

# Underachievement

*Every human mind is a great slumbering power until awakened by a keen desire and by definite resolution to do.*

-Edgar F. Roberts -

When gifted children enter school, parents begin to be concerned about their children working up to their potential. Underachievement in school is perhaps the most common motivational problem parents and teachers observes.

It is important to recognize that underachievement is a matter of degree. All people achieve less than they are capable of at times. The serious concern must be reserved for the child who habitually responds to school by not working up to his/her ability.

What are some characteristics of underachieving children? According to Sylvia Rimm, director of the Family Achievement Clinic at Metro Health Medical Center in Cleveland, Ohio, and clinical professor of psychiatry and pediatrics at Case Western Reserve School of Medicine, underachievers tend to be disorganized; forget homework; lose assignments; misplace books; daydream; don't listen; have poor study skills; some are slow and perfectionist while others work fast, more concerned with finishing quickly than doing quality work. These children may be lonely and withdrawn or bossy with a short temper. Underachievers have innumerable defenses ("school is boring," "school is irrelevant," "teacher is terrible," "the tests are wrong," "I'm not really that bright," "you're expecting too much from me").

The child who is ready and wants to learn will do so provided he/she has the emotional maturity and opportunity. The focus for the underachiever needs to first be on discovering what is blocking him/her from being ready to learn. Here are some common reasons for a lack of motivation on the part of gifted children according to Dr. James Webb, author of *Guiding the Gifted Child*:

1. It's easier to drop out than to fulfill others' expectations.
2. It's a coping behavior to get teachers and parents off his/her back.
3. It's a way of rebelling where his/her parents cannot win if he/she goes on strike in a passive way.
4. It avoids risk-taking since the child can always say he/she did really want to try, and thus can save his/her ego.
5. It can help the child gain acceptance from less-academic peers.
6. It can be an expression of depression, perhaps of feeling misunderstood.
7. It can be a way to get others to help him/her and to give the child the attention he/she wants.

Serious underachievement problems need professional help. Here are a few practical suggestions for less serious problems:

1. Realize that your child is not unmotivated, but rather not motivated in the ways you want him/her to be.
2. Communicate your desire to understand, and that you care about his/her feelings and concerns.
3. Use the concept of "successive successes" toward the desired result. Praise, reinforce and reward movement toward the desired goal helping the child to "reward himself/herself" as well.
4. Goal setting must be learned and must include both attainable short-term as well as long-term goals.
5. Parents need to honestly keep in touch with their own values and goals and be willing to reassess and change them as needed.
6. Build on the relationship you have with your child. Share your feelings about his/her accomplishments. Convey our trust in the child's ability to act intelligently and responsibly. Model positive motivation as you share activities together.