

GATE MIDDLE SCHOOL COUNSELING RESOURCE NEWSLETTER

November-December 2019 Edition: Underachievement

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As the GATE middle school counselor, I will be sending a monthly newsletter with tips, resources, strategies, and interventions to support GT students. This month's newsletter addresses the topic of underachievement.

Underachievement is epidemic among gifted students and it happens due to various causes at school and/or at home. Dr. Sylvia Rimm explains that "underachievers deny themselves the opportunity to build confidence because they direct their energies toward avoiding the relationship between process and outcome, between effort and achievement". The resources below provide a comprehensive approach to reversing underachievement, addressing underachievement identification, causes, types of underachievers, and strategies for reversing it.

Recommended Articles (attached):

1. **Underachievement Quiz:** <http://www.sylviarimm.com/uq.html>
2. **Bright Kids, Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It:**
http://www.sylviarimm.com/article_brightkids.html
3. **Solving the Mysterious Underachievement Problem:**
http://www.sylviarimm.com/article_mysundprob.html
4. **The Pressures Bright Children Feel And Why They May Underachieve:**
http://www.sylviarimm.com/article_pressbrightkids.html

Recommended Books:

1. **"Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades and What You Can Do About It: A Six-Step Program For Parents And Teachers"** (2008) - by Dr. Sylvia Rimm
2. **"The Underachieving Gifted Child"** (2013) - by Dr. Del Siegle



Underachievement Quiz

Parents and Teachers

Do you wonder if your child (or student) is at risk for underachievement or is underachieving? To find out, ask yourself the following questions.*

Score 1 point for each "yes" response and total the points for each section. Scores are explained after each section. (If you are a teacher, substitute "my student" for "my child.")

Section 1:

Does my child forget to do homework assignments? Does my child give up easily?

Does my child avoid competitive activities unless he/she is almost sure to win?

Does my child start working late on homework each night?

Does my child watch two or more hours of TV (or play two or more hours of video games) on school nights?

Total Points for Section 1:

- 4-5: My child has characteristics that indicate a very serious underachievement problem.
- 2-3: My child has characteristics that indicate a fairly serious underachievement problem.
- 1: My child has characteristics that indicate only minor underachievement problems.
- 0: My child has no characteristics of underachievement.

Read Chapter 1 of Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades to understand the characteristics of underachievers.

Section 2:

Was my child the center of an unusual amount of attention for the first three years of his/her life?

Were my child's parents divorced before he/she was a teenager?

Does my child have a same gender sibling who is less than three years younger or older than he/she?

Does my child want a lot of one-to-one attention?

Total Points for Section 2:

- 4-5: My child encountered very serious risks for underachievement.
- 2-3: My child encountered fairly serious risks for underachievement.
- 1: My child encountered only minor risks for underachievement.
- 0: Indicates no obvious risk factors that would lead to underachievement.

Read Chapter 2 of Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades to learn about risk factors that may initiate underachievement.

Section 3:

Is the mother or father in this child's family perfectionistic?

Does my child tend to ignore his/her mother, father, or teacher when they make requests?

Did the mother or father in this child's family not like school?

Is the mother or father in this child's family unhappy in his/her career?

Is the mother or father in this child's family disorganized?

Do the mother and father in this child's family have very different approaches to child rearing?

Underachievement Diagnosis Quiz by Dr. Sylvia Rimm

Is one parent in this child's family a more rigid disciplinarian than the other?

Do my child's grandparents live nearby and overindulge him/her?

Total Points for Section 3:

- 5-8: My child has very serious problems related to imitation of family patterns.
- 3-4: My child has fairly serious problems related to imitation of family patterns.
- 1-2: My child has minor problems related to imitation of family patterns.
- 0: My child has no apparent problems related to imitation of family patterns.

Read Chapter 3 of Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades to understand how your child or student may be unconsciously imitating problem parental attitudes or behaviors.

Section 4:**Dependent Underachiever:**

Do other children seem to pick on my child?

Is the mother or father in this child's family overprotective?

Does my child need lots of parent help with homework?

