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Neurodiversity and Learning Strengths- Gifted students

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The most recent research on brains & learning shows that we all have different patterns of processing information. This confers upon the human race a great advantage, in that collectively we are smart in different ways. Some people are more 'neurotypical' while others think in vastly different ways. This means that we need to focus on how to help all types of brains to learn & succeed.

With gifted students there are two aims:
-to help them to make the most of their main learning strengths; &
-to support them in using those learning strengths to perform well in other areas.

Young people & children who have been identified as gifted, benefit greatly from knowing their learning strengths & how their brain works & learns. This knowledge provides a basis for navigating life successfully.

Some gifted kids oscillate between feeling anxious, perfectionistic & overwhelmed to feeling underwhelmed & that school is tedious. Others have a mismatch between their intellectual capacities & their ability to process their emotions under pressure.

Students who are identified as gifted students have nearly double the rate of anxiety. If they have additional forms of neurodiversity beyond giftedness, their rates of anxiety rise even further.

Perfectionism

A lot of gifted kids that I see in my clinical psychology practice are perfectionists. Perfectionism can either work for them or against them. When it works for them, they stick with problems until they are solved & find ingenious & creative solutions. When it works against them, they go into 'melt down' if they don't succeed the first time they try something & then avoid areas where they might 'fail'.

Academic Self- efficacy

Knowing your learning strengths increases academic self-efficacy. This is the level of self-belief that you can do well. Gifted kids often have high self-belief in the areas they are adept in but are unfairly self-denigrating about their capacity in areas they find challenging.

Utilising their learning strength areas to lift their success in other areas is something most kids who are identified as gifted don't consider without prompting. This may be especially the case when success has felt relatively effortless.

Converting Neurodiversity into Neuro-advantage

Gifted children often acquire new ideas & skills better quickly, & often with less practice. They

can be skilled at seeing how ideas link together.

Generally, they are passionate thinkers. This means you either have their interest (or you have totally lost their interest). Usually, they come in-built with a strong sense of curiosity for a narrow range of interests.

Gifted kids are rarely neurotypical. They are also not balanced people- they are excited about learning about some areas & excruciatingly bored about other areas. Helping them to think differently requires some determination & resilience.

Their enthusiasm about their interests, their fascinations as well as their creative problem solving & imagination is delightful.

How Parents Can Help

Be proud. Your child is a unique thinker. Build from their interests & strengths & they will flourish. Parents don't need to be smarter than their kids & they don't have to have all the answers but asking a lot of good questions helps.

Protect their childhood. While gifted kids are incredibly capable, they are still kids. They can get overwhelmed, bored, passionate & grumpy just like any other kid. Give them the freedom to be good at some things but also allow them to have the privacy to try out areas where they may not as skilled (but may enjoy).

Learning strengths can help them to understand that they, like everyone else, have some areas where they perform at high levels but also have some areas that are more challenging. Some gifted kids can be pleased with their areas of great ability & incredibly self-damning about areas where they are not as developed.

Parents can complete the analysis of their gifted child's learning strengths (either with them or on their behalf) at

www.mylearningstrengths.com & use the free letter to create a conversation about building on the identified strengths.

Discuss these with a view to creating a plan to build these strengths even further. A full report is also available outlining strategies, strengths, & possible future career areas.

Spatial Reasoning

Spatial reasoning is the ability to solve problems, connect ideas & recall information using pictures & symbols.

A learning strength in this area allows gifted kids to deal with abstract concepts in symbolic form & is highly predictive of their ability to deal with advanced concepts in mathematics & other number smarts.

Perceptual- Motor Skills

Some of these kids have high levels of performance in using their senses & their bodies to learn. Gifted dancers, gymnasts, athletes, & musicians often have learning strengths in this area. Others use their sensitivities to create success as artists or designers.

Being adept in perceptual-motor skills can lead some to under-value other ways they can learn & generally don't see how to utilize their existing skills to promote success in areas.

Concentration and memory

This is like the tale of the hare & the tortoise.

Some gifted kids with a learning strength in concentration & memory have lightning-fast speeds of recall. This can set them up for success at school but may not be as useful in the broader world.

