Asynchronous parenting

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This article shares the first-hand experience of the parent of a profoundly gifted daughter and son. Anne Cronin describes her initial confusion and worry at having a baby who refused to sleep, was constantly active and her feelings of being overwhlemed by her daughter's explorations. Her son offered some relief -- although profoundly intelligent, he was creative and less active. She wraps up with some lessons she has gleaned.

I was "over-educated" as I first faced motherhood. Before starting my family, I had worked for twelve years as an occupational therapist treating children with special needs, I was "Board Certified in Pediatrics" and taught the normal child development course sequence for occupational therapy students at a major university. I knew all the minutiae of infant development and developmental timelines. I was well informed on most things presented in parenting books and felt up to the job ahead. From the day of her birth, my daughter re-educated me. My education as a parent has been much like my child's, gaining skills far more easily than expected in some aspects, while being maddeningly limited in others. I have been angry and frustrated, have felt helpless and inadequate, and have at times annoyed everyone around me. At the same time I have continued to work with children with special needs and their families, with far more sensitivity than I had before.

From the start, my baby did not like to sleep. She actively fought it. A friend, who was a specialist in neonatal intervention, commented that Robin was "hyper-alert." This is a bad thing that happens to babies in neonatal intensive care units and is treated by reducing environmental stimuli. I worried. I went to my weekly moms group with her. All the other babies were smiling and cooing. Robin was flailing her arms, wanting only to be held upright (no lying down for her) and whipping her head around. I worried some more. She was really different. It wasn't a developmental problem. I knew that much. Her motor control was far above normal for her age, but she still seemed agitated. I tried reducing stimuli at home, turning down lights and sounds around her. That lasted about ten minutes. I then learned that a six week old could be "pissed" in a really big way. Robin wanted MORE not less. There was no question about what she was telling me. I commented on this experiment to my husband, who looked at me with a puzzled expression and said something like "Of course she got pissed. Anyone can see that she is frustrated when she is not in the middle of things."

The moms group was an eye-opener. The other moms in my group came, put their babies on their cute little quilts, and chatted. Robin was not a "little quilt" girl. She would swipe with her hand, snag the fabric and pull. She would bury herself, stuff it in her mouth, tangle herself up, and somehow squirm her way off of it. While the other moms chatted, I untangled writhing baby limbs and felt left out. I never enjoyed the moms group after Robin became mobile. I spent all of my time chasing Robin and keeping her from stealing the quilts from the cooing, immobile babies. I began to hear the word

"hyperactive" used. I was a therapist for hyperactive children so I knew that she was not hyperactive, but the comments upset me. She clearly was different.

That was only the beginning. Robin had big plans. Most babies are delightful in the 3-6 month period, rolling around a little and playing with their feet and hands. Not Robin. Robin wanted to walk. I knew that as certainly as I knew my name. By sheer desire and persistence, Robin was sitting well at 3 months and VERY mobile with a belly crawl by 4 months. She could get around, but she fussed all the time. She watched everyone and every thing with her "hyper-alert" gaze. She began to try to walk. It seemed that she knew that everyone else was walking, and that she had all the right body parts, and therefore should be able to walk. She tried and tried, and was irritable and fussy when not in her infant walker. I tried a new therapy strategy, infant massage to calm her, but this also pissed her off. She didn't want to be calmed; she wanted to walk. She loved it when my husband would help her stand and do "deep knee bends" to help her strengthen her legs and she loved her baby walker.

Robin took her first steps in this moms group at about six months of age. There was a pause in the conversation with her steps, and, inexplicably, I felt guilty. Many of her peers were not yet crawling. We quit the group shortly after that. That was the end of me sitting quietly anywhere for about three years. As a low activity, low key person by nature, I was the opposite of my vibrant, intense daughter. My husband seemed baffled by my persistent state of stress. He had responded practically to Robin's need to explore by bolting much of the furniture to the walls, and making the whole house "baby-safe." But he was away at work and did not have to keep up with the daily challenges. I was the one who found nine month old Robin at the top of 10 steps outside the banister (where the wood is 1 inch wide), completely unaware of the danger and having no idea how to get down from her perch about five feet in the air. I began telling people that being a stay-at-home mom was like being an air traffic controller. Lonely and boring a lot of the time, because you had to be so vigilant you never could really attend to anything other than the baby.

I had not heard of asynchronous development at this time. I knew that Robin was far ahead of her age peers in all areas of development except social/emotional. I knew that her cognitive skills far exceeded her motor skills and that she often became so frustrated that she was inconsolable. Robin never napped. She would occasionally pass out from exhaustion, but if and when that would happen was unpredictable. I felt as if I had been run over by a steam roller at the end of each day. Child development books didn't help. Child development experts (who were my friends) didn't help. The message that I got was that maybe there was some post-partum depression or other personal problem going on if I was so thrown by a toddler. I searched the child development literature, and learned some useful things about temperament. Robin was still different, still prone to violent tempers, and I didn't know what to do.

