



## Screaming and No One Listening: Advocating for a 2e Child

By Dan Peters, PhD, and Julie Mills, LCSW

**Dan Peters:** Since the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) in 2004 and the inception and implementation of RtI (Response to Intervention), the landscape for and the experience of 2e students has drastically changed. Prior to these changes, students who were struggling in school were regularly referred for comprehensive assessments to look at the totality of their cognitive and academic functioning. Learning and processing disorders were identified by the pattern of a child's scores and abilities. The assessments revealed discrepancies that existed and, when a diagnosable condition was found, qualified children for special education services. Thus, comprehensive evaluations served as the tool for identification of learning and processing disorders, and they guided individualized education planning.

The overall goal of RtI makes sense. Its purpose is to identify students who are struggling, provide interventions to help them in the classroom, and eliminate the time spent waiting in line for an evaluation that might qualify them for special education. Thus, with RtI more students have access to intervention than just those who receive special education services.

So what's the problem? With the implementation of RtI and the continued fiscal cuts in education, comprehensive assessment and the availability of school psychologists have been greatly reduced. Under RtI, children are considered to be struggling in class if they are performing "below grade-expected levels," which in some states is defined as low as the 12<sup>th</sup> percentile.

Furthermore, RtI is dependent on a teacher recognizing that a child is struggling. Very few teachers re-

ceive training in gifted education, let alone the concept of twice-exceptionality — that a child can be both gifted and disabled. Since gifted children with learning and processing disabilities compensate by means of their advanced thinking, they often score within "grade-expected levels." Unfortunately, this performance is far below their ability and signifies a problem.

My colleagues across the U.S. are seeing the same thing — gifted kids with a long history of underachievement, frustration, burn-out, depression, and anxiety who are not getting identified as having a disability; or, if they are assessed and identified, they are not receiving a qualifying diagnosis to get an IEP (Individualized Education Program) or Section 504 Plan. Lives are being affected, kids are struggling, and our greatest minds are being wasted.

I have had the privilege of working with a family who was willing to share just such a story. While this is one family's unique story, it is also the story of the 2e child in our modern-day educational system. This is the story of "Aaron," as told by his mother.

**Julie Mills:** When my happy-go-lucky son was in kindergarten, he enjoyed school just as he had enjoyed preschool. However, with homework being assigned in kindergarten, homework time often resulted in tantrums. We were not alone. Other parents of boys in Aaron's class described similar experiences in their homes. So, my husband and I figured this was common behavior for boys when it comes to homework.

Every year, the frequency and severity of the tantrums diminished slightly to the point that by middle school Aaron did his homework without a major argument. In retrospect, I wonder if the tantrums were

related to his twice exceptional (2e) issues, which we discovered much later.

**Dan:** It's very common for gifted individuals, particularly boys, to have difficulty with writing. It can be a relative weakness, meaning their visual-motor skills lag behind their thinking abilities; or it can be suggestive of a processing disorder called dysgraphia. In both situations, the child is extremely frustrated because either he cannot get the ideas and words in his head onto the paper or doing so is a laborious process. These struggles often result in tantrums and meltdowns over "simple" homework.

**Julie:** I recall seeing a chart on the wall when Aaron was in second grade. It showed how students were performing on timed math facts tests. Many of the students, I noticed, were quicker than my son. When I asked about this, the teacher assured me that Aaron understood the concepts better than most other students, which she thought was more important than speed. This teacher, who was new to the profession, said she wasn't concerned about Aaron being slower than many of his classmates. Looking back, I wonder if a more experienced teacher would have warned me to keep an eye out in future years for the possibility of processing issues.

When we received Aaron's second-grade state test scores, we saw that he scored in the bottom 25th percentile for writing strategies. Was his antipathy toward doing homework surprising given that writing was so challenging for him?

Then came third grade, when writing paragraphs and stories became part of



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the curriculum. Aaron's struggles with writing were now more apparent to us. However, at this point and at others over the years, Aaron's teachers rarely expressed much concern when we met with them. As for my husband and I, we thought Aaron's writing seemed very poor; but having only one child, we didn't know if it was out of the ordinary.

