

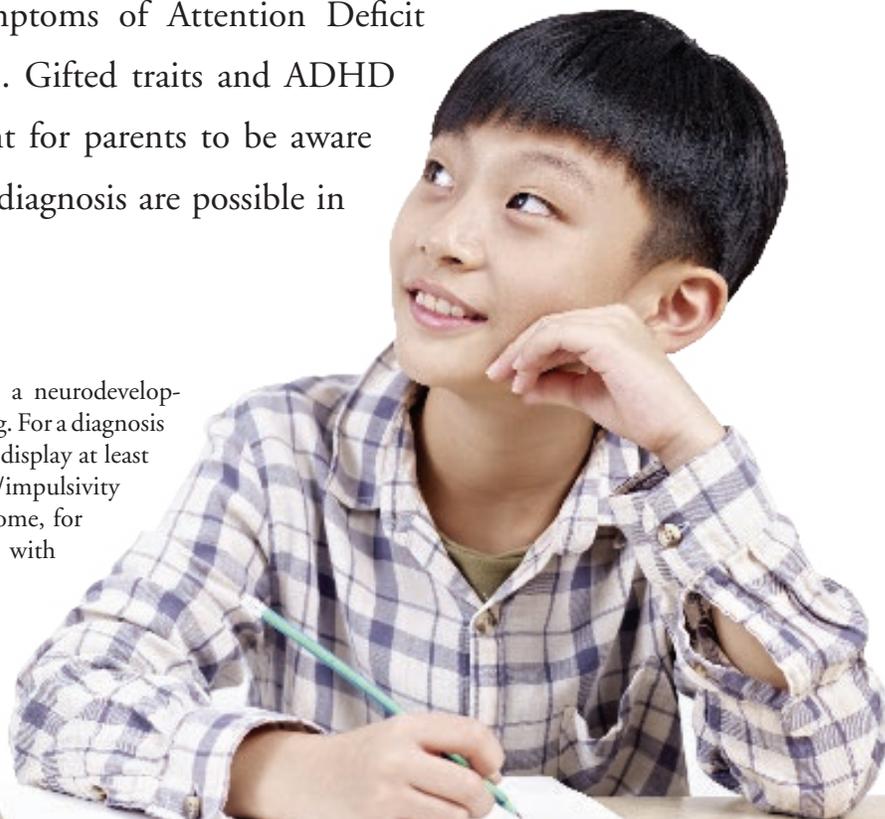
What Parents Should Know about ADHD

By Dianna R. Mullet and Dr. Anne N. Rinn

Does your gifted child challenge authority, show inattention, wander off-task, and demonstrate unusual amounts of high energy? These traits and characteristics are often signs of giftedness, but are also symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Gifted traits and ADHD can look similar, so it's important for parents to be aware that both misdiagnosis and dual diagnosis are possible in gifted children.

Does My Gifted Child Have ADHD?

Some gifted children suffer from ADHD, a neurodevelopmental disorder that impairs a child's functioning. For a diagnosis of ADHD,¹ children under the age of 17 must display at least six symptoms of inattention or hyperactivity/impulsivity in at least two different settings (school and home, for example), and those symptoms must interfere with the child's normal functioning.



The severity of ADHD varies among children:

- Some children display primarily *inattention*, which can appear as an inability to remember verbal instructions or to focus on routine tasks.
- Other children display *hyperactive or impulsive behaviors* such as trouble staying seated or talking out of turn.
- Some children may display *both* types of symptoms.
- Symptoms may appear different in different children.
- Some children are *mildly affected while others have severe symptoms*.

Gifted children without ADHD can also demonstrate high levels of activity or inattention, but the problems tend to be specific only to certain situations (for example, a particular subject or class that lacks stimulation or challenge).²

In school, teachers are often the first point of referral for special programming, yet the overlapping characteristics of giftedness and ADHD can make it difficult to correctly refer a child. Research suggests that when a child presents characteristics that span both giftedness and ADHD, teachers and counselors are more likely to identify a disability than giftedness.³

Therefore, in order to avoid a misdiagnosis or missed diagnosis, it's important to receive a comprehensive evaluation by a trained professional experienced in working with gifted children.⁴ The evaluation includes tests of intelligence, achievement, and cognitive processing; interviews with teachers, parents, and the child; observation; and developmental history.

