

# Addressing Underachievement in Gifted Learners



Jennifer Ritchotte, Ph.D.  
University of Northern Colorado

# Questions You May Have

- What does underachievement look like for a gifted child?
- How does a child get identified as having an issue with underachievement?
- What causes a child to underachieve?
- Is a child still “gifted” if he/she underachieves?
- What can I do to help?

# Gifted Individuals: NAGC's Definition

“Gifted individuals are those who demonstrate outstanding levels of aptitude (defined as an exceptional ability to reason and learn) or competence (documented performance or achievement in top 10% or rarer) in one or more domains. Domains include any structured area of activity with its own symbol system (e.g., mathematics, music, language) and/or set of sensorimotor skills (e.g., painting, dance, sports).”

# Further...

**“The development of ability or talent is a **lifelong process**. It can be evident in young children as exceptional performance on tests and/or other measures of ability or as a rapid rate of learning, compared to other students of the same age, or in actual achievement in a domain. **As individuals mature through childhood to adolescence, however, achievement and high levels of motivation in the domain become the primary characteristics of their giftedness.** Various factors can either enhance or inhibit the development and expression of abilities.”**

# Dispositions of Gifted Students Toward Learning

- There are basically 4:
  1. Passion player
  2. Hard worker
  3. Easy street
  4. Underachiever

*Adapted from the work of Dr. Julia Roberts*

*“The Passion Player”  
Have you known this child?*



I am passionate about learning. I can see the value of what I am doing in my classes. I can't wait until we talk about cellular biology in science. I think about college a lot and wonder what I will become when I grow up.

*“The Hard Worker”  
Have you known this child?*



I have that biology test on Wednesday and the quiz for Algebra I on Thursday. I need to study hard to make my mom and dad proud of me. I hope Mr. Smith likes the paper that I turned in today.

*“Easy Street”*

*Have you known this child?*



I did well on that test even though I can't remember the last time I had to study for one, or even opened the textbook. I will finish this year with all good grades like every other year.



I can't keep up with all the other kids in my class. No matter how hard I study I am never going to get an A on that test. There is always someone who gets a better grade. Even though they say I am so smart I don't understand why I have to work so hard to get the grade—so why try?

My teachers hate me. I am not going to get all As even though I can just to please them. I don't see how I will ever use anything their teaching to help me become a doctor. I am tired of not knowing if my friends really like me or if they are using me to get good grades.

My mother is always nagging about getting my work done while Dad is oblivious because of work. If I hear one more time, "Why can't you just be like your older brother I am going to scream!" I am so tired or hearing how I can be anything I want if I just try.



***"The Underachiever" ... Do You Know This Child?***

# Identifying Gifted Underachievement

- Gifted underachievement is characterized by a severe discrepancy between *expected* achievement and *actual* achievement.
  - *Expected* achievement is measured by standardized achievement test scores or cognitive or intellectual ability assessments.
  - *Actual* achievement is measured by class grades and teacher evaluation.

# Whitmore's Checklist

If the student exhibits ten or more of the listed traits, several that are asterisked, individual intelligence testing is recommended to establish whether he or she is a gifted underachiever.

- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Poor class test performance.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Achieving at or below grade level expectations in one or all of the basic skill areas; reading, language arts, mathematics.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Daily work frequently incomplete or poorly done.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Superior comprehension and retention of concepts when interested.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Vast gap between qualitative level of oral and written work.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Exceptionally large repertoire of factual knowledge.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Vitality of imagination: creative.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Persistent dissatisfaction with work accomplished, even in art.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Seems to avoid trying new activities to prevent imperfect performance; evidences perfectionism, self-criticism.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Shows initiative in pursuing self-selected projects at home.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Has a wide range of interests and possibly special expertise in an area of investigation and research.
- \_\_\_\_\_ \* Evidences low self-esteem in tendencies to withdraw or be aggressive in the classroom.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Does not function comfortably or constructively in a group of size.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Shows acute sensitivity and perceptions related to self, other and life in general.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Tends to set unrealistic self-expectations: goals too high or too low.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Dislikes practice work or drill for memorisation and mastery.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Easily distracted; unable to focus attention and concentrate efforts on tasks.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Has an indifferent or negative attitude towards school.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Resists teacher efforts to motivate or discipline behaviour in class.
- \_\_\_\_\_ Has difficulty in peer relationships; maintains few friendships.

