



Characteristics of Giftedness



Giftedness in Socio-historical Perspective



Parenting for Achievement



Overcoming Underachievement

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by C. Suzanne Schneider, Ph.D.

Academic underachievement is often measured by significant discrepancies between IQ scores and grades, or between IQ and achievement test scores. It may also become apparent as a result of unexplained decreases in any or all of these measures.

Each of these approaches is limited by whether or not the person's true potential has been adequately assessed in the first place.

- **Assessing Underachievement**
- **Patterns of Underachievement**
- **Helping Underachievers Develop Their Potentials**
- **Identifying and Overcoming Patterns of Underachievement**

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Assessing Underachievement

For assessment purposes, individually administered tests of intelligence and achievement are preferable to group tests for a variety of reasons. Group tests often fail to provide accurate assessments at upper levels of intelligence. They may also fail to identify gifted children who are depressed, anxious, and unmotivated, or simply more profound thinkers. Even when individually administered tests are used, the performance potentials of creative students are often higher than their IQ scores may suggest. In addition, physical disabilities as well as adverse economic and social conditions may limit the development, expression

and adequate assessment of children's gifted potentials.

Without adequate assessment, gifted children are all too likely to languish unnoticed and underachieve in educational environments that fail to meet their special needs. Since gifted students are generally capable of performing at least one or two grade levels ahead of their age peers in their areas of talent, they are seldom challenged to perform in accord with their true potentials. In fact, these capable students may be considered underachievers even when they get "good" grades.

Patterns of Underachievement

Underachievement is a pervasive national problem that results in a tremendous waste of human potential, even among our most able students. Studies have generally shown the dropout rate among gifted high school students enrolled in regular public schools to be somewhere between 10 and 20 percent.

differently as soon as a problem becomes apparent. Excluding students with physical disabilities and neurological conditions, there appear to be at least six different types of underachievers, whose patterns of underachievement may overlap or occur sequentially. The first five patterns are listed later in decreasing order of frequency. However, there is no

Treating underachievers all alike just doesn't work. Specific patterns of underachievement need to be differentially identified and dealt with

firm data concerning the prevalence of the sixth pattern, which is listed last.

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Helping Underachievers Develop Their Potentials

It may be outside the scope of this publication to present specific strategies to help prevent these patterns of underachievement from occurring. However, regular study times and realistic, positive expectations – jointly, calmly, firmly, and consistently conveyed by both parents and teachers – can help to foster academic achievement in children. Parents' involvement in their children's schools also appears to help children achieve. However, doing children's homework for them does not.

In addition, parents need to show love and appreciation for their children. While a parent of the same sex as the child needs to serve as a role model for achievement, a parent of the opposite sex needs to provide simultaneous validation of the child's competence and desirability as a member of the opposite sex. This is true for children of both

sexes. However, in the absence of such validation from their fathers, girls may more easily succumb to inhibiting, and sometimes even stunting, social and sexual pressures. They may, therefore, underachieve in efforts to meet their emotional and social needs.

Don't be too hard on yourself if your child is an underachiever. Patterns of underachievement *can* be changed, with professional help if not without it. The recommendations included in this publication are based on a synthesis of the research on underachievement and clinical experience. In implementing these recommendations, it is very important to make clear distinctions between children as people and their behavior, as well as to precede and follow constructive suggestions with positive and encouraging comments.

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Identifying and Overcoming Patterns of Underachievement

- **Type I Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Avoidance of Responsibility**
- **Type II Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Anxiety**
- **Type III Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Search for Identity**
- **Type IV Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Conduct Disorder**
- **Type V Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Oppositional Behavior**
- **Type VI Underachiever:** **Key Issue = Discrimination**

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Type I Underachiever: Key Issue = Avoidance of Responsibility

Primary Characteristics

Avoids and "forgets" responsibilities.

Avoids setting specific goals and making commitments. Uses vague and passive language.

Recommendations

With younger children, set clear, positive, and realistic expectations for achievement.

With older children, help them set specific, positive and realistic goals for achievement. Then, expose the gap between their expressed intentions and actions.

	Behavioral contracts may help, but rewards may be ineffective.
	Establish regular study times in a well-organized, quiet place, alone; and make sure these limits are observed.
Fears taking responsibility for self and future.	Confront fear of taking responsibility for self and future.
Appears unmotivated but is actually highly motivated to underachieve and remain dependent on others.	Encourage and reinforce even small signs of independence and self-sufficiency.
Sees grades and other consequences as unrelated to personal choices and actions and completely under external control.	Stress the connection between the child's efforts and outcomes, choices and consequences.
Is easily distracted and tends to give up easily.	Positively reinforce effort as well as achievement.
Makes endless excuses for poor performance and lacks introspection.	With young children, exchange evaluation forms between home and school to provide accountability.
	With older children, confront excuses methodically and supportively.
	Avoid nagging and verbal reminders. Instead, use lists and consequences for non-compliance.
	Calmly and consistently enforce stated consequences for non-compliance, without anger, until required tasks are completed.
Attempts to lower other people's achievement expectations by volunteering information about supposed personal deficiencies.	Provide information about personal abilities.
	Avoid doing for these children what they can and should be doing for themselves.
	Limit passive forms of activity and entertainment.
Is friendly and easygoing. Represses anxiety and tends to express anger passive-aggressively.	Model and teach assertive communication skills.
Becomes firmly entrenched in this pattern by age 10 or so.	Get professional help as soon as possible.
Lacking adequate challenge may have failed to make the normal transition from play to work at school.	Get professional help as soon as possible.

