

101

From the authors of *Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties*

school success tools for smart kids with **Learning Difficulties**



A **Prufrock Press** Book

- Provides field-tested tools for parents and teachers to use with smart kids with learning difficulties
- Includes reproducibles, checklists, worksheets, and charts for ensuring school success
- Covers topics such as supporting struggling readers, building self-advocacy, recognizing students' strengths, and more



Betty Roffman Shevitz, Marisa Stemple, Linda Barnes-Robinson, and Sue Jeweler

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Dedications

To all of the kids who taught us everything we wanted to know and more, and to the teachers who work so hard every day to “turn on the bright” in their students.

To my husband, Max; my sons, Michael and Andy; my mother, Gloria; and my sister, Sally; and in memory of my father.

To my husband, Ronnie, and my wonderful parents, Erna and Richard.

To Art, my children, and my grandchildren.

To Larry, Brie, and Alexis.



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Introduction

HAVE you ever had students in your classroom who just confused you because they struggled with many classroom activities, yet seemed so smart at the same time? Maybe you have had a student who couldn't read, but knocked your socks off whenever it was time for a science lesson or lab. Or perhaps you have had a student who read like an adult but was unable to spell and hated to write. Or maybe you have had a student who appeared to be "average," but every once in a while you would see a spark of brilliance and wonder what else you had been missing. If so, this book is for you! These are the students who we refer to as "smart kids with learning difficulties," and this book is devoted to helping you find them, teach them, and nurture their potential.

Meet Some Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties

"Sarah has so many great ideas in class discussions, but when I ask her to write responses about what she has read, I get little if anything on paper. I wish I could help her get her ideas down—I know she is bright. Is she lazy?"

"Whenever anyone has a question about history, whether it is Ancient Civilizations or the American Revolution, Jeremy is our resident expert, spouting off detailed accounts of periods in history, yet he has trouble working cooperatively in groups. I don't get it."

“Darryl’s mother and science teacher constantly tell me how bright he is, but frankly, I just don’t see it! He seems like just an average kid who is doing fine.”

You know them—bright kids sitting in your classes who are struggling because they have learning difficulties that interfere with their ability to be successful. Some are easy to spot, and you are immediately aware of their difficulty in reading, writing, organization, or memory. Some really smart students just seem unmotivated, yet you wonder if there is an underlying reason for this apparent “laziness.” Then there are kids like Darryl, who appear average, because their difficulties and gifts are masking each other, but who are actually anything but average. In all of these cases, their gifts and talents are hidden—waiting to be revealed by the skillful teacher who knows how and where to look, and then knows what to do to help these students be successful.

Bright kids who are not reaching their potential present themselves in different ways, depending on what is contributing to their lack of success and achievement. The social/emotional well-being of children is a prime factor in their readiness to learn. Gifted students with learning difficulties typically experience symptoms of worry and sadness related to their school frustration. Therefore, addressing the social/emotional needs of these students is a critical factor in educating them and helping them to reach their full potential. The lesson may be outstanding and the teacher may be terrific, but if the young person is socially and/or emotionally not available, the learning will suffer.

There are many reasons why students may be underperforming in school and various disabilities that may be impacting their level of productivity. *101 School Success Tools for Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties* is not “disorder specific” in its design and is not meant to be a diagnostic tool. The goal of this book is not to label, but rather to help teachers gain an understanding of who these students are, what struggles they face, and how best to address their needs so they may develop intellectually, socially, and emotionally.

101 School Success Tools for Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties provides you with tools and strategies to help you recognize and nurture the potential in these students. As the teacher, you are in the position to be able to serve as a catalyst, empowering these students to become successful learners. As you discover the types of learners they are, you will be able to help them work through their strengths, understand their needs, and begin to realize their true potential. As you help your students learn more about themselves, they will gain confidence and independence, and ultimately translate their knowledge into plans and strategies that will enable them to be successful in school.

Although parents may be the first to recognize their children’s gifts and learning difficulties, your role is critical in ensuring that students receive the challenge and support they need. It is a varied role that moves fluidly from

educator, interpreter, facilitator, manager, motivator, guide, director, and advocate, while ensuring that the learning environment is the best it can be. With the necessary resources and a thorough understanding of these students, you determine a precise educational direction and create a dynamic program that helps to “turn on the bright.”

How to Use This Book

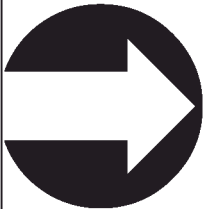
The information in the book is cumulative in nature. On the next two pages is a graphic organizer, provided as a way to record your thinking as you read and reflect on the information in each chapter. The first part of the organizer is a K-W-L template, a strategy often used with students (Ogle, 1986). You may find it a practical and relevant tool for your own learning as well. The second part of the graphic organizer is called the Transfer/Application Template and is designed for you to record your thoughts and plans based on what you have learned in each chapter. If you find this organizer helpful, we encourage you to reproduce it to use for each succeeding chapter.

