

Specifics of dual exceptionality of children with ADHD and giftedness

(overview essay)

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Abstract: *This article discusses specific dual exceptionalities in children with ADHD. Dual exceptionality can be discussed when a child with ADHD has concurrently other diagnoses ranging from neurodevelopmental or psychiatric disorders to giftedness. This combination usually causes greater problems in behaviour, learning and social interaction than if the child had only one of these diagnoses. Dual exceptionality can be a challenge for a child with ADHD because the diagnoses can be intertwined and affect each other. With adequate diagnosis, therapy, and the right approach, the dual exceptionality can be corrected and the child can be developed to his or her full potential. The authors identify the specific needs of these children while discussing certain limits that prevent these needs from being met. The paper highlights the current scientific reality not only in the Czech Republic but also abroad. The findings and recommendations are also based on a specific case study.*

Keywords: ADHD, giftedness, dual exceptionalities, dual diagnosis, children

1 Introduction

Children diagnosed with giftedness and ADHD often face many specific challenges, but they may also have great potential and outstanding abilities in certain areas. Some of these areas may include creativity, innovation, speed of thought, and the ability to learn and adapt quickly. However, they may also have specific needs that require an individual approach. Although they may be very creative and innovative, they may also have problems with organization, planning and completing tasks, and socializing among peers. These difficulties usually affect school performance and success in life in general. The family and school play an indispensable role. Parents can help the child to organise and plan, provide space for creativity and develop his/her

strengths. Schools can use a variety of strategies and methods, such as differentiated education, individual support and special education plans and programmes that will respect the child's needs and abilities. Within the school, it may be important to provide a special education plan that respects the child's needs and specific educational requirements. Various strategies and techniques may be used such as short breaks, individual support, visual stimuli and positive behaviour reinforcement. It is also important that they are provided with sufficient challenge and stimulation to enable them to develop further and reach their potential. This may include involvement in special projects, science clubs, competitions and other activities that match their abilities and interests. Overall, children with ADHD and high IQs can be very talented, capable and successful, but with the right support and development. With adequate support and stimulation, these children can reach their full potential and lead fulfilled lives.

2 Theoretical background

It is not possible to cite one particular author who defines a child with giftedness and ADHD, as this combination is not a universally accepted category in the field of education or psychology. However, there are many experts who have addressed the topic of giftedness and ADHD in children and who have sought to describe and understand how these two characteristics may be related. We can mention, for example, Susan Baum, Linda Silverman, James T. Webb, Edward R. Amend, Nadia E. Webb, Jean Goerss, and others. We can attempt to define a child with giftedness and ADHD as a child who not only has high intellectual ability and talent in a particular area, but also displays symptoms of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and/or lack of focus associated with ADHD. Thus, this type of child has a combination of giftedness and problems with attention and self-regulation. A child with giftedness generally displays significantly above-average ability in a particular area, such as math, science, languages, art, or music. These abilities may be evident at an early age and the child may be able to learn more quickly and with greater understanding than most of his or her peers.

Betts and Neihart (1988) define a child with giftedness as an individual who exhibits a high level of ability and creativity combined with an intense interest in a particular area and a greater sensitivity to the subtle nuances of that area than most of his or her peers. Linda Silverman (1993) views giftedness as "an unusual ability that manifests itself in intense interest and outstanding performance in a particular area." Susan Baum, Steven Owen, and Shelley F. Harp (2011) refer to a child with giftedness as an individual who has an outstanding ability in a particular area and requires special educational support to reach his or her full potential. James T. Webb, Edward R. Amend, Nadia E. Webb, Jean Goerss, and Paul Beljan (2016)

define giftedness as “a high level of ability combined with unusual emotional, social, and motivational needs.”

In the case of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder), we can mention Russell A. Barkley (2014) who defines ADHD as a neurodevelopmental disorder that manifests itself in difficulties with attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity. The combination of these definitions gives an overall picture of the child with giftedness and ADHD as an individual with outstanding ability in a particular area that is accompanied by difficulties with attention, hyperactivity and impulsivity, which may require special support to reach their full potential.

