

What Makes Our Kids Underachievers?

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Like many other questions asked about education, the question: "What is underachievement in reading?" is a question with neither a simple nor a single answer. Factors that can lead to underachievement in reading may be grouped into these four areas: physical, environmental, emotional, and intellectual factors.

Physical Factors

Every child entering school needs to be examined for sight and hearing problems, and parents need to be encouraged to have their children examined for problems earlier than that. Any persistent or chronic illness can also affect reading negatively. For example, students with asthma and/or allergies may miss many days of school due to illness; therefore, they may have problems learning to read because that have missed lessons on specific skills. Asthma doesn't make you an underachiever, but missing too many days of school can.

Environmental Factors

At least three environments--school, home, and society or culture--can affect learning.

- **School:** Sometimes, poor or inappropriate instruction causes underachievement in reading: too much of this or that kind of instruction, too few options, and not enough variety of approach. Teachers need to gear their teaching to the ways that individual students learn. What works well for one child does not always work well for other children. One child may seem to be a "natural reader," but another child may need to come at reading by way of music or sports, or in solitude, or in a structured setting.
- **Home:** Children become "ready" at home to read in school. Children who see parents and others reading, and who are surrounded by books and magazines in a print-rich environment, are themselves more likely to read.
- **Many children** grow up in homes in which the only available reading is *TV Guide*. More fortunate ones grow up with books present and being read on a regular basis. Being read to--and read with--helps children make the connection between the spoken word and the written word.
- **Society:** The major cultural factor that works against reading is poverty. Since so much energy must be devoted to securing the basic needs of food and shelter, poor children may not have had many early literacy experiences. Self-reliant children of poverty who have learned to take care of themselves at an early age, may find it difficult to adjust to school rules and procedures, reading groups, and silent reading.

Emotional Factors

Emotions and underachievement in reading are a chicken-and-egg question of cause and effect: Does underachievement cause emotional problems, or do emotional problems lead to underachievement? To be sure, both situations happen. Too often, emotional problems are a result of underachievement (or of failure). Children who do not do well in school may feel ignored; they feel out-of-place; they feel dumb. Similarly, some emotional problems lead to underachievement. For example, children who are under stress for any of many reasons may not be able to learn readily. Teachers and parents need to be alert to the possibility of more serious emotional problems and, in that case, seek professional help.

Intellectual Factors

Lack of intelligence does cause underachievement in reading and in other aspects of education. It is easy to say that underachievers are "just not smart enough," but the statement is rarely true. Almost every underachiever can do better, given the right kind of help.

Overcoming Underachievement

The most important single piece of information to know is that underachievement in reading is not usually caused by any single factor. Most often, underachievement is a result of several factors working together against a child's achievement in reading--a lack of reading readiness from home, a discouragement in the classroom, the emotional static that goes with poor performance, and the terrible resulting untrue conclusion: "I'm just too dumb to learn."

Underachievement in reading develops over a long time, usually starting with an early failure in learning to read, so it cannot be

corrected over night, probably not in one grade. A child who is struggling with underachievement in reading needs long-term commitments of help and support from parents, teachers, and peers.

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