

Underachievement

Definition

Underachievement is defined as a discrepancy between a child's school performance and his or her actual ability. The word "underachiever" should not be a label placed on a child, but rather a definition used to describe a child's current progress in school. A child who is underachieving has a significant gap between his or her ability and what he or she is actually achieving at school. There are four common pressure areas underachieving students frequently experience:

- Pressure to be the smartest
- Pressure to be different
- Pressure to be popular
- Pressure to be loyal to peer group or family

Children are more likely to be achievers if their parents join together with the school to give the same clear and positive message about school effort and expectations. Children become oppositional if one adult allies with them against a parent or a teacher.

Characteristics of Achievers

- Goal orientated
- Positive thinker
- Confident
- Resilient
- Self disciplined
- Demonstrates pride in abilities
- Proficient in basic skills
- Takes safe and appropriate risks

Characteristics of Underachievers

- Disruptive or quiet in class
- Poor attendance
- Low self-esteem
- Feels like a victim
- Low motivation
- Poor organizational skills
- Immature
- Not goal oriented
- Procrastinates
- Aggressive with peers
- Under challenged
- Depressed, sad
- Tense, anxious
- "Lazy"
- Tired or sleepy

How to Help an Underachiever

1. Create an environment that promotes achievement and motivation. Provide high but reasonable expectations.
2. Avoid power struggles. Try not to impose your will on your child. Working together produces results.
3. Developing a positive relationship with a parent and/or teacher is the most important factor to reverse underachievement.
4. Provide stimulation, interest, and challenge. Show how learning relates to the “real world.”
5. Establish appropriate goals and sub-goals. Emphasize effort rather than a grade.
6. Build on gradual success. Support small steps.

Up From Underachievement, by Diane Heacox

Reasons for Underachievement

- It's an attempt to fit in with peers; high achievement is not valued by classmates.
- The assigned tasks just do not seem interesting, relevant, or important to the child's life.
- It's an expression of the child's desire to show independence.
- It's a way for the child can gain power by taking control away from parent and/or teachers. To gain control a child may express anger against parents or teachers by going on “strike.”
- It's sometimes easier to drop out than to go along with others' demands.
- A child may fear that success will result in pressures; other will expect more and more.
- It's a way to get attention from parents and teachers.
- It avoids risk-taking; saying “I really didn't try,” can save face.
- It's an expression of dependency to get others to give attention and sympathize.
- There is too much emphasis put on extrinsic incentives for achievement rather than the intrinsic rewards of learning.
- The child is unable to think about future plans or goals.
- The child has poor study habits or has not learned ways to organize material.
- The child is distractible and impulsive, which hinders persistent academic work.
- The child is disheartened because of a learning disability or learning deficit.
- The child is preoccupied with concerns, such as family matters.
- The child feels misunderstood, not valued, discouraged, has a low self-concept or depression.

Patterns of perfectionism, unusual sensitivity, extreme introversion, over-commitment to activities, and feelings of loneliness and alienation are common feelings for some gifted children to experience, especially in adolescence. Because of these characteristics, some gifted children do appear to be more at risk for social and emotional difficulties. If you see any of these characteristics at an extreme level, please make sure to let the school know about your observations. As a parent, if you feel these behaviors are to the point where you are concerned for the health and well being of your child, you may want to contact your child's physician and share your concerns.

A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children, by Webb