

From One Parent

Elementary Lessons for Mom

By Amy Price

To Another

Just before the start of the school year, my family relocated from a bustling suburb of New York City to a peaceful rural community in the Hudson Valley, a family friendly haven where we were certain to enjoy raising our family. Both our sons were identified as gifted and would enter new schools. Our older son would be a seventh grader in the middle school, where he also would attend advanced math classes at the high school, and our younger son would enter third grade at the local elementary school.

Although our new district did not offer a gifted elementary school class like the magnet gifted program that my youngest attended in the city, this new district was well-reputed and took pains to assure us that it was experienced in meeting the needs of gifted children via differentiated learning in the classroom. I provided the school with my son's records and samples of his work.

No one was prepared for the challenges that we would face with my son over the next 2 years. I had no inkling either, that I was about to learn my most pivotal parenting lessons through this journey.

Signs of Trouble

Problems immediately surfaced. Although he initially achieved perfect scores on daily timed addition and subtraction tests, my son's scores quickly declined. Reed was not completing timed tests and was answering basic questions incorrectly. I knew that he had already mastered multiplication and division. How could these simple problems provide such a great challenge? Even worse, this once-articulate child now seemed unable to organize his thoughts on paper. Simple tasks like using vocabulary words in sentences became hurdles. Reed was reduced to tears in reporting that he was finding the physical process of writing exhausting and difficult. With the onset of class lessons in cursive writing, his misery increased. So, too, did the phone calls and notes from the school.

My son's difficulties were not limited to academics. He became the subject of a laundry list of behaviors reported

by the school. He cried easily and often. The more the teacher tried to communicate with him, the louder and longer he cried. And he moved a lot. He slid his feet in and out of his sneakers. He tapped his pencil on the desk. He often knelt on his seat, or even stood beside his chair, while concentrating on assignments. He resisted moving from one activity to the next. He hummed while working on tasks. When he was asked to stop, the humming would start up again. With the tactless honesty of an 8-year-old, Reed informed the teacher, in front of the class, that she was doing the math problem wrong. "Why," he asked, "would you take all those steps just to come up with an answer that was obvious?"

At home, the simplest homework assignments became explosive battles. Assignments that could normally be completed in minutes dragged out for tearful hours. Reed was despondent, unmotivated, withdrawn, and angry in turns. He would be unable to settle to go to sleep at night, even as he was complaining that he was really tired. He woke with painful stomachaches in the morning. My heart was broken. Where was the exuberant son I had always enjoyed, and who was this sad child in his place?

The Great Dilemma

Reed had earned a reputation as a student with social and emotional behavior problems. His self-esteem was on the ground. He was not learning much, and he was miserable. Our entire family was impacted and walking on eggshells to avoid further meltdowns.

What did my son want at this point? Simply to be "normal." One evening, he shared a brief diary entry: "I

wish I were normal. Normal means you can run fast and catch a ball. I'm slow and not good at catching. Normal kids say their favorite subjects are gym and recess. Mine are science and math. They like sports. I like to read . . .” In truth, there were many times that I also wished we could trade gifted for just average and happy.

Everyone genuinely wanted to help this boy. We were dedicated parents who would communicate our son's needs and support solutions. The educators were experienced teachers and caring people. Yet, parent and school perspectives on how to help Reed were initially at great odds. We suggested that the lack of academic challenge,

others are cloudy, yours is an electron microscope. You are seeing things that others might not see.” Like many parents of gifted children who have faced challenges, we began to scour the Internet and read articles and books. Each one led to a greater understanding of giftedness and resources to help our son and our family. We shared helpful articles with the school and his teachers.

Second, we were cautioned that our son's perfectionism needed to be addressed, and that he needed to work with someone who could help him understand and accept his giftedness. The professional told us that Reed was at risk for anxiety, depression, and even suicide in his teen years—

One evening, he shared a brief diary entry: “I wish I were normal. Normal means you can run fast and catch a ball. I'm slow and not good at catching. Normal kids say their favorite subjects are gym and recess. Mine are science and math. They like sports. I like to read”

the resulting frustration, and even fear of feeling different from his classmates, might be the cause of—or at least a contributing factor toward—the troubling behaviors. The school, however, required our son's behavior to improve before it would consider providing more advanced work.

I did what I was certain that any good mother would do. I set out on a mission to get Reed's needs recognized and met. I harnessed my fear and directed my anger at the very people who were in the position to help my son. I demanded change. This was a battle for my son's well-being, and I was in active combat mode. Accusations and sarcasm were my weapons. And I cried. I spent one awful meeting with a principal, where not a word was exchanged. To my horror, I cried, and he handed out tissues. Much later, I found comfort in the words of our superintendent, also a parent, who explained that a parent's pain is understandable and that tears of distress are humanizing.

My husband and I realized that we needed impartial and specialized expertise. We decided to pursue a complete psychoeducational evaluation for Reed. The school did not request this and would therefore not pay for it. We silently said goodbye to our hope of affording a finished basement for the children, and made an appointment for several days of testing. We had no knowledge of any psychologists versed in testing gifted children, and we were relatively new to the neighborhood, as well as to the gifted education field, but we were lucky in our choice.

Discovering the Right Tools

The report and subsequent meeting with the psychologist were life-changing events. Three things stand out in my memory of that day.

First, Reed was not gifted—he was beyond gifted. The psychologist later told our son, “If everyone sees life through a lens, and some people's lenses are clear and

unless we intervened and helped find appropriate support to help him understand his feelings. This was terrifying news. Who could we turn to? We began to contact organizations from the Web. We received information through NAGC, the ERIC (Education Resources Information Center) Clearinghouse, The Davidson Institute for Talent Development, and SENG. We reached out, and caring experts reached back. We had found supports, not only for our son, but for us and our son's teachers.