Children with ADHD may experience certain challenges and difficulties in the educational process that can affect their performance, overall educational experience and also self-concept. The most common issues are inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, anxiety, and difficulty establishing relationships. These children may need special support within the educational process (CDC, 2022[online]). Children with giftedness also face certain challenges and difficulties during the educational process. They may tend to tire quickly when exposed to repetitive or easy tasks, which can lead to boredom and loss of interest in the educational process. They may also face increased pressure due to high expectations which can lead to anxiety, stress and unwanted emotional reactions. They may suffer from social isolation through not fitting in with their peers and may experience a lack of support, making them feel abandoned (NAGC, 2022[online]). Research conducted in 2019 by Vlasta Kuchařová and colleagues focused on gifted children in the context of the school environment. They found that gifted children can tend to be overly critical of themselves and feel isolated due to high expectations and demands on themselves. When a child is in this situation and is exposed to these phenomena they are not only struggling with themselves on a daily basis but also with society, just what happens when these two exceptionalities come together and a child has ADHD and is also exceptionally gifted? How do schools work with these children, how do these children feel and fit into mainstream society?

3 Socialization of children with ADHD and giftedness

Both giftedness itself and ADHD can have different effects on an individual's socialization. Some gifted individuals may feel lonely and may have difficulty relating to peers because of differences in interests and intellectual abilities. On the other hand, some gifted individuals may have a natural ability to relate and interact with others.

Hébert, T. P. (2011) points out that relationships with peers are very important for gifted individuals and therefore it is important to promote socialization and social interactions. Some schools and educational programs try to address this by providing an environment where gifted individuals can meet and work together on projects

and tasks. Neihart, M., Reis, S. M., Robinson, N. M., & Moon, S. M. (2002) point out that it is important to take into account cultural and social factors that may affect the socialization of gifted individuals. For example, some cultures may be more inclined towards an individual approach and thus may tend to be more supportive of gifted individuals, while other cultures may place more emphasis on a collective approach and thus may tend to restrict gifted individuals.

Children with ADHD face similar difficulties in socialization, so deficits may multiply in children with dual exceptionalities. Children with ADHD often have problems with concentration and impulsivity, which can lead to problems in peer interaction and teamwork (Barkley, R. A., 1998). However, socialization can be very helpful for children with ADHD as they can improve their social skills, learn from other children, and make new friends. (Mikami, A. Y., & Hinshaw, S. P., 2006). Some children with ADHD can be naturally impulsive and hyperactive, which can be difficult for other children and teachers. However, it is important that adults do not reject these children but help them find ways to integrate into the group (Raggi, V. L., & Chronis, A. M., 2006). Sometimes special programs such as group activities with a therapist or special sports teams that are designed to help children with ADHD improve their social skills and build self-esteem can be helpful for children with ADHD. (DuPaul, G. J., Eckert, T. L., & Vilaro, B., 2012). Unfortunately, these programs do not yet account for the dual exceptionalities of children.

Lastly, it is important for parents and teachers to work together to support children with ADHD in socialization. Communication between parents and teachers can help ensure that the child feels safe and promote their success in school and beyond (Barkley, R. A., 1998).

4 Double exceptionalism in the Czech Republic

In the Czech Republic, dual diagnosis of this type is referred to as “Dvojí nadání” and abroad as Twice Exceptionalism or 2e for short. The National Institute for Education refers to double exceptionalism as the co-occurrence of exceptional ability and another diagnosis. In particular, it is the co-occurrence of exceptional giftedness and specific learning and/or behavioural disabilities or Asperger’s syndrome or sensory and/or physical disabilities (National Institute of Education, 2022[online]). Focusing only on the combination of giftedness and ADHD, Skolnick (2017) states that the dual exceptionality in children with above average intellect and ADHD means that the child has significant giftedness in some areas but also has difficulties with attention, hyperactivity and/or impulsivity. This condition can be very frustrating and challenging for the child as well as for parents and teachers, as the child may have high expectations but face a number of challenges related to his or her ADHD (Skolnick, 2017).

Both ADHD and giftedness are sometimes described as having the same or similar characteristics. However, one diagnosis is considered a disability and the other a gift. Gifted children suffer when there are unreasonable expectations without consideration of other complex characteristics that define their everyday experience. Children identified with ADHD focus on deficit strengths not recognized or celebrated. Twice-exceptional children experience overexposure based on the combination of strengths and challenges they exhibit (Skolnick, 2017). Twice-exceptional is not a diagnosis, but rather a descriptive term for children with a combination of giftedness and deficits. It is important to understand that each child with dual exceptionality is unique and requires an individualized approach (NAGC, 2010 [online]).