We ask that you avoid the urge to skip the chapter overviews (as we all find ourselves doing from time to time) as the content addresses the guiding questions, providing valuable information and detailed rationale for the tools that follow. Each overview opens with a set of Guiding Questions and Word Sparks, key words found within the chapter. These two components are designed to activate your knowledge and develop your ideas as you read through the materials. In addition, each chapter also revisits Sarah, Jeremy, and Darryl to illustrate the information provided. After reading the overview, review the tools in the chapter, selecting those that best meet your needs and the needs of your student(s). The tools and tips (insights into the use of the tools) are designed to help you in your instructional planning for these students. Some pages are designed to use directly with the students, either one-on-one, in a small group, or with your whole class, while others provide you with tools to help with your instructional planning or to further develop your professional knowledge. We are aware that the tools for students are in a paper-and-pencil format and that the kids that they are designed to serve are the very ones who may require alternative products that reflect their understanding of concepts and content material. Therefore, as you study the tools and plan for their use, realize that student responses may need to be dictated or recorded. For your convenience, the publisher has also made all of the student tools accessible through its website using the link: <http://www.routledge.com/skld>.

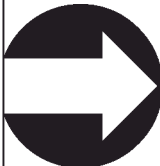
As you are working with your students and are beginning to unmask their gifts, remember to seek out their parents as a resource. Parents are a child's first teachers and can provide information on strengths and gifts that may not be evident in your classroom. For this reason, each chapter includes tools called

KWL Template

What I Know	What I Want to Know	What I Learned



Transfer/Application Template

Implications for Instruction	What I Will Do
Student: _____	
Accommodations: _____ _____ _____	
Strategies: _____ _____ _____ _____	
Resources: _____ _____ _____ _____	
Other: _____ _____ _____ _____	

Parent Partnership Pieces to share with parents that complement the teaching tools and tips. Some of the activities are designed to help parents recognize strengths in their child or better understand ways to support his or her needs. Others draw on the parents' own expertise and knowledge of their children and provide an opportunity for parents to share information with you about their children that may not be evident in the classroom.

At the end of each chapter, following the tools, is a list of additional ideas for Keeping the Bright Turned On. We hope that by progressing through the book at your own pace, you will have a meaningful learning experience and truly have an impact on the bright students with learning difficulties in your class. Although we know that all students will certainly benefit from the best practices included in this book, these students *need* these components to survive. Experience tells us that turning on the bright requires working together to gain a better understanding of who these students are. This is their best hope for success. Key to this success is the teacher's and parents' adoption of the firm belief that these students are gifted first and challenged by learning difficulties second. Only then will students learn to see themselves as successful learners because they understand who they are and what they need.

Now it is time to turn on the bright!

Who Are These Kids?

No bird soars too high if he soars with his own wings.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Guiding Questions

- ☐ Who is included in this population?
- ☐ What are the characteristics of smart kids with learning difficulties?

Word Sparks

- | | |
|---------------------|--------------------|
| ✓ characteristics | ✓ IEP |
| ✓ twice-exceptional | ✓ 504 Plan |
| ✓ gifted | ✓ profile |
| ✓ strengths | ✓ impairments |
| ✓ weaknesses | ✓ social-emotional |
| ✓ disability | |

Chapter Overview

IN today's world, our classrooms are diverse and our students have varied abilities, interests, skills, and backgrounds. Although there are now rigorous academic standards that all children must attain, educators realize the importance of adjusting instruction so that *every* student can learn and grow. In the case of a gifted student with learning difficulties, this may mean adjusting instruction “up” and “down” and sometimes laterally within one unit, one lesson, and even within a single activity. It means increasing the challenge for

these students while simultaneously increasing the supports. This is a complex maneuver for a teacher of many students to accomplish, but with the right knowledge, resources, and tools, it is possible! And when done well, the rewards are visible and infinite. A child can be transformed from a student who says, “I’m stupid,” and who dreads school, to a student who says, “I’m smart, but I learn differently,” and who loves learning. In order to appropriately adjust instruction to meet the needs of our bright students with learning difficulties, we first need to know who they are as learners.

Who Are These Kids?

