

Tipping the balance for the underachiever.

The first in a series of articles for parents on helping the bright, underachieving student succeed.

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Children have a natural inborn inclination to succeed. When they first start to walk, they fall down and learn from their missteps, getting up over and over again until they gain balance and perspective. With each improvement, they increase confidence to try again. As their minds develop, their perceptions and responses to failure are key to the development of their self-confidence and ability to excel. Children naturally become attuned to how others react to their mistakes; as they develop each new skill set they are particularly sensitive to negative feedback and may not recognize that mistakes are simply “failing forward”—a way to gain experience and knowledge. Some children put a lid on their abilities and potential, thus programming their minds to accept mediocrity and resisting tasks that seem difficult or challenging. In effect, they avoid the pain of making mistakes because of the fear of letting down themselves and others.

Many bright and gifted children in particular learn quickly how to perform for the approval of adults and may become dependent on the applause. As they begin to discover their own limitations, some children develop unproductive routines that hinder their progress. Entrenched habits, like studying for a test or doing an assignment at the last minute, begin to work against them when it becomes increasingly difficult to handle the more complex demands of school. Pressure from parents to meet academic expectations may further exacerbate feelings of inadequacy and embarrassment. Such individuals complain that school is “boring,” and they often lack the motivation to perform reliably on mundane tasks. As a result, academic underachievement becomes a pattern as school assignments involve a more complex array of skills to consolidate information quickly, build on this information, reproduce it, and perform reliably.

Learners often suffer from persistent success deprivation, feeling they have little to show for their efforts, so they make excuses, decide to reduce their efforts, and seek immediate gratification through playing electronic games, watching excessive amounts of television, focusing more on sports or hobbies, or “hanging” with their friends. Some kids become inattentive and report that they study, even though they cannot reproduce what they have learned on tests or assignments. Further, an individual may fail to do homework because of poor mental energy; he or she may not know how to organize all of the components needed, say, for writing; or he/she may understand and remember concepts better than details. The learning style of some students is not geared to the format in which information is presented in school; for example, a visual-spatial learner may struggle with abstract details and miss the larger concept when confronted with lectures, reading, and written assignments, or he/she may need more hands-on activities to understand and recall material. If students are primarily visually oriented, they may experience a delay in turning the written material into a mental picture, resulting in a certain amount of mental fatigue; thus, distractions from related thoughts and noises are more prevalent. If a student is socially distractible and feels like an inadequate performer, he or she may avoid schoolwork and gravitate toward activities with friends or solitary games. The other side of the coin is the fear of success—how relationships with peers might change as a result of becoming an excellent student—which is an equally important factor producing mediocre performance. Finally, a student may lack organizational and study skills and feel overwhelmed by the amount of knowledge to be broken down, sequentially ordered, digested, managed, prioritized, remembered, and orchestrated for the appropriate purpose—homework, projects, tests, oral or written reports,

experiments, etc. Fear of failure and accusations of laziness further decrease self-confidence and produce rationalizations for procrastination.

Despite these challenges, recent studies and my experience reveal that there are a number of environmental changes parents and students can make to reverse underachievement. The minds of most kids today are geared for the immediate and programmed by a disproportionate amount of passive activities such as TV and overstimulating ones like fast-paced games that train their minds to be impatient and unfocused on slower-paced activities; their brains require increasing amounts of stimulation in order to trigger the adrenaline needed to pay attention on less appealing tasks. When school assignments are tedious or uninteresting, more exciting activities offer a great temptation, and shortcuts become the norm. Many attention inconsistencies are related specifically to lifestyle, including irregular or limited exercise, unregulated sleep patterns, and the immoderate consumption of simple sugars—found in sodas, most cereals, white bread, and many processed foods—and fatty “fast foods.” Changes in diet may have a significant impact on one’s ability to focus on routine and “boring” activities. Complex carbs, such as vegetables and multigrain breads, as well as lean protein, provide energy over extended periods of time, while simple carbs—like refined sugars—provide a quick rush of adrenaline followed by lethargy, thus robbing the body of much-needed energy for sustained attention and focus. Furthermore, continuous exposure to over-stimulating visual stimuli—excessive use of video games, television, Net-surfing, etc.—works like a drug to fuel the attention centers in the brain and results in withdrawal symptoms—boredom and fatigue—that make it extremely difficult to focus on chores and schoolwork. Thus, the “tipping point” for achievement in many students is a change in diet and restrictions on their exposure to visual stimulation.

The second “tipping point” to help underachievers succeed is to understand how their mind works. Some individuals are “wired” for concrete, visual-spatial thinking. Appreciating their strengths and minimizing their weaknesses will promote the development of a positive attitude, which in turn improves focus and attention. Underachievers must retrain their minds to see success as a long-term process, not an immediate result or single event—as a way of thinking, not an end product. Both parents and students need patience to move beyond judgment to acceptance of how each mind approaches the learning process. Next, knowing their “why”—what they would like to be, do, and/or have—and deciding that the “price” is worth the “prize” are essential elements for students to improve performance and move forward with purpose. Many teens do not see the relevance of school; others lack a clear idea of who they want to become and the kinds of interests they might pursue. Without a picture of their future, they lack the mental energy needed to form the right attitudes and tackle the tedious aspects of life—be it in school or elsewhere. In tandem with the dream, it is essential that students believe in their ability to achieve. If they set goals and attempt to persistently act upon them before developing a compelling “why” and the belief that they can achieve it, they are starting backwards, which is an exercise in frustration and futility. The ageless success pattern—dream-belief-commitment-goal-action—is a critical “tip” that develops the “habits of mind” to reverse the tide of underachievement.

The next two articles will focus on understanding attention deficit disorder and tipping the balance for the ADD student. The fourth and fifth articles will elaborate on retraining the underachieving mind to use specific strategies that lead to excellence.

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