

# On Being "Gifted"

**L**et's assume that if you're reading this book, you've probably been identified as "gifted" somewhere along the way.\* Maybe you were tested as a toddler or a preschooler because your parents suspected that you were smarter, more creative, or more precocious than other kids your age. Maybe one of your teachers noticed that you had special talents or abilities. Maybe high grades and/or test scores qualified you for a spot in the "gifted program" in elementary or middle school. For whatever reason, like it or not, you've been labeled, and you may not even have a clear idea of what "gifted" means.

**"WHY IS THERE SUCH A THING AS BEING 'GIFTED'?"**  
Josh, 12



Oh, maybe you haven't been identified as "gifted" but you believe you are gifted. Either way, keep reading! Not every gifted person is recognized as such, for reasons we'll explain later.





# Dueling Definitions

If anyone has told you what “gifted” means, chances are the definition was vague or confusing, because nobody can *agree* on a single definition. There are government definitions, school definitions, teacher definitions, administrative definitions, researchers’ definitions, authors’ definitions, and dictionary definitions. And they all differ in some ways. Examples:

*From Merriam Webster’s Collegiate® Dictionary, Tenth Edition (1993):*

- gifted 1:** having great natural ability:  
TALENTED (~ children)  
**2:** revealing a special gift (~ voices).

*From the U.S. Department of Education:*

“ ‘Gifted and talented children’ means children and, whenever applicable, youth, who are identified at the preschool, elementary, or secondary level as possessing demonstrated or potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts, and who by reason thereof require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school.”

*From the National Association for Gifted Children’s mission statement (1996):*

“ ... children and youth with demonstrated gifts and talents as well as those who may be able to develop their talent potential with appropriate educational experiences.”

*From three respected experts on giftedness:*

**Lewis Terman** (1925): “The top one percent level in general intelligence ability as measured by the Stanford-Binet Intelligence Scale or a comparable instrument.”

**Paul Witty** (1940): “There are children whose outstanding potentialities in art, in writing, or in social leadership can be recognized largely by their performance. Hence, we have recommended that the definition of giftedness be expanded and that we consider any child gifted whose performance in a potentially valuable line of human activity is consistently remarkable.”



On Being  
"Gifted"

**Dr. Joseph Renzulli (1978):** "Giftedness consists of an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—these clusters being above average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity."

What can we conclude from the above? That existing definitions of giftedness have problems because:

1. they're too general AND
2. they're too restrictive. (Curious, isn't it?)

It can also be argued that the main problem with any definition isn't *what it says* but *how it's used*. Adults use definitions of giftedness to develop criteria for identifying students who then receive special opportunities and more challenging educational programs. That's fine, except that sometimes definitions include people who really shouldn't be included—or they exclude people who really shouldn't be excluded.

We recently discovered another definition of giftedness that seems like a step in the right direction:\*

"Giftedness can be defined as *the ability to solve complex problems in effective, efficient, elegant, and economical ways*. Using this definition, a gifted individual is one who can use existing knowledge when necessary and can apply known methods when appropriate, therefore reaching solutions based on the best available knowledge and methods. However, a gifted individual can also abandon existing knowledge and concepts, redefine problems, devise new methods, and reach entirely different solutions."

Of all these definitions, which one(s) do you prefer, and why?

## Think About It, Talk About It

- Why do you suppose giftedness is so hard to define?
- Do you believe that it's possible/desirable to enhance your mental abilities? Do you try to? How?

\* Reported by C. June Maker in "Identification of Gifted Minority Students: A National Problem, Needed Changes and a Promising Solution," *Gifted Child Quarterly*, Volume 40, No. 1 (Winter 1996), p. 44. Based on work by Howard Gardner, C.J. Maker, A.B. Nielson, J.A. Rogers, and P. Bauerle.





## Who Gets Left Out?

No matter how diligently teachers and administrators work to identify gifted students fairly and accurately (so the “right” students can receive more challenging educational programs), some gifted kids get left out. They aren’t identified because they don’t satisfy certain criteria. If you don’t fit the description, you miss out on opportunities that might enable you to demonstrate and enhance your giftedness.