# Characteristics of Gifted Underachievers

- Low self-concept/self-efficacy/self-esteem\*
- More socially than academically oriented
- May use defense mechanisms
- Often do not exhibit goal directed behavior
- May avoid competition
- May appear passive-aggressive
- May appear rebellious or antisocial
- May fear success

# Characteristics Continued

- May have poor coping skills
- May attribute successes or failures to outside forces
- May avoid difficult tasks in order to protect their conception of their ability
- May become vulnerable to depression
- May be uninvolved in school activities
- May have a negative attitude toward school
- May possess poor self-regulation strategies
- May be anxious or impulsive

LEWIS AND CLARK SET OUT ON THEIR EXPEDITION IN WHAT YEAR, CLASS?

HOLY FARTS! NOT... I KNOW THE ANSWER!



BUT RAISING MY HAND COULD UNDERMINE MY IMAGE OF A LOOF COOLNESS. TIME TO DEPLOY THE SADISTIC-TEACHER-TRAP BY JUST SITTING STILL...



...AND LOOK LIKE I DON'T WANT TO BE CALLED ON

HMM... HOW ABOUT YOU, PANAG?

BINGO!



UM... RIGHT!

UNDERACHIEVEMENT ISN'T FOR THE WEAK



WWW.NON-SECUTUR.COM

WWW.NON-SECUTUR.COM

WWW.NON-SECUTUR.COM

WWW.NON-SECUTUR.COM



"Mr. Wickers called me 'gifted' in front of the whole class. I'm ruined."

# Causes of Underachievement



# Home

- Parenting techniques may be inconsistent.
  - One parent may emerge as the disciplinarian and the other as a protector
  - Parents may be overly lenient or overly strict – or may vacillate between the two
- There may be an overemphasis on accomplishments/products
- Appropriate behavior may not be modeled by caregivers
- “Referential speaking” is commonplace

# School

- The child may have accurate/inaccurate perceptions of teachers and school environment (e.g., All my teachers hate me; I am alone at this school.).
- He/she may express discontentment for teachers, school, and assignments.
- He/she may complain about a lack of challenge.

# Peers

- The child's behavior, attitude, or vocabulary changes when peers are present/not present.
- There is a difference between answers given in class and answers on homework.
- The child is disinterested in working with partners and/or group work.

# Self-Efficacy

- The child doubts his/her abilities.
- The child questions his/her placement in g/t classes or a g/t program.
- The child fears failure and may procrastinate.
- The child is fearful of taking risks.

# Self-Regulation

- The child may appear disorganized.
- He/she may set unrealistic schedules or goals.
- He/she may use ineffective study methods.

# Task Meaningfulness

- The child may not see relevance in the curriculum.
- The child may wish to study topics that are not currently studied in school.
- The child may show a lack of interest or enjoyment in class topics.
- He/she may not understand how classes will help him/her achieve long-term goals.

# Reaching the Underachieving Child

# The Problem

“Because the factors that influence the development and manifestation of underachievement vary, no one type of intervention will be effective for the full range of underachieving gifted students” (Reis & McCoach, 2000).



# Reversing Underachievement: Home

- Consult with a counselor to develop strategies for addressing family concerns.
- Schedule regular meeting times for the child with a school counselor or adult mentor.
- Provide journaling opportunities, bibliotherapy, or art/music/film therapy.

# Rimm's Laws

Children are more likely to be achievers if their parents join together to give the same clear and positive message about school effort and expectations.



