



PHOTO BY DAN NELSON

# Coping 101

## Building Persistence and Resilience in Gifted Children

As an advocate for gifted kids, my colleagues and I spend a considerable amount of time helping to explain the characteristics and needs of gifted children inside and outside of the classroom. We talk about the need for academic differentiation and acceleration, for these kids to be with intellectual and academic peers, and that these kids often have uneven development where some abilities are really advanced while others are not.

At the end of a recent talk I gave with some colleagues about meeting the needs of a vulnerable group of gifted kids—the twice-exceptional (2e), a gifted educator and advocate whom I have a lot of respect for asked a very important question. Her question went something like this, “At what point do we expect a gifted child to make an effort at his weak abilities and persevere through his challenges, rather than refusing or shutting down?” In a conversation that continued after the talk, my colleague outlined experiences where she and her fellow teachers were making accommodations but the child just didn’t seem to make an effort. She further stated that accommodations can only do so much if the child isn’t invested in working on things.

Many in the field of gifted advocacy may respond defensively to my colleague’s statement, but since I knew her and her amazing work with gifted children, I knew she was asking a good question that deserved some thinking and answers. We know that gifted kids often have very high standards for themselves which some refer to as perfectionism. We also know that gifted

kids expect to be strong in all areas of their performance and functioning as they are in their strength area, which is often very unrealistic. This is most often true for 2e kids who may be advanced in their reasoning abilities for example, and delayed in their writing abilities. There is tremendous frustration for the child who can speak in detail about the universe, but cannot put any of his thoughts into writing—one of the most common way schools assess learning. Thus, a very bright child with very high standards for himself, can feel stupid and ashamed.

In my experience, the child such as the one above will respond with either avoidance, refusal, “inappropriate” or acting out behavior, and often a combination of the these behaviors. So the question my colleague raised usually comes in the form of:

- How do we increase a gifted child’s persistence and resilience? or
- How do we teach a child the coping skills he or she needs to manage life’s inevitable challenges and adversity?

This is a critical issue. Even if a gifted child is given appropriate differentiation and accommodation, he or she still needs to learn to persevere in the face of adversity, right?

### COPING SKILLS 101

**Improve frustration tolerance (Lengthen the fuse).** The first key issue is that a gifted child often has limited frustration tolerance for his or her limitations and thus reacts quickly and

abruptly when faced with a challenge. In his book *The 8<sup>th</sup> Habit*, Stephen Covey describes that successful people have a “space” between a stimulus and a response. This means that something happens and then the person thinks about how to deal with the situation and then reacts. People who exhibit emotional and behavioral regulation difficulty (of all ages) often have very little or no “space” between the stimulus (attempt to write) and response (meltdown). A major goal then is to help a child get some “space” between what he is facing and how he is going to respond to it. When this occurs, the child has more time to think and problem-solve before getting upset and shutting down. The more space, the more opportunities for solutions.

**Teach them to use their great “thinking brain.”** It is important to highlight a child’s strong thinking abilities and help them to access his great “thinking brain” to figure out his “problem” or “challenge area.” Teaching children about “self-talk” and how our thoughts determine how we feel and act can be very useful. Help a child understand what his negative and defeating thoughts are. A client of mine with incredibly high standards and who experiences emotional meltdown much more often than she and her parents would like, recently realized that her defeating thought is “If it’s not great, it’s not good enough.” Other common ones are “If I can’t get it right immediately, I am stupid” and “I am supposed to know (or be good) at everything.” Helping a child to uncover his negative thinking allows the opportunity to have more control over feelings and behavior by changing or editing this thinking. Some examples of more adaptive thinking may be, “This is hard for me: I don’t have to be good at everything,” “Good is OK,” or “Learning takes time.” When a child can change his thinking, it allows him to have more “space” between the stimulus and his response.

**Help form a realistic view of self and abilities.** Another issue is helping a child to have a realistic understanding of his or her abilities. Remember that the gifted child (and adult) usually has very high expectations for all that he or she does. This is not realistic and not helpful. Parents and teachers can help a gifted child learn about what he is good at, what he is “normal” at, and what areas are challenges for him. It is important that adults model these same “imperfections” and talk to the child about their challenges. Gifted kids love learning about adults’ past experiences and challenges. It often allows them to see that those they admire also have weaknesses. Highlight a child’s strengths in order to give him the courage to work on a weakness area.

**Scaffold and support weaknesses.** Often the avoidant and acting out behavior comes in response to not knowing how to start. The idea of “scaffolding” is to provide a support structure while a child is learning an ability. This may include asking him questions about what he read in order to help him outline an essay, or sitting with him to help provide structure for concentration for his math assignments. Despite being advanced in some areas, many of these kids need the support for their weaker areas that one would give a younger child. It is the scaffolding that allows a tall building to be painted, and for struggling children to complete tasks they are currently unable to do on their own.

**Set up opportunities for success.** It takes a lot of courage for gifted children to do things that makes them feel “stupid” and inferior. It is important to set up the environment so they can take these chances in a private forum. Very bright kids who are used to being seen as the smart ones, do not want this image to be blown or exposed. As well, gifted kids who have learning and processing issues often become used to underachievement and “failing” and thus have little tolerance for doing more of it. This is often where the unfortunate but true adage may come into play, “It is better to be bad, than stupid.”

Thus, it is critically important to set up opportunities for success. Remembering that success is reinforcing of effort and appropriate risk taking, and failure is reinforcing of avoidance and refusal, we must set up conditions where the child can get a “win.” Since gifted kids tend to have strong wills and ideas, it is often very helpful to include them in the plan. Help them understand the reason for, and importance of what you want to help them with, and ask them for ideas to increase the chances of success. Explain what others are doing to support them, and ask how they think they will be able to participate and try. For example, do they want to start with an outline, sentence, a paragraph, or power point? The key is getting children to “buy in” to the plan that will increase the possibility of a successful outcome.

## CONCLUSIONS

Helping to increase persistence and resilience is critical for both teaching and parenting a gifted child. What good is it to have exceptional science abilities with a promising career in physics if you meltdown when you don’t agree with your professor or “refuse” to do what you are asked by your boss at a leading technology firm? While we must differentiate and accommodate for a gifted child’s strengths and weaknesses, we also must help him or her to manage challenges and adversity.

While understanding how difficult it is for them to feel stupid and inferior, we must help them build the coping skills to take risks, to fall down and get back up, and to keep coming back for more. As we all know, it is not the smartest who are most successful in our world, it is those who persevere, adapt, problem-solve, and don’t give up. Successful people understand what they are good at, what they aren’t, and how to solve problems as they arise—in short, they show resilience. While many gifted kids pose challenges in parenting and teaching, we must continue to try to help them grow—and not give up either. ■



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