By the age of two Robin had burst all my bubbles about parenting. Much of the child development literature, especially Piaget's stages of cognitive development, looked like superficial garbage. I had lots of tools, but it didn't come together in a way I could make

sense of. I was not the calm, cookie-baking earth-mother type I had envisioned. I was overwhelmed, exhausted, and emotionally needy. Meanwhile, Robin was blossoming. She was talking, singing, climbing, and an expert on dinosaurs to boot. Robin started at a Montessori school at 2 ½. When she started at the school, I spent a lot of time at the school watching all of the children. I didn't know that it had been named and described, but I intuitively came to understand asynchronous development. I recognized in Robin the same frustration and helplessness I saw in the children with cerebral palsy who could not talk to express themselves, and I began to understand why she had been such an angry baby. The teachers in the Montessori setting recognized Robin's special needs and supported her growth socially and emotionally. And all the adults in her world worried about school for her.

I have heard many analogies for parenting a profoundly gifted child, including riding a cheetah. For me, the experience has been asynchronous, like my children. Robin was, by any standards, a difficult infant. From age four, when she began to read and learn music she was full of joy and enthusiasm. She had grown into a delight to teach and parent. Robin was my first teacher about profoundly gifted children and asynchronous development, and the course was one of the hardest I have ever taken. We have a second gifted child, Jack, who was born when Robin was two. Jack's preschool years were totally unlike Robin's. Jack was a sweet, happy infant. He had an attitude similar to his sister's about sleep, but we saw no rage or anger in his first year. His large motor skill development was very typical, crawling at six months and walking at a year. I knew from the research that cognition was not associated with large motor skill, but we watched him closely because he was so much slower than his sister.

Jack was not driven to move as his sister had been. He was a watcher instead. Jack's small motor skills, the ability to manipulate small objects and use his eyes and hands together was as precocious in its way as his sister's early walking. The difference was that only I, as an expert in this area, noticed his hand skills. People don't watch a baby's hands. This characterized the big difference between our two kids. Their IQ's are comparable (later testing has shown) but Robin was a spectacular, showy, in-your-face kind of brilliant, and Jack was a quiet brilliant. I did not get the negative comments or social censure with this smiling, dimpled baby that I had known with his sister. Jack trudged around happily in his sister's shadow, letting her talk for him and do for him. He was a happy, loving, good-natured child, watching and analyzing everything. Around 2 ½ we noted that Jack was able to complete puzzles designed for 8-10 year olds, and was better at problem solving than his older sister. We thought we were getting better at parenting. His sister had been difficult, but was a superstar in preschool. I had assumed his preschool would be even better.

We were totally unprepared for the difficulties that appeared with his transition to preschool. Within a few weeks, we learned that Jack really did not like children his age. With very few exceptions he preferred to work alone or when possible with older children. Over a three month period Jack transformed into a sullen, sometimes aggressive child, with a quick temper. Jack's small motor skills were so far advanced that he rejected even the toys offered in the 3 year old room. He hated the imprecise

lines made by markers, crayons, and finger paints. At three he had little restraint, and his unhappiness resulted in markers being thrown, papers shredded, and tears. About this time Jack learned to love time out. Time out freed him from the need to interact with others, having to do dumb art projects, and kept other children from messing with his work. Jack has always loved precision, by the age of three preferring mechanical pencils and ball point pens to any other writing tools. This is an age developmentally when most children are just learning to use fasteners and copy simple circles on paper. Jack was a highly persistent child and he hated to be rushed. At home Jack would work for 3-4 hours on a building project or with computer art projects. In the preschool, the day was divided into 20 minute activities, and many of these had stations they rotated to. From his point of view, he would only be getting started when asked to move.

At home, and when allowed the freedom to choose his activities Jack continued to be a sweet child who was easy to parent. We had been totally exhausted by his sister, and he seemed so easy going in comparison. We were slow to understand how unhappy he was and how creative he could be in opposing the preschool routines. We had asked the preschool to let him alone, to let him play by himself, and in particular to excuse him from any art activity he was not interested in. I was an expert, I told them. I was confident that he was not delayed in any area of development and his fine motor control was so advanced that skipping their cutting and pasting activities would not be a problem. They were reluctant, did their own tests, and then agreed to our plan. Jack tolerated preschool then, although he did not make friends and was not a favorite of the teachers. I was frustrated that my sweet, loving child was labeled as "difficult." I was surprised at how defensive I felt when we were told of his most recent escapades.

