




DR. SYLVIA RIMM
APPEARS ON NBC'S
TODAY SHOW
This special newsletter
focuses on issues dis-
cussed with Dr. Rimm
on the Today Show.
We hope you find this
newsletter helpful.

A Newsletter to Help Parents and Teachers

Volume 12

Issue No. 1



*SOLVING THE ?
MYSTERIOUS
UNDERACHIEVEMENT
? PROBLEM ?*

Parents continually take stock of their children's school progress. Hopefully their children are making good efforts, earning positive grades, and enjoying school. For some parents, there comes a time when they realize that their children's small problems are simply not disappearing. They wonder why their children are not working to their abilities in school. They may have already heard the word "underachiever" from an earlier teacher, but they hoped their children would mature out of the problem. The parents are puzzled, and so are the children's teachers.

*"Underachievement is epidemic
and enters every classroom
and many homes."*

Underachievement is epidemic and enters every classroom and many homes. Underachievers usually begin as apparently bright and often very verbal preschoolers, but at some point their enthusiasm for learning and their satisfactory school performance change. Symptoms of underachievement may include unfinished work, loss of homework, disorganization, disinterest in school, excuses like "I forgot," blaming others for problems, and declining grades.

IS YOUR CHILD AN UNDERACHIEVER?

1. Does your child forget to do homework assignments?
2. Does your child give up easily?
3. Does your child avoid competitive activities unless he/she is almost sure to win?
4. Does your child start working on homework late each night?
5. Does your child watch two or more hours of TV (or play two or more hours of video games) on school nights?

Score 1 point for each yes response and total the points. Scores are explained below.

Total Points

- 4-5: Your child has characteristics that indicate a very serious underachievement problem.
- 2-3: Your child has characteristics that indicate a fairly serious underachievement problem.
- 1: Your child has characteristics that indicate only minor underachievement problems.
- 0: Your child has no underachievement characteristics.

(continued next page)

IN THIS ISSUE . . .

- *Solving the Mysterious Underachievement Problem*
- *Sylvia Says... Boy Underachieves to Be "Cool"*
- *Teacher Tips - Tutoring to Prevent Underachievement*
- *Parent Pointers - Rimm's Laws*
- *Sibling Competition*

UNDERACHIEVEMENT . . .

Some School Causes

- ▶ peer pressure
- ▶ lack of challenge
- ▶ conflicts with teachers
- ▶ unidentified learning disabilities
- ▶ too much or too little competition
- ▶ a move to a more or less difficult school

Some Home Causes

- ▶ overprotectiveness
- ▶ sibling rivalry
- ▶ conflict between parents in expectations for their child
- ▶ overempowerment
- ▶ too much or too little attention
- ▶ an anti-work attitude or overemphasis on work
- ▶ feelings of pressure

Underachievement results when some things go wrong both at home and school. Underachievers deny themselves the opportunity to build confidence because they direct their energies toward avoiding the relationship between process and outcome, between effort and achievement.

Dependence and Dominance

Well-intentioned parenting mistakes frequently have the effect of destroying parenting leadership. The children learn rituals of either unusual dependence or dominance, or both. These dependent and dominant patterns begin to feel natural to children and parents alike. Parents often believe that teachers and the school structure will resolve their children's problems or that children will mature out of them. Dependent and dominant children may have practiced their control patterns in relating to adults for several years before they enter school. These patterns seem to work well for them, and they know no others. They may carry them to the classroom from home or learn them in the classroom. They continue to use them to preserve their fragile self-concepts.

I PREFER THE KITCHEN



The dependency pattern is often masked as insecurity, immaturity, passivity, or learning disabilities. Dependent underachievers ask for more help than they require. They may insist on having parents sit with them while they do their homework. Dominant underachievers are more vociferous in arguing about why they shouldn't have to do their work; they tend to blame teachers or parents for their problems. They like to pick and choose only the schoolwork they enjoy.

Preventing Underachievement

Parenting by positive expectations can be extraordinarily successful for children both in school and out. If high achievement, positive attitudes, and constructive behavior are expected and reinforced by parents, they will become internalized by the child. Parents should share with their children realistic and positive views of achievement.

