

Underachievement and the Gifted Child:

“Why is my child failing classes when he is so smart?”

There is perhaps no situation more frustrating for parents or teachers than living or working with children who do not perform as well academically as their potential indicates. These children are labeled as underachievers. At what point does underachievement end and achievement begin? Is a gifted student who is failing mathematics while doing superior work in reading an underachiever? Does underachievement occur suddenly, or is it better defined as a series of poor performances over an extended time period? Certainly, the phenomenon of underachievement is as complex and multifaceted as the children to whom this label has been applied. The characteristic most frequently and consistently found among gifted underachievers is low self-esteem. Related to this is their sense of low personal control over their own lives. If they fail at a task, they blame their lack of ability. If they succeed, they may attribute their success to luck, accepting responsibility for failure but not for success. Students with low-self esteem tend to have avoidance behavior, rebel against authority, expectations of low grades and perfectionism. These behaviors, among others, serve as defense mechanisms for the underachieving child. Underachieving children protect their self-esteem by avoiding effort and achievement in order to justify their failure. Some of the characteristics associated with gifted underachievers are poor study habits, problems with peers, home and school discipline problems and a tendency to exhibit an “I don’t care attitude.” They tend to forget homework, dawdle, lose assignments and misplace books; they daydream, don’t listen, look out the window or talk too much to other children. Other underachievers are more concerned about finishing first than doing quality work and will hurry through assignments and make careless errors. Children are not born underachievers. It is a learned behavioral pattern, which can be reversed. The reversal of this pattern takes the combined efforts of parents, teachers, and the student understanding and applying proper strategies and techniques. Contact the gifted facilitator in your school for assistance if you suspect your child is an underachiever.

Rimm, Sylvia, *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades*, 1995.