

Underachievement: What's a Parent To Do?

BY NANCY M. ROBINSON



It's 9 pm. Sam, a fifth grader, should have completed his "20 minutes" of homework hours ago. Now he is sitting at the dining room table, books open, Mom (or Dad) alternately pleading,

offering help, and threatening loss of privileges. By 10:45, the grudgingly finished homework is in the backpack, and Sam is finally in bed. Inevitably, Mom and Dad engage in a heated discussion about whether he should be helped at all, what consequences (if any) he'll get next time, and whose fault it is. Sam hears every word and feels resentful and miserable. Incidentally, he "forgets" to turn in the work the next day. Although Sam does well enough in class discussion and on tests, his zeros for homework create a failing situation. It doesn't get better.

This scenario is, alas, all too common. Academic underachievement is a particular tragedy for gifted students because of their potential not only for high achievement but for the joys of the "life of the mind." Parents are confused, frustrated, and alternately angry with their children and with the system in which they are failing. All too often, parents disagree about what to do, and that conflict is a negative for all concerned.

Underachievement comes in various sizes and degrees of misery, and it stems from a variety of causes. No single solution fits all children or families. Not until you sort out the situation can you develop a set of strategies that is likely to work. Take your time examining a variety of issues within your student, the school, your family, and the interactions among all these players.

Your Student

Gifted children almost all demonstrate a high degree of *asynchrony*, or unevenness in development, with some abilities significantly ahead of others. Especially when the

"highs" are quite high, the "lows" may still be above average, but experienced as though they were disabilities, sneaking up on a competent student and making some tasks very frustrating. A student who is quick to learn most information may, for example, accomplish some simple tasks very slowly, have to put forth special effort to remember certain kinds of material, learn less from hands-on tasks than verbal ones (or vice versa), have relative trouble initiating and/or organizing tasks, and so on. Attention deficit disorder is often missed in bright children, especially girls, who are not hyperactive but do have trouble staying on task in a busy classroom or when not doing a favorite activity. Depression can also appear at an early age and interfere with a student's ability to cope.

Start, then, by mapping your student's assets and liabilities. In my experience, the student labeled by everyone (including

poor fine motor skills that make writing and rewriting truly laborious. Sometimes there is overload. Trying to get an idea started, organize complex thoughts that are part and parcel of being gifted, monitor spelling and punctuation, stay between the lines, and meet one's own standards is just too much. Students who are able to read literature well above grade level are all-too-aware of what fine writing entails and know how far short they fall.

Still another aspect of children's development is their notion of what it means to be smart and how much they can modify their abilities. (We'll have a full column about this soon.) Students who believe that hard work is incompatible with being smart, booby trap themselves, like waiting to get started until the night before a term paper is due, skipping assignments, or refusing to review before an exam. They seldom develop a

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him/herself) as "congenitally lazy" is often experiencing undetected learning disabilities. Carefully observe activities your child does well or not so well and whether he does so willingly or unwillingly. Take stock, too, of family members' school histories and preferences. Did you love school and do well there, and if not, where did you struggle? Does one of you still read slowly and/or unenthusiastically? How's your spelling? Do you need to make lists to stay organized? Glitches tend to run in families but are often so subtle that, especially for bright children who are able to compensate by strength in something else, nobody catches on, least of all the student. A careful assessment by a psychologist familiar with gifted children may identify some differences that are getting in the way.

Writing is the most frequent concern for gifted students. Sometimes the problem is

strong "can do" sense. How much healthier are those who believe that the harder you work, the smarter you get!

The School Setting

Many gifted children find much of the work of the regular classroom to be "boring," but all underachieving children do so! Of course it is unsatisfying to endure six hours a day in which neither you nor your teacher is pleased with your efforts. Often the student has not gone far enough into a topic to find the interesting parts, or is spending so much energy struggling with or resisting the basics that there is none left for the "good stuff." Listen carefully. If "biology is boring," then perhaps the teaching style of the teacher is boring, the pace of the class is too slow, or the topic is being treated superficially. Or perhaps your child's strengths aren't a match for this subject or this teacher's style. (Are

some parts of the school day better than others? Have there been “great” years with “great” teachers and “dismal” years with “dismal” teachers?)