Supporting Your Gifted Child with ADHD

If your gifted child is diagnosed with ADHD, it's important to provide the appropriate supports necessary for them to succeed. In addition to ensuring appropriate medical treatment, parents have an important role in helping their ADHD gifted child succeed with educational accommodations, behavioral strategies, and opportunities to apply their strengths.

Know Strengths & Struggles

To help set expectations for self, school, and other pursuits, it's important that children be aware of their strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles. Armed with this information, parents can set expectations and help advocate for younger children, and encourage older children to be self-accepting and, ultimately, self-advocating.

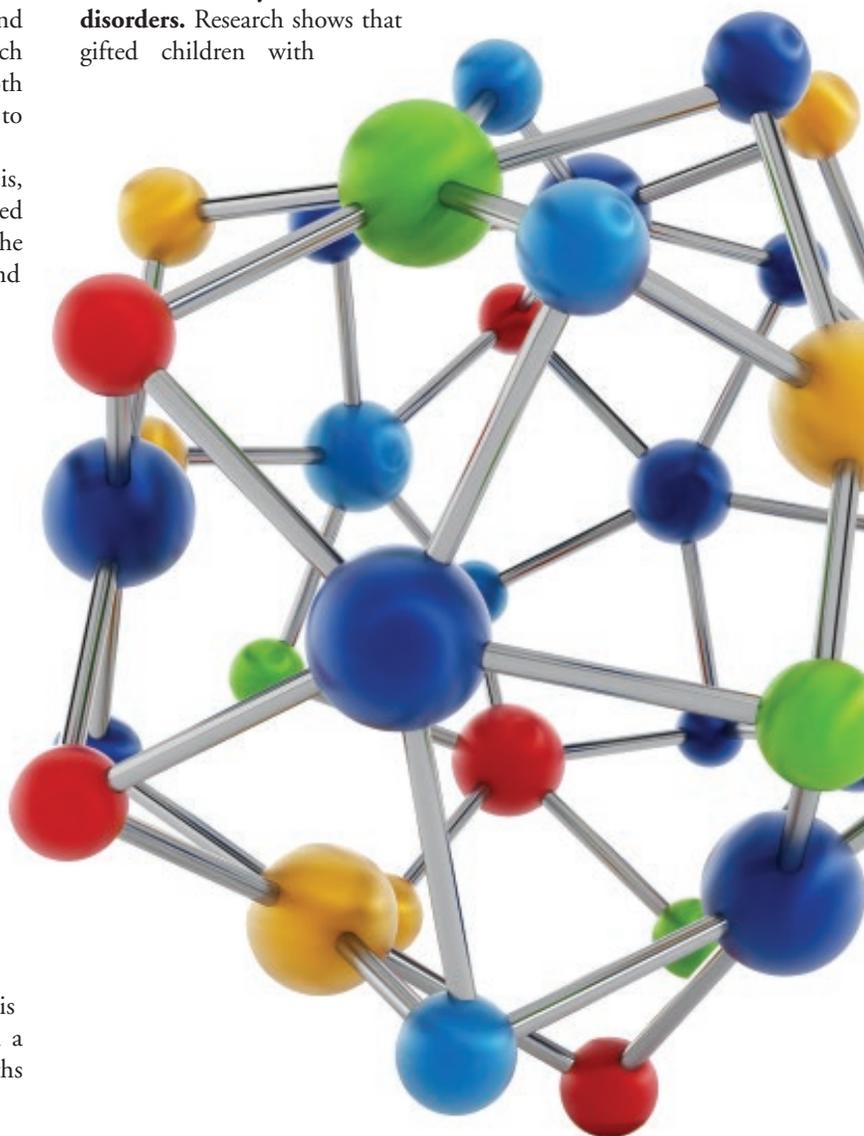
Strengths

- **Superior general intelligence.** General intelligence is unaffected by ADHD. A gifted child with ADHD is still a gifted child. Many children learn to use intellectual strengths to partially compensate for impairments caused by ADHD.⁵

- **Exceptional creativity.** Research suggests that the combination of impaired short-term memory and high intelligence actually enhances creativity.⁶
- **A desire for complexity and abstract thinking.** Gifted children with ADHD excel at analyzing big problems and understanding the way that ideas are connected to each other.
- **Self-awareness of how they learn.** Gifted children with ADHD need to understand their strengths/weaknesses and which learning strategies work best for them.

