

## Achievement: Life on the Fringes

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“Do you feel my child is working to his/her potential?” A simple, yet poignant question. Why? Because whatever the response, it is rich information about your child’s current situation. If the teacher states, “Yes,” and you feel or know otherwise, then you can be fairly certain your child has stepped onto the slippery slope of a condition we call underachievement. If your child’s teacher states, “No,” then you are a bit ahead of the game and can join forces to implement a plan—a plan of attack.

*A Plan of Attack?* Isn’t that a bit combative? Yes. Combative to the condition.

While it may be convenient to pin underachievement on the wrong school, class, teacher, instructional methodologies, or pedagogy...the truth is that no one issue will cause a child to *choose* underachievement, and school environment alone won’t do it either. And, the word is *choose*. Overtly or covertly, a student chooses this response.

So what is underachievement; how is it defined? Reis and McCoach (2000) assert that “Underachievers are students who exhibit a severe discrepancy between *expected achievement* (as measured by standardized tests, assessments, etc.) and *actual achievement* (as measured by grades and teacher evaluations).”<sup>1</sup>

When districts are no longer identifying or providing services for gifted students, and annual standardized achievement tests are in transition, how can one know the marker of expected achievement for their child? Watch and listen. Non-traditional identification is powerful. How does your child order and make sense of his world? What is the level of depth of the questions she is asking? What connections is she making? Is he intuiting solutions to complex problems? Is there discrepancy in the level of work he is doing at home versus the classroom? How would you compare her abilities to age-mates and grade level curriculum from an academic, intellectual, social and emotional perspective? If you are fortunate to have assessment of cognitive abilities and/or academic achievement, this too will provide powerful information as you advocate on behalf of your child.

*Choose.* Why would a child choose to underachieve? Research supports that this is a complex phenomenon and it typically stems from a multitude of interwoven causes—a

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<sup>1</sup> Pagnani, A. R. (2008, September). Gifted underachievement: Root causes and reversal strategies. A practical handbook for guidance counselors and teachers. *The Summer Institute for the Gifted Newsletter*.

perfect storm of factors converging over time. While the idiosyncratic nature of these factors will look different in every child, the root causes seem to fall into distinct categories of a combination of school, family, and personal challenge factors.<sup>2</sup>

A young girl of 8 years scores in the top .01% of the population on an IQ test, yet her parents and teachers see little evidence of her advanced reasoning ability in the classroom. She used to be a precocious learner but now seems to have perfected the art of blending into the social situation of the classroom.

An 11 year-old boy who scores in the profoundly gifted range has started skipping school. He finds the work and his teachers “mind numbing” and has not found any intellectual peers or friends since transferring from elementary to a large middle school this year. He is receiving D’s and F’s at the close of the first quarter of 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

A highly gifted 16 year-old girl became increasingly depressed and detached by the social dynamics of high school. Once a straight A student, her grades plummeted to C’s and D’s. She left high school halfway through her junior year and finished her courses at a local community college.

These are all children of parents I have talked with over the past few weeks.

In a publication by The Centre for Talented Youth, Ireland,<sup>3</sup> Whybra identified the two major needs of gifted and talented children as being recognition of their abilities and understanding of their social and emotional needs. In allowing gifted children to maximize their potential, four needs must be secured:

- To face appropriate academic challenge
- To feel valued by their education system
- To find a peer group
- To be accepted as an individual

They further discuss research that demonstrates when a child encounters material that is not challenging the brain fails to release appropriate levels of dopamine, noradrenalin and serotonin, all of which are required for learning. Externally, this manifests as apathy. In

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<sup>2</sup> Pagnani, A. R. (2008, September). Gifted underachievement: Root causes and reversal strategies. A practical handbook for guidance counselors and teachers. *The Summer Institute for the Gifted Newsletter*.

<sup>3</sup> Dublin City University, The Centre for Talented Youth, Ireland. <http://www.dcu.ie/ctyi/why-identify.shtml>

addition, in a space where children feel intimidated, threatened or rejected, an excess of noradrenalin is produced and results in a “fight-flight” response. This can manifest itself in the form of either misbehavior or withdrawal. They go on to state that this response is neither intentional nor invented. It is a natural response when the brain’s primary response is self-protection instead of learning.

The actions to reverse underachievement in gifted students are as complex as the condition itself. A combination of academic and counseling approaches may be necessary to begin the reversal process.

As parents, our society can undermine our own intuitive understanding of our children and their needs. We are continually bombarded with “Ten steps to...” or “How to...” from experts and professionals who offer presentations, write books and articles, and post on social and mass media. Their messages are as helpful and inspiring as they are confusing and anxiety provoking. In the end, you know your child. While it would be convenient to classify a child and follow a lock-step approach to any challenges the child is facing, this is not likely. We find that these suggestions are merely that—suggestions. We may try them if they seem like a close fit to what our child is experiencing. And then we watch, we listen, and we modify our approach.

In the words of one wise advisor, *“We must have faith in the child—we are gardeners (growing the fruit)—not manufacturers (canning the fruit)—children will turn out well if we unconditionally support and encourage them.”*

Ask for help. And trust yourself. Most of us no longer have the generational guidance of the past. We are operating in more fast-paced and transitional communities. The parent-school relationship must be nurtured. By reaching out to teachers, administrators, and counselors, as well as by looking within, we are modeling resourcefulness and collaboration. These are skills that our children will need to make connections about the relevance of what they are learning today, and the impact it will have on their future selves as they continue their journeys into adulthood.

*About the author: Ann Smith serves as Parent Chair on the executive board of directors for California Association for the Gifted, and she previously served two terms as Parent Representative for the Bay Area Region. Ann is Co-Founder and Executive Director of Gifted Support Center, which offers assessments, consultations, support groups and resources for parents of gifted children. She also serves on the Board of Trustees for Odyssey Middle School for the Academically Gifted and Talented in San Mateo, CA and is a Co-Chair for the bi-annual Innovative Learning Conference at The Nueva School in Hillsborough, CA.*