

Gifted ADHD

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The LANC sees many children and adults who are extremely bright and whose parents consider that they have enormous potential. However, their concentration and learning difficulties may mean that they are underachieving relative to their ability.

Sometimes this is because the children are in the wrong academic environment and are not being stretched to their ability without the recognition of the fact that they are very able children. Very often teachers of such children consider them to be just of average ability, because that is where they have been achieving, and don't always recognise that the child has much more potential than is being shown.

In our experience, children with ADHD become much more demotivated and their self-esteem lowers at an earlier stage than with children of more average abilities. Frequently they are much more aware of their underachievement and may become anxious and frustrated by this. Indeed something the demotivation is the most obvious difficulty.

Many very bright children with ADHD have the ability to switch on to subject matter which is interesting or where the teacher is stimulating and unable to concentrate on the more mundane and brogan subjects. Of course everyone can concentrate if things are interesting, however for children with ADHD is almost like having a "faulty on/off switch." It is like there is a brick wall between the ability to overfocus on interesting things such as computers, but they have great difficulty in focusing on schoolwork, homework etc. The question always rises as to whether or not they could try harder to concentrate, however it appears that with people with ADHD trying harder on mundane subjects, and continuing to fail and struggle only serves to lower their self-esteem and make them more demotivated.

Historically teachers often say that because a child couldn't concentrate well on one thing that if he tried harder he could concentrate on anything else. Unfortunately with children with ADHD it does not work that way and the problems are often masked.

In addition, having well above average intelligence scores services as a cushion and masks the degree of difficulty that many bright children with ADHD are having. For a child who is in the top 1 to 5% for intelligence scores to be achieving at about average in class, is just as bad as being average intelligence and being at the bottom of the class. In the latter situation the problem is usually noticed, however when gifted children are underachieving to the average range the problem is often missed.

An even more difficult situation is where the child has a patchy profile and maybe in the gifted range for one section of the IQ score such as say, the verbal score but not in other areas. This problem can be even harder to tease out, as can the situation be where a child has not only ADHD but also a specific learning difficulty or difficulty with handwriting.

All these situations require careful assessment and the nuances of such situations must be understood by the assessing professional as such children don't always neatly fit into the ADHD criteria. Very often the associated executive function difficulties, i.e. in planning, organisation, time management, having a concept of time, and difficulties in prioritising and making decisions, as well as his short-term memory can make such children have very significant problems. Such difficulties are often quite subtle and many teachers consider that

being organised is something that any child can achieve without realising that children with ADHD find this particularly difficult.

It is always extremely important to emphasise to teachers that ADHD is not an excuse, rather it being an explanation. Thus putting in place accommodations and strategies to counteract the difficulties and try to prevent them occurring again is essential, rather than the child being put in detention or punished for his disorganisation.

Frequently gifted children with ADHD do not come to the attention of professionals until they go to senior school, sometimes not till they go to university. Their intelligence often pulls them through primary school especially till there are more organisational demands on them with senior school entry. Especially if such children are at private school where there is usually a smaller class size and particularly if the child is at boarding school where there is a greater structure, associated educational strategies are inherently put into place by virtue of being at such a school, the child can go longer without such severe problems being obvious.

Because both ADHD and giftedness are inherited, the parents of such children are frequently gifted themselves and may be highly effective people. Frequently the story is that they have underachieved at school, however once they got through school and could focus on something that they have an interest in and use their energy in an effective way, they did very well indeed.

Many historical and national figures may well have or have had ADHD and have been able to use their ADHD to their advantage in life, largely because of their environment and opportunities in association with their hyperactivity, energy and drive. However, their offspring may not have been so fortunate and may have inherited the core ADHD symptoms but with a different set of complicating factors.

For example, there are strong suggestions that Winston Churchill had ADHD. He significantly underachieved at school, being easily distracted. He had difficulty learning more boring, mundane elements of school work, and yet he did very well in Greek literature and history, subjects that he really like. He enjoyed the action of politics in war time but found the relative boredom in peacetime not so much to his liking.

Churchill's school reports included such comments as: "history and geography are very good but conduct is exceedingly bad; he cannot be trusted to do any one thing – he's persistent lateness is disgraceful – if he were to really exert himself he might yet be first at the end of term – he loses his books and papers and various other things - he is so regular in his irregularity that I sometimes think he cannot help it – he has such good abilities made useless by habitual negligence."