Nevertheless, our concerns led us to try a few strategies to help Aaron improve his writing. Among them were sending him to a summer school writing class and having someone at school work with him on writing for an hour a week. Finally, in eighth grade we sent Aaron to a different school, a very small school where his teacher could spend more time with him. She astutely noticed that there was a disparity between what my son said during class discussions and what he wrote. While his thoughtful comments demonstrated insight into the material, his writing was meager and poor. Her observations led to a student study team meeting and to an assessment by the resource specialist and occupational therapist. When their testing showed no cause for his difficulties, we proceeded with testing by the school psychologist. While this testing still revealed no causes for Aaron's struggles, it did show him to be highly intelligent. Issues with executive function, especially related to organizational skills, were raised as possible causes of my son's difficulties; but now it was time for high school, so there was nothing left to pursue at this school.

**Dan:** Aaron's teacher did the single most important thing a teacher can do for a 2e child — recognize

that there was a discrepancy between his thinking abilities and his academic output. It is also positive that Aaron was assessed. However, it's when the testing data is interpreted that things usually hit a grinding halt. At this point, as in Aaron's case, a 2e child's "average" performance is seen as evidence that "he's at the level we expect him to be for his grade." The child's high reasoning scores, on the other hand, tend to be minimized or ignored.

**Julie:** That fall, while attending the annual California Association for Gifted conference, I went to a seminar on 2e. When some of what I heard sounded like Aaron, I asked the presenter, Dr. Dan Peters of Summit Center, if he thought my son could be 2e. Dr. Peters explained that with twice exceptionality, people are often misdiagnosed or the diagnosis can be missed altogether. A key to getting a correct diagnosis is for the person doing the assessment to understand giftedness.

This new information led my husband and me to consider further testing for Aaron. We had Summit Center do the assessment; and, to our surprise, we found out that our son has dyslexia, dysgraphia, and other processing disorders.

Aaron had always been able to read and was above benchmarks for fluency in elementary school (although he never liked to read on his own), so he had not been specifically tested for dyslexia in the past. The rest of the testing he went through in middle school was very similar to what Summit Center did, and so were the scores. The school's test showed a great disparity in Aaron's intelligence versus his fluency

and speed at doing reading and math. This pattern indicates a processing disorder. Just as Dr. Peters said, since school staff members were not knowledgeable about issues regarding gifted students, they missed that Aaron had a processing disorder.

**Dan:** We conducted a neuropsychological evaluation of Aaron to better understand his learning profile. I will highlight some of his scores to show the key issues.

### IQ Scores

Area Tested	Ranking
Verbal Comprehension score	99.8 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Processing Speed score	27 <sup>th</sup> percentile

There were more than three standard deviations between Aaron's ability to verbally problem solve and ability to copy and write quickly.

### Reading Scores

Area Tested	Ranking
Accuracy	16 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Rate	25 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Fluency	9 <sup>th</sup> percentile

### Writing Scores

Area Tested	Ranking
Sentence Combining	9 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Contextual Conventions	16 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Contextual Language	16 <sup>th</sup> percentile



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### Additional Scores

Area Tested	Ranking
Visual-motor	6 <sup>th</sup> percentile
Motor tasks	1 <sup>st</sup> percentile

In other testing, Aaron showed weaknesses in executive-functioning — the ability to plan, organize, and shift attention — and in auditory processing.

**Julie:** Getting the correct diagnosis had been a long journey. From the time my son was four, he'd been assessed by a speech pathologist; by an audiologist for hearing loss; by a specialist checking for nasal tonality; and by an ear, nose, and throat doctor related to speech issues. He also underwent testing to assess for attention deficit disorder; an occupational therapy assessment for writing; and assessment by a resource specialist and two psychologists. All but the speech pathology assessment were recommended to us by other professionals due to their concerns about my son.

Except for the assessments by the speech pathologist and Dr. Peters, none of the other assessments ever revealed any significant findings. Had we been on a wild goose chase? I now wonder if my son's many issues, which had led to all of these assessments, were related to the dyslexia and dysgraphia.

Finding out the cause of my son's difficulties has been a turning point for us. With tutoring for dyslexia, Aaron's writing has begun to improve dramatically. His grammar is better and he's able to express his ideas in more depth. His English teacher, noticing the improvement, commented that she looks forward to reading his writing. She noted that the ideas in Aaron's papers are so good that she'd like him to comment

more in class to raise the level of class discussions. What a dramatic change from someone who struggled to put a sentence together!