Those who are most often passed over when the gifted program Selection Day comes along include:

### Gifted Girls

They may be excluded not because they aren’t as smart or talented as boys, but because they may have learned to cover up or deny

**“WE ARE EXPECTED TO BE PRETTY AND POPULAR, AND IT IS SO HARD TO BE INTELLIGENT AND LET IT SHOW IN SCHOOL.” GIRL, 14**

- their abilities in order to be popular or feel “normal.” (This is especially true in middle school/junior high.)
- Or, if they are identified as gifted,

they may choose not to participate in the gifted program due to social pressures.

### People with Disabilities

They may be left out if their physical, emotional, or learning disabilities hinder their capacity to demonstrate their giftedness in the most recognizable and acceptable ways. The traditional methods used to identify gifted kids would have failed to notice Helen Keller.

Gifted people with disabilities have been called an “unseen minority.” As researcher Nick Colangelo has observed, when teacher and parent groups are asked to imagine a “gifted child,” they rarely conjure up the image of a gifted child with disabilities.

### Troublemakers

They often aren’t considered because some teachers associate “good” behavior with being gifted and “bad” behavior with being unwilling or unable to learn. Thomas Edison was considered a little hellion in school (and, in fact, he never graduated from grade school).



On Being  
"Gifted"

**Dr. Joseph Renzulli (1978):** "Giftedness consists of an interaction among three basic clusters of human traits—these clusters being above average general abilities, high levels of task commitment, and high levels of creativity."

What can we conclude from the above? That existing definitions of giftedness have problems because:

1. they're too general AND
2. they're too restrictive. (Curious, isn't it?)

It can also be argued that the main problem with any definition isn't *what it says* but *how it's used*. Adults use definitions of giftedness to develop criteria for identifying students who then receive special opportunities and more challenging educational programs. That's fine, except that sometimes definitions include people who really shouldn't be included—or they exclude people who really shouldn't be excluded.

We recently discovered another definition of giftedness that seems like a step in the right direction:\*

"Giftedness can be defined as *the ability to solve complex problems in effective, efficient, elegant, and economical ways*. Using this definition, a gifted individual is one who can use existing knowledge when necessary and can apply known methods when appropriate, therefore reaching solutions based on the best available knowledge and methods. However, a gifted individual can also abandon existing knowledge and concepts, redefine problems, devise new methods, and reach entirely different solutions."

Of all these definitions, which one(s) do you prefer, and why?

## Think About It, Talk About It

- Why do you suppose giftedness is so hard to define?
- Do you believe that it's possible/desirable to enhance your mental abilities? Do you try to? How?

\* Reported by C. June Maker in "Identification of Gifted Minority Students: A National Problem, Needed Changes and a Promising Solution," *Gifted Child Quarterly*, Volume 40, No. 1 (Winter 1996), pp.44. Based on work by Howard Gardner, C.J. Maker, A.B. Nielson, J.A. Rogers, and P. Bauerle.





## 15 People Who Probably Wouldn't Have Made the Cut

1. John F. Kennedy received constant reports of "poor achievement" and was a lousy speller.
2. Beethoven's music teacher once said of him, "As a composer, he is hopeless."
3. Winston Churchill failed sixth grade and finished last in his class at Harrow, England.
4. Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper editor because he had "no good ideas" and he "doodled too much."
5. Sally Jesse Raphael was fired at least 19 times before becoming the host of her own TV and radio shows.
6. Paul Orfalea, founder of the successful Kinko's Copy Centers chain, was placed in a class for retarded students after he failed second grade due to dyslexia.
7. Isaac Newton—who discovered calculus, authored the theory of universal gravitation, originated the three laws of motion, and formulated the binomial theorem—did poorly in grade school.
8. Singer-dancer-choreographer Debbie Allen was turned down by a dance school.
9. Dr. Robert Jarvick was rejected by 15 American medical schools. He later invented an artificial heart.
10. Madeleine L'Engle's book, *A Wrinkle in Time*, was rejected by almost every major publisher before Farrar, Straus, and Giroux agreed to do it—after warning that the book would probably not sell. It went on to win the Newbery Medal.
11. Babe Ruth struck out 2,000 times on his way to becoming one of baseball's all-time greatest home-run hitters.
12. Tina Brown—former editor of *Vanity Fair*, current editor of the *New Yorker*—was expelled from school.
13. So was swimming champion Diana Nyad.
14. So was Roger Daltrey—composer, musician, and lead singer of the rock group The Who.
15. Albert Einstein flunked math.



