



Gifted or Guarded? What We Miss When We Only Look at Strengths

A White Paper for Attorneys, Advocates, and Professionals Supporting Twice-Exceptional Students

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January 2026

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Overview

Giftedness and trauma are two concepts rarely discussed together - yet, in clinical practice, their overlap is more common than we think. Both can produce emotional intensity, behavioral variability, and social sensitivity. When misunderstood, these similarities can lead to **misdiagnosis, inappropriate placement, or insufficient support** for students who are both high-achieving and highly vulnerable.

This paper explores the **intersection of giftedness and trauma**, reviews relevant research, and offers recommendations for more accurate and equitable assessment.

Giftedness: More Than Just High IQ

Gifted students often display traits such as:

- Emotional sensitivity
- Asynchronous development (advanced cognitive skills paired with age-typical or delayed social/emotional skills)
- Intense curiosity and perfectionism
- Heightened sensory sensitivity

These characteristics, especially when misunderstood, can lead to labels like "anxious," "defiant," or "inflexible." According to the National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC), gifted students are often under-identified for support services if they exhibit behaviors inconsistent with academic achievement, especially those from underrepresented populations (NAGC, 2019).

Trauma: The Hidden Variable

Trauma - especially complex, developmental trauma - can result in:

- Hypervigilance and overreactivity
- Executive functioning difficulties
- Distrust of adults and authority figures
- Emotional dysregulation and behavioral outbursts

Neuroscience has confirmed that early adversity changes how the brain processes emotion, attention, and threat (Teicher & Samson, 2016). Trauma is often **invisible in formal testing** unless directly assessed or observed through behavior and qualitative data.

The Overlap: When Strength Masks Struggle

Students who are both gifted and trauma-exposed - often referred to as **twice-exceptional (2e) with emotional vulnerability** - can show profiles that are difficult to interpret. Behaviors that may appear to stem from "intelligence" can actually be coping mechanisms, such as:

- **Perfectionism as control:** Trying to manage chaos through achievement
- **Withdrawal as protection:** Avoidance of relational risk
- **Overcompliance:** Gifted masking combined with trauma survival strategies
- **Disruptiveness:** Acting out in response to misattunement or emotional overload

A high IQ can sometimes serve as a buffer - but it can also exacerbate internal stress, as the child is more aware of their surroundings, their differences, and their pain (Neihart, 2002).





Lucid Psychology

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The Risk of Missing the Whole Picture

When we focus solely on strengths (academic achievement, vocabulary, reasoning scores), we may:

- Dismiss signs of emotional dysregulation as “quirkiness”
- Miss underlying anxiety or trauma responses
- Inadvertently delay access to social-emotional or therapeutic supports
- Place students in academic settings that challenge them cognitively but **neglect emotional scaffolding**

Moreover, standard cognitive and achievement batteries rarely assess trauma exposure, relational stress, or sensory dysregulation - unless the evaluator knows to look for them.

What an Effective Evaluation Should Include

To meaningfully assess students who may be both gifted and emotionally impacted, a comprehensive evaluation should include:

1. **Social-emotional screeners** (e.g., BASC-3, ASEBA, MASC)
2. **Trauma history** via clinical interview or caregiver questionnaire
3. **Observational data** in naturalistic or classroom settings
4. **Executive functioning measures** in real-time conditions (e.g., TOVA, D-KEFS, Nesplora AULA)
5. **Qualitative tools:** student interviews, drawings, open-ended writing
6. **Narrative integration** of scores - beyond composites, focusing on what the patterns mean in context

Equally important: the evaluator must be open to complexity without oversimplification. A student can be deeply gifted and deeply impacted. One does not cancel out the other.

Case Reflection (De-Identified)

In a recent evaluation, I assessed a 12-year-old with exceptional verbal reasoning, yet persistent behavioral shutdowns at school. Teachers saw defiance; the school suspected emotional disturbance.

Deeper assessment revealed a history of family disruption and emotional neglect. His “disengagement” was protective. His writing samples, interviews, and behavior during testing showed internalized anxiety masked by intellectual agility.

With a comprehensive report, the team re-framed his needs: not just as giftedness or behavioral concern, but as a call for trauma-informed gifted support - which included placement in an advanced humanities program and weekly school-based counseling.

Conclusion

When we only look at a student’s strengths, we may miss their trauma. And when we only look at challenges, we may miss their gifts. Students deserve both to be seen.

The goal is not to pathologize gifted students, nor to excuse trauma-based behavior, but to understand that **complex profiles require complex thinking**.

If you’re working with a student whose scores and story don’t align, or if a gifted learner is still struggling despite cognitive strengths, I’d be honored to consult.

About the Author

Narges Izadi is a Licensed Educational Psychologist and Diplomate in School Neuropsychology with extensive experience evaluating twice-exceptional students and those with complex social-emotional profiles. She specializes in bridging data and narrative to uncover the full picture of a learner’s needs.

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