Does my child often play the class clown?

Does my child cry, whine, or complain a lot?

Dominant Underachiever:

Does my child brag a lot when he/she does something well?

Does my child often disobey his/her mother, father or teacher?

Does my child blame others or find excuses?

Does my child often convince a parent of teacher to change his/her mind?

Does my child get one parent (or teacher) to say yes after the other parent (or teacher) says no?

Total Points for Dependency:

- 4-5: My child has very serious dependency problems.
- 2-3: My child has fairly serious dependency problems.
- 1: My child has only minor dependency problems.
- 0: My child has no dependency problems.

Total Points for Dominance:

- 4-5: My child has very serious dominance problems.
- 2-3: My child has fairly serious dominance problems.
- 1: My child has only minor dominance problems.
- 0: My child has no dominance problems.

Read Chapter 4 of Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades if your child is a dependent or dominant underachiever.

Section 5:

Is my child bored with school?

Does my child seem to ask for more teacher help than most children?

Does my child tend not to finish class assignments?

Does my child disrupt the class by talking too much?

Does my child complain that schoolwork is too easy?

Is socializing the most important part of school for my child?

Does my child's class emphasize competition in almost everything?

Does my child's class attempt to eliminate all competition?

Total Points for Section 5:

- 5-8: My child has characteristics that indicate a very serious underachievement problem.
- 3-4: My child has characteristics that indicate a fairly serious underachievement problem.

Underachievement Diagnosis Quiz by Dr. Sylvia Rimm

1-2: My child has characteristics that indicate only minor underachievement problems.

0: My child has no characteristics of underachievement.

Read Chapter 5 of Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades to discover what classroom risks can cause underachievement.

****Quiz questions taken from Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades by S. B. Rimm, Great Potential Press., Scottsdale, AZ, 2008.***

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BRIGHT KIDS, POOR GRADES: AND WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT¹

My third edition of *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* celebrates more than 30 years of developing and using the Trifocal Model to reverse Underachievement Syndrome for capable children who are not working to their abilities in school. While this new edition continues to provide the same principles that have reversed underachievement for thousands of children, I've added sections that reflect information that has been gleaned from my clinical experiences, my research and that of others, and the successful experiences of other educators and parents.



As a psychologist who has worked directly with families and educators, I find that whenever I give a presentation or workshop, at least one—and sometimes more than one—teacher or parent takes me aside to thank me for making a difference for their child or student. For me, this is an awesome experience and it motivates me to continue working with underachievers as well as to disseminate my work.

Reversing underachievement is more than just about achievement. It's really about guiding children toward leading fulfilled lives. My work is for parents who value achievement in their children and for the teachers who are challenged to motivate all students. Although Underachievement Syndrome continues to be epidemic, with your help and knowledge we can motivate and inspire children to achieve, feel good about themselves, and make contributions to our society that needs their contributions. I hope you will use this information to both prevent and reverse Underachievement Syndrome in your classroom and/or in your home.

WHAT IS UNDERACHIEVEMENT SYNDROME?

What is underachievement and what causes it? There is no gene for underachievement. Instead, underachieving children seem not to have learned the process of achievement—in fact, they have learned to underachieve.



Underachievers are often disorganized, dawdle, forget homework, lose assignments, and misplace books. They daydream, don't listen, look out the window, or talk too much to other children. They have poor study skills—or none at all. They have innumerable excuses and defenses. School is boring when they are young, irrelevant when they are older. The boredom or irrelevance is constant and tends to be unrelated to the actual assignments. They blame their poor grades, which they say don't matter, on "terrible teachers." They think that drama, sports, music, or, in particular, having a good social life is more important than school work.

Underlying these children's poor study habits, weak skills, disorganization, and defensiveness is a feeling of a lack of personal control over their educational success. Underachievers aren't really certain that they can achieve their goals even if they work harder. They lack self-efficacy.