On Being  
"Gifted"

You'll learn more about tests and testing on pages 47–64. You'll find an example of a teacher screening form on page 14. (As you'll see, evaluations tend to be open to individual interpretation.) In addition to teacher evaluations, some schools ask for recommendations from parents. And in a few instances, students might be allowed to nominate themselves by completing a questionnaire.

Take a few moments to read through the teacher screening form. How many of these characteristics do you have?

Obviously, no one will exhibit *all* of the characteristics listed in any evaluation; for example, a gifted mathematician will probably show different abilities than a gifted dancer. Evaluations attempt to identify those students who demonstrate excellence or strong potential to achieve in one or more of the following five areas. Which descriptions fit you?

### **Academic**

- *High rate of success in subjects of interest*
- *Pursues certain areas with vigor*
- *Good memory*
- *Comprehends well*
- *Acquires knowledge quickly*
- *Widely read in special areas*

### **Leadership**

- *Likes structure*
- *Self-confident*
- *Well-accepted by peers*
- *Shows good judgment, common sense*
- *Responsible*
- *Articulate, verbally fluent*
- *Foresees the consequences of things*

### **Creativity**

- *Independent thinker*
- *Expressive (orally or in writing)*
- *Keen sense of humor*
- *Is resourceful*
- *Doesn't mind being different*
- *Is original, unconventional, imaginative*

### **Intellectual**

- *Observant*
- *Gets excited about new ideas*
- *Inquisitive*
- *Learns rapidly, easily*
- *Independent learner*
- *Has a large vocabulary compared to others of same age*
- *Thinks abstractly*
- *Enjoys hypothesizing*
- *Intense*

### **Visual/Performing Arts**

- *Ability to express feelings, thoughts, and moods through art, dance, drama, or music*
- *Good coordination*
- *Exhibits creativity, imagination*
- *Observant*
- *Likes to produce original products*
- *Flexible*



.....

## TEACHER SCREENING FORM FOR GIFTED EDUCATION

Please take a few minutes to list the names of the students who come into your mind *first* as you read through the descriptions below. This should be done as "free association," very rapidly. You don't need to fill in every space. It's likely that you will be able to name more than one student per description.

1. Learns easily, quickly

---

2. Original, imaginative, creative, unconventional

---

3. Widely informed, informed in unusual areas

---

4. Thinks of unusual ways to solve problems

---

5. Persistent, resourceful, self-directed (does things without being told)

---

6. Persuasive, able to influence others

---

7. Shows common sense, may not tolerate foolishness

---

8. Inquisitive, skeptical, curious about knowing the how and why

---

9. Adapts to a variety of situations, new surroundings

---

10. Clever at making things out of ordinary materials

---

11. Abilities in the arts (music, dancing, drawing, etc.)

---

12. Understands the importance of nature (weather, moon, sun, stars, soil, etc.)

---

13. Outstanding vocabulary, verbally fluent

---

14. Easily learns new languages

---

15. Independent worker, shows initiative

---

16. Good judgment, logical

---

17. Flexible, open

---

18. Versatile, many interests, interests go beyond chronological age

---

19. Shows unusual insights

---

20. Shows high level of sensitivity, empathy toward others

---

21. Has excellent sense of humor

---

22. Resists routine and drill

---

23. Expresses ideas and reactions, sometimes in an argumentative way

---

24. Sensitive to truth and honor

---





On Being  
"Gifted"

## Quick Answers to Two Common Questions

### Where does giftedness come from?

Nature—and nurture. In part, your giftedness is inherited from your parent(s) or grandparent(s). It has also been affected by your environment. Everything around you—your experiences with friends, family members, and at school; books you've read, games you've played—has enhanced your abilities.