Other gifted students are slow & methodical in their processing of information. This means in the rapid-fire life of school they can be seen as

ponderous & can be over-looked. Timed assessments can seriously under-estimate their capacities.

Their more meticulous processing allows them to give deeper & thoughtful responses. If you ask them to tell you about a concept (especially one they are fascinated by) & you are able to wait, a rich web of connected thoughts & memories tumble out.

Planning and sequencing

When success comes easily to you, you may not see the need for planning. This is a trap that waits for gifted students. There comes a time when, no matter how easy you find learning to be, that planning an approach to success will be of benefit.

Developing a learning strength in planning & sequencing is advantageous in school but eventually in all aspects of life, especially the practical aspects that create success.

Thinking and logic

Gifted kids often run on their own timelines. While they are often very systematic & logical, school may not always have the patience to wait for their intricacy or idiosyncrasies of their thinking.

Even debating competitions often reward a brevity of response & the ability to respond rapidly. While some gifted kids can certainly do this, others will be left floundering.

Gifted children tend to look for all possible answers or solutions before settling for a best answer while more neurotypical students will often choose the first answer that 'will do'.

Finding an area, often outside of school, where these kids can develop their strengths in thinking and logic is important. Allowing them time to richly investigate, deliberate over & develop ideas about an area of their interest is essential.

People smarts.

This is a critical learning strength to develop. While they would like to have some good friends, many gifted kids prefer solo projects & self-instruction over small group work. In terms of friendships, some go for a narrow group of like-minded kids. Some even try to tone down their smarts to gain acceptance by their friends.

No matter how gifted they may be, developing the people smarts to deal with different types of people as well as managing their own feelings & frustrations is going to be helpful.

Developing the skills of conversational curiosity will also benefit them long-term. Learning that a good conversation is a two-way process of sharing & expanding on ideas rather than a one-sided diatribe or soliloquy, is a valuable life lesson. Some gifted kids are able to tell people a lot of information about things they know but are less skilled at encouraging others to share their ideas & knowledge.

Studying the lives of eminent people will help them to see everyone has setbacks on their way towards great achievements.

Language and word smarts

This learning strength involves the ability to reason, interpret or create stories, solve problems & recall information using verbal methods such as printed & spoken words. It is the basis of being truly literate.

The art of communicating well to create a desired outcome is a skill that anyone can benefit from. This may be especially the case for gifted kids who may in the future need to 'pitch' ideas that are unfamiliar to others.

Developing knowledge about how to present information visually, symbolically & with impact is a useful link between these two areas. Video creation & editing, drama & acting, musical performance, game design & puppetry are some activities that promote this link.

Number smarts

Gifted young people with a learning strength in number smarts are often clear & logical thinkers who can sequence tasks well. There is a strong overlap between number smarts & spatial reasoning. Musical processing is also related.

For some gifted kids we need to help them to shift from the abstract to the practical. Seeing the applications of numbers to real world problems is a good starting point.

In summary, gifted kids can have a shaky sense of their self-efficacy in areas they find challenging & knowing their learning strengths & how to apply them broadly advantages them in terms of life success.

Next steps

Schools could ask parents & students to complete the assessment of learning strengths & use this knowledge as a basis for collective planning over the next term. Starting from what is strong increases engagement & self-efficacy. Learning strengths could also be integrated with career planning for senior students.

Schools could also consider hosting professional development sessions on neurodivergence & learning strengths to consider ways of building on the strengths of all students.

It is essential that we regard neurodivergence as a strength rather than as a deficit & applaud, support & build the strengths of all of our wonderful young people.

I would like to acknowledge my discussions with Kerry Gilmore, Jess Duff, & Jennifer Stephens in preparing this paper & express my gratitude to them.

I also recommend the linked-in posts of Liz Keable & Amanda Kirby.

More information

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Andrew's website

www.mylearningstrengths.com has helped over 45,000 young people in the past year discover their learning strengths.

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Learning Strengths

Books for Parents

The Bright Kid Challenge

Unlocking Your Child's Genius

Tricky Behaviours

The A to Z of Feelings (Bad Apple Press)

Book for Teachers

Neurodevelopmental Differentiation- Optimising Brain Systems To Maximise Learning (Hawker-Brownlow).

