



A hit and miss affair

An Auckland mother, who prefers to remain anonymous, writes about the ups and downs of having a twice-exceptional son.

Tsunami science is of great interest, along with quasars and black holes.

They say that twice-exceptional (gifted and learning disabled) children are the hardest ones to identify. Their giftedness allows them to compensate for their learning disability, causing them to be viewed as average in the classroom. This only works for so long; by the end of primary school their giftedness can no longer compensate for the increasing gaps in their learning as academic demands increase. At this point, if they haven't already, they often disengage.

I am grateful, then, that my son was diagnosed as a twice-exceptional (or 2E) child at the age of six. He is gifted, with dyspraxia – a motor co-ordination disorder that affects fine and gross motor skills as well as causing sensory processing problems. This causes learning, to be a hit and miss – or sometimes just a miss and miss – affair.

As a baby, he displayed a baffling mixture of behaviours and characteristics. Even with the benefit of hindsight I am unsure whether to attribute them to giftedness, dyspraxia, a deteriorating home environment – or just to the fact that he was a young child and the behaviour of babies and young children IS baffling sometimes. He was easily upset, wouldn't feed and was a poor sleeper. He refused to let me out of his sight, or often out of his grasp, much to the dismay of his doting grandmother.

My son started walking at 13 months, defying the dyspraxia tendency for delayed walking. He spoke early and fluently. But he refused to draw anything and hated Lego and puzzles. His crèche teacher remarked that he asked the same question repeatedly, despite being answered. He had a favourite statement at home in my parents' house where we now lived: that 'the pump makes a noise'. They had a pump attached to a rainwater tank. We were once again baffled by his need to repeat this phrase, and it occurred to me that something was, if not wrong, then different. I found out later that it probably seemed much louder to him than to us, and to this day he claps his hands over his ears if the noise around him is too much – noise that you or I may not have noticed.

Toilet training seemed beyond him. He just didn't seem to get the

signals his body was sending, or if he did it was too late. He was seen by a paediatric surgeon but no physical cause was found. I was told he would grow out of it. (I think, after a toileting accident every day this week, we will still be waiting for a while.)

Yet despite being unable to tie his shoelaces, do up buttons, remember simple instructions or get to the toilet in time, he was looking up quasars, black holes and tsunami science on the internet; wanting to know about the asteroid that was said to have hit 65 million years ago; or figuring out why the small dinosaurs survived and evolved into birds. He still hated puzzles and games – the rules always out of his grasp – but developed a love of drawing, and once he loosened his pencil grip, he found he could draw for longer without getting so tired. It's still not that long.

School, with the accompanying academic and social demands, is challenging. Sometimes he hates it, sometimes he doesn't. He doesn't understand the rules of the playground and hates the classroom 'noise', but is getting better at adapting.

His teacher understands that instant recall in maths will never be his forte, that his inability to follow instructions isn't disobedience, and that he can capture his ideas faster by typing. Writing for him is laborious, and anyway the idea has gone before he's finished forming the letters. Will next year's teacher understand? I hope so.

There have been medical and psychological consultations and assessments, hearing tests, occupational therapy assessments, nutritionists' visits and school meetings. There will be more. Sometimes I feel hope and gratitude. Sometimes I feel frustration. The frustration I feel is nothing compared with the frustration I know my son feels. Sometimes his gifts shine unimpeded by his dyspraxia and he really flies. His GaTE class is such an occasion. Other times, his dyspraxia grounds him and the best he can do is to keep his frustration from overwhelming him. As always, he will learn to adapt and cope. He is a resilient child – as these children have to be. He is also insatiably curious, tenacious, funny and a delight. And I am proud of him.