While no one knows exactly which of these factors is most important, we do know that there are specific things you can do to maximize (or minimize) your giftedness. For example: If you're active, read a lot, meet new people, travel, are inquisitive, and take advantage of life's opportunities, you'll stretch your mind, grow as a person, and become more knowledgeable and creative. On the other hand, if you're sedentary, watch a lot of TV, eschew books, and do your best to keep people, ideas, and experiences at a distance, you'll limit your natural ability to learn. Studies have shown that IQ can vary as much as 20 points over a person's lifetime.

### How many people are gifted?

It's estimated that there are between 2–3 million gifted kids in the United States alone. Worldwide, perhaps 5 percent of the population would be identified as gifted, using various definitions and selection practices.

Not everyone agrees with these numbers. A few educators suggest that broadening our definitions would result in up to 60 percent of the population being defined as gifted. Some even believe that everyone is gifted in some way.



**“In our society to admit inferiority is to be a fool, and to admit superiority is to be an outcast. Those who are in reality superior in intelligence can be accepted by their fellows only if they pretend they are not.”**

Marya Mannes

## The “Gifted” Label: Burden or Blessing?

In an ideal world, we wouldn't need labels of any kind. In our less-than-ideal world, labels help us to communicate, understand, make decisions—and allocate funding. The “gifted” label exists in schools today because the needs of bright, talented, creative students often aren't met by the regular curriculum. Identifying these students as gifted gives schools a way to justify special programs that come closer to meeting the students' needs, and also to select kids for inclusion in gifted programs.

The problem with the “gifted” label isn't the label itself but rather how people perceive it and use it. When it's attached to certain nouns (athlete, musician, writer, actor, etc.), it's usually acceptable and considered a compliment. But when it's used in reference to academic or scholarly pursuits, it's not necessarily an asset. In fact, many students experience the label in conjunction with such negative nicknames as “geek,” “nerd,” “dweeb,” “junior genius,” “dork,” or worse, none of which promote feelings of acceptance or popularity. And this in turn leads some gifted students to downplay or deny their giftedness.

Every gifted person we've ever taught, interviewed, talked with, worked with, or lived with admits to enjoying the benefits of being intelligent. Knowing how to think deeply, think creatively, feel intensely, understand complex concepts, explore a variety of interests, make connections that others don't see, solve problems, come up with unique ideas, and so on makes life interesting and exciting. So why does the “gifted” label—when linked with intellectual pursuits—end up as more of a burden than a blessing?

At least part of the answer lies in the way our culture values (or devalues) academic effort and achievement. Consider these facts:\*

- *Americans spend less time in school than the people of most other industrialized countries.*
- *We devote less than half as much time as other nations to core subjects.*
- *Less than half of a typical American school day is devoted to academic activities.*
- *The three main television stations in one major metropolitan area give up to 30 times more coverage to student athletes than to student scholars.*

\* From the dissertation titled “Brains, Beauty, or Brawn: A Context Analysis of Adolescent Response to Three Superlatives” by Stephen Schroeder-Davis, Ed.D.; copyright ©1995. For permission to reprint this excerpt, please contact: Stephen Schroeder-Davis, Ed.D., Vandenberg Jr. High, 948 Proctor Ave., Elk River, MN 55330.



On Being  
"Gifted"

- Two-thirds of our students state that student athletes are more respected than student scholars.
- The "pure scholar" (the non-athletic academic achiever) is the least popular student in a typical school.
- Over two-thirds of our brightest students report deliberate underachievement to avoid being labeled a "nerd" by classmates.
- Less than a third of our students (30 percent) report a "positive school climate."
- Students report spending more time per week on virtually anything other than schoolwork, including socializing, sports, extracurricular activities, TV, work, and listening to the radio.

