



The Quandary of Underachievement

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performance



potential



“All children – all people – achieve less than they are capable of some of the time.

It is when underachievement becomes a **habitual** way of responding . . . that it should become a serious concern.”

Dr. Sylvia Rimm

Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades



Reasons for Underachievement

Parents who:

- set unrealistic goals for their gifted youngsters;
- show concern with educational progress, but pay little attention to emotional development;
- engage in limited sharing ideas, affection, trust, approval;
- demonstrate inconsistent handling of discipline.



Reasons for Underachievement

Gifted students who:

- feel unable to meet expectations of parents and teachers, and see themselves as failures;
- have poorly developed work habits;
- have varied and numerous interests that may extend unmanageably into too many areas;
- may lack peer support and fear risking their popularity.



Reasons for Underachievement

Teachers who:

- use threats, ridicule, warnings, and ultimatums;
- rarely show warmth or acceptance;
- are threatened by students' intelligence;
- do not present academically challenging material.



Conditions That Create ACHIEVEMENT Or UNDERACHIEVEMENT

QUADRANT 1

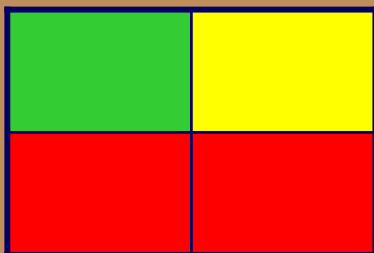
These are the high achievers. They perceive that when they work hard, they get good results. The curriculum is slightly beyond their grasp and requires significant effort to master.

All learners, whether below average, average, or above average, should be in this quadrant.

QUADRANT 2

These are the kids who get high grades with little or no effort. They have learned to resist challenging work. They fear that others will think they're not so smart if they have to work hard to get good results.

Many gifted kids are in this quadrant. They assume from experience that smart means easy.





Conditions That Create ACHIEVEMENT Or UNDERACHIEVEMENT

QUADRANT 3

These are the students who may work hard but rarely achieve success. They don't realize that if they used the appropriate learning strategies, their success in learning would noticeably improve.

Students in this quadrant may become discouraged and move into quadrant 4.

QUADRANT 4

These are the classic underachievers – students who have stopped putting forth any effort because nothing they do leads to any measurable success or satisfaction.

Our goal as educators is to prevent any student from moving into this quadrant.





Taught to Underachieve?

“In second grade, I was asked to cut out the rising and setting times of the sun from the newspaper. After the first few times I refused to do it – once I understood the concept, I saw no point to it. That year the teacher announced to the class that I was passing by the skin of my teeth. I remember sitting there thinking that teeth don’t have skin.”

-Meg, a teacher and doctoral candidate in her 40s





Underachievers and Selective Consumers

Do not understand causes or cures	Can explain the problem and possible solutions
Are dependent and reactive	Are independent and proactive
Tend to withdraw	Tend to rebel
Respect or fear authority figures	Set teachers as adversaries; can be contentious
Need both structure and imposed limits	Require little structure; need “breathing room”
Exhibit uniformly weak performance	Exhibit performance that varies relative to the teacher and/or content
Generally require family intervention	Can usually be dealt with within school resources
May change over the long term	May change “overnight”
Are often perfectionistic; nothing they do is ever good enough	Are frequently satisfied with their accomplishments
Have a poor academic self-image	See themselves as academically able

Delisle, J., & Galbraith, J. (2002). Underachiever or selective consumer? In When gifted kids don't have all the answers: How to meet their social and emotional needs. (pp. 167-190). Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit.



Patterns of Underachievement (in order of prevalence)

1. *Avoidance of Responsibility*
2. *Anxiety*
3. *Search for Identity*
4. **Conduct Disorder**
5. **Oppositional Behavior**
6. **Discrimination**

**Internal
Control**

**Often Beyond
Internal
Control**

Excerpted from Schneider, S. (2003). Overcoming underachievement.

Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education.