For comparison, we present the findings of research by Fernández-Alvarez et al. (2018) from Spain, where it was found that up to 41.8% of children with ADHD who were surveyed had above average intellect. Which may raise the question of how many children in our country have a double exceptionalism hidden under the diagnosis of ADHD.

At the same time, research was conducted in 2020 that focused on the question of whether attentional difficulties in children with above-average intellect are caused by ADHD, or whether they are manifestations of the negative consequences of high intellect and the challenging environment in which these children are often found. In this research, 192 children with above average intellect were observed for various levels of attention and hyperactivity. The results showed that children with high intellect often had difficulties with attention, regardless of whether they had ADHD or not. It was also found that children with attention difficulties often had other problems such as anxiety and depression. Research has also suggested that it may be very important for these children to be in an environment that allows them to develop their talents while providing support and assistance in dealing with attentional difficulties (Leon et al., 2020).

Research from 2021 based on a meta-analysis of 21 studies published between 1987 and 2019 that assessed emotional and social functioning in adults with ADHD and IQs above 120 found that these adults have significant problems in emotional and social functioning, including problems with communication, interacting with coworkers, and managing emotional challenges (Schmeck, 2021).

Much research has been conducted to date on children with ADHD and high intelligence, the overall conclusion is that these children may be capable of high intellectual performance, but may also suffer from attention difficulties, impulsivity, and hyperactivity that can affect their ability to complete tasks, interact with peers, and maintain attention in class. They are also prone to anxiety, depression and social exclusion. The key for these children is then the support of both the family and the approach of teachers in schools. It is important that these people understand that this combination of talent and specific difficulties requires specific support and adaptation

of the educational environment. Schools should have sufficient resources and support to work with and provide specific support for the twice-exceptional. This may include supporting the child's individual needs, creating individual education plans and working with specialists. At the same time, multidisciplinary collaboration is important.

There are several organisations within the Czech Republic that focus on the issue of giftedness and support gifted children in the socialisation process. Here are two of the most important ones.

- **Mensa ČR** – the Czech branch of the international Mensa organization, which focuses on the development of intellectual abilities and support for gifted individuals. Within its activities, the organisation also provides programmes aimed at developing social skills and promoting socialisation.
- **Centrum pro talentovanou mládež (Centre for Talented Youth)** – an organisation that focuses on supporting gifted and talented children in education. The Center provides a range of programs and services, including programs aimed at developing social skills and promoting socialization for gifted children.

These organizations offer a variety of programs and services for gifted children, including classes, workshops, and educational programs aimed at developing social skills and promoting socialization. Outside of these organizations, where these children are already identified as gifted, there are many organizations that target children with ADHD and as a result of its significant symptoms, this giftedness goes unrecognized.

5 Case study

In our practice we have encountered children with dual exceptionality and the challenges these children go through. We see them mainly from the perspective of social workers, but at the same time we work with parents who often do not understand their children, want to help them but do not know how. Parents often encounter misunderstanding in the school environment, where children are labelled as misbehaving or troubled, often standing outside the classroom collective. Children often feel isolated, excluded and face negative attitudes towards themselves. Within their self-concept, children are then unable to say what led them to the situations and feel lonely.

Following on from the previous text, we now present a specific case study of a child-client of the family centre where we work as social workers. The following text describes the particular problems and specifics of a child with dual exceptionality.

Girl with ADHD and giftedness (9 years old)

A mother came to the family centre because of her daughter (9 years old). As part of her family history, the mother had a high-risk pregnancy and was taking supplemental hormones. The girl was born prematurely. The girl has had health problems since childhood, long-standing urinary tract infections, suspected lupus, troubled by skin rashes, and now has early hormonal development. The girl is very gifted, above average intelligence, reads from the age of 4, and is bored at the school. She has an excellent ear for music and artistic ability. A year ago she attended another primary school where she had problems. According to the mother, the class teacher did not accept her and was too hard on her. The girl started wetting the bed and did not want to attend school. As a result, the parents changed the primary school. The daughter's problems disappeared. She has no friends at the new school. She can communicate with younger children and likes to take care of them or, on the contrary, with older children with whom she has common interests. According to the PPP report, she is intellectually two years above but emotionally and socially at the level of a 5 year old. At the same time, she sometimes displays almost adolescent behaviour. It is very difficult to communicate with the girl – she is constantly counter-argumentative, very rude, even in public. She cannot estimate her strength and it happens that she hurts children, does not listen to authority figures, jumps into speech. She constantly demands attention, she needs her needs to be met immediately, if this does not happen she has a tantrum or goes into resignation. In order to get children to interact with her at school she chases them or is vulgar. She uses dysfunctional patterns to find her playmates. The parents try to set rules and boundaries, but the mother admits that the husband more often backs down because he cannot handle his daughter's outbursts. The girl often lies and makes things up, according to the mother. The mother is very often invited to school to address her daughter's behaviour. She is very exhausted and has no understanding even within the family – the mother's sister condemns them for not being able to raise the daughter. She hears the same opinion from the teachers at school.