Kindergarten was even worse. His sister had managed the transition to kindergarten well because she was allowed to read and draw while the other kids worked. Jack was not yet reading, and hated the childish way his drawings looked. Jack became even more creatively oppositional. He refused activities often. I worried that we had taught him that refusing adult directives was OK in our approach to his preschool problems. Unfortunately, the teacher responded to his refusals by having an adult sit with him and try to talk him into the task. He liked the adult attention. The bad part was that these adults grew to dislike him, because they assumed his refusals reflected lack of skill. They were very sweet and encouraging, until he finally did the task and they saw that he did it easily at a far higher skill level than the other children. At that point he was demoted to "brat." We had many teacher conferences. He would not be excused from doing class activities. His opposition and perfectionism masked his real abilities, so acceleration was not an option. He hated school, and things kept getting worse. He grew angry, sullen, and oppositional at home. Jack's ability to conceptualize things greatly exceeded his ability to draw them. He loved to work slowly and methodically and was always getting interrupted. Jack was also really angry when people told him something he had done was good when he believed it was not. Most of the adults at school lost credibility with him, and he did not care to please them. We were at a stand off by the end of his kindergarten year. It was terrible time for me as a parent. Jack was

miserable and rebellious more and more of the time at home, and I did not know how to help.

We tried getting expert help in the form of a clinical psychologist. In a free play setting with one-to-one adult attention Jack looked like a superstar, and we looked like over-involved, over-bearing parents. No one really said that, but that was the message I gathered from that experience. With no other good ideas, we just decided to back off and let him unwind. I drew on my experience as an occupational therapist and built lots of physical activity into his days. He had some success in a summer day camp for gifted kids and did well working in a mixed age work group. I gained confidence in Jack and was able to emotionally accept that this was a school specific problem. We set up an IEP meeting at the start of school, laid our cards on the table, and were blessed with a practical, flexible teacher. It took time, but the most highly problematic school behaviors stopped. Jack does not love school as his sister does, but he has learned the skills he needs to find it tolerable.

Robin had taught us about intensity, a drive to learn, emotional vulnerability, and dramatic mood swings. Jack taught us about creativity, precision, persistence and perfectionism. In my frustration, I found the literature on gifted, and then highly gifted children, and found names for what I had learned. Some of that old learning began to fall into place. My learning was asynchronous, having had some of the pieces long before I had the supporting experience to apply them. I began to understand why sensory integration techniques (often used with children with learning or developmental problems) were effective, even though my children did not have any real "disorder." They became "overloaded" with their own drive to learn and needed extra help to relax and unwind. I understood the special education system well and understood how to work within that system. This was a big help in getting Jack extra support from the school counselor and in insisting on alternatives to time-out as a behavioral intervention. The interaction between developmental asynchronies, the individual temperaments of my children, and my own temperament had led to two completely different pictures of development. I am, in temperament, more like Jack. We like to think and work in the same way. Because of this I inadvertently encouraged many of the behavior patterns that later proved to be problematic.

Much the way it does for my children, things sometimes come together in an exciting way, and I feel like a competent parent. On other days I feel totally overwhelmed, and wonder what it is that my kids are really learning. Jack's teacher this year rewards children who do well on spelling pre-tests with "bonus words." I noticed that Jack was misspelling very easy words on these tests, and asked him about it. He said "if I don't miss three words she gives me more work." In this and countless other ways my children outmaneuver their teachers, usually without the teacher's awareness. We continue to educate the teachers and combat the idea that children who complete their class work excellently and easily, should be given more of the same to do. I have learned to ask pointed questions about classroom and social activities. The kids know

when they are unhappy, but often cannot pinpoint why. I'm trying to teach them to advocate for themselves. I often feel unprepared for the challenges my children offer. I know that I have grown both personally and professionally as my children have guided me through the pitfalls of parenting young profoundly gifted children. Among the many things I've learned are:

1. I may not know as much about dinosaurs as Robin, but I am smart enough to listen and to help her grow.

2. Teachers only see the skills they ask for. They know your child gets good grades, but have no idea how differently they learn or what they are capable of. Don't let them convince you that occasional arithmetic mistakes are a reason to avoid acceleration in math.

3. My kids are not going to become less smart. As long as I keep them emotionally positive, we can survive mistakes and occasional bad teachers.

4. Other people, including some of our extended family, view our kids as "weird" or "odd." This includes the implication that we are pushing the kids and shouldn't. These people are uninformed. We will educate them if they are interested and otherwise limit our exposure to them.

5. Profoundly gifted kids need lots of support and encouragement in learning to express fears, concerns, and frustrations. Our most difficult times have been figuring out why one child or the other was so distressed, not working out the solutions. We try to fill their lives with lots of loving people who encourage them to talk about their triumphs and their hurts.

6. It helps to know normal psychosocial development: it helps you hear what children don't say as well as what they do. This has been especially important as they have gotten older and were trying to find their place with peers.

7. Believe that their problems are real, even if you don't understand them. Offer options and alternatives when you can. Teach them to trust that you will stick up for them, so they can learn to stick up for themselves.

Children's friendships are treasures, and very hard for kids to nurture on their own. Make time with friends as important as the other extra-curricular things you do.

1. Love goes a long way in smoothing the rough spots.

2. Balance every day with lots of exercise and movement play, it helps the kids weather their special stresses.

Now as our eldest, Robin is facing adolescence we are cautiously optimistic. I am well armed with knowledge of normal adolescence, and am learning more every day about

the unique trials of the highly gifted teen. I am sure there will be much more asynchronous learning for all of us, and many more chapters in our saga of asynchronous parenting.

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