

Twice Exceptionality: The Road Less Traveled

By Kristy Mall

At just 2 years old, my son was an extraordinary, self-taught mathematician—a fact noted by me, my husband, and his preschool teacher. He also had language delays—a fact all three of us ignored for a long time, since he was otherwise exceptionally intelligent. Later, when I followed my gut and took him for evaluation, he was diagnosed with high-functioning autism. Suddenly, his math skills and his language deficits fell into place: I had a twice-exceptional son.

In fact, what happened to my own family represents the difficulty with parenting the twice-exceptional child: A child's giftedness can often mask his special needs, or his special needs can mask his giftedness. Advocating for your child—especially at school—is essential, since educators often assume a child performing at grade level is fine, when, in reality, a twice-exceptional gifted student may be underachieving. Parents and educators must learn to work with a child's learning challenges to ensure that she performs to her ability.

I know about advocacy first-hand: After receiving the twice-exceptional diagnosis for my son, I volunteered on NAGC committees; became the state liaison for Supporting the Emotional Needs of the Gifted (SENG); and became active on my state gifted committee and board. Most recently, I formed a support network for parents of twice-exceptional children.

Based on my own journey, along with anecdotes shared by friends and colleagues, I offer these tips for parenting the twice-exceptional child:

- **Find your tribe.** Twice-exceptional children and parents can feel very isolated. Our children are like the zebra in the middle of a corral of horses: They don't really fit in with the gifted category, but they also don't fit in with children who have learning disabilities. Finding friends, advocates, psychologists, therapists, and family members that support you is crucial to your and your child's success. Having professionals on hand to back you up is especially important when you choose to share your child's diagnosis and need to advocate with school personnel.
- **Be adaptive.** Change your tactics if things aren't working. Switch your focus, if needed. This is great parenting advice for all parents, but for parents of twice-exceptional kids, it's imperative. You may find that your child quickly masters or is frustrated by therapies or interventions, and you may need to find alternate solutions. Stay abreast of the current information and a network of professionals, as you may need to seek out alternative therapies and educational methods, when others do not work for your child.
- **Trust your “parent gut.”** If your gut tells you something, listen. This is how I pursued an autism diagnosis for my son in the first place, and it is how many of the individuals I have met through my advocacy work have found appropriate twice-exceptional diagnoses for their own children. At times, you

may also need to rely on your gut when educators—some who may rarely work with twice-exceptional students—may fall short.

- **Focus on small areas to improve and grow.** When you finally get a twice-exceptional diagnosis, you may want to fix everything all at once, but that will only frustrate you and your child. First, be sure to create opportunities for your child to lead with his strengths and interests. This helps your child feel successful and further develop those areas of strength for growth. When seeking support to work on areas of weakness, focus on the areas of greatest need first. Once your child has mastered those, move to another area to work on.
- **Celebrate all victories.** It's a marathon, not a sprint. There are no short-term solutions to issues stemming from learning disabilities, and it can be hard to feel like your child is progressing. So, celebrate the small victories. Keep a journal or portfolio to remind yourself of the progress your child has made. Help him realize his successes by celebrating with him.
- **Allow yourself to feel a sense of loss.** “Ambiguous loss” is grief for the child that you had envisioned or the potential that you see that may never manifest because of her dual (or multiple) diagnoses.¹ Allow yourself to feel and process this loss. By acknowledging and working through these feelings, you will be able to more fully support your child.

Every child has different needs, personalities, and gifts to offer the world. The twice-exceptional child is no different. Focus on your child's strengths and accomplishments, helping your child find his path along the road less traveled. With your support and guidance, he will be able to claim his victories. ☺

Author's Note

Kristy Mall, Ed.D., is a fourth grade teacher at Discovery School in Murfreesboro, TN, an award-winning school for gifted and high-achieving students. She serves on the board of directors for the Tennessee Association for the Gifted and just completed a 3-year term as member of NAGC's Parent Editorial Content & Advisory Board (PECAB). The mother of a 14-year-old son and 19-year-old daughter, she is a frequent national and local presenter on education, gifted, twice exceptionality, curriculum, social and emotional needs, and robotics.

Endnotes

- ¹ O'Brien, M. (2007). Ambiguous loss in families of children with autism spectrum disorders. *Family Relations*, 56(2), 135–146.