Look at actual assignments, listen to what other students and parents have to say, and sit in on a session or two yourself, watching the teacher with student eyes and your student with teacher eyes. Life may be going by like a slow-motion movie. Your underachieving student may have been excluded from a more appropriate class and would in fact have a hard time keeping up, given the ineffective study skills that have become a cause as well as a symptom.

Also assess the pressures of the peer group, making gifted students want above all to be like everybody else when in fact they are not. Peers who do not honor differences, an absence of other students who “talk the same language,” and a climate of anti-intellectualism can set the stage for a student to slow down enough to lose ground and bury a love of learning.

Home and Family

Finally, look closer to home. Ongoing parental conflict and stress saps much of a student’s energy. Often, the student’s own distress is disguised. Are you too invested in your child’s doing well or perhaps not enough? How is home life organized to support your student’s getting work done efficiently? Are family routines and rules predictable or nonexistent, even chaotic? Are so many other responsibilities or extracurricular activities expected that there isn’t time enough for schoolwork? Is your student alone after school?

What is the rest of the family doing while this student is supposed to be “working”? (Watching sitcoms? Playing computer games?) Is there pleasant one-to-one parent time this student can count on, safe from criticism? Is there fun in your family? Physical activity? Does the student get enough sleep?

Now What?

Once you have an inventory of possible sources of difficulty—rarely is there only one—begin a list of matching strategies. We haven’t room to discuss all the potential strategies that might help, but here are some guidelines:

- Don’t just try to get through this year and hope that things will get better.

They seldom do, unless a temporary crisis of some kind has occurred.

- Involve your student in your planning right away. In a perfect world, what would help him/her become more invested in and excited about school?
- Don’t try to change everything at once. Prioritize. Try some strategies, and focus on some parts of the picture, but don’t expect grades to shoot up (modest improvement is welcome) or generalize immediately to all subjects. A good place to start is the subject in which your student is most interested.
- Get professional help if it’s appropriate, both in diagnosing the situation and intervening, whether it be social skills



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training, occupational therapy, prescribed medication, family counseling, or psychotherapy.

- Consider a tutor for some subjects, both to help your student catch up and to neutralize the situation. Try to turn yourself from being the taskmaster/teacher into an appreciative cheering section as your student takes small steps.
- Recognize that some conditions, especially attention deficit disorder and learning disabilities, may slow your

student’s mastery of basics like organization and time management, so that you may need to stay involved longer than you’d anticipated. Otherwise, extricate yourself from the situation gradually and graciously.

Formerly underachieving students have some interesting insights about what their parents did that helped them. Emerick (1992) found that such students described their parents as:

- never using deprivation of out-of-school activities as punishment
- maintaining a positive attitude (“helped me get through some rough times”)
- seeing underachievement as temporary
- remaining calm, consistent, and objective
- placing responsibility for school performance on the student

A tall order, you say? Yes, it is. But well worth the effort! ■

Suggested Readings:

- Emerick, L. J. (1992). Academic underachievement among the gifted: Students’ perceptions of factors that reverse the pattern. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 36, 140-146.
- Reis, S. M., & McCoach, D. B. (2000). The underachievement of gifted students: What do we know and where do we go? *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 44, 152-170.
- Reis, S. M., & McCoach, D. B. (2002). Underachievement in gifted students. In M. Neihart, S. M. Reis, Nancy M. Robinson, & S. M. Moon (Eds.), *The social and emotional development of gifted children: What do we know?* (pp. 81-91). Waco, TX: Prufrock.
- Rimm, S. (1995). *Why bright kids get poor grades and what you can do about it*. New York: Crown Trade Paperbacks.

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