

When “I’m Struggling” Becomes “I’m Not Good Enough” REEL Launches “See the Whole Child”

Year-long campaign calls on parents, educators, clinicians and communities to recognize and consider how focusing on struggles can shape a young person’s confidence and mental health, and what can change when the strengths, interests, needs, and potential of every neurodivergent and twice-exceptional child are seen, too.

Palo Alto, Calif. — October 7, 2026 —A child solving math beyond his grade level struggles to turn in homework on time. Another tells amazing stories but shuts down when asked to write. Another has difficulty sitting still in class, but is listening and learning the whole time. A child who excels academically struggles to connect with peers.

For neurodivergent and twice-exceptional (2e) students, challenges with executive function, emotional regulation, communication, attention, academics, or social connection can sometimes become the primary way adults see them. Over time, repeated attention to what is difficult can affect more than a child’s experience at school, it can begin to influence how they see themselves.

REEL (Resilience & Engagement for Every Learner), a Bay Area nonprofit dedicated to supporting neurodivergent and twice-exceptional (2e) students, is working to shift that narrative with **See the Whole Child**, a year-long awareness campaign rooted in a simple idea: **every child is a whole person, with strengths, interests, needs, and potential worth recognizing and nurturing**. When we see the whole child, we see not only what they need, but all they have to offer.

“When we see the whole child, their strengths, interests, ideas, needs, and potential, we give them more ways to understand and value who they are,” said Callie Turk, Co-founder and Board Chair of REEL. “See the Whole Child is about making sure the things that are hard never become the whole story.”

Why Seeing the Whole Child Matters

Research points to significant mental health challenges among neurodivergent students and young people.

Studies have found that 66% of autistic people report having an anxiety disorder and 53% report depression (Jadav & Bal, 2022). Autistic learners who are also identified as gifted are five times more likely to experience suicidal ideation than gifted peers who are not autistic (Casten et al., 2023). By their teen years, one in four students with ADHD experiences co-occurring depression (CDC, 2024).

Research has also found elevated anxiety among students with dyslexia. One study of middle and high school students reported anxiety among 23.9% of students with dyslexia compared with 2.8% of a control group, an 8.5-fold difference (Giovagnoli et al., 2020).

These findings underscore the importance of creating environments where neurodivergent and twice-exceptional young people feel understood, capable, and valued. When children repeatedly feel that they are falling short despite their effort, it can erode confidence, contribute to self-doubt, and affect their sense of belonging.

Seeing the Whole Child does not mean overlooking challenges or lowering expectations. It means understanding those challenges in context while giving more attention to what a child does well, what engages them, what they need to succeed, and what they have to contribute.

At the heart of **See the Whole Child** is a shift in the questions adults ask. Instead of *“How do we stop this behavior?”* REEL encourages questions such as *“What might this behavior be communicating?”* *“What is getting in the child’s way?”* *“What strengths can we build upon?”* and *“What is their potential?”*

Understanding what lies beneath a behavior can change both the adult’s response, and the message the child receives about themselves.

“When we get curious instead of immediately correcting, we have an opportunity to understand the child in front of us,” said Abby Kirigin, REEL’s Executive Director. “That doesn’t mean ignoring what is hard. It means giving children the support they need while making sure they also know what is strong, capable, and valuable about them.”

Turning Awareness Into Action

Throughout the 2026–27 school year, REEL will bring the **See the Whole Child** approach into its parent resources, educator professional development, community programming, partnerships, and events.

The campaign reflects REEL’s broader mission to ensure neurodivergent and twice-exceptional students thrive by increasing parent and educator awareness and understanding of practical, research-based strategies that address their educational needs.

“Our vision is for every neurodivergent and twice-exceptional child to be recognized, appreciated, encouraged, and empowered,” said Yael Valek, Co-founder of REEL. “A child can need support and have extraordinary strengths at the same time. Seeing the whole child means holding both of those truths and helping young people learn to see their own strengths beyond their challenges.”

About REEL

REEL (Resilience & Engagement for Every Learner) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to ensuring neurodivergent and twice-exceptional students thrive by raising parent and educator awareness and understanding of practical, research-based strategies to successfully address their educational needs.

Through parent education and resources, educator professional development, community programming, and partnerships, REEL works toward a future where all neurodivergent and twice-exceptional children are recognized, appreciated, encouraged, and empowered to use their immense strengths and lived experiences to achieve their goals.

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