When Good Grades Hide Real Struggles

Executive Functioning in Twice Exceptional Children

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Disclosures

SWEETWATER THERAPY SERVICES

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- **Non-financial:** I am a member of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) and the North Dakota Speech Language Hearing Association (NDSLHA). I also serve on the board of directors of the American Academy of Private Practice in Speech Pathology and Audiology (AAPPSPA). I operate Sweetwater Therapy.

Learner Outcomes

1. Describe executive functioning as a multidimensional self-regulation system that extends beyond attention and academic performance
2. Recognize common presentations of executive function challenges that may be masked by high intelligence, strong academic behavior, or compensatory supports
3. Apply targeted interview questions to identify functional impairment and guide referral decisions when concerns for executive dysfunction, ADHD, or twice exceptionality are present.

Gifted and Talented

A student who is “gifted" means an individual who is identified by qualified professionals as being capable of high performance and who needs educational programs and services beyond those normally provided in a regular education program.

- Intellect: reasoning, abstract thinking, solving complex problems
- Academics: advanced understanding in a particular subject, e.g., math, science, language arts, etc.
- Creativity: ideation, inventive solutions, approaching a problem from different angles
- Leadership: coordinating a group, recognizing different perspectives, rallying around a shared goal
- Visual/Performing Arts: music, dance, drawing, drama, etc.

Twice exceptionality (2E)

Gifted ability or potential in one or more domains

- A coexisting disability that also requires recognition and support
- Both exceptionalities matter to the child’s participation

The range of 2e presentations

Learning disorders:
- Dyslexia (affects processing of written and spoken language)
- Dysgraphia (affects written expression & fine motor skills)
- Dyscalculia (affects comprehension and processing of number-based information and mathematics)

Neurodevelopmental
- ASD, ADHD, Tourette syndrome, etc.

Mental health conditions with disabling functional impact:
- GAD, SAD OCD, Depression, etc.

Physical disabilities
- Visually impaired, deaf/hh, CP, etc.

Processing disorders
- Central Auditory Processing Disorder (making sense of what you hear)
- Visual Processing Disorder (making sense of what you see)
- Sensory Processing Disorder (making sense of your senses)

Executive Functioning

Decision-Making Skills

- Planning and prioritizing
- Organization
- Time management
- Working memory
- Metacognition: monitoring and evaluating one's thinking

Behavioral Regulation Skills

- Response inhibition/impulse control
- Emotional regulation
- Attention: sustained, alternating, and divided
- Shifting focus
- Task initiation
- Task persistence
- Cognitive flexibility

Executive functioning across time
An integrated, multidimensional system of self-regulation

Coordinating Processes

- Self Awareness
- Inhibition
- Nonverbal Working Memory
- Verbal Working Memory
- Emotional Regulation
- Self- Motivation
- Planning and Problem solving

What it looks like

- Self-monitoring: noticing and checking actions
- Self-restraint: pausing before acting or responding
- Foresight: playing out your own movie
- Self-guidance: using self-talk to stay on task
- Managing frustrations and returning to a goal
- Generating and sustaining effort toward a goal
- Sequencing steps and revising a plan

Possible Strengths	Possible Vulnerabilities	Presents as
Advanced vocabulary and verbal reasoning	Producing written work	"He can explain the entire concept, but writing one paragraph brings him to tears"
Advanced Mathematical Reasoning	Rapid calculation or retrieval of maths facts	"She understands advanced math, but cannot finish the time multiplication quiz"
Deep Listening Comprehension	Accurate, fluent reading	"He understands the audiobook beautifully, but reading the same passage independently is exhausting."
Creative ideas and complex problem solving	Starting, organizing, and completing a project	"I will send him off to clean his room . Two hours later, he is organizing his Pokemon cards by color and type, but the room is still a pit"
Sophisticated discussion of "fairness" and emotions	Tolerating distress during a setback	She can discuss complicated ethical questions, but is terrified over the thought of getting a "B".
Deep specialist knowledge	Navigating reciprocal conversations or asking for help	"He can explain everything about his interests, but struggles to tell someone he is confused or needs support"

The classroom mismatch: ZDogg and Dr. Blair Duddy



School and home can look different

At school	After school
Strong grades	Needs prolonged recovery
Exceeds classroom expectations	Struggles with familiar routines
Teachers see competence	Parents see exhaustion

Questions for a brief visit

Working at school and home

- “How does your child do with explaining ideas out loud compared with writing them down?”
- “Does the schoolwork your child turns in show what they know?”