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Type II Underachiever: Key Issue = Anxiety

Primary Characteristics

Recommendations

Has excessive anxiety. Is a chronic worrier.

Acknowledge anxiety, and teach relaxation techniques.

Decrease emphasis on competitive grading, and encourage creative risk-taking.

Overestimates real or imagined difficulties.

Confront negative self-talk (e.g., "I can't do this, it's too hard."), and dispute pessimistic and catastrophic thinking.

Underestimates personal resources and abilities.

Provide information to help the child gain a better understanding of his/her own abilities and resources.

Teach coping strategies to bolster personal resources (e.g., study skills and how to divide daunting tasks into manageable segments).

May be perfectionistic and tend to procrastinate.

Confront perfectionistic expectations and underlying beliefs. Explain how these relate to procrastination.

Commonly equates perfection with personal adequacy and lovability.

Has external locus of control. Depends on reassurance and approval from authority figures.

Help the child make simple decisions and then progress to more involved age-appropriate ones to develop a more internal locus of control.

Usually wants to achieve to please authority figures.

Encourage and reinforce signs of independence and self-sufficiency.

Model and teach assertive communication skills.

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Type III Underachiever: Key Issue = Search for Identity

Primary Characteristics

Is intensely introspective and preoccupied with identity issues involving three questions: Who am I as a separate person? What's my purpose in life? How do I relate to other people?

Engages in long, involved emotional and philosophical discussions and arguments.

May experience anxiety and depression in relation to this search for an independent, cohesive, and satisfying sense of self.

Underachieves selectively and takes responsibility for choices.

Recommendations

Interact on an equal level, showing empathy, genuineness, warmth, and unconditional positive regard.

Listen actively and serve as a sounding board to facilitate introspective exploration of identity issues.

Explore the probable long-term consequences of each choice to underachieve and the relevance of academic achievement to personal goals.

May be immobilized by confusion.

Use vocational interest testing to broaden or focus and explore possible career options.

Provide achieving role models and mentors willing to interact with him/her in a collegial manner.

Explore practical steps needed to reach his/her goals.

Help those who intend to work in the creative and performing arts to develop vocational survival skills.

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Type IV Underachiever: Key Issue = Conduct Disorder

Primary Characteristics

Persistently violates social norms and basic rights of others with no remorse.

Seeks power and control over other people to feel safe, and blatantly manipulates others to get what he wants. (Is more likely to be male than female.)

Is impulsive, may act out aggressively, and seeks immediate gratification.

Has very low frustration tolerance.

Distrusts and blames other people for problems.

Generally comes from abusive home environment where parental alcohol abuse is common.

Masks feelings of low self-worth with bravado.

Recommendations

Show empathy without condoning unacceptable behavior.

Calmly expose and confront self-serving attempts to manipulate other people.

Teach more appropriate ways to satisfy needs.

Teach self-control and delay of gratification.

Discover and use what they value as rewards where appropriate.

Establish a safe environment and build trust.

Provide corrective experiences.

Get professional help. Without special training you may easily get sucked into these underachievers' manipulative games.

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Type V Underachiever: Key Issue = Oppositional Behavior

Primary Characteristics

Reacts stubbornly in negative opposition to authority.

Defines self negatively in opposition to authority figures as "not me."

Recommendations

Avoid power struggles, edicts and ultimatums.

Model and teach assertive communication skills.

Persistently opposes authority and "the system," in spite of negative consequences.

Help the child understand that his/her reactive rebellion is a sign of dependence rather than independence.

Provide acceptable choices to foster appropriate decision-making and independence.

Set clear and reasonable expectations with calmly and consistently enforced consequences based on the child's behavioral choices.

Highlight the child's abilities, and provide positive verbal reinforcement of desired behaviors directly or within the child's hearing.

Often has a history of temper tantrums in the "terrible twos."

Avoid giving in to temper tantrums.

May feel frustrated by lack of opportunities for creative self-expression and independence.

Provide ample opportunities for creative expression to foster positive self-definition.

Respect the child's dreams.

Try to understand and validate the child's creatively uncommon ideas and perceptions.

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Type VI Underachiever: Key Issue = Discrimination

Primary Characteristics

Has experienced trauma resulting from discrimination because of deviance from average white, middle-class norms and traditional sex roles (e.g., African-Americans, the gifted, females, etc.).

As victim, may be blamed as though responsible for causing discrimination.

Experiences self-doubt.

Has experienced and/or fears social isolation.

Has lost belief that the world is basically safe, meaningful and predictable and that only good things happen to good people.

May hide abilities, even from self.

Recommendations

Validate his/her experiences of discrimination and feelings about it.

Explore the true nature of personal/group deviance.

Explore differing values, beliefs, and social behaviors.

Affirm personal and group identities.

Support pluralistic attitudes, and affirm perceived needs to develop dual (e.g., racial) identities for effective social integration.

May need more than one group of friends.

Establish a safe environment, and build trust.

Help develop a more internal locus of control and sense of personal security.

Model and teach assertive communication skills.

Provide achieving role models and mentors for him/her to emulate.

Confront any differences between expressed attitudes toward achievement and efforts expended.

Excerpted from OVERCOMING UNDERACHIEVEMENT, A Special BULLETIN of the Pennsylvania Association for Gifted Education (PAGE), First Printing 2-91, Revised 11-98. Editors: James LoGiudice, M.A. (1991) and Colleen Willard-Holt, Ph.D. (1998).

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