Struggles

- **Deficits in short-term memory and speed of processing information.** Your child may have trouble quickly recalling facts and details.
- **Mood, anxiety, and behavior disorders.** Research shows that gifted children with



How to Avoid a Misdiagnosis

Research indicates that 25% to 50% of gifted children diagnosed with ADHD are actually misdiagnosed and fail to meet the diagnostic criteria for ADHD.¹ Gifted children who do not have ADHD but who display behaviors similar to symptoms of ADHD typically display only one or two ADHD-like symptoms, not the full set of six symptoms required for diagnosis.

Gifted children may exhibit ADHD-like behaviors due to lack of challenge or stimulation in the classroom.² Colleen Willard-Holt³ suggests asking the following questions when you think that your gifted child may have ADHD:

- Could the behaviors be responses to inappropriate placement, insufficient challenge, or lack of intellectual peers?
- Is the child able to concentrate when interested in the activity?
- Have any curricular modifications been made in an attempt to change inappropriate behaviors?
- Has the child been interviewed? What are his/her feelings about the behaviors?
- Does the child feel out of control? Do the parents perceive the child as being out of control?
- Do the behaviors occur at certain times of the day, during certain activities, with certain teachers, or in certain environments?

An accurate diagnosis of ADHD requires a comprehensive evaluation by a trained professional experienced in working with gifted children.⁴ The evaluation includes tests of intelligence, achievement, and cognitive processing; interviews with teachers, parents, and the child; observation; and developmental history.

Endnotes

¹ Webb, J. T., Goerss, J., Amend, E. R., Webb, N. E., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F. (2006). Diagnosis or misdiagnosis. *Understanding Our Gifted*, 18, 15–17.

² Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., Webb, N. E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F. R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other disorders*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

³ Willard-Holt, C. (1999). *Dual exceptionalities*. <http://eric.ed.gov/?q=ED430344&id=ED430344>.

⁴ Webb et al., (2005).

(Continued from p. 11)

ADHD are more likely to experience mood, anxiety, and behavior disorders.⁷ Your child is aware of his or her high potential and may feel frustrated and anxious at being unable to tap into it.

- **Difficulty organizing and managing time.** Most gifted children with ADHD need to be explicitly taught how to organize their time and tasks.
- **Difficulty with transitions.** Gifted children with ADHD have difficulty shifting their frame of mind from one task to another.⁸ Your child may be capable of sustained attention on an interesting task, but shifting attention requires a great deal of effort—often more effort than your child can expend without support.
- **Uneven performance across academic areas.** Gifted children with ADHD are often unable to perform equally well in all academic areas.⁹ Your child may display extremes in strengths and weaknesses—he or she may earn A's in some classes yet fail others.
- **Academic underachievement.** Your child may experience academic struggles when the demands of school increase beyond his or her ability to compensate with intelligence alone.

Help Manage Symptoms

Gifted children with ADHD thrive when they learn strategies, tools, and skills that help them tap into their intellectual potential. While children may need help in learning to use the strategies, the ultimate goal is for them to become self-directed and to request help as needed.

