

Gifted Children with Disabilities

The ERIC Clearinghouse on Disabilities and Gifted Education (ERIC EC)

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IS IT POSSIBLE FOR A GIFTED CHILD TO HAVE A DISABILITY, OR A CHILD WITH A DISABILITY TO BE GIFTED?

Children who are gifted and have disabilities share many of the traits and challenges of both groups—gifted and disabled. Their intellectual capacity may be equal to that of an adult. Other strengths include short- and long-term memory, intellectual curiosity, ability to conceptualize abstractly and see cause-effect relationships. Like most gifted learners, they have a love of justice, truth, and equity; heightened intensity and sensitivity; and they are perfectionistic, especially about subjects of interest. However, there are differences. A student may be using giftedness to compensate for a disability. For example, a student who is severely hearing impaired may be able to stay on grade level because of a self-taught ability to lip read. Or, imagine the frustration of a gifted child with cerebral palsy who is mistaken by others as having mental retardation, perhaps because people have difficulty recognizing giftedness in a child who is wheelchair bound. Because their disabilities mask giftedness, these students may never be recognized as gifted and represent a tremendous waste of talent. They are one of the most underserved groups of gifted students in the nation.

Whitmore and Maker (1985) discussed four obstacles to identification:

- Stereotypic expectations that disabled persons are below normal.
- Developmental delays, particularly in verbal area, among disabled children, so their high intellectual ability usually goes undetected when using verbal tests with them.
- Incomplete information about the child, which results in overlooking areas of strength that might be displayed in nonacademic settings.
- No opportunity to demonstrate superior ability because of the highly verbal nature of school tasks and ability testing used in special education.

To lessen these barriers, schools must use nonverbal intellectual measures as well as alternative assessments. Child Find programs should encourage the search for giftedness as they assess children who might be disabled. As in all things, early intervention is a key to ultimate success.

ERIC DIGESTS: E574 Dual Exceptionalities; E522 ADHD and Children who are Gifted; ED479 Gifted but Learning Disabled; E516 Learning Disabilities; E517 Learning Disabilities: Glossary of Some Important Terms.