What your looking for: Discrepancy Between Input and Output (Asynchrony)

Questions for a brief visit

Getting through the school day

- “How do teachers describe your child’s day? How does that compare with what you see when they get home?”
- “Walk me through a typical homework night. How long does it take, and what do you need to do to help?”

What your looking for: The After-School Collapse and the “Two Different Children” Paradox

Questions for a brief visit

Attention and the Pace of School

- What can your child stick with for a long time? What’s harder to get started on or keep doing?
- What does your child say about school? Does that fit with what you see on their report card?

What your looking for: Asymmetry in school engagement and attention

Questions for a brief visit

Mistakes and Frustrations

- What happens when your child makes a mistake or something doesn’t turn out how they wanted?
- What does your child say about themselves when things are hard?

What your looking for: Difficulty with Emotional Dysregulation, Perfectionism, and Self-Esteem

Questions for a brief visit

Peers, Friends and Overwhelm

- Who does your child like spending time with? What do they enjoy doing together?
- How does your child respond when something seems unfair?
- Are there sounds, lights, or things about clothing that really bother your child? What happens when they do?

What you are looking for: peer connections and sources of overwhelm that affect participation

- Amy recently started middle school. She is an advanced reader who enjoys discussing complex characters and ethical dilemmas. She has a strong sense of justice and readily notices when adults apply rules inconsistently or classmates experience unfair treatment.
- Her new schedule involves seven transitions each day. Every transition requires her to stop one activity, gather materials, remember where she is going, and arrive prepared for the next class.
- Amy understands the coursework, but keeping track of folders, assignments, and supplies feels overwhelming. She repeatedly checks her backpack because she worries she has forgotten something. An unexpected room change or a missing notebook can leave her distressed and struggling to regroup.
- Her grades remain strong. At home, however, she spends considerable time reorganizing her materials and asking a parent to confirm that she has everything she needs. Some evenings end in tears.
- Her parent explains: “She can discuss whether a school policy is fair in incredible detail, but figuring out which things need to go into her backpack feels impossible.”

Making the referral - Amy

Provider	What the referral could support	Possible assessment
Occupational Therapist	Managing transitions, organizing materials, and developing workable routines with fewer demands	Occupational profile, child/caregiver interview, analysis of transition routines, and observation or school input to identify where demands exceed her current skills
Speech Therapist	Amy’s ability to self-advocate and language retrieval, processing, and expression under stress	Language sample - expository, procedural, and narrative
Psychologist or Mental health Provider	Addressing persistent worry, anticipatory anxiety, or distress that interferes with participation	Interview with Amy and caregivers, assessment of anxiety and its functional impact, and appropriate rating measures
Neuropsychologist	N/A	

- Hayden is a 10-year-old boy who reads at approximately a seventh-grade level and participates in gifted and talented programming for reading and mathematics. He has a diagnosis of ADHD and takes prescribed medication.
- At home, getting ready for school can become overwhelming. Putting on his shoes, filling his water bottle, and gathering what he needs are familiar tasks. Yet bringing those steps together within the morning's time constraints can leave him distressed and in tears.
- His caregiver says, "Get your shoes on, then fill your water bottle. We need to leave in five minutes." Hayden becomes increasingly upset. As the departure time approaches, repeated reminders add to the tension. His caregiver eventually stays beside him, helping him move through one step at a time.
- The contrast is confusing for the family: Hayden can discuss a complex book and solve advanced mathematics problems, while an ordinary morning routine requires substantial assistance.