Model hard work and satisfaction of accomplishment. Hard work is not enough. Hard-working parents who constantly complain about their jobs are not good role models. Children should hear their parents speak in a more balanced way about the satisfactions of achievement. Imitation of good role models is very important in the reversal of underachievement.

(continued on page 3)

Voice your sincere respect for educational institutions and teachers. Children avoid work and learning if teachers are not respected by their parents. Set up a regular communication with the child's teacher.

Involve your children in developing study routines. Don't sit with your children when they study, but be interested and review work. Disorganization is a frequent symptom of underachievement. Reasonable structure and organization are necessary for accomplishment and dealing with responsibilities.

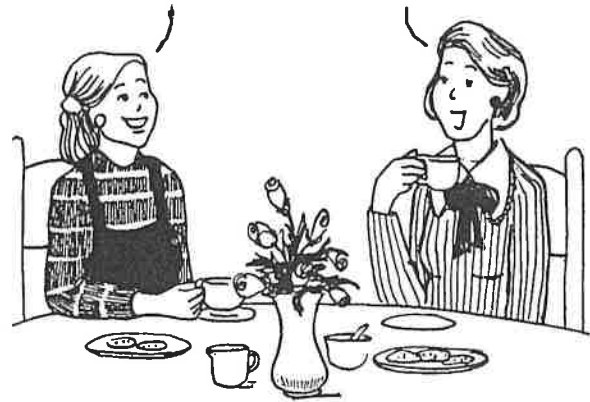
Be consistent with your children's other parents(s) in setting goals for children. If one parent sets higher goals than the other parent, children are likely to choose the easy way out. Don't ally with your children against the other parent, no matter how subtly.

Help your children cope with competition. Explain that being best is not as important as doing their best, and that winning and losing are temporary. Discuss effort, problem-solving strategies, creative-thinking processes, and ways of dealing with failure. "Magical" thinking, which emphasizes success by luck and without effort, causes problems for children. Children who give up easily and get by with a minimum of effort have little or no confidence in their abilities to function successfully. Children build confidence by achievement.



"MOM, I'VE BEEN ACCEPTED INTO STRING QUARTET."

"GREAT! YOUR HARD WORK HAS REALLY PAID OFF!"



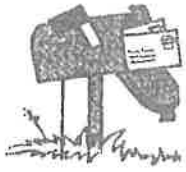
Encourage independence in your children without giving them more power than they can handle. Parents should be clearly in charge, although children should be able to make choices and voice opinions within limits. Encourage your children's strengths and interests. Emphasize the positive, and plan fun family activities even if family time is limited. Limit screen time, including television, video/computer games, and the Internet.

Praise children realistically with words that set goals they'll be able to achieve. "Bright," "good thinker," "kind," and "persevering" are fairer than "brilliant," "genius," "smartest," or "perfect."

Don't give up on your children. Your children need your support and a clear priority expectation of achievement. Even if it doesn't seem to have immediate results, your children do hear you eventually.

Additional Reading

I've summarized the main principles of parenting to prevent underachievement in my Rimm's Laws of Achievement found on page 6 of this publication. For more information about reversing the problem of underachievement, consult my book *Why Bright Kids Get Poor Grades—And What You Can Do About It*. For more strategies on raising happy, achieving children, consult *How to Parent So Children Will Learn*, *See Jane Win*, and *How Jane Won*.



Sylvia Says . . .

BOY UNDERACHIEVES TO BE "COOL"

Dear Dr. Sylvia,

How do you deal with a student who deliberately underachieves because he thinks it's not cool to be smart. He doesn't want to be considered a nerd by his peers.

Mom Concerned about the Future

Dear Concerned Mom,

We find that by fourth or fifth grade, children become very anxious to fit in with a special crowd. When the peer norm is "casual" and uncaring about schoolwork, many bright children who wish to "fit in" stop studying. Some children will copy, cheat, and be defiant to fit in with friends who are doing the same. Your son's underachievement could become much more serious as he loses skills and confidence.