These children set their goals either too high or too low, and as a result, they guarantee failure. They want to be millionaires, professional football players, inventors of computer games, rockstars, Olympic gymnasts, or presidents; and they have magical ideas about the effort necessary to arrive at these unrealistic goals. They have not yet discovered what the word work actually means. They can't build firm self-confidence because they haven't learned perseverance or a real sense of effort.

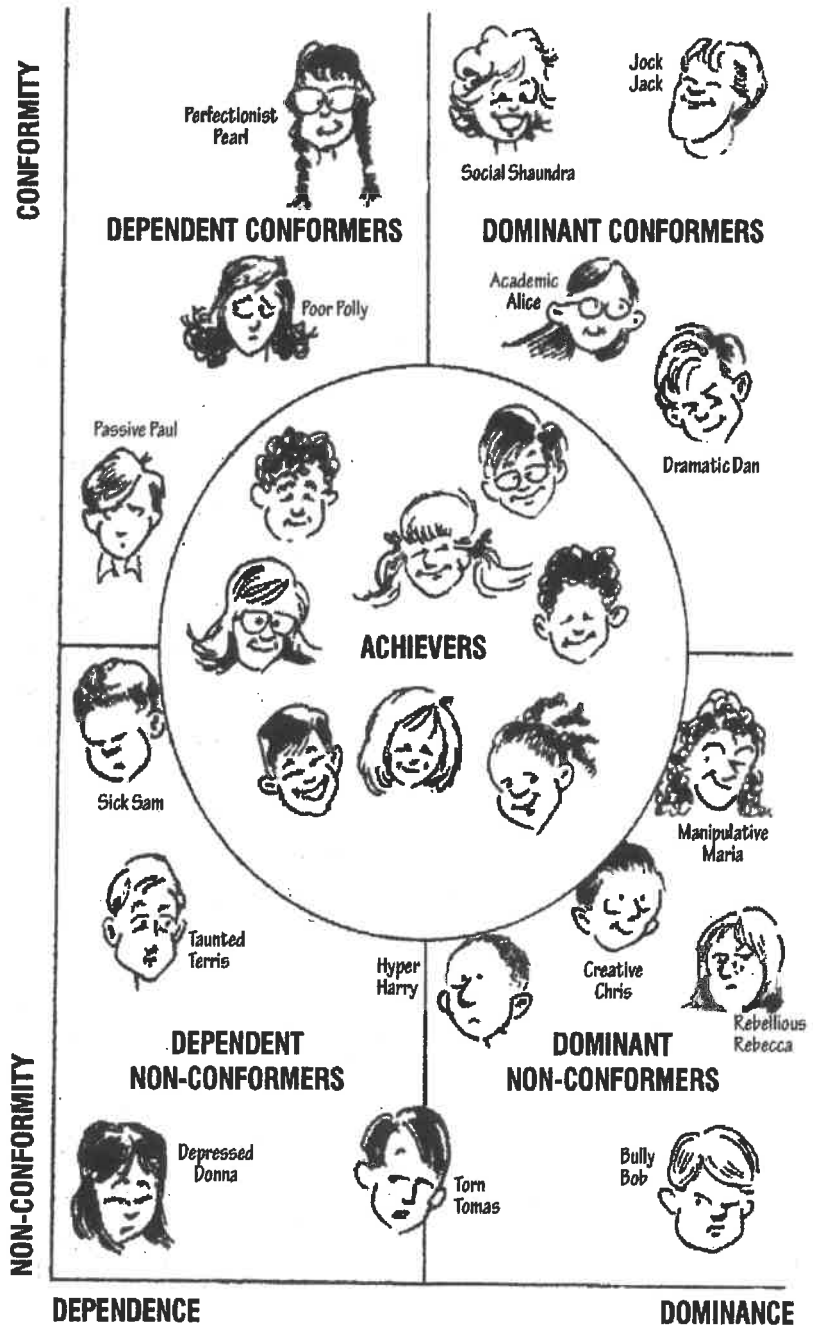
Underachievers often have highly competitive feelings, but they may not be obvious. They aspire to be winners and are poor losers. If they don't believe they can win, they may quit before they begin, or they may select only those experiences in which they are certain of victory. They are competitive, internally pressured children who have not learned to cope with defeat.