Making the referral - Hayden

Provider	What the referral could support	Possible assessment focus
Occupational Therapist	Participation in daily routines; initiation, organization, sequencing, and caregiver supports	Observe or simulate the morning routine; examine task and environmental demands, assistance required, and supports that help.
Speech Therapist	Language and cognitive-communication skills supporting planning, self-monitoring, and self-advocacy	Assess understanding and organization of task-related information, communication of difficulties, and ability to request clarification or assistance.
Psychologist or Mental health Provider	Emotional distress, anxiety, perfectionism, avoidance, and coping	Explore Hayden's experience of the routine, sources of distress, and effects on participation and family functioning.
Neuropsychologist	Clarification of a complex cognitive, learning, or behavioral profile	Comprehensive assessment when the pattern of strengths and difficulties remains unclear and broader diagnostic clarification is needed

- Alex recently started middle school. He has an extensive vocabulary and enjoys discussing complicated stories. When listening to an audiobook or a teacher reading aloud, he makes sophisticated inferences about characters' motives and notices connections that classmates miss.
- Independent reading tells a different story. Alex reads slowly, struggles to sound out unfamiliar words, and makes persistent spelling errors. In elementary school, he often used pictures, familiar story patterns, and context to anticipate words. His thoughtful contributions to class discussions made the effort behind his reading less apparent.
- Middle school brings longer passages, unfamiliar vocabulary, and more independent reading across subjects. Alex can no longer rely as heavily on context to work around unfamiliar words. Homework takes much longer, and he sometimes understands a passage only after a parent reads it aloud.
- He begins avoiding reading assignments and becomes anxious when asked to read in class or at home. His family notices that he increasingly calls himself "stupid," despite his obvious clear intellect.

Provider	What the referral would support	Possible assessment focus
Speech-language pathologist with literacy expertise	Assessment and treatment of phonological processing and written-language difficulties	Phonemic awareness, phonological memory, rapid naming, decoding, spelling, and comparison of listening versus reading comprehension
Occupational Therapist	Functional postural control, motor coordination, sensory participation, and adaptations that support access to learning activities	Sensorimotor functioning and its impact on participation in literacy-related activities
Psychologist or neuropsychologist with learning-disorder expertise	Diagnostic clarification for suspected dyslexia and identification of other contributing difficulties	Reading and spelling achievement, developmental and instructional history, and additional cognitive or attention measures as indicated
Reading specialist or structured literacy provider	Explicit, systematic instruction matched to Alex's reading needs	Assessment of word-reading accuracy, decoding, fluency, and spelling, with ongoing progress monitoring
Mental health clinician	Support for anxiety, shame, avoidance, and negative beliefs about his abilities	Interview with Alex and caregivers, assessment of emotional distress and its impact, and appropriate symptom measures

- Tommy has an encyclopedic knowledge of plants. He identifies species, explains how ecosystems interact, and enthusiastically discusses gardening with adults and older students. He also enjoys sharing his knowledge with younger children, who welcome his explanations.
- Connecting with classmates is harder. Tommy sometimes misses signals that someone wants a turn to speak or wants to change the subject. On the playground, he struggles to follow rapidly changing conversations and the unspoken rules of group games.
- Loud voices and crowded spaces make participation more difficult. When another child abruptly tells him, "You have to do it this way," Tommy may argue, raise his voice, or leave. Adults sometimes describe him as controlling, although he is more flexible during quieter, collaborative activities.
- Tommy wants friends and feels hurt when classmates stop inviting him to play. He increasingly asks to spend recess in the library.
- His parent explains: "He can talk comfortably with an adult for half an hour. At school, he comes home saying nobody likes him."

Provider	What the referral could support	Possible assessment focus
Speech-language pathologist	Joining peer activities, navigating reciprocal conversation, repairing misunderstandings, and communicating boundaries or support needs	Functional social-communication assessment, observations across partners and settings, and Tommy's, caregivers', and teachers' perspectives
Occupational Therapist	Participating in noisy or crowded settings, recognizing overload, and identifying helpful environmental adjustments	Occupational profile, sensory-processing measures as indicated, and observation of how activity and environmental demands affect participation
Developmental-behavioral pediatrician, psychologist, or neuropsychologist	Clarifying whether a broader developmental condition contributes to the presentation	Developmental history, information across settings, and targeted diagnostic assessment

Support for both exceptionalities

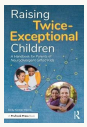
Areas of strength	Disability-related needs
Appropriate intellectual challenge	Access to communication
Meaningful interests	Supports for participation
Talent development	Individualized intervention

Resources for families and clinicians

Raising Twice-Exceptional Children by Emily Kircher-Morris

Declarative Language Handbook by Linda K. Murphy

Lost, Late, and Unprepared by Joyce Cooper-Kahn and Laurie Dietzel







Thank you

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