

Looking Beyond Behavior

By Julie F. Skolnick, M.A., J.D.

Joey is a highly gifted boy identified with ADHD. Speaking impulsively in class one day, Joey unintentionally insulted his teacher, a teacher he was very fond of. Up to this point, they'd had a wonderful relationship, but bored Joey blurted out what he thought about the day's lesson. When Joey saw the impact of his words, he felt remorse and was sure that now his teacher hated him. But Joey, a child who also has pragmatic language challenges, had no idea how to correct the situation. *[See the sidebar at the end of this article for more information on pragmatic language challenges.]*

A combination of impulsivity and emotional intensity often got Joey into trouble like this — with friends, with siblings, and now with his teacher. He grew accustomed to being labeled “that annoying kid” and developed a tough-looking exterior when things got rough. His mother came to me for help communicating with the school and strategizing for Joey's success.

A Shift in Focus

When bright kids misbehave in the classroom, appreciation for their intellect often goes out the window. A myopic focus on behavior leads to the conclusion, “I cannot teach this child until he changes.” Getting the school to address a child's giftedness becomes difficult in this situation and may lead to a cycle of focusing on challenges rather than strengths. The result for a child can be underachievement and poor self-esteem. Often overlooked in this situation is the fact that inappropriate behaviors might actually melt away if teachers turned their focus away from the child's areas of

weakness and toward his or her strengths.

Refocusing is sometimes hard at home as well. When these kids melt down or dig in their heels, parents find it difficult to pause and consider what is truly behind their child's behavior. Parents often are overwhelmed by immediate tasks at hand — homework, dinner, activities, siblings. In the heat of the moment it's easy to forget that answering intensity with intensity only exacerbates the situation. In order to develop an effective response, parents must comprehend what underlies their child's behavior in order to craft successful strategies.

So what happens when parents can't wrap their minds around the intricate inner lives of their high-ability kids? What happens when a school doesn't understand giftedness, let alone the nuances of 2e? When exceptionalities are not understood, it's easy for negative assumptions to spiral out of control. The result, unfortunately, is that our gifted, and especially our 2e kids, are often misunderstood.

What's Behind the Misunderstanding?

We have no single definition for the term *gifted*. There is a federal definition, various state definitions, and one from the National Association for Gifted Children. *[See the sidebar to the right.]* By and large, these definitions address ability but fail to capture the complexity of the social and emotional needs specific to giftedness.

The Columbus Group definition, on the other hand, does provide a broader view of what it is to be gifted. In the 1980s in Columbus, Ohio, a group of parents, educators, and psychologists disagreed with the debate going on about giftedness — was it an

Some Definitions of Giftedness

Giftedness is often misunderstood. Teachers and administrators routinely misunderstand it, as do diagnosticians, evaluators, psychologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians, and educational consultants — not to mention parents and even gifted folks themselves, including gifted children. Here are some definitions of giftedness.

Federal definition. “The term ‘gifted and talented,’ when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities.” See No Child Left Behind Act, P.L. 107-110 (Title IX, Part A, Definitions, <http://goo.gl/iD37QT>).

State definitions. For a complete listing of state definitions see, <http://goo.gl/OhgwUV>.

National Association for Gifted Children definition: “Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).” See <http://goo.gl/OEQnAN>.

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inborn trait, ability, or willingness to work hard? They sought to redefine giftedness in terms of the inner experience of the individual. The definition, published in 1992 in *Off the Charts, Asynchrony and the Gifted Child*, is as follows:

Asynchronous development in which advanced cognitive abilities and heightened intensity combine to create inner experiences and awareness that are qualitatively different from the norm. This asynchrony increases with higher intellectual capacity. The uniqueness of the gifted renders them vulnerable and requires modifications in parenting, teaching and counseling in order for them to develop optimally. (www.gifteddevelopment.com/isad/columbus-group)

Along with intellectual ability, the Columbus Group recognized other characteristics as being part of giftedness. They directly addressed two of them in their definition:

- Asynchrony, when a child's intellect matches the trajectory of an older child while simultaneously displaying behaviors or skills years below his chronological age, such as underdeveloped social/emotional skills. This particular characteristic can be a hard one to identify and address; and if a specific learning disability is present, the child's asynchrony can become even more complicated — particularly if the child's ability surpasses that of the adults around her. Why, for example, can she operate in their intellectual domain while simultaneously having little success making friends?

- Intensity of various types, which may include insatiable intellectual curiosity, high emotional sensitivity, sensory challenges, imaginal reverie, or energetic liveliness. There are times when these characteristics encourage passionate productivity as well as times when they, combined with a second exceptionality, result in behavior difficult to control or understand. If the second exceptionality happens to include impulsivity, staying in control becomes even more difficult for the child.

A third characteristic, perfectionism, has been called by one of the Columbus Group members, Linda Silverman, “an affliction of the gifted” and a “sister” of intensity (1999). While it is sometimes a motivator for doing one's best, perfectionism can also paralyze an individual who sets the bar impossibly high. The anxiety of falling short of perfection can result in a child's “failure to launch” or being labeled “lazy” by teachers or parents.

The Columbus Group's view of giftedness makes clear that gifted children must be parented and taught differently to succeed. When teachers and parents understand their children's perspective, situations become workable, teachers listen and learn, and partnerships form that set up children for success.