The Board of Education in one Nevada county has come up with a revealing series of euphemisms to describe students' academic performance. Those who earn D's or F's are "emerging." Those who earn B's and C's are "developing." And those who earn A's are merely "extending." (As opposed to "succeeding," "achieving," or "excelling," all of which might imply that the A students are doing better than the others.)

No wonder so many gifted students struggle with insensitive and uninformed comments from teachers, peers, and/or parents. For some kids, the best response is simply to ignore the ridicule. They refuse to allow others to damage or destroy their self-esteem.

Staying centered and strong takes determination and practice. One thing that helps is making a list of the pluses in your life—the benefits that come from being smart, creative, and talented. It also helps to consider the minuses—the drawbacks of the label—so you can decide which ones you'll try to change and which ones you'll just have to live with.

- **"BEING GIFTED ISN'T NECESSARILY A GOOD THING IN AMERICAN SOCIETY. AVERAGE INTELLIGENCE IS VALUED MORE. WHO WOULDN'T WANT TO COVER IT UP?"**
- **IVORY, 12**

- **"HOW DOES A PERSON AVOID BEING RIDICULED FOR HAVING AN ADVANCED VOCABULARY OR WHATEVER? I MEAN, SAYING 'I CAN'T HELP IT, I'M GIFTED' ISN'T EXACTLY A GOOD COMEBACK, IS IT?"**
- **PETER, 12**

## Some Possible Advantages of Being Gifted

- You may have access to challenging programs, classes, and other educational opportunities that match your ability level and interests.
- Being gifted may open the door to scholarships, awards, and competitions.
- Adults may assume that you're more responsible, which can lead to increased freedom.



- You are able to tackle and surmount many types of problems and challenges, often with greater speed and finesse than people of average or low ability.
- Some teachers appreciate (some even prefer) the opportunity to work with smart students. In fact, you make their day!
- Having a good mind can mean a more interesting life (depending on the choices you make).

**“AT THE SCHOOL I GO TO, PEOPLE STRIVE TO PUT THEIR TALENTS AND INTELLIGENCE TO GREAT CHALLENGES. WE AREN’T LABELED FREAKS, AND IT’S ACTUALLY ‘COOL’ TO BE GIFTED.” JAY, 15**

- What other advantages can you think of? Come up with your own list, then consult (and update) it frequently—or whenever the “gifted” label seems more of a burden than a blessing.\*

## Some Possible Disadvantages of Being Gifted

- People who don’t understand what being gifted means (and doesn’t mean) may equate giftedness with perfection. As a result, some people may have unreasonable expectations of you, from your grades to your behavior.
- Labels are easy excuses for put-downs and insults. Being “gifted” may make you a potential target.
- When someone asks you what “gifted” means, there really is no “right” answer, which makes it awkward to explain.
- Your classes and schoolwork are often too easy—and dull. Much of your schoolwork may seem irrelevant.
- Friends who really understand and accept you may be few and far between.
- You sometimes feel overwhelmed by the number of things you can do. How can you make good choices? How can you decide which direction(s) and interest(s) to pursue in life?
- You may feel “different” from other kids your age—and if you view being different as a deficit, you may try to suppress your true self.
- Because you are knowledgeable, sensitive, and smart, you may be more aware of and concerned about world problems than some of your peers. On the other hand, you may feel helpless to do anything about them, and that can be frustrating and frightening.

**“In this world people have to pay an extortionate price for any exceptional gift whatever.”**  
Willa Cather

Make your own list of disadvantages. Throughout this book, we’ll offer suggestions for dealing with some of the most common “minuses” of being gifted.

\* TIP: If you enjoy journaling, you may want to keep a journal as you read this book. Use it to record your lists, thoughts, questions, reactions, and ideas.



