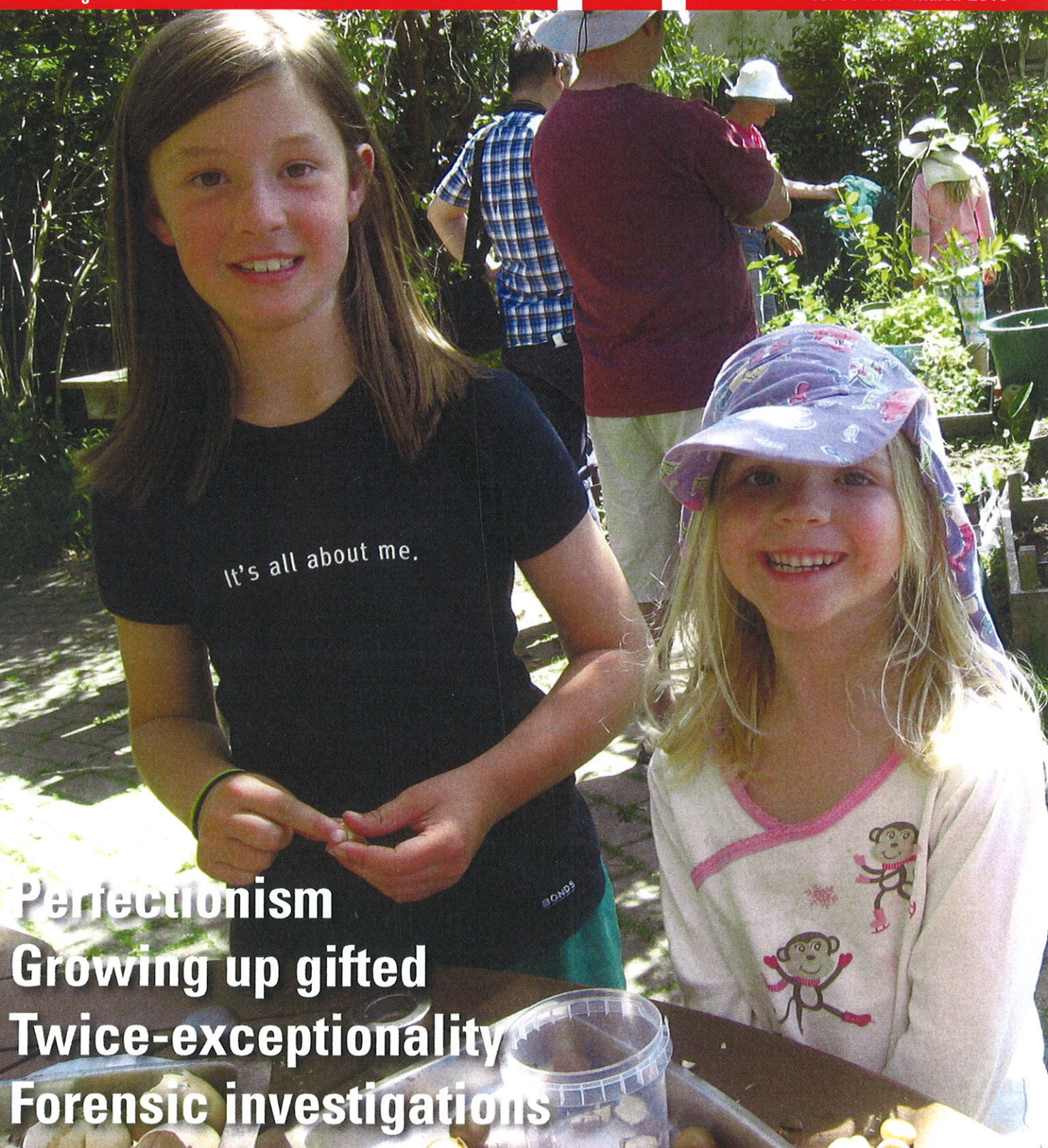


Tall Poppies

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THEIR FUTURE — OUR CHALLENGE

Gifted kids all grown-up

by Sue Barriball

I preface this article by stating from the outset that this is an account of my personal experiences and is not intended as a template for other parents. Nor do I presume that my children's experiences mirror others. It is simply an account of my children and their lives as gifted kids to date.