Bright kids with learning difficulties are twice-exceptional students who are advanced in at least one way and simultaneously possess learning challenges. They may or may not be formally recognized as gifted or officially identified with a disability, and they may or may not have a formal educational plan such as an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or 504 Plan. If recognized as a student with a disability, the category or label may vary. Many twice-exceptional students with learning challenges have a learning disability (LD) in reading and/or writing and struggle to acquire basic academic skills. Others may be diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and have difficulty with attention, organization, and production. Additionally, autism spectrum disorders such as Asperger’s syndrome, high-functioning autism, or Pervasive Developmental Disorder-Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS) often coexist with above-average or gifted ability. Still others may have vision impairments, hearing loss, physical disabilities, or other disorders. Some twice-exceptional students have more than one recognized disability or have a “fuzzy” profile where they have many characteristics typical of different diagnoses, making the designation of one label difficult. We also know that students with the same label can be different and that labeling a student’s disability does not tell us what to do about it. While under federal and state laws and regulations, it is often a necessary part of the process to identify and label the disability; the important thing in this book is not the label, but the understanding of the student as an individual with a unique array of strengths and weaknesses.

Bright students with learning difficulties often confound teachers because they have significant strengths and surprising weaknesses. They are often incredibly articulate and verbal, but simultaneously have production problems and may be significantly impacted in the areas of written output, organization, memory, reading, attention, and social skills. Many times these students seem average because the gifts and the learning difficulties are masking one another. There are also students who, despite a lack of any documented disability, are underachieving. These students are often the most difficult to understand and

reach because they do not fall into a neat category with specific instructional skills that can be addressed.

Social/Emotional Characteristics

Regardless of category or label, bright students with learning difficulties often do not understand why they have so much difficulty at school. They are told that they are smart by the adults in their lives, but they may feel “dumb” when they compare their ability to read, write, organize, or socialize with the “smart” kids at school. Can you imagine how you would feel if you had so many creative ideas and good information to share, but could not write fast enough or well enough to get these ideas on paper? Bright students with learning difficulties generally want to please their teachers and produce quality work, but many have difficulty with starting or finishing a task. They often struggle to keep up with classroom expectations, causing many of these students to feel extremely frustrated and anxious. They may avoid schoolwork because of these feelings of inadequacy and develop problematic behaviors (e.g., frequent trips to the bathroom or nurse, work avoidance, task negotiations) in an attempt to hide or escape their weaknesses. Other common signs of emotional distress that parents may see are the student crying or making self-deprecating comments, not wanting to go to school, and refusing to do homework. These behaviors often can be clues that there is something wrong and may be signs of a possible learning problem, particularly if they occur *only* when the student is asked to read or write. A skilled teacher will analyze the behavior to determine why it is occurring.

There are two characteristics that are important to discuss, as they are pervasive in gifted children (with and without disabilities): perfectionism and emotional overexcitability. Perfectionism is a combination of thoughts and behaviors associated with high expectations for one’s own performance. Kids with perfectionism often would prefer to take an incomplete, even if it meant their teacher thought they didn’t care, rather than hand in something that didn’t meet their own expectations. In the case of gifted students with learning difficulties, this perfectionism coupled with lower performance translates into work avoidance, work destruction, and what is often described by teachers as “shutting down” or disengaging from the learning process. One cannot fail at something one does not try. This is an unfortunate lesson that many of these students learn early on as they experience school failure relative to their own expectations.

Emotional overexcitability refers to an emotional sensitivity and richness in creatively and intellectually gifted children that is characterized by strong emotions and reactions to their inner conflict between the world as it is and the world as they believe it should be (Dabrowski, 1964). The work of Dabrowski (1964) and Piechowski (1991) suggested that the higher levels of developmen-

tal potential in the gifted sometimes create crises characterized by strong emotions, and these strong emotional reactions are a critical part of developing the personalities of gifted children. Overexcitabilities represent a real difference in the fabric of life and quality of experience for these students. Parents often notice emotional overexcitability first. It is reflected in heightened, intense feelings; extremes of complex emotions; identification with others' feelings; and strong affective expression (Piechowski, 1991). Gifted and learning-disabled (GT/LD) kids may manifest these overexcitability behaviors to an even greater degree because of their struggle to be recognized as being bright or gifted, and therefore often having their needs unmet.

Student Profiles

Let's revisit the students we met in the introduction and explore their characteristics further.

Sarah

Sarah is able to comprehend advanced mathematics concepts, yet is unable to show her work or organize her materials. She is a strong reader and loves science fiction. She has a strong imagination and is often "in her own world," coming up with fantastical stories and ideas. She can decode text well above grade level; however, she has difficulty attending to, and therefore comprehending, text that she is not particularly interested in reading (teacher-assigned text). She demonstrates good spelling and a grasp of punctuation and capitalization on weekly quizzes, yet her own writing is full of mechanical errors. She can talk at length about almost anything, but she struggles to organize her ideas in writing. She has trouble selecting a topic from all of the ideas swimming around in her head, and once she picks one, she has trouble figuring out what to say first. Most often, she sits "thinking" while the other kids are writing and her pieces are rarely completed. When finished, they are short and to the point, failing to represent her creative and complex ideas. Sarah is hopelessly disorganized. She forgets to bring home her books for her homework and forgets to return completed assignments back to school. She loses papers almost as soon as she is given them. Sarah seems to have no internal clock. It takes her forever to get started on her work, and she often saves things for the last minute, not realizing how much time it will take to accomplish the task. Sarah says she wants to be more organized, but she never wants to use her teacher's methods for organizing her time or materials, saying she likes *her* system better.