The mother's contract at the family centre was to help her daughter to manage her aggression and to stop swearing at her parents and others. The cooperation included individual consultations with the parents, individual consultations with the daughter, she has been a participant in two runs of the sociotherapy group and is now a participant in the drama therapy group. At the same time, two meetings were held with the class teacher and the assistant. We were also present for one meeting at the school followed by a meeting with the principal, class teacher and assistant. In one meeting held earlier, an agreement was reached between parents and teachers regarding formative assessment, communication, and also a goal to be focused on by both the school and parents. This agreement was broken by the teaching assistant

after two months, due to non-functionality without notification to the parents. There were problems between the girl and the assistant, with the assistant distancing herself from the girl. She felt that the girl was stalking her. As the parents were not happy with the progress at school and the girl stopped sleeping, after two months a meeting was held at the school with all concerned and the school psychologist. As a result, communication was resumed in the form of weekly emails as the parents were not informed about how the girl was doing in school. The new issue was homework, which the assistant refused to do in the after-school club with the girl.

The girl likes school. The only difference for her is when she knows that there will be an assistant at school. The girl herself has an ambivalent feeling towards her. Sometimes she talks about how she thinks the assistant doesn't like her and is mean to her, ignoring her. The girl cannot guess how Mrs. assistant will behave in certain situations, she cannot read her emotions, as she is not transparent to her. Now the girl has one friend in her class, otherwise she is excluded from the collective.

Suggested recommendations

Building on previous research and theories, the authors perceive that the girl would need a different approach at school and at home. In neither setting are her needs listened to, although the mother tries to educate herself, she perceives that she does not understand the girl. The authors agree that in order to support the girl, it would be beneficial to link the parents to an organisation that deals with dual exceptionality and brings such children and parents together. However, such an organisation does not yet exist in the Czech Republic. There are several clients with children with dual exceptionality in the family centre, so it would be good to connect these parents so that they can share their experiences and understand the children better.

Although the girl attends a group with similar children, it would be good for her to continue to meet children who are twice exceptional in the future so that she does not feel alone. Relationships weigh most heavily on the girl. She doesn't understand why her peers don't want to play with her and uses pressure them to do so.

Should the girl fail to make friends and identify with her peer group, she may experience feelings of loneliness, deprivation, anxiety and depression. If there is not more support at school to focus on her talents, she may become frustrated and demotivated to study.

The authors would also recommend psychotherapeutic support to the family.

Children like the girl in the case study attend the family centre in 10 of the 55 co-operating families. Most of them have behavioural disorders that overshadow their intellect and thus receive the label of problem children. It is necessary to work with their individual needs while also considering the fact that these children do not have their basic needs met – physical needs, the need for safety, the need for loving

relationships, the need for knowledge and the need to grow (Pesso A., Boyden – Pesso D., 2009).

6 Conclusion

Children who have dual exceptionalities also have dual challenges. They can be very successful if their potential is supported and they are worked with within the framework of their individual needs. If a child is not supported and is excluded from their social group, they can develop psychological difficulties that can carry over into adult life. Multidisciplinary care is important for these children, bringing together the family, the school and the organisations that usually provide social services and associations. It is necessary to perceive the child with his or her individual needs, not only to observe the manifestations of behaviour that are inappropriate for us as a society, but also to perceive his or her positive aspects. There is also a need for a match between the pupil and the teachers who work with him in school. In particular, the choice of an appropriate assistant is an important step that is underestimated. Within the classroom, it is essential to work with the class collective so that these children are not marginalised and do not live in social isolation. Parents often live in this isolation as well, as they are labelled as having failed to raise their child. Such situations must be prevented. Organisations that work with the family and these children become an integral part of the system, as it is these organisations that help parents to understand their children.

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