

## **"Bad News for the Highly Intelligent": TAG Kids Need a Different Approach**

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The phrase "talented and gifted" turns people off. It makes it sound like TAG kids are rich and smart and happy, like they're going to have smooth sailing in school and in life. Many teachers, parents, and administrators assume that TAG parents—and maybe their kids—are proud and boastful. Some say that testing for TAG is racist, classist, or just plain bad.

Maybe these folks haven't spent a lot of time with TAG people. I have. My family and many of my friends are TAG. From what I've seen, and from what research shows: TAG comes with downsides, and just plain "different" sides.

Being TAG is nothing to brag about. Many TAG kids aren't just "bright" or smart, but *different*. Being TAG doesn't make a kid better than any other kid. It doesn't make them worse. It just means that their differently-wired brains genuinely need a different type of stimulation and learning environment.

If you're a child assessed as TAG, there's a good chance your brain works differently — just like someone on the autism spectrum might be a little different from other folks. TAG kids need and deserve accommodations for their different, bright minds — a different educational approach.

"Bad News for the Highly Intelligent," reported Scientific American in 2017.  
"Superior IQs are associated with mental and physical disorders, research suggests."

Research found that a whopping 26.7% of high-IQ adults had been formally diagnosed with a mood disorder, such as bipolar, and another 20 percent reported an anxiety disorder—far higher than the national averages of around 10 percent for each. These folks also had physical problems: they were three times more likely to have environmental allergies than the national average.

That's what I've seen in the TAG people I know. A few of them get through just fine. But many struggle with their wiring. Being different and "bright" can be an advantage in some situations; often, though, the differences make it very hard to function in everyday life—in schools and workplaces and social situations that aren't designed for the TAG brain. A lot of people turn to drugs and alcohol to tamp down their seemingly overactive minds.

In one family I know, there were two "bright" kids. When the oldest, Chris, was going to elementary school in Oregon, there was no TAG program. Chris was a super-brilliant kid. She was not challenged in school and, not surprisingly, found creative ways to get in trouble. Sidelined in education, she struggled with addiction and undiagnosed mental illness as she got older.

Nowadays she is an alcoholic and lives in her car. Over the years she has been able to rehab from cocaine, then meth, then benzodiazapenes and opioids, but a new substance often comes along to grab her. Her kids have inherited a legacy of addiction and poverty.

Even if you have no compassion for these struggling folks, or believe they should be hoisting themselves up by their bootstraps, consider that Chris and her children cost taxpayers thousands of dollars every year. Addiction and poverty are costly to everyone.

Chris's sister Denise, a few years younger, was offered a TAG class every Wednesday afternoon in elementary school, then put on Honors and AP tracks in middle and high school. Denise struggles with mental illness, too. Still, she graduated with highest honors from one of the top universities in the world and went on to earn a graduate degree. It's not smooth sailing for Denise, but she has managed to raise a family, pursue a career alternating with motherhood, and contribute to her community.

Did early TAG education make the difference? I believe it played a significant role. One child had the acknowledgement that their brain worked differently. One child was offered the chance to be herself once a week, with other active-brained, creative kids. The other child was dismissed as unruly by teachers who were not able to challenge her.

Which outcome do administrators, politicians, and teachers want? More addiction and misery, or bright kids who have a real chance?

I believe our children deserve an education that meets their needs. TAG kids have different needs. Oregonians should make sure our schools meet those needs.

*Details such as names have been changed to preserve the family's privacy in this letter.*