Children can learn appropriate behaviors more easily if they have an effective model to imitate.

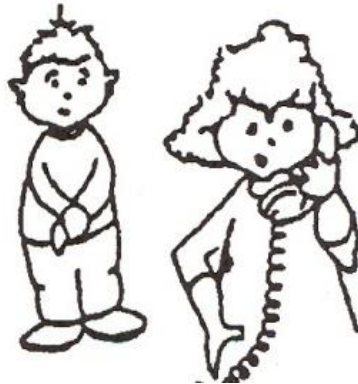


Rimm, Sylvia. (1995) *Why bright kids get poor grades :and what you can do about it* New York : Crown Publishers.

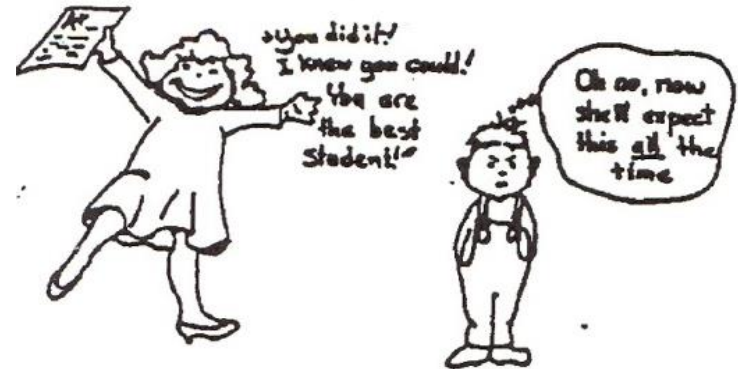
# Rimm's Laws

Communication about children between adults (referential speaking) within the children's hearing dramatically affects children's behaviors and self-perception.

I can't believe what a dumb thing Bill did.



Overreaction by parents to children's successes and failures leads them to feel either intense pressure to succeed or despair and dis-couragement in dealing with failure.



Rimm, Sylvia. (1995) *Why bright kids get poor grades :and what you can do about it* New York : Crown Publishers.

# Rimm's Laws

**Children become oppositional if one adult allies with them against a parent or teacher, making them more powerful than an adult.**

"I know how it is.

I've had some lousy teachers, too."



**Children will become achievers only if they learn to function in competition.**



"At least we gave it a good try - maybe next time."



Rimm, Sylvia. (1995) *Why bright kids get poor grades :and what you can do about it* New York : Crown Publishers.

# Rimm's Laws

**Children will continue to achieve if they usually see the relationship between the learning process and its outcomes.**

'I'm so glad I practiced my last speech like this. It really helps me remember it.'



Rimm, Sylvia. (1995) *Why bright kids get poor grades :and what you can do about it* New York : Crown Publishers.

# Reversing Underachievement: School

- Meet with your child's teachers and the school counselor (if appropriate) to address your concerns.
- Work with your child and his/her teachers to create a more supportive environment, which may result in more positive teacher feedback/encouragement.
- Help your child understand the connection between effort and success.
- Ensure your child is being pre-assessed, so that content is appropriately challenging.

# Reversing Underachievement: Peers

- Provide out of school experiences (e.g., enrichment camps, online learning experiences, after school clubs).
- Ask about potential mentors.
- Ask about opportunities for small groups to work closely on meaningful projects.
- Encourage your child to meet with the school counselor.

# Reversing Underachievement: Self-Efficacy

- Encourage your child to reflect upon growth.
- Provide detailed, appropriate, growth-oriented feedback.
- Encourage them that with effort, they will be successful.