Homework and Other Tasks

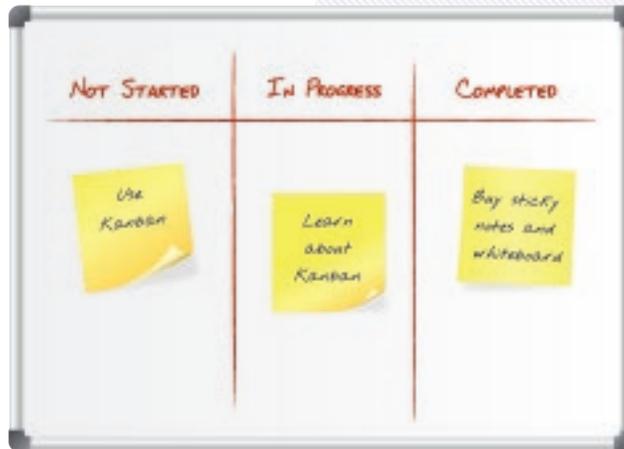
- **Chunking.** Demonstrate how to break a task into smaller, more manageable parts.
- **Checklists.** Have your child create and follow a checklist for evening activities.
- **Self-monitoring.** Help your child use a timer to monitor progress on tasks. Set timers as reminders to take breaks and again to resume work. After some practice using a timer, your child will be able to track time without using a timer.
- **Positive reinforcement.** Reward the use of strategies. Always describe the behavior being rewarded and explain why that behavior is important. Reward your child with motivators that she finds meaningful.

Organization

- **Organizer systems.** A Simple Organization System (SOS) is a helpful way to stay organized at school. For example, the SOS might be a 2-inch binder organized by subject, with sections for agendas, essential supplies (e.g., pencil, pen, and sharpener), and important papers (such as permission slips).

Each subject section begins with a two-sided pocket divider: one side for homework due, the other for returned work. Class notes on loose leaf paper are added to the end of the section.

- **Visual systems.** Gifted children with ADHD often find time and tasks easier to organize visually. One visual organization system is *Kanban*, Japanese for “visual card.”
- **Graphic organizers.** Many children with ADHD struggle with writing and prefer to convey ideas visually. Graphic organizers, such as concept maps, timelines, and Venn and Frayer diagrams, help children collect and organize their thoughts, making it easier to initiate writing.



Kanban

Kanban is a visual tool for tracking a task’s progress that gives a child a sense of control, independence, and accomplishment. Kanban consists of a “board” (a whiteboard, poster board, magnetic board, or sheet of paper) divided into three columns: “Not Started,” “In Progress,” and “Completed.” Tasks are written on “cards”

(or sticky notes, or magnets) and placed in the “Not Started” section. When your child begins work on a task, he moves it to “In Progress” and eventually to the “Completed” section. Kanban allows your child to immediately visualize where he stands on all tasks and move to online tools after some experience.

Technology

- **Reminders, calendars, and camera apps.** Your child can set reminders or use calendar events to alert him to a task at a particular time or GPS location (e.g., home or school). Some students take pictures of assignments or other written information on the classroom whiteboard using their cell phone or tablet.
- **Manage notes.** Evernote is a free, user-friendly app for note-taking that allows notes in any format (text and images). After adding notes, your child can sort notes into online notebooks.

Develop Self-Awareness

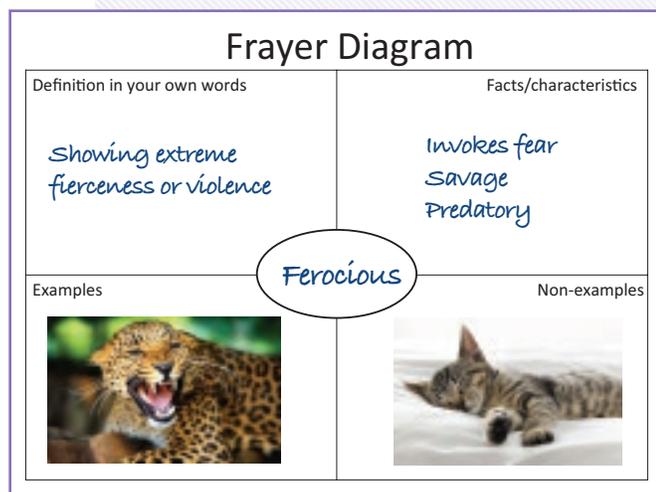
The greatest gift parents can give their ADHD child is to nurture self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-advocacy.