On Being  
“Gifted”

# Maddening Myths

There are many misconceptions about what it means to be gifted. Here are ten of the most common myths we've encountered over the years:

**Myth #1:** Gifted kids have it made and will succeed in life no matter what. They don't need any special help in school or anywhere else.

**Fact:** Everyone needs encouragement—and help—to make the most of their abilities and succeed in life.

**Myth #2:** Gifted kids should love school, get high grades, and greet each new schoolday with enthusiasm.

**Fact:** Most schools are geared for average learners, not gifted learners, which makes it hard for gifted students to get excited about going. Some of the most talented students in the United States actually choose to drop out of school altogether.

**Myth #3:** Gifted students come from white middle- and upper-class families.

**Fact:** They come from all cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups.

**Myth #4:** Gifted kids are good at everything they do.

**Fact:** Some gifted students are good at many things; others are exceptionally able at only a few things. Some gifted students are also learning disabled,\* which means that they might not be very good at schoolwork. For more about giftedness and LD, see pages 22–24.

**Myth #5:** Teachers love to have gifted students in their classes.

**Fact:** Some do, some don't. Certain teachers feel uncomfortable with gifted students and get defensive when they suspect that their students know more than they do.

**Myth #6:** If gifted students are grouped together, they will become snobbish and elitist.

**Fact:** Some will, some won't. What's especially pernicious about this myth is that some adults use it to rationalize decisions about *not* allowing gifted students to work or study together or *not* providing them with opportunities that meet their learning needs.

**Myth #7:** All gifted kids have trouble adjusting to school and forming friendships.

**Fact:** Some do, some don't—just like other kids.

**Myth #8:** Gifted students don't know that they're “different” unless someone tells them.

**Fact:** Most gifted kids don't need to be identified or labeled before they know that they're not quite like their age peers.

**Myth #9:** Gifted students must constantly be challenged and kept busy or they'll get lazy.

**Fact:** They might get bored, but they won't necessarily get lazy.

**Myth #10:** Gifted kids are equally mature in all areas—academic, physical, social, and emotional.

**Fact:** That would be convenient, but it's not a reasonable expectation. On the other hand, it's not fair to assume that just because someone is advanced intellectually, he or she will lag behind in other developmental areas.

“Arguments of elitism are foolish. This nation fosters a sense of elitism when it comes to sports or the entertainment industry. Certainly there needs to be no apology for those who wish to nurture the minds of the best young students.”

James Gray

\*We prefer the term “learning different” because we believe that it more accurately reflects individual characteristics.



## What This Means to You

Not everyone who is gifted has been identified as such. You may have friends, brothers, and/or sisters who are gifted but haven't been spotted by the school's selection system. (If your test scores drop, *you* may be labeled "gifted" one year and not the next. Which doesn't make a lot of sense, but that's the way it is.) Some schools don't check for giftedness at all, so students in those schools are never identified. And some schools that formerly identified gifted kids don't anymore because their gifted programs have been eliminated, so why bother?

What you need to remember, in the midst of all the confusion, inconsistencies, and inequities, is this: *The system isn't perfect.* People make mistakes. Right or wrong, most teachers aren't required to take training in gifted education. Therefore, many teachers know very little about giftedness and are not adequately equipped to identify gifted students.

What matters most is what *you* think of yourself and your abilities. Whether someone else believes that you're gifted is incidental and even irrelevant. It's up to you to decide how and whether you will use your gifts; it's up to you to determine the direction your present and future will take. *Never let anyone else decide for you how smart you are.*

Being gifted won't guarantee you a particular GPA or success in school. It won't automatically lead to a satisfying and meaningful career (or series of careers). It won't reward you with fame, friendships, and happiness. It won't make you kinder, more compassionate, and more caring than other people. Like everyone else, you're going to have to work at who you want to be and what you want from life.

But, let's face it, being gifted *will* give you an edge. You just have to know when and how to use it.

