

# Helping the Underachieving

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Much of the material on this page was culled from 1994 conversations with Prof. George Sheperd, University of Oregon.

## In General:

- Underachievers often have un-met needs for "Safety and Security" or "Love and Belongingness." These are part of humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Accordingly, what is generally thought of as achievement cannot be reached until these lower level needs are met.
- Underachievers are under constant stress which must be reduced. Competition, grades, evaluations, reward/punishment systems, are some sources of stress.
- Stress and underachievement symptoms can be identical to symptoms of ADD/ADHD.

## Parent and teacher behavior that contributes to social-emotional problems and underachievement:

- Failing to communicate respect.
- Trying to maintain superiority.
- Setting unrealistic goals (too high or too low).
- Using threats or ultimatums.
- Acting cold and impersonal, rarely showing warmth and acceptance.
- Setting predictable, routine schedules; rigid structure.

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*"The manifestations of this potential [giftedness] are easily misunderstood, since they might appear as characteristics which the psychological community deems neurotic. . . we risk losing our most morally advanced individuals." - L.K. Silverman in Issues in Affective Development of the Gifted*

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*"Underachieving gifted [UAG] students do not belong in classes for the emotionally disturbed. . . Behavior management is not philosophically in line with the approach taken in UAG." - P. L. Supplee in Reaching the Gifted Underachiever*

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## Recommendations and considerations:

- Provide cooperative, non-competitive social climate.
- Decrease comparisons with high achievers.
- Be relevant to kid's needs and interests
- Involve kid in problem solving and decision making.
- Broad, open curriculum.
- Process (not product) orientation, emphasizing skill, ability and success.
- Encourage and accept divergent thinking, creativity, analysis, synthesis, and self-expression.
- Incorporate interpersonal relations, self-understanding, and study of society.
- Allow self-selection, self-direction, self-evaluation.
- Discuss ways to handle social situations.
- Discuss coping mechanisms for everyday life.
- Accelerate socialization. Social peers may be same age, but intellectual peers may be older students or adults, and emotional peers may be rare.
- Develop self-esteem.
- Gifted kids should not be expected to have higher grades.
- Students need teachers with a "How can I help you best learn?" not a "Do what I say!" approach.
- A gifted kid's intellectual peers are in higher grades. His social peers may be in the same grade. But because of "keen insights into the inequities of life . . . his emotional peers are few and far between." (James Delisle) A so-called "peer group" at school

may just be a temporary pigeonholing based on age.

- It is not the duty of gifted kids to conform if they become inattentive or rebellious in school. Gifted kids will not turn-off to learning, only to school. "If the teacher takes the care to individualize the curriculum, then discipline will take care of itself." It is never necessary to bore a kid at school. "The real problem exists within the structure, not within the child." (James Delisle)
- "Multipotentiality" describes ability in a variety of areas. When someone has skills, interests or abilities in many areas, making choices about both one's immediate behavior and about one's future plans becomes difficult.
- Frequent time-outs are cruel, total rejection.
- Teachers and parents need to teach kids that conformity is a question of ethics and common sense which balances personal freedom with social acceptance. Conformity is a choice relative to personal values and social values.
- Playing isn't just fun, it is also the serious work of active and creative minds.
- It is not the messages sent, but the messages received and interpreted by a person that influences his self-concept. When teachers or parents use sarcasm, or when kids pick up subtleties and double meanings, the intended message is lost.
- Kids need to be told point-blank that they are accepted, loved, respected and trusted, and the message must be backed up by *actually being treated with acceptance, love, respect, and trust*. You don't have to approve of everything a kid does, but you must accept it and go on from there - using planning, cooperative problem solving, and honest and open communication. **It is not easy!**

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