You're asking about a very serious problem in our country. I know you don't want your son to be without friends, but these are crucial years for teaching him your value system, which I'm sure includes achievement. Don't "wimp" out because you are afraid of his losing friends. Let him know early and often that everyone has to go it alone at times. Tell him that it is more important to "stand tall" and know that he is living by a standard of excellence and honesty than to conform to a peer standard that in the long haul will cause him problems. Let your son know that it's all right to "walk alone" because it will equip him to be strong. Encourage him to be selective in his friends. A few good friends with similar values and interests are healthier than a crowd who may get him into trouble. Good academic habits and independence will be critical tools to have for the rest of his life.

Although it is often effective for you to give your son this important individualistic message, it may be

even more impressive if his father has a heart-to-heart talk with him. Sometimes boys believe that women are the only ones who prioritize education because they see so many more female teachers at the elementary level and because mothers often take the main responsibility for communicating with schools. A son who hears directly from his father in a one-to-one talk may consider the communication important enough to counteract some of the anti-achievement peer pressure he is feeling.



When children are in elementary school, parents and teachers alike worry too much about social adjustment and fitting in with the rest of the group. If children play alone or have only a few friends, both teachers and parents tend to encourage them to join others or invite friends to their homes almost as if they fear that children who are not popular will not be successful. If we continually redirect their independent activity to social activity, and we praise the more social children in the family, our children will receive a very strong message about social adjustment that leads directly to peer conformity.

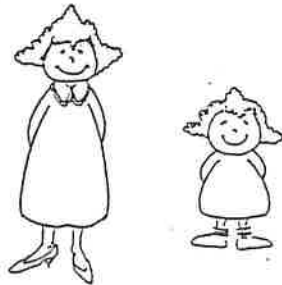
What children need most is the courage to be independent. We surely don't want them to be friendless or lonely, but peer conformity with antilearning friends can be a terrible waste of educational opportunity.

RIMM'S LAWS

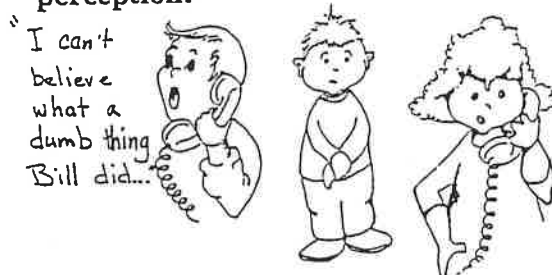
- 1 ▶ Children are more likely to be achievers if their parents join together to give the same clear and positive message about school effort and expectations.



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



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



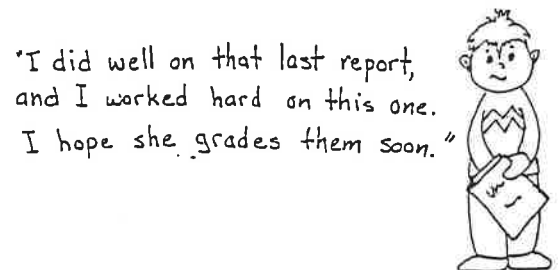
- 4 ▶ Overreaction by parents to children's successes and failures leads them to feel either intense pressure to succeed or despair and discouragement in dealing with failure.



- 5 ▶ Children feel more tension when they are worrying about their work than when they are doing that work.



- 6 ▶ Children develop self-confidence through struggle.



(Artwork by Anne McCunney and Pamela Miles of Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia.)

RIMM'S LAWS

- 7 ► **Deprivation and excess frequently exhibit the same symptoms.**

"You are so mean. Why can't I have a go-kart like all the other kids?"



- 8 ► **Children develop confidence and an internal sense of control if power is given to them in gradually increasing increments as they show maturity and responsibility.**

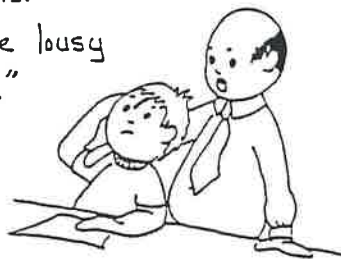


"When I told her how well you watch your sister, Mrs. White asked if you could babysit her little Tommy."



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

"I know how it is. I've had some lousy teachers, too."



- 10 ► **Adults should avoid confrontations with children unless they are sure they can control the outcomes.**



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



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

- 12 ► **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."



(Artwork by Anne McCunney and Pamela Miles of Fairfax County Public Schools, Fairfax, Virginia.)