While Aaron's writing still needs improvement, we are so happy to have finally found what works. Without knowing the cause of the problem, we were unable to provide the proper remedy. All of the effort we put into trying to teach my son how to write correctly was futile without dealing with the underlying cause, his dyslexia.

**Dan:** Time and time again, we see families who have gone through the same ordeal — multiple evaluations and consultations with educators and professionals who are unaware of the signs of twice exceptionality. They don't know that the discrepancy in a child's abilities, along with the child's emotional and behavioral reactions to particular tasks, tell the story about his or her learning challenges. In all cases, accurately identifying learning and processing disorders and understanding the child's learning profile mark the beginning of effective and targeted intervention. The end result can then be increased self-confidence and academic success for the child.

**Julie:** Despite our successes, however, we still have a long way to go to get Aaron the support he needs at school. Immediately following the dyslexia diagnosis, we provided the school with the 20-page Summit Center neuropsychological evaluation report; and we arranged a meeting with the school to request a 504 Plan for accommodations. The meeting was held two weeks into my son's sophomore year. There we heard that, because Aaron was doing so well in school, he didn't qualify for a 504 plan. He would have to be performing below average to qualify.

I responded with these points:

- The law states that a student's disability must substantially limit his or her learning, but does not state that one needs to perform below average.
- Based on Aaron's IQ, in the top 99<sup>th</sup> percentile, he should be expected to achieve very high grades. His most recent semester GPA was a 2.66 (based on how colleges calculate it) — not what would be expected for someone with his IQ.
- Aaron's executive-function challenges leave him with weak organizational abilities. As a result, he misses assignments and forgets to turn in completed homework, lowering his grades.
- To achieve the grades he has, Aaron puts in a tremendous amount of effort, receives a great deal of parental support, and gets tutoring. Under the law, tutoring is supposed to be taken into account when determining whether a student qualifies for special education.

The school responded by agreeing to meet again in two weeks, when there would be more data — grades and teacher familiarity with Aaron — on which to make a decision. At the meeting, the 504 coordinator for the school district was present, along with the principal, the assistant principal, and two of Aaron's teachers. So was Dr. Peters, who attended both meetings to present Summit's assessment of my son and help us convince the school of the need for a 504 Plan.

At this meeting, the school agreed that my son has dyslexia and dysgraphia, but not that it impaired his learning enough to qualify for a 504 Plan. We disputed the school's statement that Aaron's performance had to be below average to qualify for

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the plan. We cited evidence from the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, responsible for enforcing 504 Plans, along with evidence from previous cases across the country.

No matter what we said, they disagreed. When I stated that I thought the goal of education is to help all students reach their full potential, I was told that's incorrect. The 504 coordinator explained that if they had to do that, schools would have many more 504 Plans than they could handle.

This second meeting ended with the district denying a 504 Plan for Aaron. In a follow-up e-mail, the 504 coordinator told me "how proud" I should be that my son's grades were mostly B's. The truth was that Aaron's grades were erratic — mostly B's interspersed with failing marks.

**Dan:** While 504 Plans were once relatively easy to get for a child with a legitimate learning or processing disorder, the trend has changed. In this case, and in others, the school acknowledged and agreed with our diagnoses (which allowed them to put a check in the first box), but said they could not mark the second box, which stated his disability was affecting his academic performance beyond what would be considered typical grade performance. When I asked how low Aaron's grades needed to be for him to be qualified, they told me it didn't work that way. I said surely it must, and asked again what Aaron's grades needed to be for him to be seen as "not meeting grade-expected levels."

We did not get an answer. So Aaron's parents were faced with a daunting, yet common, question: Do we pull away all the support Aaron is given so that the

school can see his real performance, or do we continue to support him so that he doesn't fail?

**Julie:** Following the 504 denial, we met individually with Aaron's teachers to ask for accommodations in each of their classes. Most were happy to give him extra time. Some looked for creative ways to help him, offering to do whatever they could to help. Ironically, the least accommodating teacher was the one who has dyslexia himself. While he said that he gives everyone

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accommodations of extra time, he insisted that my son had to write all of the class notes, even though Summit Center's report recommended against this due to the dysgraphia. Despite posting all of his class notes on his website, this teacher still required my son to hand-write them for notebook checks. He explained to us that Aaron should do what he, himself, had done to get through school — work extra hard. We were not asking anyone to spare our son from working hard, we were asking for accommodations to give him the opportunities to learn and express his knowledge on a level playing field with his classmates.