WHAT DO UNDERACHIEVERS LOOK LIKE?

Underachievers come in many varieties, and although they are truly individual, they often fit into prototypical categories. In real life, the prototypes are not pure in any one child but are blended. The Inner Circle figure from my book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades* will help you to identify if you have an underachiever in your home or classroom. These children have not learned to work hard or persevere. They have not learned to cope with competition and avoid full school effort by making excuses.



THE INNER CIRCLE OF ACHIEVERS



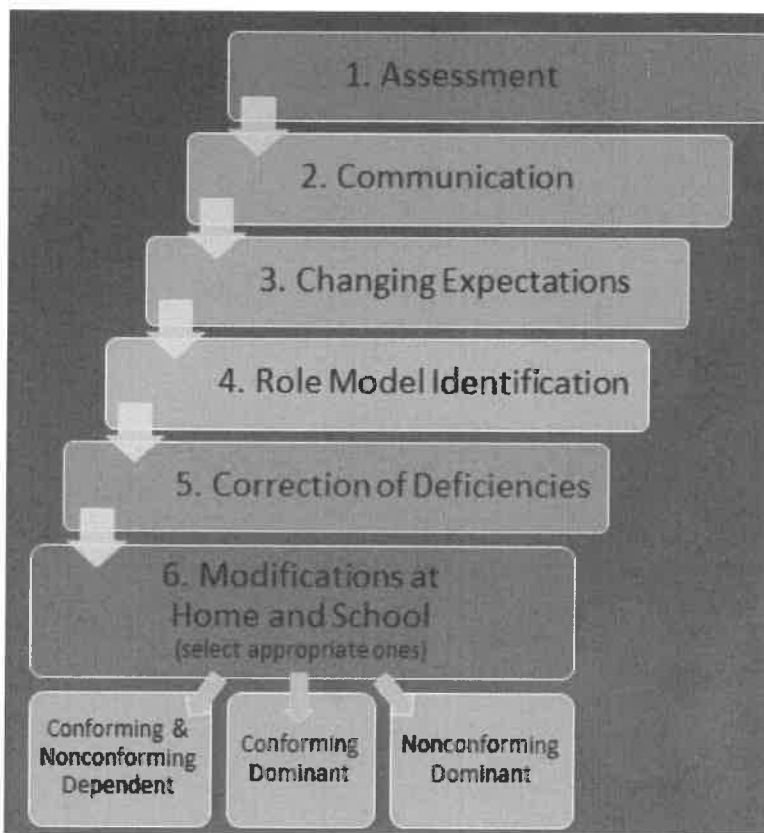
HOW YOU CAN REVERSE UNDERACHIEVEMENT SYNDROM USING THE TRIFOCAL MODEL

At Family Achievement Clinic, we are able to reverse underachievement in roughly four out of five children by using a three-pronged approach. We call it the Trifocal Model because it focuses on the child, the parents, and the school.

Many schools have also used the Trifocal Model with excellent success. It has been utilized effectively in regular school programs, programs at under performing schools, special education and gifted programs, and for children in kindergarten through Grade 12. It has also been used with college students.

The Trifocal Model includes six steps, of which the first five apply to all underachievers. In step six, which is divided into three types of underachieving children, you will select the ideas that most apply to your underachieving child or student. See the figure below illustrating the Trifocal Model. The full model and strategies are described in Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades.

TRIFOCAL MODEL FOR CURING UNDERACHIEVEMENT SYNDROME



ADAPTING THE TRIFOCAL MODEL FOR DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS



While ideally the Trifocal Model should include parent involvement, sometimes parents either refuse to get involved or are experiencing difficult life events that prevent their becoming involved. Students whose parents cannot participate in the model for reversing underachievement are defined as disadvantaged for the purpose of reversing their underachievement.

