Underachieving kids: no quick fix

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If my friends and colleagues are anything to go by, underachievement is rampant. Kids who have the intellectual wherewithal to succeed in school, but who seem bent on bypassing homework and assignments in favour of more interesting pastimes, whether they be computer games or, well, computer games.

I have observed their frustration as they grasp at any solution, trick, or manipulation that might motivate their "lazy and unmotivated" children and put them on course for school success. This situation is far too common, and it isn't new. An arsenal of strategies has been thrown at the problem. Parents have rewarded, punished, entertained, pep-talked, tutored, threatened, role modeled, changed schools, changed programs, and so on, often with discouraging results. Upfront, I can tell you there is no quick fix — sorry folks — but we do understand some things about underachievement that may help you and your kid get to a better place.

Underachievement defined

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Underachievement is defined as performance that is below what is expected given normal intellectual potential. These are kids with high IQs and low school marks. The problem often appears in middle school, when kids start getting homework that requires planning, disciplined work and follow-through. This is also when kids begin to assert themselves more and make more of their own decisions. These are normally bright kids, and it is not uncommon to see underachievement among the gifted.

Much of what we know about underachievement, its causes and potential solutions, comes from the work of the late psychologist and renowned expert Dr. Harvey Mandel. Mandel studied underachievers for more than 20 years and concluded that, contrary to popular belief, underachievers are highly motivated. They just happen to be motivated about things other than getting good grades.

'knowing this is the first step to turning things around.

The road to underachievement

Underachievement is not only a problem for parents, it can lead to children seeing themselves as failures and to placing self-imposed limits on what they can achieve. Dealing with underachievement, according to Mandel, begins with identifying the type of underachiever. Essentially, not all underachievers are alike. Recognizing what motivates these kids is the key to helping them fulfill their potential.

Types of underachievers

Mandel identified six underachievement styles. Here's an overview of the two most common:

- **Coasters** make up 40 per cent of all underachievers, equal among both girls and boys. They come from all kinds of families. Coasters procrastinate at home and at school. They give up easily, get low marks, and lose interest without concern for the consequences. They have selective memories, forgetting things they deem unimportant, and while they may have good intentions, they rarely follow through. These kids seem unfazed by their lack of academic achievement.

- **Anxious underachievers** really want to do better, but their anxiety gets in the way. About 20 per cent of underachievers comprise this group, with no gender differences. Parents tend to be critical - bringing home an 85 per cent is not considered good enough. Anxious underachievers put off homework for fear they won't succeed. They need constant reassurance and approval and can become physically sick as a result of their anxiety about schoolwork. These are the kids who don't see the forest for the trees and simply get lost in the details.

Other types of underachievers

- **Identity-searchers** (five to 10 per cent, equally common in both genders) are preoccupied with self-discovery to the point that they become distracted from the school tasks at hand. They are intense and self-absorbed and question adult values and opinions with their fierce independent streak.

- **Wheeler-dealers** (five to 10 per cent, males predominate) are impulsive charmers who are focused on instant gratification but deep down, are lonely, sad, and angry. Most are in trouble at home, at school, and in the community. They lie, cheat, steal, skip school, are disruptive of others' activities and can alternate between charming and intimidating.

Pathways to achievement

**Coasters:** Years of research suggests that no amount of coaxing or support from teachers or parents is effective for motivating coasters. These are the kids who brush things off with comments like: 

"I don't have any homework" or "I'll do better next time."

According to Mandel, part of the solution lies in building communication with the school in order to know what assignments are due and when. Parents should clearly communicate who owns the problem and not accept pat answers off hand without digging deeper. Coasters do not respond to rewards or punishments, so this is a tough one to tackle. Their goal is to "just get by" and at that, they are achieving.
'Parents and teachers can help by not letting kids get away with thinking they can't achieve, are unmotivated and lazy. Call them on it'

Coasters need to see that they are in charge of their future and to let go of their excuses. That isn't an easy task. As one parent recently explained: "The resource teacher told me that you sometimes have to let your kid become "ready to learn" at his own pace, and although I believed her, I found it really hard to let go. You feel like you'd be a terrible parent if you don't prevent your kid from failing. But I can see that she's right, and that sometimes kids have to fall on their faces so they can find out for themselves that they actually want to succeed and find it worthwhile to do the work."

Parents and teachers can help by not letting kids get away with thinking they can't achieve, are unmotivated and lazy. Call them on it. To do that, you need to build a rapport with the school so that you can identify when assignments are due and when tests are scheduled. Then, you can address it with the facts to back you up.

Although teachers are extremely busy and have to contend with many special learners, do what you can to get the information you need and to build a good relationship with the school. Set up regular homework checks at home, and don't be afraid to confront your child when you know you're not getting the facts or when they've dropped the ball — but do so calmly and firmly. Helping them to see that they are the one responsible for their academic outcomes will help to bring ownership back to them and empower them to change their behavior.

**Anxious underachievers:** Relaxation techniques can be just what the doctor ordered for anxious underachievers, because their anxiety is real. Physical activity can also help, providing a release of tension. These are kids for whom the task at hand looms over them, and they can benefit by learning how to break things down into manageable tasks that appear less overwhelming. These kids are really worried about doing well. They feel like they just won't succeed, regardless of what they do.

Mandel encouraged parents of these kids to curb their critical nature, listen openly and be supportive of more successful approaches toward achievement. Follow their suggestions of how to approach their achievement goals. Coming at them with a directive style can backfire. Help them to be realistic with their learning goals and steer them away from perfectionism. Praise for specific accomplishments can work wonders, but high and persistent anxiety may also require specialized mental health attention.

**Homework tips**

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These general points on how to approach the different types of underachievers can be combined with tips for developing structure and consistency in homework completion. Poor study habits are a common obstacle to successful achievement. Above all — pick your battles. Homework should not be one of them. Remember that behaviour can change over time under the right conditions. Here are some tips:

- While helping with homework is fine in most cases, don't become your child's tutor; designate someone else for that role. This allows you to maintain your parent-child relationship in a way that doesn't morph into a judging, nagging interaction on a daily basis.
- Teach your child how to use a day planner and to schedule when assignments are due.
- Designate a specific area for homework.
- Minimize distractions such as television, games, social media, music, and regular family hustle and bustle.
- Allow kids to pick their homework hours and their favoured learning style; if they concentrate better with music on, let it be. Be regular about homework time.
- Help them learn the tools of school success, including scheduling, tasks lists, and completion of work on time. These skills transfer to the real world.
- If you do choose to reduce or remove privileges, be consistent and follow through. Too much time playing video games, for instance, must be addressed in a consistent manner that both of you can live with. If video or computer games are interfering with homework time, buying them as presents is not the best move on your part.
- Above all, separate your feelings about your child from your feelings about their poor performance; they know they're loved regardless of how they perform in school.

As I said, there are no easy solutions for underachievement. We know some things about why kids underachieve, and that does help in figuring out what approaches may work best. However, in the words of one parent who has struggled with an underachiever for several years, "Sometimes, you have to let your kid learn his lessons the hard way. After failing three out of four courses last term, (Tom) is now on probation. The principal told him that if he wants to go back to (this school) in the fall, he's going to have to bring his marks way up and take three summer courses. It was a huge rude awakening for him. He admits he put himself in this position and can't blame anyone but himself. In one course, he aced the final exam but he handed in none of the assignments so he ended up with a 30 per cent, which really showed him that the assignments are really important."