## **GIFTED PEOPLE SPEAK OUT**

**Vamir, 15**

I was classified as "gifted" in second grade. This was really driven home when I skipped two grades, going from fifth grade to seventh over winter break. Though the social adjustment was rough initially, since then I have been fine both socially and academically. My major problem now is relationships with girls—I don't know too many my own age, and college girls are rather reluctant to have a relationship with someone so young.



**"Our highest responsibility, finally, unavoidably, is the stewardship of our potential—being all we can be."  
Marilyn Ferguson**



Throughout the years, I have found myself and my gifted classmates to be motivated, curious, creative, and strong-willed (well . . . stubborn). In high school, especially, I noticed the independence of gifted students.

I don't know about you, but I've never liked the word "gifted." I don't think "capable" or "special" are specific enough, and "intelligent" isn't at all subtle. "Talented" seems to be okay, but if you've got a better word, I'm all ears.

A little bit about myself: My parents are both highly educated professionals, and I think that I am gifted entirely because of them (but my accomplishments are my own). My mother is a physician and my father is an engineer. Both of them apply science to their jobs. At the University, I am majoring in physics and math, possibly with another major and at least a substantial minor in economics. After college, there'll be more study, but I'm not sure what—either graduate physics or business (or possibly both, in time).

I am interested in science (especially physics), mathematics (algebra), philosophy (logic) and finance (futures trading). I like to read about these topics and some science fiction and espionage, as well as the "classics" that I started reading in my Humanities and Social Science classes. I also participate in College Bowl and Model United Nations, too.

Here are some of my concerns as a "gifted student." I hate it when adults are condescending to me simply because of my age (if it's because I've done something stupid, it's my fault). Most people don't give kids enough credit, so I try to treat younger children like they are my age, and those that can talk are usually mature enough to act that way. I also hate it when my parents (usually my dad) shows me off to friends and acquaintances. I talked to him about it and he does it less and less, but he still does it.

I hate it when I have so many thoughts that I lose one (which has happened to me at least a dozen times while writing this). I also hate it when I cannot think of anything, and when I have a really neat thought that I can't investigate more deeply because I just don't have the educational background.

I worry too much. I worry about "losing my talents." I worry about becoming average. I worry about my "lost childhood" and the opportunities I've missed because of my advancement. I worry I will burn out or overspecialize. I worry about how successful I will be in my career and whether my colleagues will accept me (and whether they do now).

Competition, standards, and records I am striving for confuse me. Do I really want to do this? I cannot decide. Should



I keep speeding up? The answer must be no, right? These questions make me doubt myself, my abilities, my sanity. It hurts.

About deciding on a career: Just like a little philosophy makes one an atheist while a lot makes you religious, a little knowledge makes you certain about your career, while more makes you uncertain once again. I have so many ideas for what to do and who to be.

I wish you luck as you grow up gifted. Always examine how you feel about school, learning, friends, and yourself.

*Vamir is a freshman at a major midwestern university.*

## “Twice Exceptional”: Gifted and LD

Some gifted students have needs in two areas that seem to contradict each other: They are gifted *and* learning disabled (LD). In recent years, gifted students with LD have been labeled “twice exceptional.” Like all labels, this one has its shortcomings, but at least it calls attention to students whose giftedness might otherwise be overlooked.

For example, a student who is easily distracted and has difficulty completing assignments or concentrating on tests may be passed over when teachers are identifying students for enrichment opportunities. Since school success is often evaluated on the basis of graded assignments and test scores, a student who doesn't perform well on these tasks may not be seen as “smart,” even though he or she is, in fact, intellectually, creatively, or otherwise gifted.

Another example is the student who has trouble with traditional written assignments (organizing content, handwriting, etc.). Unless alternatives are available—oral reports, artistic projects, access to computers—his or her giftedness may not be recognized.

Gifted students with LD may have uneven academic skills and may appear unmotivated. They may have “processing problems” with the way they see and hear, causing them to seem “slow.” They may have motor skills problems that affect their handwriting. And because they are often frustrated with school, they may act out and have low self-esteem.

