

Factsheet 53

Misdiagnosis & Dual Diagnosis

Diagnosing behaviours that are normal to gifted and talented individuals is a significant and widespread problem. Classifying such behaviours as mental health problems occurs all too often and, in our opinion, stem primarily from the widespread ignorance among many professionals about the social and emotional characteristics and needs of gifted children and adults. There seems to be two main reasons for misdiagnosis.....first, the lack of knowledge about giftedness among professionals results in common characteristics of giftedness being mistaken for one or more disorders. Secondly, many of the traits and characteristics of giftedness mimic, are similar to or overlap with many other disorders, e.g. ADD/ADHD, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD), Asperger's Syndrome, Autistic Spectrum Disorders, Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) or Bipolar Disorder. Many intellectually or creatively gifted individuals are being misdiagnosed by well meaning and well trained professionals and their gifts and talents not recognised alongside a possible secondary need or disability. Not only is this a very real phenomenon but a widespread problem.

You may ask yourself how could this happen? Don't these well trained professionals – psychologists, nurses, teachers, GP's and other health practitioners learn about the behavioural, emotional and intellectual characteristics of gifted children and adults? The answer is NO! The truth is these professionals receive very little, if any, training about the characteristics, traits, behaviours, sensitivities and diversity of gifted and talented individuals and even less about the social, emotional and behavioural characteristics and needs. The lack of in-depth training, knowledge and understanding is the main reason for frequent misdiagnosis.

Another concern that can influence the accuracy of diagnoses is that some of the characteristics of high ability and giftedness can lead the professionals to overlook an underlying disorder. The characteristics of giftedness can sometimes confuse the situation making appropriate diagnosis and intervention less likely. For example, a child's brightness or high ability may obscure a learning disability or difficulty for several years because the child can intellectually compensate. Some children and young gifted individuals have dual or multiple diagnoses suggesting they have a severe problem. Many gifted people do not fit nicely into a diagnostic category and if the diagnosis is based solely on the common gifted traits, behaviours or characteristics then the individual may accumulate a huge list of disorders where each diagnosis only captures a few aspects of the person's behaviour or disorder. For example we sometimes see children who have been diagnosed with ODD, ADD/ADHD and Asperger's Syndrome. Such multiple diagnoses, in many instances, are not helpful and tend to obscure the real issues, stigmatise the child and only reinforce to the individual that "something is wrong with me." Labels are a hindrance and obscure what may be going on.

Health care professionals can help by providing early screening, identification and guidance to high ability children and their families. They can assist families with educational decisions, learning and behaviour problems but more importantly they can guide families in obtaining as much informed knowledge as possible in all areas and aspects of high ability and giftedness thus directing them to the various qualified professionals for accurate diagnoses including informing them of expert organisations/specialists in order to gain accurate information and expert knowledge. An Educational Psychology assessment may be essential

Resources

www.aagc.org

www.sengifted.org

www.ditd.org

www.hoagiesgifted.org

www.bps.org.uk

www.dcfs.gov.uk

www.potentialplusuk.org

www.taqfam.org

Suggested Reading

Misdiagnosis and Dual Diagnosis of Gifted Children and Adults by James T. Webb et al

The Social and Emotional Lives of Gifted Children: issues and factors in their psychological development by Tracy Cross

Uniquely Gifted: Identifying and meeting the needs of twice exceptional students by K. Kay

Multicultural Gifted Education by D. Y. Ford & J. J. Harris