- **Show your child that he is not alone.** Share stories of famous gifted people who overcame the problems associated with ADHD, such as political commentator James Carville and musician Adam Levine.
- **Encourage independence.** Give your child opportunities to make choices, take on responsibilities, and attempt tasks to produce achievement and success. Gifted children often disengage from activities they find uninteresting. For gifted children with ADHD, however, it’s not a matter of choice—these children lack the ability to focus and sustain effort on less desirable activities.¹⁰ When allowed to choose personally meaningful activities, the child is better able to focus and complete activities successfully.
- **Promote self-advocacy.** Self-advocacy requires clearly communicating one’s needs and desires to others. Use role

Two Visual Ways to Manage Tasks

Frayer Diagram

The Frayer Diagram is a useful way for some students to collect and organize their thoughts visually, either as a replacement for or precursor to a writing assignment.



(Continues on p. 23)

(Continued from p. 13)

play to practice dialogs that include introducing herself, talking about her interests and strengths, asking for an explanation, and talking about what she needs in order to be successful, both personally and academically.

Ultimately, parents should remember that ADHD behaviors are not willful or intentional, but result from neurobiological differences. Gifted children with ADHD must learn to apply strategies for managing their work and emotions. With practice and positive feedback, new strategies become habit. And, when provided appropriate strategies for managing ADHD, dually diagnosed children often show significant improvement—both in their achievement at school and in their self-concept.¹¹ ♻



Resources

Websites

Before Referring a Gifted Child for ADD/ADHD Evaluation

<http://sengifted.org/archives/articles/before-referring-a-gifted-child-for-addadhd-evaluation>

Ensuring Gifted Children with Disabilities Receive Appropriate Services: Call for Comprehensive Assessment (Position Statement)

<http://goo.gl/XKBXni>

Frequently Asked Questions about Section 504 and the Education of Children with Disabilities

<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>

Social and Emotional Needs of the Gifted: Misdiagnosis Initiative

<http://sengifted.org/programs/seng-misdiagnosis-initiative>

Wrightslaw: Education Law and Advocacy for Twice-Exceptional Children (2E)

<http://www.wrightslaw.com/info/2e.index.htm#books>

Books

Brown, T. E. (2014). *Smart but stuck: Emotions in teens and adults with ADHD*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., Webb, N. E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F. R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other disorders*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

Weinfeld, R., Barnes-Robinson, L., Jeweler, S., & Shevitz, B. R. (2013). *Smart kids with learning difficulties: Overcoming obstacles and realizing potential*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

Authors' Note

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Endnotes

¹ American Psychiatric Association. (2013).

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² Webb, J. T., Amend, E. R., Webb, N. E., Goerss, J., Beljan, P., & Olenchak, F. R. (2005). *Misdiagnosis and dual diagnoses of gifted children and adults: ADHD, Bipolar, OCD, Asperger's, Depression, and other disorders*. Scottsdale, AZ: Great Potential Press.

³ Hartnett, D. N., Nelson, J. M., & Rinn, A. N. (2004). Gifted or ADHD? The possibilities of misdiagnosis. *Roeper Review*, 26(2), 73–76.

⁴ Webb et al., (2005).

⁵ Antshel, K. M., Faraone, S. V., Stallone, K., Nave, A., Kaufmann, F. A., Doyle, A., & Biederman, J. (2007). Is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder a valid diagnosis in the presence of high IQ? Results from the MGH Longitudinal Family Studies of ADHD. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 48(7), 687–694.

⁶ Fugate, C. M., Zentall, S. S., & Gentry, M. (2013). Creativity and working memory in gifted students with and without characteristics of attention deficit hyperactive disorder: Lifting the mask. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 57, 234–246.

⁷ Antshel et al., (2007).

⁸ Webb et al., (2005).

⁹ Brown, T. E. (2014). *Smart but stuck: Emotions in teens and adults with ADHD*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

¹⁰ Reis, S. M., Baum, S. M., & Burke, E. (2014). An operational definition of twice-exceptional learners: Implications and applications. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 58, 217–230.

¹¹ Brown, T. E. (2011). Executive function impairments in high IQ children and adolescents with ADHD. *Open Journal of Psychiatry*, 1, 56–65.