We are now in the process of preparing to appeal the 504 denial. I have talked to special education attorneys and advocates, and we are working on our next

steps. Among the reasons to continue to fight, aside from mandating accommodations in his classes, is to increase the likelihood of getting accommodations for the SAT. Without an official 504 Plan, chances of getting extra time on the test are unlikely.

So while we have traveled a long way down the path on our learning disabilities journey, we still have a long way to go; and I am sure there will still be many more hills to climb. Sadly, instead of being embraced by the school and receiving support for our son, we face an uphill battle to get him the services to which we believe he is entitled. This battle is not over yet, and we will continue until our son gets what he needs.

**Dan:** Aaron and his parents are among good company. Their story is unfortunately typical. I speak regularly to colleagues around the country who tell me similar stories about their 2e clients and students.

All children have a right to a free and appropriate education (FAPE). In the case of many 2e students, their education may be free, but is it appropriate? Are their learning and processing disorders getting identified? Are they receiving specialized intervention under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)? Are their civil rights being violated?

If your gifted child is struggling in school, you have the right to request a comprehensive evaluation (in writing). If you are denied, do not give up. Seek private assessment with a local psychologist, educational psychologist, or at a local mental health center or university counseling center. You are your child's strongest advocate. Like Aaron's parents, you will make a difference.



## Advocating for a 2e Child, concluded

### Recommended Resources

“RTI and the Gifted Child: What Every Parent Should Know,” by Mike Postma, Dan Peters, Barbara Gilman, and Kathi Kearney, *Parenting for High Potential* (June, 2011)

“Twice-Exceptional Students: An Endangered Species,” by Barbara Gilman, Dan Peters, Mike Postma, and Kathi Kearney, *Gifted Education Communicator* (Summer, 2012)

Wrightslaw (special education law and advocacy website), [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com)

*Dan Peters is a licensed psychologist in California. He is the co-founder and executive director of the Summit Center (<http://summitcenter.us>), which specializes in the assessment and treatment of children, adolescents, and families, with special emphasis on gifted, twice-exceptional (2e), and creative individuals. He is also the co-author, with Susan Daniels, of *Raising Creative Kids* (Great Potential Press, 2013).*



*Julie Mills is a licensed clinical social worker in the San Francisco Bay area. She works for her county's Behavioral Health Care Services as the clinical liaison for transition age youth programs, alcohol and drug perinatal programs, and tobacco cessation programs. She is also known for her advocacy skills. When it comes to her son, she will not give up until she gets him what he needs.*



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### Accepting a Child's Diagnosis

Although it was upsetting to learn that Aaron has dyslexia, Dr. Peters also shared with us all of the strengths associated with the way a brain with dyslexia processes information. Then, after reading the book *The Dyslexic Advantage*, by Drs. Fernette and Brock Eide, we understood more clearly how our son's brain works and we became more hopeful.

Now, when I looked at an old piece of Aaron's artwork, I saw it with new eyes. I had always thought it showed how he thinks “outside the box,” but now it helped me to understand how Aaron's brain works differently than most people's. The picture, shown here, is a drawing of a catfish. In their book, the Eides said that spatial processors, like Aaron, see and process things from all angles. Now I understood why he drew the fish from a front angle when most people would draw it from a side angle. This was an epiphany for me and for my son.

A main reason we chose Aaron's high school is for its highly regarded Engineering Academy, which begins in tenth grade. Aaron has been intent on being an engineer for several years. According to Summit Center's testing, he excels in the kinds of skills necessary for engineering and would likely make an excellent engineer.



The Academy's esteemed reputation attracts three times as many student applications as there are spaces available. As part of the application process, students must take an exam in ninth grade that includes an essay and math test. Unfortunately, due to Aaron's poor writing abilities, he was not accepted. I spoke with the director of the Academy about Aaron's strengths, but the director said there was nothing he could do.

According to Drs. Fernette and Brock Eide, there is a high incidence of dyslexic engineers whose dyslexia causes them to both process things differently and to be exceptional engineers. It seems ironic that acceptance into an engineering program would be based on writing an essay when many of the best candidates for the program are likely to be eliminated due to their difficulties with writing.

—JM