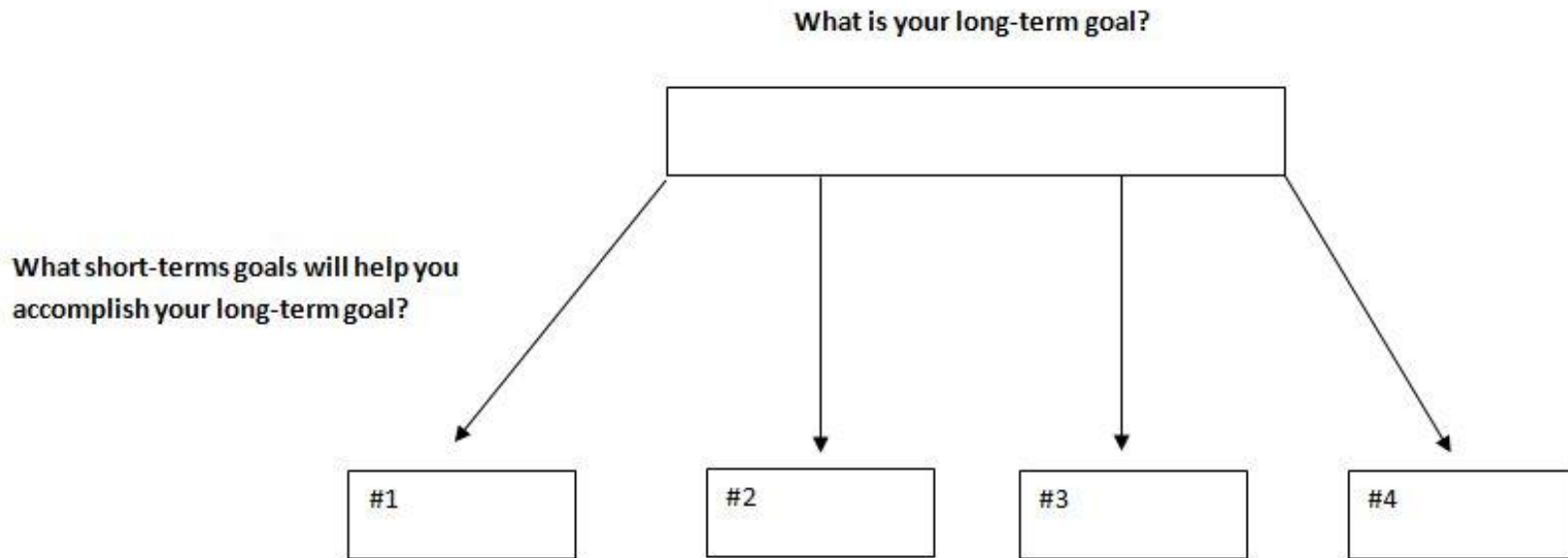
# Reversing Underachievement: Self-Regulation

- Allow your child to use appropriate technology to help organize their goals and time.
- Make long term and short-term goals.
- Try different study methods (e.g., rewriting notes, making flashcards, teaching material out loud or to peers, participating in study groups).

# Reversing Underachievement: Task Meaningfulness

- Encourage your child to design and investigate his/her own questions over the content.
- Ask the teacher to allow your child to demonstrate understanding through a product of his/her choice that still meets the unit objectives.
- Connect content to goals.

# Sample Activity



*Marshall, Martin, Maxson, Hughes, Miller, McGill, & Jerman, 1999*

# Sample Activity

Long-term Goal Pass the class

Short-term Goal Get a "B" on the unit test

Part 1: Student Plan					
<b>STANDARD</b>	<b>MOTIVATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>SCHEDULE</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>FEEDBACK</b>
What will I be satisfied with?	Why do I want to do this?	What methods should I use?	When will I do this?	What help do I need?	How will I get information on my performance?
Get a "B" on the test	To keep from getting grounded	Study with a friend	Study with Joe all day Sunday before the test	Study with Joe	See what my grade is on the test

# Sample Activity Cont.

Name Michelle Date March 15

Short-Term Goal Get a good grade on the unit test

Did I meet my short-term goal? YES  NO

**Part 2: Action**

<b>STANDARD</b>	<b>MOTIVATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>SCHEDULE</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>FEEDBACK</b>
Did I meet the standard? yes <input type="radio"/> no <input checked="" type="radio"/>	Was I motivated? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no	Did I use the strategy? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no	Did I follow the schedule? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no	Did I use support? <input type="radio"/> yes no	Did I get feedback? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no

