



Advocacy for Gifted and Talented in New York

The Underachieving Gifted Child

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What do you do when the parent-teacher conference concludes with, "Your child is not working up to potential?" How do you help when your youngster, who has shown exceptional performance on some measure of intelligence, comes home with unsatisfactory ratings on his/her report card? Why does this youngster, who seems to be interested in everything that happens on weekends and holidays, find nothing worthy of attention in school?

The reasons for underachievement are complex and vary from learner to learner. Studies conducted in the 1970's, however, identified some patterns of behavior in each of the members of the child/parent/teacher triad that elicit underachievement.

Parents who:

- set unrealistic goals for their gifted youngsters
- show concern with educational progress, but pay little attention to emotional development
- engage in limited sharing ideas, affection, trust, approval
- demonstrate inconsistent handling of discipline.

Gifted students who:

- perceive their worth to be synonymous with achievement
- feel unable to meet expectations of parents and teachers, and see themselves as failures
- have poorly developed work habits often lack basic skills to use as academic tools have varied and numerous interests that may extend unmanageably into too many areas
- may lack peer support and fear risking their popularity

Teachers who:

- use threats, ridicule, warnings, and ultimatums
- rarely show warmth or acceptance
- are threatened by students' intelligence
- do not present academically challenging material

There are two types of underachievement. "Situational" refers to underachievement that occurs in response to a particularly difficult home problem or clash with a particular teacher. In this case, counseling should be sought.

"Chronic" underachievement is defined by a recurring pattern resistant to remediation. (The literature cautions us to have thorough physical and learning diagnostic tests to rule out both organic origins and learning disabilities as sources of underachievement.)

Most psychologists and educators studying the phenomenon of underachieving gifted learners recommend the earliest possible identification and treatment. Treatment consists of counseling and a collaborative effort between home and school.

Some suggestions for parents to augment counseling:

1. Parents need information about giftedness. A child can be intellectually gifted and experience isolation, conflict, and failure in school. A list of recommended reading follows this article.
2. Parents need to know that anywhere from 15% to 50% of the gifted population can be identified as underachievers. Use the AGATE Parent Connection Network to help establish an emotional informational support group.
3. Get involved. Volunteer to assist in the school library, with special programs or events. Parent involvement sends a message to the child that you value the child's total school experience (i.e. beyond academics).
4. Contribute time and/or talent. If the child can accept your presence in the classroom, serve as a resource person for a special unit of study. If not, arrange field trips.
5. Be available to share information about your child that will help the teacher get a more complete picture of his/her strengths and vulnerabilities.
6. Call the teacher with questions or concerns about school performance rather than communicating your anxiety to the child.
7. Refrain from daily interrogations about progress in school. Encourage physical development.
8. Encourage the child to explore the literature on self-understanding. Suggest reading biographies of "people who were different" (i.e. Einstein, Churchill, Edison, Isadora Duncan, Eleanor Roosevelt).
9. Create a home atmosphere that encourages communication and is nonjudgmental about sharing ideas.

Some suggestions for the teacher of a gifted or talented child:

1. Accept that the child has a history of perceived failure. His/her alienation may be demonstrated through problem behavior that is aggressive (disruptive) or withdrawn (passive, daydreaming). These are avoidance behaviors that consistently lead to incomplete work.
2. Get information in order to identify and remove obstacles or emotional blocks that may interfere with the youngster's adjustment and achievement. During the first weeks of school the curriculum should exclude experiences strongly identified with failure.
3. The first priority is to get the youngster interested and reacting positively to the school environment. The critical ingredients are:
 - a teacher who is supportive and accepting
 - a classroom that conveys a student-centered philosophy by providing a sense of freedom to explore, express, and experiment without fear of failure, rejection, or being ignored
 - opportunities to interact with classmates in stimulating intellectual activities through large and small group participation

- a curriculum that is challenging and rewarding in arts, sciences, and social studies. This curriculum should be process oriented, emphasizing skills, and providing opportunities for creativity, divergent thinking, critical evaluation, and self-expression. The curriculum must also enable the child to gain self understanding, self confidence, and self acceptance. The child must be guided in developing more constructive ways of handling social and academic pressure. S/he needs opportunities for decision making and self direction.

This very special problem calls for a very special teacher. It is essential that the teacher of an underachieving gifted child have a healthy self concept and a genuine appreciation for and understanding of the qualities of giftedness. Only in a meaningful partnership between parent and teacher can we hope to effect change for the child.

For further information:

Clark, B. (1988). Growing up gifted. (3rd Edition). Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill.

Gallagher, J. (1975). Teaching the gifted child. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.

Horowitz, F. & O'Brien, M. (1985). The gifted and talented. Hyattsville, MD: American Psychological Association.

Mallinson, T. (1972). Gifted underachievers. Toronto, Ontario: Ontario Board of Education Research Department .

Perkins, J. & Wicas, E. (1971). Counseling bright underachievers. Gifted Child Quarterly, 18,273-278.

Whitemore, J.R. (1980). Giftedness, conflict and under achievement. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.