Students will need an adaptation of the Trifocal Model that a school in Colorado facetiously termed "the bifocal version" of the Trifocal Model. Most steps of the model are similar to the original Trifocal Model, but a "child advocate" substitutes for the parent reinforcement role and meets

with the student weekly to monitor progress. Also, instead of the typical homework routine that parents conduct, an after-school study club can be instituted where students complete all their homework under teacher supervision. These two modifications make the model very effective for disadvantaged students, despite the lack of active parent involvement.

STRATEGIES FOR REVERSING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Listed below are strategies from my new book, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*. Parents and teachers can select and implement those that most apply:



- Easing Perfection
- Independent Homework
- Teaching Concentration
- Goal-Directed Tutoring
- Multiple Methods for Giving Instructions
- Teaching a Growth Mindset
- Building Resilience through Biography
- Teaching Organizational Strategies
- Teaching Other Children
- Reversing Early Childhood Dominance
- Avoiding Confrontations
- Differentiating Curriculum
- Building Task Value
- Teaching Healthy Competition
- Teaching to the Emotional Needs of Students
- Organizational Skills
- Encouraging Activities with Intrinsic Interest
- Coping With Emotional Ups and Downs
- Anti-Arguing Instructions
- Giving Them Power and an Audience
- Avoiding Student Manipulations
- Changing Academic Grouping
- Helping Students Find Balance
- Appealing to Altruism

The **ALLIANCE Acrostic** briefly summarizes the strategies that can be used for reversing underachievement. Your ability to inspire and engage students, as well as your patience, is most helpful!

ALLIANCE FOR REVERSING STUDENT UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Ally with the student privately about interests and concerns.

Listen to what the student says.

Learn about what the student is thinking.

Initiate opportunities for recognition of the student's strengths.

Add experimental ideas for engaging curricular and extracurricular activities.

Nurture relationships with appropriate adult and peer role models.

Consequence reasonably but firmly if student doesn't meet commitments

Emphasize effort, independence, realistic expectations, how strengths can be used to cope with problems and extend possibilities patiently.

¹**Adapted from *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades: And What You Can Do About It* (Scottsdale, AR: Great Potential Press, 2008).**

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SOLVING THE MYSTERIOUS



Parents continually take stock of their children's school progress. Hopefully their children are making good efforts, earning positive grades, and enjoying school. For some parents, there comes a time when they realize that their children's small problems are simply not disappearing. They wonder why their children are not working to their abilities in school. They may have already heard the word "underachiever" from an earlier teacher, but they hoped their children would mature out of the problem. The parents are puzzled, and so are the children's teachers.

<< [Click here to take the Underachievement Quiz](#) >>
<< [to determine if your child is underachieving](#) >>

UNDERACHIEVEMENT IS EPIDEMIC AND ENTERS EVERY CLASSROOM AND MANY HOMES

Underachievement

Some School Causes

- Peer Pressure
- Lack of Challenge
- Conflicts with Teachers
- Unidentified Learning Disabilities
- Too Much or Too Little Competition
- A Move to a More or Less Difficult School

Some Home Causes

- Overprotectiveness
- Sibling Rivalry
- Conflict between Parents in Expectations for the Child
- Overempowerment
- Too Much or Too Little Attention
- An Anti-Work Attitude or Over Emphasis on Work
- Feelings of Pressure

Underachievement is epidemic and enters every classroom and many homes. Underachievers usually begin as apparently bright and often very verbal preschoolers, but at some point their enthusiasm for learning and their satisfactory school performance change. Symptoms of underachievement may include unfinished work, loss of homework, disorganization, disinterest in school, excuses like "I forgot," blaming others for problems, and declining grades.

Underachievement results when some things go wrong both at home and school. Underachievers deny themselves the opportunity to build confidence because they direct their energies toward avoiding the relationship between process and outcome, between effort and achievement.

DEPENDENCE AND DOMINANCE

Well-intentioned parenting mistakes frequently have the effect of destroying parenting leadership. The children learn rituals of either unusual dependence or dominance, or both. These dependent and dominant patterns begin to feel natural to children and parents alike. Parents often believe that teachers and the school structure will resolve their children's problems or that children will mature out of them. Dependent and dominant children may have practiced their control patterns in relating to adults for several years before they enter school. These patterns seem to work well for them, and they know no others. They may carry them to the classroom from home or learn them in the classroom. They continue to use them to preserve their fragile self-concepts.

