

Resetting the *status quo* for achievement.
The fourth in a series of articles for parents on helping the bright, underachieving student succeed.

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As discussed in the first three articles of this series, many smart kids do not consistently perform to their full potential. Whether they are above average in intelligence, gifted, and/or coping with challenges such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, bright underachievers tend to resort to procrastination and utilize few if any strategies in school. When these students struggle in an area—i.e., attention, memory, language, math, problem solving, critical thinking, organization, or studying—they often do not have a systematized approach for improvement. When they discover their own limitations or lack of understanding in a given area, they often become dependent learners, resist responsibility, and lose self-confidence in their ability to succeed. On the other side of the spectrum, when intelligent children do not have a sufficient challenge to fully engage their minds and keep their interest level high, they often develop self-defeating habits that undermine performance. Without special interests to pursue, many of them tune out of the learning process. They develop a narrow perspective and a skewed view of education; they do not readily find the relationships among various components and develop new perspectives. These individuals would benefit from understanding that learning is different from the gathering of information that we usually associate with school. Even though it may involve the understanding and synthesizing of information, it is the *process* of obtaining knowledge that is more important than the information itself. Children grow into understanding; it does not come all at once, and school provides the environment for this process to occur. In effect, school is a rehearsal for life. The way learners respond to academics is indicative of their response as adults to life's challenges, and parents can make a difference in this area to help children succeed.

The first solution to reverse underachievement is to challenge students' own pre-established *status quo*—the central tendency or mental set point to which they return by default. Most children lack awareness of what their mental thermostat is; therefore, they will not go beyond this comfort zone until they decide to change it. To do so, they must start with reprogramming false beliefs about themselves, since belief conditions their commitments, goals, and behavior. Recognizing and celebrating their particular learning style and their strong points and finding the strengths on the flip side of perceived weaknesses will program their minds to believe they can succeed and will lead to being accountable for their own learning. Many children do not realize that when they refuse to take responsibility and blame someone or something else, they are, in fact, diminishing themselves in the process, as they end up focusing on *I can't* rather than *I can*. They become trapped in a pessimistic outlook. In fact, students feel more tension when they are avoiding and worrying about what they haven't done than when they are doing the work. Furthermore, if they are prone to the perfectionist trap, they obsess about what they do not feel capable of achieving and end up playing the procrastination game.

The first step is to start at the point where learners can begin; break the work down into manageable components; take small steps; reevaluate their progress as they go; and make the needed adjustments. As a result, they will change their set point, increase self-confidence, and improve performance. Often, the area that most needs adjustment is re-estimating the time it takes to achieve a task. Students often minimize the amount of time needed to improve in an area of natural ability, and if they are learning a new skill they need time to learn strategies for mastering it. It is important to establish timetables to reflect how long an assignment should take,

notate the actual length of time involved, and make an effort to keep on track. Time management is, thus, one of the critical elements to control. The mind is a muscle, and, like bodybuilding, it takes time and commitment to strengthen it; the process starts with manageable first steps.

In addition, children must learn a new definition of failure by learning how to turn mistakes into lessons for growth. Parents can make a big difference in demonstrating to their children the value of making mistakes by not pointing out all the negatives, nor labeling children “lazy” or “unmotivated.” Such labeling only exacerbates the situation and creates an unhealthy mental set point. Telling children they are lazy is de-motivating, and they will tend to live up to that expectation. Laziness is a symptom of fear, boredom, poor mental energy, or output deficit. Modeling for a child a different response to the situation will encourage the right environment for change. Many bright children are saddled with a poor self-image and perceive their failures as *being* a failure. Mistakes and adversity can motivate them or derail them, depending on how they learn to view them. Failure does not so much reveal inadequacies as it points to the aspect that needs to change in order to grow and achieve. It has been said that, if a person is succeeding in everything he does, then he is probably not pushing himself hard enough. In other words, he is not risking enough to learn what the experience is designed to teach him and move beyond it. For most students and their parents, changing attitudes about failure will reverse a longstanding mindset about risk. Putting the focus on finding the benefit in every experience and learning from it resets the status quo from underachievement to achievement.

In essence, when learners decide that schoolwork is worthy of their time, the biggest decision has been made, which persuades them to apply themselves to the work at hand; but this decision comes only as a result of knowing how present activity relates to future rewards. Children should appreciate that it is not what they are going through, but what they are going to that really matters, so knowing the “why” is essential to their self-motivation. Visualizing the future they want to have is vital to changing students’ mental set point. If they cannot see it, they cannot make it happen. Taking responsibility for who they want to become and what they want to do or have creates the right mindset. Students need to know what they’re working toward and believe they are capable of achieving it. Otherwise, they slide into procrastination, inattentiveness, and forgetfulness. In the classic children’s tale *Through the Looking Glass* (by Lewis Carroll), the Queen gives Alice a new perspective on the importance of imagination: “There’s no use trying,” she [Alice] said. “One can’t believe impossible things.” “I daresay you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.” The importance of encouraging children to dream audacious dreams cannot be minimized. Dreams provide a positive attitude and the mental energy to understand the benefit in doing mundane or boring tasks. Without dreams, students resist what they do not enjoy, and they lack the mental energy to succeed. With dreams, the “impossible” becomes possible; learning becomes relevant; and new habits of mind are formed. Then, they are ready to improve the skills that are necessary to achieve their goals. There is a direct relationship between what students strive for and what they actually achieve. They cannot reach beyond the rut of their status quo without clear and specific goals. Goal-setting is an integral part of achieving success; therefore, goals are the set point for accomplishment. Learners will achieve what they focus on, so as parents we can encourage them to concentrate on their unique potential and believe they will succeed.

The next article will elaborate on the impact of left-right brain continuum on the underachiever.

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