The Procrastinator

- Project an image of helplessness; things could not have turned out any differently
- Full of good intentions that are somehow never fulfilled
- When expected to live up to their potential, they often whine and complain that unjustified demands are being made on their time and abilities



The Hidden Perfectionist

- Hidden in their self-expectations and in their judgments about what others expect of them
- Internalized idealistic expectations about what they should be doing or how they should perform, but they do not believe they can live up to those ideals
- Afraid to make mistakes; often preoccupied with trivia details, stubborn, controlling of others, hindered in expressions of feeling, conventional, indecisive, and unable to relax



The Martyr

- Tend to emphasize their own particular weakness and shortcomings to others
- May complain that they really are not as smart as others believe them to be
- Claim powerlessness concerning their behavior, as though they cannot help what they do
- Often fail to accomplish tasks that would further their progress toward important, especially self-chosen, goals despite their ability to accomplish those tasks easily



The Shy Type

- Seek approval and acceptance of others while avoiding social humiliation
- Avoid new situations for fear of possible disapproval and engage in challenging tasks only when assured of success and approval
- They fail by lack of trying, not by lack of intelligence or some other potentially humiliating self-deficiency



The Socialite

- Need for approval, praise, and attention with quick gratification creates a focus on short-term gains at the expense of long-term goals
- Social chameleons
- Love novelty, seek excitement, and tire easily when having to conform to routines that call for delayed gratification of their social wants



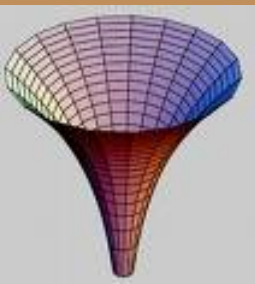
The Con Artist

- Want something for nothing
- Charmers – wear a mask of sociability and interpersonal sensitivity which they use to get what they want
- They are outsiders looking in on the warm, human, emotional drama, but are not able to fully participate in that drama even if they wish they could
- Interpret love and compassion as potentially hiding ulterior motives



Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Narrow the problem.
 - Look for patterns in certain subjects, assignments, homework, or teachers.
 - Are there more problems taking information in or getting it out?
 - When did things get more complicated?
 - Could your child be overscheduled?





Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Identify Strengths.
 - Realize the importance of strengths in designing solutions. Children need to feel good enough about themselves to have the mental energy to tackle school frustrations.
 - Also learning strengths should tell you the best routes for overcoming learning or performance 'blocks'.



Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Share Your Stories.
 - Realize that you are probably a powerful role model.
 - Share your realistic stories about learning difficulties, personal obstacles, and discuss what you continue to grapple with.
 - Be aware that underachieving children easily succumb to 'catastrophism'. Encourage them, and give them perspective.



*Edie, F. & Edie, B. (2001). Finding answers to underachievement.
Neurolearning Library. <http://www.neurolearning.com>*



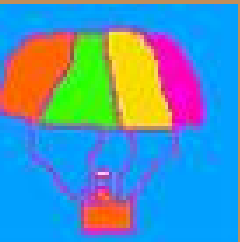
Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Commit to a Change.
 - Encourage them to commit to a change and start small.
 - The answers will be found by problem solving.
 - Celebrate every small bit of progress as it arrives.



Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Don't Forget Your Parachute.
 - Encourage realism and don't expect everything to work the first time.
 - Underachieving children often need some accommodations (reduced work load, assistive technology, adjusted deadlines) at first to allow them to develop and become efficient with new styles of processing information or expressing ideas.





Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Adopt a Team Approach
 - Partner with your child problem solving situations.
 - Let your child express worries and desires.
 - Develop a plan that seems sensible to you both, and then push forward.



Finding Answers to Underachievement

- Remember the Big Picture.
 - Focus on the present, plan sensible changes, allow time to see their effects, and adjust plans accordingly.
 - Constantly redirect the focus on the big picture - how can we help make them more happy, reduce their frustrations, accentuate their talents, and prepare them for their future.