On the other hand, many gifted students with LD score in the gifted range on ability, achievement, and creativity tests. They may have a wide range of knowledge about a variety of topics and a fertile imagination. They may have a superior vocabulary and sophisticated ideas.





On Being  
"Gifted"

"Twice exceptional" students benefit when educators and parents focus on strengths, not perceived deficiencies. These students also need opportunities to learn and to show what they know in ways that are more natural and effective for them.

## **GIFTED PEOPLE SPEAK OUT**

**Aaron Samouelian**

My struggles aren't over. They began early in my education. I always found it so difficult to understand what was being said in class! For example, when the teacher told us to follow multiple directions ("Fold your paper like a hot dog and then turn it 90 degrees"), I would not have a visual picture of what the final result should look like. Therefore, I would immediately rely on my neighbor's product for clues. I felt like crying knowing I couldn't rely on my own abilities. They were there, but I didn't know how to apply them.

This led to feelings of stupidity. Stupidity is not a motivating feeling to have at any time. But for me, it was a constant and exhausting struggle just to complete assignments and turn them in. I was insecure of their quality and value. Furthermore, when class discussion was going on, I would know the answers but not take a chance in answering for fear of looking stupid if I was wrong. This was a big factor in my life: feeling afraid to fail.

Struggling in high school can be very lonely and depressing. The schools I went to did not have a supportive environment in which I could learn, especially the high schools I attended. High school consists of peers and fitting in, so when you combine peers, rigid high school teaching styles, feelings of insecurity, and stupidity, you have a person who really knows what the word "struggle" means.

It got so bad for me that lying became automatic. Through lying I fooled my family, friends, and teachers—and probably myself. For example, I would change a report card grade or show my parents old homework when they asked to see current assignments. It became easier to fool everyone than to do the work. At the end of my sophomore year, I ran away from home because I was finally caught at failing. This turned out to be the first time that failure was good for me. In desperation, my parents had me tested, and we all discovered that I had a very high IQ, being deficient only in language retrieval. This enabled me to get admitted to a school for the gifted and talented. It was there that my successes began.

"Evidence suggests that the conventional educational system may be focusing on the wrong kinds of skills and . . . weeding out many of those who might have the most to give. . . . Different kinds of problems and different kinds of tools may require different talents and favor different kinds of brains."

Thomas G. West



There were many factors that contributed to my success. One was that the students and faculty at my new school made me feel a part of their community. This began on the first day of school, when I was greeted with open arms and a smile. I hadn't been used to these! I now belonged to a learning institution filled with a kind, caring faculty. They were there for me and my fellow students and not just for the paycheck. This attitude was evident through their understanding and acceptance of my special needs. They showed an interest in my learning styles and, even though my opinions and ideas were different from others, for the first time in my academic career, different was accepted.

Secondly, I started learning about myself and the styles in which I learned best. I no longer tried to imitate others and how they learned. I came up with my own ways to learn. This was a relief. This was true success. I could learn, achieve, and smile all day. Through seeing my efforts pay off, I gained self-esteem. My learning disability was no longer disabling; I'd finally found ways to learn that worked for me. I was different, but it was something to be proud of—it was a true talent! I have my own mind and no one else's.

Because of my experiences, I will now begin college knowing that it won't be easy but I am up to the challenge.

*Aaron Samouelian graduated from the Roeper School for the Gifted in 1995. He is attending college in Michigan.*

## **Find Out More** To learn more about giftedness and LD, read:

**Bireley, Marlene.** *Crossover Children: A Sourcebook for Helping Children Who Are Gifted and Learning Disabled.* Second Edition. Reston, VA: The Council for Exceptional Children, 1995. Although this book is written for educators and parents, it contains information that may be helpful to "twice exceptional" students.

The following Web site is another great source of information about young people who are gifted and LD:

[www.hoagiesgifted.org/twice\\_exceptional.htm](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/twice_exceptional.htm)