My elder daughter, Jess, was born in 1991. She was a difficult baby, slept little, was colicky and very aware from her earliest days. She reached most of the milestones a little early, except for walking ... she took a few steps at the 'right age', and then sat for the next six months but, when she finally walked, she took off. At the age of 18 months, she was talking in sentences and making unusual comments about things to which we were unaware she had had any exposure. I remember vividly a little voice coming from the back of the car when she was about 18 months old, responding to Led Zeppelin's 'Stairway to Heaven' on the radio with an enthusiastic 'Rock and roll! Ka pai!'

When Jess was about three years old, her kindergarten teacher commented that she was far ahead of her peers with regard to conceptual understanding, but had problems making friends. I should have seen the writing on the wall then and, in hindsight, this was to be a recurrent theme throughout her schooling. Like many gifted children, Jess was on a different wavelength to other kids and, while she wanted a 'real friend', others wanted someone just to play alongside. Primary school was punctuated by concerns over Jess' sensitivity, lack of close friends, and finding appropriate reading materials for a child who was reading four to five years above her age. She was blessed with some superb teachers though, who nurtured her intellectually and kept an eye on her socially. Intermediate school was, by and large, disastrous for Jess. By the end of the first term, she was crying herself to sleep and regularly said that if this was all there was, she didn't want to go on. Alarm bells rang and we sought help from a psychologist and finally someone mentioned the 'G' word – gifted. Diagnosed with clinical depression at 11 years old, acceptance to One Day School was her saviour. While not always particularly intellectually challenging, that one day a week in a different environment with other gifted kids helped her to cope with the other four days. As a child who was very introverted and needed careful, sensitive introductions to new people and activities, intermediate school was a huge shock. Having a formal assessment of giftedness was like walking from fog into clear sky – it helped both us and Jess to understand her! College was another minefield. By the middle of the first year, her depression had reared its head again and she had begun to cut herself in class so that she could 'feel something' throughout the mind-numbing days. This was a clear indicator that she was in emotional pain and needed help but, after months of fruitless counselling at school, it was finally a visit back to the psychologist which helped. While the school counsellor just wanted her to talk about her problems, the psychologist gave her strategies to address them. Best money ever spent!



Jess

Application of those strategies along with finally connecting with another girl of similar intellect – though as much of an extrovert as Jess was an introvert – made the final part of secondary school bearable socially. The real turnaround, however, came with an unexpected discovery – Jess' talent in design. In Year 11, she needed to pick up another subject and chose art. For Jess, art was like opening the curtains in a darkened room. Through art, she developed a passion for design, and found an outlet for her creativity. In her final year at high school, her programme was almost entirely art-based and she had teachers who trusted her to do the work without requiring her to be at every class. Their trust paid off.

Today, Jess is a graphic designer. She excelled in her university studies and was acknowledged for her skills in event management following organising the third-year students' exhibition by being invited to give the commencement speech at Graduation. Her life is full of creative activities, usually ones which require plenty of problem-solving, be they patterning and making amazing costumes for her next 'cos-play' event, craft projects for home, or designing printed materials at work. If she needs a skill to help her achieve a goal, she will learn it – she's definitely an autonomous learner! For her, creating is as important as breathing and I honestly think it keeps her sane. I long ago gave up trying to make her have a 'balanced' life, even though pressure from others to get her involved in sports and groups has often felt rather intense. Our other two children are also gifted but differently so. Our



Alex

middle child, Eilis, is the extrovert. While the other two were not the least interested in sports, Eilis was a netballer, touch rugby player and dancer. As creating through art and design was like air to Jess, dance was to Eilis. Throughout primary school, being a sporty extrovert meant Eilis had plenty of friends and social issues related to giftedness were rarely an issue for her. However, she is a strongly visual-spatial learner and, throughout her primary years, she underachieved in relation to her ability.

Like Jess, Eilis attended One Day School and for her, the benefits of this were an increase in confidence in her abilities. She developed a good understanding of the way she learned and was pro-active in working out strategies to help herself study when she reached high school. At college, she was involved in many student committees and received a College Medal for her service to the school in Year 13. Academically, she held her own, and gained excellence endorsements in Level 2 and 3 of NCEA. Currently, Eilis is studying for a BSc at Otago University, aiming to become a dietician.

