential that educators and caregivers collaborate and lend careful and simultaneous considerations to the student's disabilities and their gifts, strengths, and possible additional emotional supports; observing how these elements work together. To develop a complete profile of the student's learning needs, it is equally important to observe the students learning behaviors holistically, as the disability, gifts and talents may mask each other, making it difficult to recognize and address them. Masking refers to the dynamic that a student's disability may be more noticeable than their gifts and talents or conversely, the gifts and talents may be more noticeable than the disability. It also can be observed in inconsistent performance on tasks and assessments (Townend et al., 2024).

### **Twice-exceptional children may exhibit characteristics that include:**

- Experiencing high levels of frustration and anxiety; may appear to lack motivation; may resist taking academic or intellectual risks.
- Experiencing difficulty in focusing, especially during lectures, reviewing material they have already mastered, or during long bouts of inactivity.
- Demonstrating intense focus and attention when the subject is of interest.

- Impulsive behavior and difficulty managing emotional responses; may use humor to deflect, make fun of others, or to avoid consequences.
- Incongruent maturity levels, relative to age, cognitive ability, and behavior
- Significant learning challenges in specific content areas, while demonstrating advanced knowledge in others.
- Difficulties with social interactions and social awareness.
- Weak executive functioning skills displayed as disorganization, difficulty with time or task management, and perseverance.
- Significant variability in verbal and written communication.
- Atypical critical thinking and problem-solving skills.
- Behavioral problems related to stress, boredom, and undiagnosed learning disabilities including auditory or visual processing disorders.
- Requiring intense teacher support, or by contrast, highly independent depending on area of need.
- May demonstrate unusual and creative imagination.

**COMPARATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF GIFTED STUDENTS AND GIFTED STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Common Gifted Characteristics	Common Characteristics of Gifted with Disabilities
Able to learn and retain information quickly with less repetition.	May process new learning and information slowly, requiring support and compensatory strategies.
Demonstrates learning and development at an advanced rate above same age peers in one or more area of talent.	May have learning delays due to Specific Learning Disability (SLD) or cognitive processing.
May complete assignments and tasks quickly, with little assistance or guidance.	Some students, especially those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), may have difficulty with organizational and social skills.
Gifted children may experience levels of asynchrony (developing one or more skill or talent faster than another). The child may develop cognitively at an advanced level, but not socially. (Cross, 2021)	The asynchrony may be more extreme.
May concentrate intensely for extended periods.	May have Attention Deficit difficulties but can sustain intense concentration for extended periods on tasks and topics that interest them.

**Student Scenarios / Examples:**

- A student may have strong creative and critical thinking skills, strong vocabulary, and deep background knowledge, but demonstrates significant difficulty in writing.

- A student has deep and extensive knowledge about “*climate change*” (or other specific topic of interest), is able to find research and discuss facts about the topic but struggles with completing and organizing related tasks.
- A third-grade student may read at an 8th grade level, but may have difficulty spelling and writing
- A student may demonstrate mental mathematical abilities and conceptual awareness beyond her age and grade but struggle with showing work.
- A student may show a deep understanding of scientific knowledge and ability but struggle to work successfully in a group or partner situation.

**Additional Observable Evidence and Alternative Assessments:**

- Differential Ability Scales-II (DAS-II)
- Student Portfolios, passion projects
- Student and caregiver interview

**RECOMMENDATIONS, INTERVENTION AND SUPPORT**

Twice Exceptional students qualify for specialized and individualized learning plans, similarly to students who only need support with a disability. There are two landmark legal cases that specifically obligate schools and Local Education Agencies (LEA) to comply with a child’s Individualized Education Program (IEP) and to offer an IEP that is reasonably developed to enable a child to make progress that is “most appropriate in light of their circumstance”. Summarily, the cases, *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Amy Rowley*, and *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*, support the Twice Exceptional student being provided with an IEP that offers them the services that support their gifted and advanced abilities, in addition to providing interventions and supports for their disabilities. In fact, failing to identify, plan for, and provide appropriate services for 2E students is negligent and harmful (Jacobs, 2020).

Students may benefit from:

- Counseling and positive relationships with a mentor or teacher.
- Formal identification, accommodations, and services for the disability.
- Varied learning experience involving student choice and “hands-on” learning experiences.
- Lessons created with the [Universal Design Learning Model](#)
- Multiple data sources for gifted programming identification.
- Consulting with families and caregivers about student behavior, performance and progress
- Culturally relevant pedagogical and assessment methods
- Explicit instruction in the disability area.
- Enhanced, enriched, and expanded opportunities to develop gifts and talents
- Project Based Learning experiences
- Cooperative Learning
- Collaborative advocacy between parents and educators (Skolnick, 2023)

Additionally, students with multiple learning exceptions experience more success when they are provided with a mentor, and enriched or advanced learning opportunities, that develop their interests and talents, building their confidence, and supporting their learning and emotional needs.

Parents can also support their 2E child by providing opportunities in their passion areas to encourage developing their strengths and interests and to give them opportunities for success. [SENG](#) (Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted) is an organization that supports 2E students and their families through their learning journeys with resources, professional development, and networking.

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