



## World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children

In early August, the Canadian city of Vancouver, British Columbia, welcomed attendees to the 18<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Gifted and Talented Children. According to the conference host, the World Council for Gifted and Talented Children, the biennial conference is the largest international gathering of teachers, administrators, faculty, researchers, and parents in the field of gifted and talented learners. Here is coverage of one of the sessions presented at this five-day event. 2e Newsletter thanks Elizabeth Nielsen and Dennis Higgins for their contribution to this coverage.



### Session: Gifted Children on the Edge – At Risk and At Promise

Presenters: Dan Peters, Ph.D., and Susan Daniels, Ph.D., Summit Center for the Gifted, Talented, and Creative, Napa and Walnut Creek, CA

In this session, presenters Dan Peters and Susan Daniels, partners in a practice that focuses on the needs of gifted children, teamed up to examine the factors that place gifted children at risk for academic underachievement and emotional difficulties. Peters is a clinical psychologist with a special emphasis on the needs of gifted and twice-exceptional children and families. Daniels is an associate professor of educational psychology and counseling, and the program director of a grant aimed at identifying and addressing the needs of at-risk gifted students in California.

To begin, the presenters looked at factors that put gifted children at risk. Through her grant research, Daniels found that five main factors, often found in combination, put gifted children in California at risk:

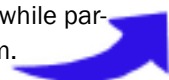
- Coming from a low-income family
- Being culturally disadvantaged
- Possessing limited English proficiency
- Having physical, emotional, or learning disabilities that mask their potential
- Coming from a dysfunctional family.

Both presenters pointed out that gifted children from middle or upper-income families can be at risk as well as those from low-income families. Two of the five factors, disabilities and dysfunctional families, can take a toll on gifted children from all economic levels.

The way to counteract risk factors in gifted children – and all children – is to boost their resiliency. Resiliency, the presenters explained, is “developed by identifying and building upon students’ developmental assets.” The rest of the presentation, aimed at identifying different types of developmental assets and ways to strengthen them, addressed the following:

- **Family support.** Peters called family support a “key ingredient” of building resiliency in a child. “These kids really need a connection with a caring adult – someone who listens to the child, someone who understands the child,” he said.
- **Neighborhood involvement.** The presenters commented that non-Caucasian cultures often do a better job of providing this type of environment for their children. Providing children with a sense of community, the presenters noted, can have “a huge positive impact.”
- **Parent involvement with the school.** This factor, as well, can make a big difference in a child’s academic success. However, Peters pointed out, it’s important to remember that “when parents are struggling, they’re overwhelmed with survival. It may not be that they’re uninterested in what’s happening at school, they just might not be able to participate due to circumstances in their lives.”

Daniels shared an effective way of getting parents to participate in school programs or events – by offering food at school. She described successful school events in which parents bring their children, share a meal with them, and then separate, with children going to take part in a supervised activity while parents take part in the scheduled program.





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- **School learning environment.** Are a child's talents and strengths being supported in the school? The answer to this question, they explained, can mean the difference between "saving a kid or losing a kid."
- **High expectations.** It's important to set the bar high for our gifted children – "right above their fingertips," as the presenters stated. However, when dealing with 2e children, it's important to remember that "all too often these kids have only heard about their deficits." To counteract that negative message and to help these children continue to love learning, the presenters recommended using an approach they described as "two strengths and a stretch." It involves helping a child work on developing two areas of strength for every one area of challenge.

What these supports all have in common, Peters and Daniels pointed out, is that they address relationships. "It's the social/emotional piece of the puzzle that's crucial," they noted.

The presenters went on to address additional issues concerning gifted and especially twice-exceptional students, including:

- **Achievement and motivation.** Homework should be meaningful, they explained, and projects should be of interest to the students. These children need to be able to make choices and have options. For example, 2e students who struggle with reading or writing should be allowed to show what they have learned in photo/documentary form, which can serve "as a bridge to other literacy development." Given such flexibility, these students will be more willing to do the "less fun" things required of them.
- **Social competence.** The presenters suggested ways to help kids build their social competence. One is to teach peaceful conflict resolution. Another is to use simulations that reflect the real world, such as mock job interviews.

- **Anxiety and depression.** Peters commented on what he believes to be the predisposition of gifted children toward anxiety and depression. Contrary to the articles that he says he has been seeing in professional journals, he thinks these kids are *more* likely to experience anxiety and depression, not *less*. One way to help them with their emotional issues, according to Peters, is to give them an outlet for social concerns by putting them in situations where they can work together with others toward a common goal. When kids see that they can have a positive impact, they can internalize that success.
- **Positive identity.** Peters stated, "We have to work much harder with our 2e and socially disadvantaged gifted kids to help them build a positive identity." We can do that, he explained, in any situation: school, home, camp, etc. Our goal should be to teach them that they have control in their lives. We want these kids to not see themselves as victims, even though they may be in a victimizing situation. Peters explained that we can use the great arguing abilities that gifted children often display to get them to articulate their thoughts and hear the fallacies in their own arguments. For example, when a child makes negative comments about his or her abilities, we can say, "I hear what you say, but I don't believe it. Prove it to me that you're not..."

The presenters reminded the audience that small things can make a difference – things that can be done in a very short time, such as families having dinner together, a caring adult reading to children, or a mentor showing interest in a child's strengths. These can all help to buffer children from the negative aspects of their life and to get them focused on their strengths. ☞

*If you missed the conference, you also missed a vibrant Vancouver downtown, cricket in Stanley Park, the UBC Museum of Anthropology, Gastown tourism, Yaletown restaurants, the amazing Granville Island Public Market, fireworks over English Bay, the magnificent Dr. Sun Yat-Sen Chinese Garden, dim sum lunch in Chinatown, the Vancouver Art Gallery, 10,000 competitors in the World Police and Fire Games, and lots of First Nation art by artists such as Susan Point.*