Finally, the psychologist told us that she suspected that Reed had a sensory issue. She had noticed during testing that he moved a lot, didn't always sit, and played with an item he held in his hand. She mentioned his resistance to writing down his work, and advised us that he did all calculations in his head until she told him that by not writing out his work he was getting wrong answers. One of the most wonderful things that happened for our son this difficult year is that he was referred for sensory testing. Diagnosed with a sensory integration disorder, he began therapy with a physical therapist, who was licensed in treating such disorders. For Reed, this was the missing link.

Great Outcomes

Finally, we began to address the problem, rather than blame the school or Reed. By the end of third grade, Reed was receiving sensory therapy twice a week. It was so effective that we implemented what we were learning into our daily routine at home, and then later at school. There are many types of sensory diagnoses, so the strategies we employed may not be right for all. However, it is important to know how fun and easy it is to become a sensory-friendly household.

For Reed, swinging and spinning helped with calming and organization. If these motions served him well at therapy, how about doing it every day? We installed a platform swing in our basement, and an inexpensive womb-

like swing from Ikea in his bedroom. I made time in the morning schedule to include sensory activities before and after school. To keep it interesting, we varied the activities each day.

I sent Reed to school with chewy sour candies or salty snacks to enjoy at break. These tastes and sensations were also calming. I provided unobtrusive fidgets in Reed's pocket and backpack to keep his hands involved and help him concentrate on assignments. I knew that sensory issues were just one facet of my son, and together we found a Saturday gifted program within driving distance. We visited museums, traveled, and read books that helped Reed to maintain and develop his interest in learning.

Fourth grade began, and the improvement was undeniable. The school reported no social or emotional problems. They saw a happy and engaged student. While still reluctant to add greater academic challenge, lest they upset the apple cart, Reed began to advocate for himself. He was now more physically comfortable, and emotionally ready to move ahead. While I insisted that he approach his teachers and principal with respect, I also did support him in his efforts to raise the level of his school work. Reed rejected assignments based on work that he had already mastered during pretests and he began to furnish his own vocabulary replacement words: grandiloquent, insouciant, and incontrovertible. When the teacher asked if he understood the meaning of these words, he used them in written sentences for her. I'll never know what she thought when she read, "My mother is torpid on the couch every night."

By fifth grade, school leaders were willing to try dual enrollment in elementary and middle school. This had never before been allowed in our school district. To ease the discomfort of school officials, and to take any pressure off our son, we were very careful to present this opportunity to Reed and to the middle school as a trial arrangement. "Your teachers notice that you feel ready to study advanced math and Earth science. Since these classes are not offered in elementary school, they are willing to let you attend classes at the middle school in the morning, and then spend the rest of the day at your elementary school. If these become your favorite classes, that's great. If not, you can stay at the elementary school all day and we'll try other solutions."

We wanted to give this arrangement every chance to succeed. So, we turned down district busing and I drove Reed from the middle school to the elementary school in the middle of each morning. The 10-minute car ride was the key: a familiar face, a salty or sour snack, a break from the hubbub of the hallways, and even a chance to engage in a calming sensory activity. This gave Reed a chance to decompress, and gave me an opportunity to see how he was really feeling.

Dual enrollment was a success. Reed loved his advanced courses, and also enjoyed being with his same-age classmates back at the elementary school. By eighth grade, he was bused to the high school for math and

science, with a relatively easy transition. I returned to the elementary school and donated "sensory baskets" for teachers to try in their classrooms. Although not every child will be diagnosed with a sensory disorder, it seemed that everyone could benefit from an occasional sensory break. Small squishy balls and other fidgets, sensory-friendly snacks, and information about sensory breaks that the class can enjoy seemed a small way to say thank you for understanding. I hoped that our experiences with one challenging child would serve to empower the school to help other children.

Today, Reed is a full-time high school student enjoying both the academic and social opportunities afforded to him. His friends span several grades. He has a well-developed understanding of what he needs to feel comfortable, and he is confident in his ability to communicate his needs to the school and to me.

Lessons Mastered

I've learned to attack a problem, not the teacher. One way of starting a positive conversation with the school is: "I know it's not easy being Reed's teacher. It's not easy being his mom either. But what I really want you to know is that it's not easy being Reed. I know that you want to help him to succeed. Let's talk about how we can team together to make this a great learning year for him."

I've learned that there is no one correct way to meet the needs of a gifted child. Flexibility allows the school, the parent, and sometimes outside professionals to try a number of ideas and find solutions that are far more wonderful than any that I would have asked for on my own.

I've learned that great opportunities are possible for gifted kids, whether they attend school in an area with mandated gifted education, one with voluntary gifted programs, or a school that does not have any specified programs for gifted children.

The greatest lesson I have learned, and my greatest gift to both of my sons, is that I have changed my expectations of what a gifted child needs. My goal for both boys is for them to confidently explore opportunities and make choices that will bring them great joy.

Author's Note

Amy Price is the Executive Director of SENG (Supporting Emotional Needs of the Gifted), a national nonprofit organization committed to supporting the affective needs of gifted individuals, and the families, educators, and health professionals who care for them. Amy's advertising background and parenting experiences served as inspiration for The SENG Honor Roll, a program allowing parents to honor educators who made a difference in the life of their gifted child or young adult. Amy lives with her husband and sons in Dutchess County, NY. For more information on SENG and its programs, including The SENG Honor Roll, or to contact the author, visit <http://www.sengifted.org>.