**Part 3: Evaluate**

<b>STANDARD</b>	<b>MOTIVATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>SCHEDULE</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>FEEDBACK</b>
Was it the right standard? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no Why or why not?	Did it work? <input checked="" type="radio"/> yes no Why or why not?	Did it work? yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> no Why or why not?	Did it work? yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> no Why or why not?	Did it work? yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> no Why or why not?	Was the feedback helpful? yes <input checked="" type="radio"/> no Why or why not?
Needed a "B" to pull my grade average up	Want good grades so I won't get grounded	I didn't get a high enough grade	I couldn't learn the material in one afternoon	Joe got tired and went home	Got feedback too late

**What were the main reasons you got these results?** Look at the Action and Evaluate sections. If you met your short-term goal, consider the parts of the plan you answered "yes." If you didn't meet the short-term goal, consider the parts you answered "no."

*I needed to study more than just one afternoon for the test. I also got the feedback about how well I knew the material too late.*

**Part 4: Adjust**

Short-term Goal?  OK or change? If change, new short-term goal \_\_\_\_\_

<b>STANDARD</b>	<b>MOTIVATION</b>	<b>STRATEGY</b>	<b>SCHEDULE</b>	<b>SUPPORT</b>	<b>FEEDBACK</b>
If standard wasn't right, what will I change?	If I wasn't motivated, what will I change?	If my strategy didn't work, what will I change?	If I didn't follow my schedule, what will I change?	If my support didn't work, what will I change?	If feedback wasn't helpful, what will I change?
		Study some every night the week before the test	Study every day	Don't rely on Joe to study all day with me on Sunday	Could take a pretest or Joe could quiz me

# Advocating for Your Child

- “In many respects the absence or presence of advocacy can determine whether or not a child overcomes underachievement” (Smutney, 2004).
  - Read, read, read!!!
  - Gather information about your child (keep a binder or two or three!).
  - Request a meeting with individuals who are invested in your child’s success (e.g., teachers, the school counselor, the gifted specialist, administrator).
  - Share information
  - Ask what you can do together, as a team, to set your child on a positive trajectory.

# Helpful Resources

## Books

- Dweck, C.S. (2006). *Mindset*. New York: Random House.
- Rimm, Sylvia. (1995) *Why bright kids get poor grades :and what you can do about it* New York : Crown Publishers.
- Siegle, D. (2013). *The underachieving gifted child: Recognizing, understanding, and reversing underachievement*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.
- Siegle, D., & McCoach D. B. (2005). *Motivating gifted students*. Waco, TX: Prufrock Press.

## Articles

- Ritchotte, J. A. (2013). Reversing gifted underachievement, one student at a time. *Understanding Our Gifted*.
- Rubenstein, L. D., Siegle, D., Reis, S. M., McCoach, D. B., & Burton, M. G. (2012). A complex quest: The development and research of underachievement interventions for gifted students. *Psychology in the Schools*, 49, 678-694.
- Ritchotte, J. A. (2010, June). Reversing gifted underachievement: The intervention that set one student on the path to success. *Parenting for High Potential*, 21-26.
- McCoach, D. B., & Siegle, D. (2003a). Factors that differentiate underachieving gifted students from high-achieving gifted students. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 47, 144–154. doi: 10.1177/001698620304700205

## Websites

- <http://www.nagc.org/index.aspx?id=180>
- <http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/underachievement.htm>
- <https://tip.duke.edu/node/817>
- [http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles\\_id\\_10442.aspx](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10442.aspx)
- [http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles\\_id\\_10094.aspx](http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10094.aspx)

# Questions???



[jennifer.ritchotte@unco.edu](mailto:jennifer.ritchotte@unco.edu)