Jeremy

Jeremy has more background knowledge about the next social studies unit than anyone else in the class. He has an amazing vocabulary, and his memory for facts and details is astounding! He can identify all of the U.S. presidents, the dates they held office, and the names of their vice presidents. He is strong overall in mathematics. He is a good reader and understands advanced nonfiction text easily, but he has a hard time understanding the deeper meaning of stories, as he doesn't connect easily to the thoughts and feelings of the characters. He also struggles with the nonliteral language often found in fiction such as similes, metaphors, words with multiple meanings, and idioms and proverbs. He can answer factual questions about text easily, but responds in a limited fashion to interpretive or evaluative questions. Jeremy has poor fine motor skills and has a hard time getting his ideas on paper. He wants to have friends but is socially awkward. He has difficulty reading social cues and doesn't seem to know the rules of conversational language, and therefore doesn't connect with his peers. During group work, Jeremy sits off to the side and does not participate. He seems very anxious most of the time. He dislikes sudden noises, crowds of people, and being touched. Jeremy needs structure and predictability to perform well in the classroom, as he has a hard time with transitions and unexpected changes. When he is overwhelmed or upset, he sometimes has very disruptive meltdowns and can become inconsolable and aggressive. Overall, he is a very sweet and smart boy.

Darryl

Darryl is fascinated with dinosaurs, sharks, and engineering. He watches the Discovery Channel all of the time and loves to build intricate structures with his LEGOs™. He has incredible problem-solving skills and demonstrates strong reasoning ability. He grasps very advanced concepts in science and social studies quickly when they are presented orally or visually. He has an amazing vocabulary and is incredibly articulate. Watching Darryl give an oral presentation is like watching a little professor. Darryl is able to listen to and discuss very advanced and complex text in a reading discussion, yet he is unable to decode even simplistic, below-grade-level text. He reads slowly and with many errors and this impacts his comprehension of text read independently. Darryl's mathematical reasoning is advanced, yet he does not know his basic math facts despite Herculean efforts to drill them into his memory. A great source of frustration for Darryl is his abysmal handwriting and spelling, as he has so many ideas he

wants to share in his writing but is physically unable to do so. Darryl has lots of friends and is athletic and artistic. Some of his teachers see how smart he is, but Darryl often says he feels stupid.

Hopefully, reading about these students has helped to illustrate the characteristics of bright students with learning difficulties. You probably have students in your class right now who resemble these students. Or maybe Sarah, Jeremy, and Darryl remind you of students from past years that you wish you had better understood. This means that you are building the ability to recognize the pattern of strengths and weaknesses that would signal that a student is smart and has learning difficulties.

What else can we learn from these student profiles? These students are all different and yet they have something in common. They all have a scattered profile of extreme strengths and significant weaknesses. Some advanced abilities come very easily to them while other skills are hard for them. One way to understand the profile of bright students with learning difficulties like Sarah, Jeremy, and Darryl is to think of the phrase, “The hard things are easy and the easy things are hard.” Things that are easy for the average student to learn (e.g., basic reading skills, simple writing tasks, recalling math facts, organizing papers) often are hard for twice-exceptional students to master, but things that are hard for most students (e.g., interpretive understanding of literature, creating unique ideas and stories, finding new ways to solve difficult math problems) come very naturally to them. Smart kids with learning difficulties can’t do many of the things that average students their age can easily do, yet they are beyond their peers in many ways conceptually, cognitively, and intellectually.

Conclusion

Understanding these students is a complex but critical task, as it helps us to understand the struggles they face, address their needs, and support their intellectual, social, and emotional development. Smart kids with learning difficulties often go unrecognized and thus do not receive the challenging instruction or supports that they need to be successful. But you *can* learn to recognize the strengths and weaknesses within students and identify these students in your classroom. The tools presented in this chapter will support you as you undertake the tasks of understanding the characteristics of these students and increasing your ability to spot them in your classroom. As with all of the tools in this book, feel free to use, modify, or adapt them according to your needs.

Recognizing the strengths and weaknesses within the individual is the first step toward reaching and teaching these students. Once the student’s strengths and needs are known, the teacher must then make appropriate instructional decisions for the student that take into consideration his gifts and obstacles.

Exploring the question, “Who are these kids?” may help shape the attitudes of teachers and parents regarding the presence of the strengths, gifts, talents, interests, and challenges inherent in each child.