Back to Joey's Story

I helped Joey's mother realize that for teacher and student to reconnect, she needed to step in as Joey's advocate. In order to do so, she had to understand her son's complexity so that she could help the teacher understand it as well. For me, it's always fulfilling to watch clients achieve “aha moments” about their

children, their spouses, and even themselves as they come to better understand giftedness. Joey's mom was no exception as we worked together to uncover what was behind Joey's behavior. She would need to help Joey's teacher understand the extent of the boy's impulsivity and make him aware of the child's remorse for insulting him.

At first, the teacher was skeptical that Joey was disheartened over his behavior in class. After all, the boy was acting cavalierly in school. Joey's mother, with her new knowledge, provided some insight by explaining that:

- Joey knows he struggles with impulse control.
- Self-awareness makes it even more embarrassing and disappointing for Joey when he commits a social faux pas like he did in class.
- Being a perfectionist with very high standards for himself, he feels like a failure when he falls short of his own expectations.
- When he experiences these emotions, Joey becomes defensive.

The mom requested that Joey's teacher connect directly and privately with him to resolve the issue and alleviate the boy's fears.

That evening, the teacher called Joey's mom to report the outcome of their talk. Upon hearing the teacher's words, Joey's shoulders and face visibly relaxed. The teacher happily explained that “the old Joey was back” and thanked the mom for taking the time to explain what was going on. Her understanding of what lay behind her son's behavior allowed Joey's mom to enlighten the teacher and resolve a difficult situation for Joey.



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After this experience, Joey's teacher had a better understanding of Joey's complex profile. He and Joey's mom kept an open line of communication, partnering in sharing successes and challenges, and brainstorming ways to avoid another uncomfortable and unhappy situation. The teacher checked in to make sure Joey had enough work — not just more work, but stimulating work — to keep his bright mind engaged. He commented privately to Joey when the boy showed successful impulse control in class.

At home, Joey's mom worked with him to practice ways to avoid social missteps like the one that occurred in school. He learned some appropriate stock

phrases to use in various situations. Plus, she taught him to stop and consider this mantra before speaking: Does it need to be said? Does it need to be said now? Does it need to be said by you?

Broadening the Focus

What can parents do to broaden the focus at school from their child's behavioral issues to his/her intellectual needs? My answer is to understand, teach, and advocate.

- *Understand* your child's particular profile. Strive to figure out why your child behaves the way he/she does in particular circumstances.

- *Teach* the teachers and administrators about your child and his/her exceptionalities. Communicate, in a supportive and effective way, what your child's strengths are and how to access them, efforts that will help in bringing out the child's potential and raising his/her self-esteem. Conversely, allow teachers to enlighten you about successful strategies they implement in the classroom. Forge a partnership — a team that is going to find the portal of strength in your child that will lead to learning.
- *Advocate*. Help teachers see the positive



What Does it Mean to Have Pragmatic Language Impairment?

Pragmatic language is the language of social interactions. It refers to non-verbal as well as verbal communication. For example, it might involve a nod of the head to acknowledge someone in passing as much as a greeting in words.

According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), "an individual may say words clearly and use long, complex sentences with correct grammar, but still have a communication problem if he or she has not mastered the rules for social language...." ASHA states that children who struggle with pragmatic language may do the following:

- Say inappropriate or unrelated things during conversations
- Tell stories in a disorganized way
- Have little variety in the way they use language.

It's not unusual for kids to experience these kinds of difficulties from time to time. However, if they occur often and if a child's behavior seems inappropriate for his or her age, the youngster may have a pragmatic language disorder. Pragmatic disorders often coexist with other language problems and are commonly seen in individuals with autism spectrum disorders. The United Kingdom's National Autistic Society has stated that there is debate about whether semantic pragmatic disorder is actually part of the autism spectrum or an entirely separate condition.

ASHA points out on its website that children with a social communication disorder are often frustrated by their inability to share their wants and needs, and their frustration may lead to behavior problems. Parents concerned about their children's social development should seek help. Among the professionals who ad-

dress these issues are speech language pathologists. Experts agree that early intervention is best and gives a child the greatest chance of learning the social skills that he or she is missing.

Information in this sidebar is based on the following sources:

- "Pragmatic Language Impairment in Asperger's and High-Functioning Autism," <http://goo.gl/2qRgPI>
- *Semantic Pragmatic Disorder*, The National Autistic Society, <http://goo.gl/XTsN7C>
- "What is Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder?" <http://goo.gl/wuDijR>
- "What You Need To Know About Pragmatic Language and Social Skills," <http://goo.gl/PMznBZ>

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side of your child's sensitivity, curiosity, creativity, and energy. Let them know what she does outside of school to make the world a better place. Share his insightful comments and give context so that teachers appreciate your child's multifaceted dimensions.

Above all, we must allow our children to be themselves and celebrate their differences. It's complicated to be gifted, and especially 2e; but if parents and teachers collaborate and celebrate these kids' exceptionalities, truly exceptional things will happen.

Reference

Silverman, LK. (1999). Perfectionism: The crucible of giftedness. *Advanced Development*, 8, 47-61.

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May/June, 2015, issue of
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