The dependency pattern is often masked as insecurity, immaturity, passivity, or learning disabilities. Dependent underachievers ask for more help than they require. They may insist on having parents sit with them while they do their homework. Dominant underachievers are more vociferous in arguing about why they shouldn't have to do their work; they tend to blame teachers or parents for their problems. They like to pick and choose only the schoolwork they enjoy.

PREVENTING UNDERACHIEVEMENT

Parenting by positive expectations can be extraordinarily successful for children both in school and out. If high achievement, positive attitudes, and constructive behavior are expected and reinforced by parents, they will become internalized by the child. Parents should share with their children realistic and positive views of achievement.

Model hard work and satisfaction of accomplishment. Hard work is not enough. Hard-working parents who constantly complain about their jobs are not good role models. Children should hear their parents speak in a more balanced way about the satisfactions of achievement. Imitation of good role models is very important in the reversal of underachievement.

Voice your sincere respect for educational institutions and teachers. Children avoid work and learning if teachers are not respected by their parents. Set up a regular communication with the child's teacher.



Involve your children in developing study routines. Don't sit with your children when they study, but be interested and review work.

Disorganization is a frequent symptom of underachievement. Reasonable structure and organization are necessary for accomplishment and dealing with responsibilities.

Be consistent with your children's other parent(s) in setting goals for children. If one parent sets higher goals than the other parent, children are likely to choose the easy way out. Don't ally with your children against the other parent, no matter how subtly.

Help your children cope with competition. Explain that being best is not as important as doing their best, and

that winning and losing are temporary. Discuss effort, problem-solving strategies, creative-thinking processes, and ways of dealing with failure. "Magical" thinking, which emphasizes success by luck and without effort, causes problems for children. Children who give up easily and get by with a minimum of effort have little or no confidence in their abilities to function successfully. Children build confidence by achievement.

Encourage independence in your children without giving them more power than they can handle. Parents should be clearly in charge, although children should be able to make choices and voice opinions within limits. Encourage your children's strengths and interests. Emphasize the positive, and plan fun family activities even if family time is limited. Limit screen time, including television, video/computer games, and the Internet.

Praise children realistically with words that set goals they'll be able to achieve. "Bright," "good thinker," "kind," and "persevering" are fairer than "brilliant," "genius," "smartest," or "perfect."

Don't give up on your children. Your children need your support and a clear priority expectation of achievement. Even if it doesn't seem to have immediate

results, your children do hear you eventually.

ADDITIONAL READING

For more information about reversing the problem of underachievement, consult: **Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades-And What You Can Do About It** (Great Potential Press, Inc, 2008).

For more strategies on raising happy, achieving children, consult:

How to Parent So Children Will Learn (Great Potential Press, Inc, 2008), **See Jane Win: The Rimm Report on How 1,000 Girls Became Successful Women** (Crown Publishing, 1999) and **How Jane Won: 55 Successful Women Share How They Grew From Ordinary Girls to Extraordinary Women** (Crown Publishing, 2001)

See a related Parenting Article: **Rimm's Laws**

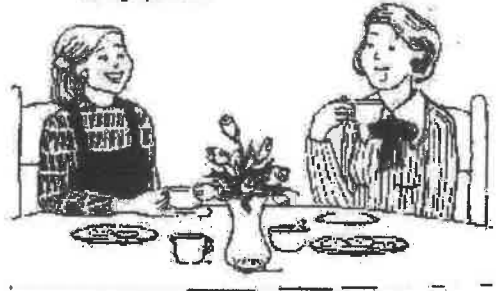
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Mom, I've been accepted into string quartet.

Great! Your hard work has really paid off!





THE PRESSURES BRIGHT CHILDREN FEEL AND WHY THEY MAY UNDERACHIEVE

Why do half of gifted children underachieve? Why are between 10 and 20 percent of high school dropouts in the very superior range of tested ability? Why do 40 percent of the top 5 percent of our high school graduates not graduate from college? What do case studies involving anxiety, suicide, and eating disorders tell us about gifted children's feelings and the pressures they feel?