She still has crises of confidence whenever she has terms tests or exams, and all I can do is listen while she cries over the phone and remind her that she has the knowledge and the ability to tackle this latest trial, and to have faith in herself. I worry that she no longer dances and that she will regret giving this up to study sciences after years of saying she wanted to do a dance degree, but she assures me that she will return to dance one day. Her dream is to be a nutritional adviser to a dance company, and she might just do it! Alex, the youngest child and only boy, is similar to Jess. He is introverted, possibly 'geeky', and has always seemed older than his years. Unlike his sister though, Alex had the good fortune to find a friend in year 1. Both gifted boys, their school kept them together all the way through primary school and they were in the same One Day School class. Each thrived in the company of the other. They shared interests, humour and intellect.

It was a sad day for Alex when his best friend went on to a different secondary school, not least because this coincided with Alex's diagnosis with Chronic Fatigue Syndrome. At a time when he should have been forming new friendships, he ended up completely out of school for three terms. When he returned part-time in year 10, he was very much the outsider. Couple this with the difficulty of being a gifted boy trying to fit in anyway, and the recipe was not a good one. With a tendency not to suffer fools gladly but enough sense to be courteous, Alex did not find school easy socially but at least he was never bullied (a very real fear for

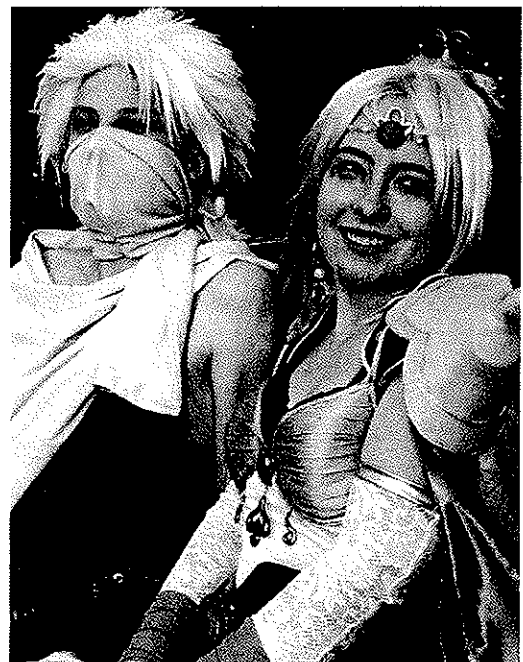
me!) Attending only around 50% of classes each week, teachers tended to leave him to his own devices, while most other students barely acknowledged him. Perhaps being gifted has been a real gift for Alex as, despite very limited attendance at school, he has done extremely well academically and this year has been accepted for early entry to university to study creative writing. His passions are writing and singing and he's just informed me that he wants to audition for X-Factor! I'll take a deep breath and let him go for it...

Occasionally, I am asked if parenting gifted kids gets any easier. On the whole, in my experience, it does, but there are still issues and challenges – different ones for different kids. Jess still has depressive episodes, but she knows she will come through them and endures. Eilis still has doubts about her ability to achieve academically and, as Alex faces a new chapter of his life, we are both uncertain about how he will cope with university study and a chronic illness. But somehow we all manage.

The two most important lessons I have learned over the years are to follow my children's lead, and the importance of honouring who they are – valuing them for the remarkable young people they are, not for what they might achieve. While I have often heard politicians and experts in giftedness extol the importance of catering for gifted children because of what they might contribute to society, to me as a parent this is far less important than their being happy with who they are. In the final analysis, I want them to be loved and loving, ethical, passionate about something and fulfilled in their work and relationships. If eminence and outstanding contributions to society are part of that, so be it, but I'll consider those a bonus!

Thank you to Jess, Eilis and Alex for allowing me to share their stories.

Sue Barriball is currently an associate principal with Gifted Kids. She also works as a GATE specialist at St Cuthbert's College, and tutor in the Certificate in Effective Practice in Gifted Education. Prior to joining Gifted Kids in 2006, she was director of the Gifted Education Centre and a One Day School teacher, a teacher's college tutor, and a secondary school teacher.



Alex and Jess in award-winning costumes