THE MAIN PRESSURES

Keys to understanding children's pressures frequently come from bright adolescents who are struggling to understand their feelings. Behavioral observations by parents and teachers provide further insights into gifted children's emotional struggles.

Young adults, looking back on their own childhood, add insights that help us to understand the emotional issues that go with giftedness.

THE PRESSURE TO BE EXTRAORDINARY

The intense feeling that one must be the smartest all the time shows itself in many ways. It is the child whose waving, enthusiastic hand indicates that he will willingly monopolize class discussion with his display of brilliance, or the child who puts others down as dumb or stupid in order to feel sufficiently intelligent. It is the youth who rushes through his work because "smart" has come to mean "quick and easy," and the one who cannot get started on her writing assignment because she cannot find a topic perfect enough to write about. It is the young person who argues endlessly with parents and teachers and appears to be completely blind to another's point of view.



The wish to feel extremely intelligent is important in motivating children to learn, but when self-expectations feel impossibly high, children may invent and discover many activities to avoid learning for fear that they can't live up to those expectations. These exercises in avoidance temporarily protect them from feeling inadequate but result in many problem behaviors, adversely affect self-confidence, and may, indeed, lead to underachievement.

THE PRESSURE TO BE CREATIVE

Every reader has experienced that sense of wanting to complete a project or activity in a unique or unusual way. That is, in miniature, the pressure that children feel to be different or to do something creative. Now multiply those feelings of pressure to be different by a thousand and you may have a sense of what some children feel when they get dressed in the morning, when they write a story or composition, or when they speak up in a class discussion. The inner pressure to be different is illustrated by statements such as these: *I would like math if I could have 6 apples and 8 apples equal something different every time. I can't possibly hand my reports in on time. It always takes me longer to make them as unique as I want them to be.*

"Creative" for these children means being different and, most importantly, nonconforming. They see no area in school sufficiently unique for their infinitely



personal expressions of being different. Yet their pressure also includes the sense that they must be the most different. It is truly much like a perfectionism of creativity.

THE PRESSURE TO BE POPULAR

Parents and teachers often equate being popular with being "well-adjusted," and they see that goal as more important than being intelligent. Elementary teachers call it "good peer relationships" and typically place it ahead of intellectual challenge. If bright children internalize these messages, they often do adjust well in elementary school and do not appear socially pressured. They learn to enjoy the comforts of social acceptance, and they play down their intelligence, even minimizing their use of extensive vocabulary.

This facade of "good adjustment" brings forth a different pressure by preadolescence. By then, adjustment translates to popularity, and becoming peer-adjusted forces children into a value system that may differ significantly from what their parents and teachers earlier described as social adjustment. Depending on the peer environment, the popular message may involve positive activities, or it may mean alcohol, drugs, and sexual promiscuity. Popularity may also mean to not get as or be excited about learning. In some schools, African-American children who are too interested in learning may be chastised as "acting white," and Native Americans students may be called "apples" (red on the outside, white on the inside).



There is a fine line that divides pressure and motivation. Pressure takes place when children don't believe they can achieve expected outcomes. Motivation occurs when children have learned the process that leads to high, but realistic outcomes. Stated more simply, *motivation means that children believe their hard work will achieve results.* Rimm's Law #2, which summarizes the appropriate achievement relationship, follows:

Intellectually gifted children who rarely have challenge in the early years of school may equate smart with easy. They don't see a connection between effort and outcome. The connection between effort and social outcomes doesn't exist for adolescents who are called "nerds," "dweebs," or "brainiacs" if they make effort, and whose peers put them down for that effort. It isn't surprising that children protect themselves in defensive ways by not completing assignments, blaming teachers for their problems, acting "cool," skipping classes, and generally underachieving. Gifted and creative children internalize pressures easily. These may cause school problems and mental health problems for them. Understanding these pressures is the first step to helping them use their capabilities.



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